The Breaking and Remaking of Takashi Shirogane

by satincolt

Summary

The Galra spent one year thoroughly breaking Takashi Shirogane.

Are we all headed to the arena? Is Sam going to the work camps? I have to stop this. We can’t afford to be split up; we’ll never make it out together if we’re separated, Shiro thinks frantically, mind racing to come up with a plan. “It’s no use,” the alien cries. “I can tell you’re trying to figure it out. You can’t! Nobody can!” They collapse into unintelligible screaming, sobbing. Shiro slaps his hands over his ears, their voice painfully loud in the enclosed cell. “Knock it off!” a guard bellows from outside, pounding on the door. The alien pays it no heed. They cry and cry and cry.

Notes

Please note the warnings and tags! This is very, very dark at parts and particularly bad chapters will have individual warnings so you can skip them if you need.

Basically this is my idea of what happened during Shiro’s year with the Galra and some of the subsequent healing. It gets canon divergent towards the end because I thought it flowed better with my headcanons. It’s whump that borders on torture porn, read at your own risk.
Yellow eyes. Blank. Dead, like a shark’s eyes rolled back before the attack.

Pleading mindlessly for his life, for Sam’s life, for Matt’s life, in front of this ghoulish yellow-eyed alien. Scrambling over the shock that fell like rubble upon seeing intelligent alien life, nearly blinded by the revelation humans weren’t alone in the universe. Shiro steals a glance at Sam and Matt, helmeted and unresponsive, limp in the grasp of armored alien soldiers.

The yellow-eyed alien mutters something about druids and the main fleet, and shooting pain from the crack of a rifle on the back of Shiro’s skull makes darkness close in.

Don’t panic, don’t panic, Shiro tries desperately to school himself. God, this is a perfect situation to panic.

Desperation wins over and Shiro panics, thrashing, trying to get his feet underneath him. The guards holding his wrists haul him up off the floor, his boots dangling inches off the ground.

“Look at this fighter,” one guard rumbles. The other chuckles, but says nothing. They swing him back and forth, a sick facsimile of how parents would swing a laughing toddler between them.

“Stop! Stop it!” Shiro shouts, mustering as much command as he can into his voice to try to hide his panic. The guards snort quietly and say no more. Shiro cranes his head back on the upswing to see the single guard leading a compliant Sam reach out and swing a cell door open. The guard raises a gun and points it into the cell, giving Sam a shove to send him stumbling into the darkness.

The guards holding Shiro throw him unceremoniously into the cell, and his ankles crumple beneath him as he lands awkwardly, wincing. Matt trips over the threshold and the guards slam the door shut on his heels. He yelps and falls into his father.

Shiro looks around, pushing himself off the floor onto tender ankles. Muttering from the back of the cell makes Sam and Matt turn around, still helmeted. Shiro feels suddenly very naked without his own. He backs away, pushing Sam and Matt towards the door with an outstretched arm as a slinky body with far too many hands slithers through the thin bar of light cast by the slit in the door.

“Stay back,” Shiro growls, and the alien halts. With a noise that almost sounds like a sigh, it
retreats. The three hunker down in the corner, Shiro braced in front of the Holts. He’s the captain, the pilot, the guard. They are the valuable scientists, their heads holding more knowledge than any other person on Earth.

“I suppose now, knowing of intelligent extraterrestrial life, my life’s work is complete,” Sam whispers grimly, and Shiro can’t tell if it’s gallows humor or admission of hopelessness.

“We can get out of this,” Shiro whispers back. Matt reaches up and detaches his helmet with a hiss.

“How? How? We don’t know where we are, who’s holding us, what they’re going to do to us—Shiro, we don’t know anything,” Matt growls, his fear manifesting as anger.

“The Galra are our captors,” a wavering voice comes from the back of the cell. Shiro’s head snaps around, eyes now better adjusted to the darkness, and he can see the outline of some aliens sitting against the wall—four of them, if Shiro had to guess. Three blue eyes blink into existence, glowing in the dimness of the cell. The spirit in them is broken and wilted. “Soon enough, the Druids will come for you. They do for all new species the Empire collects.”

“What do the Druids do?” Shiro asks, desperate for any information.

“Everything,” a new voice speaks up, a voice that might have once been booming and deep, but now sounds no more than the low whisper of dead leaves in the breeze. “The High Priestess Haggar is Zarkon’s right hand. We hardly see her; she generally comes when someone is to be tortured.”

Shiro’s blood goes cold. He should have expected this. A hostile species. How naive of him to expect a benevolent first encounter of the third kind. The silence that falls in the cell is deafening.

Hours pass Shiro by in a half-conscious stupor. He long ago tuned out the ambient noise from the other cells; the muffled, echoed wailing of other prisoners; the stamping of guards passing by in their clacking armor. The crisp snap of stiff fabric and hush that falls down the hallway raises Shiro’s head, dread settling like lead deep in his chest. The Druids.

Their cell door opens smoothly, purplish light washing in and stinging their retinas. Shiro’s breath seizes in his chest as his eyes travel up the towering, cloaked figures of three Druids. Their pointed faces are featureless save five slitted yellow eyes, lifeless and cold. They reach in and wrap their claws around each Kerberos crew member’s bicep and drag the three to their feet. The terror that creeps through their bodies, emanating from the icy vice each Druid’s talons forms around their arms, freezes their thoughts.

“Take us to Haggar’s lab.”

The voice is sibilant, deep; it would be pleasant if not attached to such a paralyzing creature. Slowly, the meaning of those words works its way into Shiro’s stilled thoughts. Haggar’s lab. Haggar. She generally comes when someone is to be tortured.

“No,” Shiro breathes. His Druid looks down at him, cocking its head. It raises its other hand, a spark of purple light jumping between the tips of its claws, and presses the glowing arc to Shiro’s...
temple. He yells and jerks away from the electric sting of the Druid’s magic, while the Druid watches him impassively, a slight tilt to its chin. Shiro’s stomach lurches as the floor drops, realizing they’re in a descending elevator. The air chills, rushing past them through the gaps in the walls, becoming charged with electricity that tingles on Shiro’s lips.

Across the elevator, Sam’s helmet hisses as the Druid removes it. Sam looks wan, his features drawn tight. Matt stares blindly at the floor in front of him. With a sick feeling in his stomach, Shiro remembers Sam’s pacemaker. If this magic is like electricity—and it feels like it—it will wreak havoc on Sam’s heart. By the look on Sam’s face, it seems he knows it too.

The elevator jolts to a stop and the Druids file out with their prisoners, approaching an open door that glows from within with violent violet light. A hunched silhouette steps into the light. It extends one hand towards Matt.

“This one first.” Haggar’s voice is rough, like rusted wrought iron, and just as blood-red. Matt jolts and struggles feebly against his Druid, which glides inexorably toward Haggar.

No, Shiro thinks. No! He’s so struck by the Druids’ unearthly presence he can barely gather his thoughts. But seeing Matt being dragged into that torture chamber, something primal breaks through.

“No!” he bellows, straining against his Druid. Haggar pays him no mind, and Matt is swallowed by the poisonous light. “No,” he cries, weaker. His Druid raises two fingers again, magic sparking, and slowly presses the painful arc through Shiro’s skin. It races down every nerve in his body, convulsing his muscles and locking his jaw. After an eternity, the Druid lowers its fingers, mild curiosity in its demeanor as if it was a child doing nothing more than poking at an interesting bug it had found.

Shiro and Sam are dragged off down the hall, pushed into a small holding cell off to the side, fenced in only by a humming orange force field. From the laboratory by the elevator, they can hear the unintelligible rasp of Haggar’s voice, but nothing else. The hall is silent for a very long time, the Druids standing watch outside paying no attention to whatever might be happening in the lab. A sense of dread settles over Shiro. Silence is better than the alternative, but not by much.

The minutes crawl by. Shiro becomes painfully aware of the ambient hum of the ship. It grows to a deafening level, drilling all thoughts out of his head. Sam sits silently in the corner of the cell, eyes closed and head bowed. He might be praying, or steeling himself. Shiro can feel the tinnitus ringing in even his teeth, gritting his jaw.

The sudden tap of footsteps in the hall snaps Shiro out of it and the humming instantly quiets. A Druid is leading Matt down the hall. He looks no worse for the wear, save the spooked expression on his face.

“Matt,” Shiro calls. The Druids admit Matt to the holding cell and he heaves a sigh as he steps in as if he’d been holding his breath through the whole interrogation. Matt gives Shiro a slight nod. It’s going to be okay, his eyes say. Shiro sucks in a breath as a Druid reaches into the cell for him.

As Shiro is pulled closer to Haggar’s lab, he understands why Matt was holding his breath. The air is so charged it burns his lungs when he takes shallow breaths, not even sure what to prepare himself for. Stepping into the lab, Shiro screws his eyes shut against the light, opening them only just in time to see the high-backed chair the Druid pushes him into, knocking his knees out from under him so he falls hard into the seat. It seals manacles on the arms of the chair around Shiro’s wrists with a wave of the hand, glides from the lab, and rounds the corner with a whip of robes.
Haggar steps forward. “You look different from the others,” she mutters, almost to herself. “More suited for the arena. Hardy. You could do well as a test subject.” With that, she raises a hand, a ball of energy so dark it seems to suck in light forming in her downturned palm.

“I will ask you some questions, and I will know if you lie or conceal information from me,” she warns. Shiro plasters himself back into the chair as the crackling from the energy in her hand intensifies, nearly burning his exposed skin and throat.

“What planet are you from?”


“What species are you?”

“Human.”

“How advanced is human interstellar technology?”

“We only just reached the edge of our solar system. We—the three of us—were the only humans to have ever reached Kerberos,” Shiro whispers, the revelation of humans’ powerlessness in the face of the Galra Empire creeping up on him.

Haggar hums. “What do you know of Voltron?”

“Voltron?”

Haggar turns her hand palm-up, taking a half-step closer to Shiro. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Shiro recoils from the blistering energy in her grasp. “I don’t know what that is, I don’t know,” he says desperately.

Haggar’s mouth twists but she relents, the energy dissipating from her hand. Shiro falls forward, gasping. The crackling air of the lab hardly hurts in comparison. She stalks off into the light so bright Shiro can hardly see her. When she returns, it’s with several black cables that fall from the blinding brightness of the ceiling in hand. Her other hand pushes a cart in front of her, loaded with scalpels and needles and completely unidentifiable, sinister-looking instruments.

Impassively, she screws fine needles into the tips of two cables. With the third cable, she reaches down to the second shelf of the cart and pulls up what looks like an EEG cap and attaches that. Then she steps forward to Shiro.

He retreats, balling up his fists and flattening himself to the back of the chair. Panic darts across his mind as Haggar pricks each needle into a vein on the back of his hands. She settles the cap roughly on his head, then pulls over a translucent monitor. With a tap on the shining surface, electricity—or magic, who can tell—races across Shiro’s scalp, sending all his hair on edge. It feels unnervingly as if worms are crawling under his skin.


Shiro grunts, the crawling, prickling sensation in his skin approaching unbearable. Haggar looks up. Her face, though shadowed by her hood, looks more alive than those of the other Galra. Especially the Druids. As she draws closer, scientific interest written in her features, Shiro meets her eyes as levelly as he can.
They’re sharper than the other Galras’. Smarter. Shiro can almost track her gaze, as if she once had pupils but were long glazed over with that dead Galra yellow. They’re the gaze of a corrupted beast.

He won’t easily forget those eyes.

Shiro is returned to the holding cell feeling oddly empty, as though Haggar had stolen something intangible from inside him. The final Druid is just reaching for Sam, still silent in the corner, when Matt lunges and knocks its hand away from his father.

“You can’t do that to him, the electricity will kill him,” he barks. The Druid pauses. It glances over its shoulder at the others. “He’s got a bad heart. There’s a pacemaker in his chest that runs on electricity. If you shock him, it stops the pacemaker and his heart.”

For a precarious moment, everyone is completely still.

Finally a Druid swoops in, knocking Matt aside, as another hauls Sam out of the cell. The force field slams down as Matt scrambles to his feet. He pounds his fist into the field, sending white ripples through it, screaming at the Druids as they disappear into the lab with Sam. He screams until his throat runs raw, Shiro hovering just behind him.

Sam is returned to the cell dangerously pale, his face covered in a sickly sheen of sweat.

"Dad," Matt cries, grabbing his father from the Druid, supporting his limp weight. "Dad, are you okay?"

Sam sucks in labored breaths, eventually nodding. "Just... set me down against the wall," he breaths, voice weak. Shiro steps in to help Matt support him, gently lowering Sam to the floor.

"What did she do to you?" Shiro asks softly.

"An EEG," Sam pants. "The current was too strong."

"I believe she was... gathering data on our... species," Sam says, each word coming at a great cost. "Considering her sample size... I doubt she obtained satisfactory results."

"She'll want more humans," Matt breathes. Sam nods, eyes drifting shut.

"She mentioned using me as a test subject," Shiro says, and Matt's eyes widen.

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I want to know," Shiro replies grimly.
"I do know she wants... more information on human... space travel from me," Sam says, eyes still closed.

"She has to give you time to rest, she can't possibly get any more out of you like this," Matt insists.

"She has to know that." Shiro nods.

Noise in the hallway draws their attention, and the three look up in time to see Haggar stalking past their cell, not sparing a glance at them. She gives a cursory wave to the Druids standing watch. They bow their heads to her.

The Druids return the Kerberos crew to their cell, and they once more hunker in the far corner away from the four other prisoners. After the searing brightness of Haggar's lab, Shiro can't see a thing in the cell. One of the aliens says something softly to one of the others in a low tone Shiro can't pick up.

Gradually, his eyelids grow heavy. He shakes himself awake, not daring to sleep in this hostile environment. The other prisoners seem subdued enough, but Shiro isn't about to put any measure of faith in these strange aliens.

Sam leans heavily against Matt's shoulder, breaths slow but deep, a reassuring sign. Matt rests his head on top of his father's, and soon enough he slumps against Shiro's back. His breathing evens out into the pattern of sleep. Shiro slaps himself across the cheek as drowsiness sets in.

It's impossible to tell how much time has passed since the Galra abducted them from Kerberos. All that time when Shiro was unconscious initially remains completely unaccounted for. The timelessness in the cell doesn't help. The warped passage of it during the interrogation and the holding cell threw off even Matt's impeccable sense of timing. They could have already been prisoners for days and not know it. It also could have been only mere hours.

Exhaustion sets in heavily, bleeding up through Shiro's limbs, dulling his senses. No, no, no. He has to stay awake. He can't afford to leave his crew unprotected if he can help it. He slaps himself again, cheek stinging not nearly as badly as it had from the Druids' magic.

"...rest," Shiro hears one of the aliens murmur, hears one crawling close in the darkness of the cell. Through his eyelashes, Shiro sees a strangely human face draw near.

"Stay back," he slurs, fighting his impossibly heavy eyelids.

"Rest," the alien repeats softly, and Shiro can't fight any longer. Quiet darkness folds over him.

The clang of the cell door slamming open sends Shiro nearly three feet into the air. Four Galra soldiers swarm into the cell, flashlights mounted on their guns stunning the prisoners.

"Stay back!" Shiro barks, disoriented, raising fists to the guards. In a flash, one reaches out and twists Shiro's arms behind his back. One grabs both groggy Holts while the third approaches with
a knife. The fourth keeps its gun trained on the four cowed prisoners at the back of the cell. The knife-wielding guard presses the blade up under Sam's chin. His head lolls submissively back, his survival instincts very different from the thrashing Shiro's. With swift strokes, the guard cuts down through the stifling layers of Sam's spacesuit.

"Stop that!" Matt yells, his voice dangerously loud in the echo chamber of the cell. The restraining guard shakes Matt violently, silencing his protest. When Sam is completely bared, Shiro averts his eyes for the man's dignity, gritting his teeth. He hears the sound of cloth hitting the ground, then naked skin. More cloth rustling, then the rip of the knife through Matt's spacesuit. Matt bellows, hurling profanity and vitriol at the guards.

"Just shut up," Shiro's restrainer growls. Matt's spacesuit falls ruined to the floor and more cloth rustles while Shiro stares pointedly at the ceiling.

Finally, the guard rounds on Shiro and places the initial cut through the neck of Shiro's spacesuit. As it slices down the chest of his suit, something in him snaps. He hears the sound of cloth hitting the ground, then naked skin. More cloth rustling, then the rip of the knife through Matt's spacesuit. Matt bellows, hurling profanity and vitriol at the guards.

"Fuck," the Holts' guard grunts. The guard Shiro kicked rises up again, more pissed off than injured.

"What a fucking pain you are," it hisses, waving the knife in Shiro's face. Deliberately, it points the knife straight at Shiro's right eye. Terror and panic explode in his stomach and he jerks his head back just as the guard stabs the knife forward. The knife pierces the skin just below his eye and he screams as pain rips through his eye socket. The guard wrenches the knife sideways, carving a gash across the bridge of Shiro's nose as he screams.

The guard slaps the flat of the blade across Shiro's left cheek and powers his fist into Shiro's right temple. Stars burst across his vision and he groans, sick to his stomach. Blood runs in rivulets down his cheeks. All he can smell is blood. Hot copper fills his mouth. He spits it out, bloody drool running down his chin. The guard rips the remainder of his spacesuit off with its bare hands, throwing Shiro's new clothing to the ground with venom. It spits on the clothes, turns, and stalks out of the cell.

Shiro's restrainer throws him to the ground naked, wounded, and stunned.

"Shiro!" Matt cries, rushing to pick up his clothes and cover him. Humiliation constricts around Shiro like a vise and he curls in on himself, grabbing the proffered clothes from Matt's hands. He struggles into the tight jumpsuit and winces as the rough-woven shirt falls over his head. Matt's fingertips are gently on Shiro's cheeks, turning his head this way and that, trying to assess the cut in the darkness of the cell.

Shiro's gaze focuses somewhere a thousand feet through the floor, his surroundings frighteningly dull. I can't lose situational awareness. Not now. Not ever. Shiro rallies, forcing his way through the fog and his senses once again sharpen. Act now, feel later.

The more-humanoid alien, still possessing far too many arms and eyes and lacking a nose, has crawled close once more and is offering their shirt up to Matt. Shiro intercepts the shirt instead, dabbing at the blood on his cheeks. He has no intention to put this dirty rag of a shirt on a fresh wound. He keeps the shirt in his grasp, blotting each new drop of blood, until the alien retreats and the wound begins to clot. This is going to scar like a motherfucker, he thinks. Distantly, a strange sense of mourning follows the thought. Mourning for what, my good looks? Shiro snipes at himself.
"Are you okay?" Matt asks tentatively.

Shiro nods. "I'll be fine. Sorry about seizing up like that."

"Shiro..." Matt protests softly, laying a hand on Shiro's shoulder. Shiro shakes his head. Matt doesn't press any further.

"We just need to move forward. Making sure your dad is alright is our main priority right now. Later, we can worry about me if we need to," Shiro instructs. Matt nods, looking a fraction more relaxed with Shiro in his familiar commanding role.

"We need some water," Matt says, casting about for any sort of water.

"It comes with the rations," the dead-leaf voiced alien whispers. Matt nods.

"How often are those?"

"Every four vargas," they respond. Contextually, Shiro assumes a varga is an hour, but he has absolutely no frame of reference. The Galra could be particularly cruel jailers. A dobash could be a day. Who knows.

Another unknown period of time passes before a flap in the bottom of the door smacks open and several trays are pushed through, contents sloshing. The aliens don't immediately move, allowing the Kerberos crew to seize a tray before coming in for their food. The meager cup of water immediately goes to Sam, who is in dire need. Shiro insists on Sam and Matt eating first. He cleans up what they leave, and he knows Matt left far too much food out of concern for him. He shouldn't have. Still, greedily, Shiro wolfs down every last bit of whatever sort of gruel and bread they were given. Marginally more alert, he resumes his protective position in front of the Holts.

Shiro keeps time by the healing cut on his face. It’s tenderly scabbed over now, the scabs new and thin enough to crack and bleed if Shiro moves his face too much. It hurts something fierce, a burn that resonates through every bone in his skull with each pump of his heart. His eyes won’t stop watering. The tears make all the tiny cracks in the scabs sting.

Idly, he tries to distract himself by counting rivets in the door, but he finds his counting matches up with his heartbeat and his heartbeat matches up with the throbbing of the pain in his face, and it’s all so inescapable. His eyes hurt, his nose hurts, the back of his head and his cheeks, his hands where Haggar pierced them with the needles. Pain. With a grimace that only draws a fresh round of stinging from his cut, Shiro realizes his face itches.

With a tender hand, he reaches up and scrubs flakes of dried blood off his face and feels stubble coming in. Of course.

Shiro turns and squints through the dark at Sam. He has a distinct five o’clock shadow. A day? Has this really all happened in a single day? No, that has to be wrong.

“How long have you been here?” Shiro turns and asks the aliens at the back of the cell. There is some stirring, and the three eyes reappear. It seems Shiro woke them from a nap.

“There is no way to keep time here,” they sigh. “I can only guess a perquinta, maybe more. Nobody stays for more than three perquintas I’ve heard. The prisoners are regularly sorted and
“Redistributed.”

“Redistributed where?” Shiro leans towards them.

“Work camps, the arena, the mothership. The arena is the cruelest of all.”

“The Galra pit slaves against each other in fights to the death,” the dead-leaf-voiced alien interjects. “I fear… that is where I am headed. It is likely so for you, too.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone,” Shiro exclaims, a knee-jerk reaction. There is no answer from the back of the cell.

“What?” Matt asks, having come around with Shiro’s loud statement.

“The Galra send prisoners to different locations from here,” he explains levelly. “I’ll appeal to the guards to sort us to go to the work camp together. The other options are fighting in the arena or working on the mothership. They must need able-bodied people to do work, we should have a shot at it.”

“No,” the raspy voice comes out of the darkness, agitated. “You don’t understand. It is no secret they send prisoners to work camps to die a much slower death than the arena. The invalids are sent there to be worked to death. All those who can fight the guards back are marked for the arena.”

Marked? Shiro glances down at his scratchy, ripped shirt. Matt’s is the same shade of grey, from what he can make out in the darkness. Sam’s is nearly white. All the prisoners at the back of the cell are swathed in darkness, no light clothing on them. Are we all headed to the arena? Is Sam going to the work camps? I have to stop this. We can’t afford to be split up; we’ll never make it out together if we’re separated, Shiro thinks frantically, mind racing to come up with a plan.

“It’s no use,” the alien cries. “I can tell you’re trying to figure it out. You can’t! Nobody can!” They collapse into unintelligible screaming, sobbing. Shiro slaps his hands over his ears, their voice painfully loud in the enclosed cell.

“Knock it off!” a guard bellows from outside, pounding on the door. The alien pays it no heed.

They cry and cry and cry.

Hours pass, the cell once again fallen silent. Every four vargas, three trays of food are pushed through the door slot. Every four vargas, the Kerberos crew splits a tray.

Sam regains consciousness fitfully, passing out only occasionally from exhaustion. Matt worries over his father, supporting his lolling head each time he slips into unconsciousness.

Shiro picks the rest of the dried blood off his face.

Shiro’s energy dwindles and he exists in a twilight state, half-conscious, head empty, barely aware of his unchanging environment. He goes on autopilot.
Down the hall, a cell door slams open and the guards shout at the prisoners. Boots clang on the metal flooring. A high-pitched jangling alerts Shiro to something new, his head raising. **Chains. Those are chains.**

“It begins,” someone whispers from the back of the cell.

Instantly, Shiro is wide awake. Quickly, he pats his chin and cheeks, startled to find the patchy beginnings of a beard. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees Sam is sporting a full salt-and-pepper shadow and even Matt has a noticeable teen mustache. **Days. A week. A week, I’ve been in a fugue for an entire week.** Shiro’s level of alarm increases drastically.

The rattle of the chains grows louder, guards throwing open the cell just to the left of the Kerberos crew’s. Shiro rises to his feet, pulling Matt and Sam up. Sam leans against the wall, more alert than he’s been since Haggar’s interrogation. Shiro pushes his crew towards the back of the cell, anticipating the guards as they burst through the door, guns at the ready.

“Everyone out! Move!” the lead guard commands, gesturing with his gun. The seven prisoners pile out into the hallway, immediately arrested by a squad of guards at the ready. In a chaotic flurry of motion, sound, and foreign inhuman faces, Shiro finds his wrists bound in manacles behind his back, heavy chains locked around his ankles. The humanoid three-eyed alien stands weakly in front of him. Matt and Sam are chained behind him. Shiro squares his shoulders as the guards drag the macabre procession down the hall, cracking open cell after cell. The chain of prisoners stretches all the way down the hall.

Hundreds of bound prisoners are crammed into the freight elevator at the end of the hall. The memory of being taken down to Haggar’s lab springs to Shiro’s mind even as he stands packed shoulder to shoulder in a hot crowd of alien prisoners, not a Druid in sight. The elevator rises at a dizzying pace, the weaker prisoners collapsing from the force. Even Shiro sways, fighting for his balance. When the elevator jolts to a stop and the doors open, it feels like they’re stepping into an oven.

The air is hot and damp and reeks of too many bodies, rings with too many voices. The prisoners are led out single-file and Shiro sees thousands of bodies rounded into pens, overseen by masked soldiers brandishing guns and ominous-looking cattle prods. As they shuffle along, Shiro aches to press his hands over his ears for the incredible din of the hangar. A headache works up behind his eyes.

A row of soldiers stands ahead, towering over the hunched prisoners. One holds a clipboard, one an instrument that looks suspiciously like a piercing gun, another a pair of bolt cutters. Shiro’s heart races. As each prisoner passes by, the clipboard soldier points, gestures, and the bolt cutter guard moves in where necessary. Beyond that, Shiro can’t get a clear view. Too many of the other prisoners are taller than he.

The soldiers do nothing other than point and stare blankly at Shiro and Matt as they pass by, but at Sam, the bolt cutter soldier moves in and clips his chains, separating him from Matt. Twisting his head over his shoulder in a frantic attempt to see even while being herded down a chute, Shiro catches sight of the soldiers grabbing Sam’s ear and piercing it with a tag.

“Dad!” Matt shouts, voice lost in the dull roar of the hangar. A soldier waves its sparking cattle prod at Matt and he shuffles along, shadowing Shiro. The chute leads them to a pen half-full with
prisoners unlike the ones Shiro and Matt had previously seen. They’re large, imposing, and look none the worse for the wear considering their imprisonment.

Shiro keeps his distance, Matt still bound behind him, but they’re at the mercy of the two other prisoners they’re attached to. At least we’re all evenly restrained, Shiro thinks just before spotting a spiked tail lashing around behind one of the prisoners.

They’re gladiators, the realization dawns on Shiro as his cellmate’s warning about the arena comes back to him. We’re slave gladiators.

The sudden confrontation with his fate makes Shiro’s mind spin. One of them is going to kill me in an arena for entertainment on an alien world. My family will never know what happened to me. Matt—Sam—oh god, Colleen and Katie will never know what happened to them either. His eyes prickle, whether from his headache or his realization, he can’t tell.

“What happened to you, ugly?” Shiro looks up to see an eight-foot-tall gladiator with broad shoulders and beady eyes looming over him. “You half Galra or something?”

Shiro frowns. Half Galra? Why the hell would— He glances over at the nearest soldier and sure enough, the Galra has a well-trimmed purple beard. Huh. I guess I never considered aliens having facial hair. Apparently this guy hasn’t either.

“You hear me?” the gladiator rumbles, leaning down slightly into Shiro’s space. He turns his head away, ignoring the alien to the best of his ability. The gladiator snorts. “I’ll give you a lot worse than that cut once I get into the arena with you.”

The gladiator moseys back to the other side of the pen, intimidating another alien. He’s definitely got his height going for him, and with as much mass as he has, there’s got to be some real muscle behind it. The soldiers singled him out for a reason. They singled me out for a reason, too, but why? Shiro thinks, casting his gaze about the others in the pen. They’re all shades of big and burly, with the exception of him and Matt and one other in the far corner.

Maybe they throw a few weak ones in to get the real gladiators warmed up, Shiro realizes grimly, setting his shoulders.

Without warning, a door on the other side of the pen opens and the soldiers jab their cattle prods into the midst of the prisoners. Two spear the air on each side of Shiro and he sets off at a dead run for the door, the others doing the same—a stampede. Matt comes up on Shiro’s right and he looks over only to see at the last second a cattle prod coming at Matt’s head. He sticks his foot out and trips Matt, the crackling device sailing harmlessly over his back.

Then it crashes into Shiro.

Thousands of volts rip through his body, worse than Haggar’s magic, and he locks up, unable to even breathe. Every fiber of Shiro’s being is set on fire.

Just as quickly as it came, it goes, leaving Shiro nearly catatonic on the floor. His ringing ears come back online then he manages to suck in a desperate breath as massive hands come down around his shoulders and knees, hoisting him into the air and throwing him bodily through the doors. The chains yank on Shiro’s wrists and he grunts, his shoulder blooming with bright pain as he slams into the floor. Matt reappears by Shiro’s side and the pilot forces himself to his feet, regaining his bearings as best he can considering his spinning head.

In the few seconds of light streaming through the doors before they close, Shiro sees they have
been herded into the belly of a cargo vessel. He pushes his way between the other slaves, trailing Matt and the unknown third and fourth prisoners chained to them, until he reaches the wall and leans against the webbing there, grasping it as best he can with his bound hands.

“The ship’s gonna lurch when it takes off,” Shiro says gruffly to Matt. He nods and pushes his body into the webbing too, not wanting to stumble into one of the more violent prisoners milling about the belly of the ship. Soon enough, the engines roar in the pitch black and the ground heaves. The two prisoners bound to Shiro and Matt nearly fall over, dragging Matt to his knees. He grunts at the impact. When the other prisoners don’t stand back up, Matt resettles into a seated position and Shiro kneels warily beside him, watching the other prisoners and fighting waves of dizziness and pain.

They’re in the belly of the ship for what feels like days. None of the other slave gladiators make any further passes at Shiro or Matt. Nobody really moves too much after the first few hours. Shiro is strung tight as a bow string. The engines of the ship vibrate through his tense body. When they cut off suddenly, he nearly falls limp before realizing the real fight is only just about to begin.

The door to the belly groans, giving Shiro a second’s warning to close his eyes before light comes flooding in. He hears cries of pain from other prisoners—Matt included—as the light blinds them.

“Get out of there! Move!” Guards are once again shouting. Shiro’s head is pounding. He cracks his eyes open just enough to see, turning towards Matt.

“Come on, buddy, we gotta get up,” he says, doing his best to help Matt into a standing position. The prisoner chained to him doesn’t move. Shiro leans around Matt, calling to the alien, “hey, can you get up? We’re getting off the ship.”

The alien doesn’t respond. The other prisoner on their other side nudges the unresponsive one with a foot. Still no stirring.

“Are they dead?” Matt asks softly, with growing horror. The guards’ shouting grows louder. Prisoners are shoving into the three as they stand still, quite in the way of the evacuation.

“What the hell are you standing around for?” a guard bellows as they reach the group.

“They’re dead,” Shiro says, gesturing to the downed prisoner.

“And? Get moving!” The guard raises its gun threateningly. Matt and the third prisoner startle, jerking forward and struggling to drag the body of the fourth prisoner across the floor towards the exit. Nausea rises in Shiro’s throat.

The three haul the body all the way out of the ship into another holding pen. There, a soldier comes around with a pair of bolt cutters and detaches the body from their group, dragging it carelessly to the edge of the pen by one ankle before tossing it and the bolt cutters over the edge of the pen. On the other side of the pen, unseen, the body lands with a dull thud. Matt suddenly pushes his face into Shiro’s arm.

“Hey, hey,” Shiro says gently, wishing desperately he could put his arms around Matt to give the boy some form of comfort. The two are now freed from any other prisoners, joined only as a pair. The increased mobility and guarantee of Matt’s proximity alleviates the tiniest fraction of Shiro’s anxiety. “We’ll get through this.”
Matt doesn’t respond. After a moment, he seems to compose himself and pulls away from Shiro. He gives a brief nod, meeting Shiro’s gaze for just a second. For Matt’s sake, Shiro pretends he doesn’t see the tears that welled in the boy’s eyes.

“Form two lines, single file!” a guard bellows from somewhere up above. The prisoners shuffle to comply. Shiro pushes Matt behind him, wary of what could happen next. Blindingly bright lights snap on overhead, eliciting groans from photosensitive prisoners. Four guards move down the line. Machinery held in their hands makes loud clicking and hissing noises that echo up the corridor. Shiro peers around the hulking alien in front of him to see giant metal blast doors, tightly sealed with a pulsing red light above the seam. Nothing about this feels good.

“Arm.” The guard on Shiro’s left grabs for his bicep at the same time as the guard on his right reaches behind him and unlocks his manacles. Something in the guard’s hand emits a whirring noise, and sharp pain lances through Shiro’s arm. The guards move on, the discarded manacles falling to the floor with a deafening clatter. Shiro grabs his own arm, tugging on the skin to see what the guard did to him. There are two parallel, thin cuts on the back of his bicep, smeared with a black ink. They tattooed me.

Shiro looks over his shoulder to see Matt holding his tattooed bicep, eyes blank.

“Hold still,” a mechanical voice demands and Shiro whips back around to see a robotic guard holding a gun trained on him. Shiro very carefully straightens up and turns around, boring his eyes into the back of the alien prisoner in front of him until the robotic guard relaxes its stance. The four guards march back up to the head of the two lines. All the prisoners stand in varying degrees of cowed silence.

“You will be divided up momentarily according to the marks we just placed on you,” one bellows in a particularly deep voice. “Group 11 will be going into the arena first. Group 44 will be going into the arena in 3 dobashes.” As it shouts, robot guards come through and pull prisoners aside according to the tattoos on their arms. Matt and Shiro are pulled into the same group. Shiro gently takes Matt’s arm and looks at the marks. A jagged 11, incriminating and bloody, stands out on his pale skin through the rips in his shirt. Matt’s face is blank and solid. He gives Shiro a firm nod, as if the pilot is the one in need of reassurance. At this point, though, Shiro will take all the reassurance he can get.

“You’re doing great, kid,” Shiro murmurs under the cover of the other prisoners’ noises.

The clanking sounds of the robot guards moving in unison draws Matt and Shiro’s attention in time for them to see group 44 being herded away down a dim side corridor.

“Now,” the guard bellows again, attention snapping back to it instantly. “The gladiator you will be facing is Myzax. You will not be given any weapons. You are not encouraged to fight back. This is a fight to the death. This door will open in two hundred ticks. If you flee, you will be shot.”

With a horrific sinking feeling deep in his chest, Shiro looks around at group 11. They’re all the smallest slaves to come off the shipment. We’re appetizers. He turns quickly to Matt, bending down slightly to eye level with the boy. He looks destroyed.

“Matt—”

“Don’t tell me it’s going to be okay, Shiro,” Matt hisses, meeting the pilot’s eyes. “Because it’s not.”

Shiro sets his jaw. He pushes down on the panic that’s trying to rise, desperately trying to figure
out how to survive this situation. Everyone in the group is being sent to slaughter for entertainment purposes. We can’t fight back—no, no, we can fight back, but without weapons… if we were to all rush this Myzax, could we win? Is there any way out of this arena alive?

As Shiro’s thoughts run a mile a minute, the guards prod group 11 back into two single-file lines. “Ten ticks!” Shiro reaches a hand back to make sure Matt’s still behind him. The boy grabs Shiro’s proffered hand, gripping hard for just a moment before a guard intervenes with a shout and a brandished gun. The red light pulses green, a buzzer drilling into Shiro’s eardrums, and the doors grind open to the breathy roar of an unfathomable crowd.

Group 11 marches forward into a vomitorium at the edge of a sandy arena. It’s so vast, the crowd of hundreds of thousands is lost in the darkness outside the arena lights and the screams are dulled to a wind-like whooshing. Behind Shiro, there’s a thud and a huff of breath. He looks over his shoulder to see one prisoner collapsed. Two robotic guards drag the prisoner away immediately.

The idea hits Shiro like a freight train. The alien’s words in the cell come back to him. The invalids are sent there… They can’t fight if they’re already injured. Shiro looks around covertly, trying to see what he could injure himself and Matt with, nonlethally enough to get them out of this gladiator fight. If he looks eager enough to fight, maybe they’ll only put him in the ring. Maybe he could spare this group. The robot in front of him is holding a bladed scythe-like weapon. If he catches it off guard, he could feasibly grab the weapon, cut Matt…

He takes a deep, steadying breath. Time is running out for him to act.

In one explosive movement, Shiro knocks the robot down, rips the weapon from its grasp, and swings it down across Matt’s leg. It’s at that exact second Shiro realizes he’s not going to make it. He can’t injure himself fast enough.

“This fight is mine!” he bellows, calling up any acting skills he has, tightening his fists around the scythe-like thing. Almost instantly, Galra guards are on Shiro, restraining him, trying to pull the weapon from his grasp. He shouts, kicks, fights back.

“Matt, I’m sorry!” Shiro screams over the guards, Matt’s betrayed, broken, hurt face seared into his mind.

“This one’s ready to fight!” one guard growls to another through a grin as they frog-march Shiro to the edge of the sand. “Since you’ve got such enthusiasm, we’ll let you keep the blade, eh?”

Shiro’s mouth twists with a bitter taste. Enthusiasm. Sure. It hasn’t registered that he’s about to die. That he’s volunteered to be killed for sport. It’s a distant recognition, but it hasn’t taken visceral root in his gut. Shiro knows he should be afraid, sick, horrified, and he is, in the most detached sense, but his immediate body is calm and ready.

The guards toss Shiro forwards into the arena. His knees hit the sand and suddenly the air-like whooshing of the crowd becomes a lion’s roar in his ears. The lights are so blinding he can’t make out the size of the crowd in the seats high above the walls of the arena. Four metal pillars soar from the center of the ring up into the lights. Standing there in the center of the pillars is a huge, bulky alien holding a staff, arms raised up into the air as he revolves slowly to pump up the crowd. Myzax.

The Gladiator turns suddenly, eyes fixed on Shiro. All of a sudden that sick terror hits like a bullet to the chest and Shiro nearly retches from it. He forces himself to his feet, ignoring his body trembling like a leaf in the wind, and raises the scythe in front of him. A hundred yards across the arena, Myzax laughs. For a very long, tense moment, the two stare at each other unmoving. Then
the screeching of metal makes Shiro almost jump out of his skin and he whips around to see the
guards lowering a metal grate across the vomitorium. Matt is nowhere to be seen. The other aliens
of group 11 are being shepherded out of sight. A deep, inhuman scream that rattles in Shiro’s
bones whips him around to the sight of Myzax charging, staff raised.

Shiro runs.

He sprints to the cover of the nearest pillar, praying Myzax lacks maneuverability considering his
massive size. A bizarre, humming-crackling noise buzzes in the bones of Shiro’s skull and he
ducks at the last second as a ball of energy? comes whipping around the corner of the pillar,
slamming into the metal where Shiro’s head had been just one second earlier. Shiro eyes the
smoldering dent it left in the pillar and doesn’t dare speculate what the orb would have done to his
head.

The ball disappears around the pillar again. Shiro leans out enough to see Myzax holding his staff
aloft, the orb perched on top. The second the Gladiator spies Shiro he whips the ball back at him.
The pilot bolts for the next pillar, narrowly dodges the ball again. He knows at some point he has
to actually fight this alien, but he’s almost frozen with terror, capable only of reacting.

*Act now feel later, act now feel later, act now feel later.* Shiro scolds himself over and over, forcing
himself through the foggy binds tight around his body. He hefts the scythe in front of him, taking a
few deep breaths. *I’ll charge him, try to get in under his defenses since I’m smaller.* His legs
don’t move.  *Move! Move, move, move! Fuck!*

Suddenly, Shiro stumbles forwards, his body moving of its own volition now. He scrambles in the
sand, darting out from behind the pillar, gunning for Myzax. The Gladiator raises his arms again,
guard completely open, and Shiro lunges.

Profound pain sears through Shiro’s spine. His face hits the sand and he barely rolls out of the way
of Myzax’s kick in time. The staff comes down on his other side, the sand hissing and fusing into
glass as the energy orb hits it. Shiro yells, gathering his feet underneath him, swinging the scythe
wildly at Myzax as he backpedals. He escapes behind another pillar, panting furiously; he hits the
dirt hard as the buzzing of the orb burns through the air and it sails over his head, arcing like a
boomerang back to Myzax’s staff.

All Shiro can hear at this point is his own ragged breath and the pounding of his heart in his
eardrums. He feels the approach of the energy ball like lightning on his skin. Over and over, it
swerves nearer to him, whipped around by Myzax’s staff. Every time Shiro dodges the ball, he
falls within range of Myzax’s staff or hands or feet. Every hit that lands on him sends waves of
pain through his bones and sinew like earthquakes; every hit worse than the last, quickly
approaching catastrophic. Something’s going to break—*I can’t take much more*—

Shiro dodges another one of Myzax’s fists, the hair on the nape of his neck rises and he throws
himself to the ground to avoid the energy ball as it returns to Myzax’s staff. The staff hums, ball
locking into place; the pitch of its hum rises to an ear-splitting level and Shiro rolls away yet again,
sweat and blood dripping down his temples, skin stinging, bones screaming. The Gladiator
brandishes his staff, but the ball doesn’t launch.

Retreating yet again, Shiro slumps against the pillar, his awareness of the screeching crowd
returning for half a second like a migraine, like a nightmare. Fighting for breath, Shiro tries to take
stock of his injuries but every part of his body hurts, howling like the crowd—every alarm bell in
his head is going off; every system is on the edge of failure, when it breaks—when *he* breaks—
he’ll die—
The ball comes flying around the pillar and Shiro nearly sobs—*I can’t take this!*—over and over again. It’s a sick dance, the second Shiro missteps he’ll fall victim to this Gladiator. The ball locks into the staff again, hissing, ringing, aching, *migraine*. A cyclical pounding in his head, the noise drilling straight into the core of his brain. *Every three passes, over and over—fuck, every three passes!* Shiro realizes. The ball can’t fly immediately after the third launch. It recharges. It’s too late now, the buzzing of the staff reaches the pitch at which it hitches, clicks, and the deadly orb goes flying.

A second wind carries Shiro away to relative safety, once again in the shadow of a pillar. He grits his teeth, crunching sand between them, and counts down the orb attacks. The moment the third orb attack passes, he lunges out from behind the pillar, weaves through Myzax’s thrown punches and brandished staff. The buzzing of the staff screams like an alarm in Shiro’s ears, rising pitch counting down the seconds he has left for this moment. *It’s do or die.*

Heat courses down Shiro’s right arm, running into his armpit and down his flank. He looks down, shocked at the hot purple liquid flowing down his body. His eyes trace the path of it back up his side, his arm, his hand, the scythe, Myzax’s neck. The Gladiator stands frozen, one eye wide, the other destroyed by the scythe blade where it pierced his eye socket. Shiro recoils in instant horror—the scythe blade is stuck; he can’t unclench his fingers from their death grip on the weapon—it jerks free with a spurt of blood, bitter in Shiro’s open mouth. He yells, gasps, spits, vomits onto the arena sand. The sound of the crowd bellowing returns gradually, like someone turning up the volume dial once more. Guards come for Shiro while he is still lying prone in the sand gagging on his own vomit. They stomp viciously on his right hand until his fingers involuntarily release the scythe under the abuse. They drag him from the ring, sand rubbing exposed skin raw through the rips in his slave rags.

The cold of the vomitorium, away from the arena lights, is unbearable. Shiro’s body seizes almost instantly, shivering as if battered by strong winds. The guards’ voices don’t register as words. His ears are still ringing. The pain catches up to him, jumping on him from behind, and Shiro screams as he’s suddenly aware of cracked ribs.

“...have a Druid look at him,” a guard mutters. Shiro shakes his head weakly. *No Druids, no Druids.* Every breath is like a stiletto knife stabbing him in the side. The guards swing him one-two-three and send him flying into a dark cell. The impact forces a pained cry from Shiro’s lips. He spits sand and bloody saliva onto the floor, coughing, still tasting the bitterness of Myzax’s blood.

So cold. *I need to get warm, I need to take stock of my injuries,* Shiro thinks. He knows he has to. He has to. But oh god, everything hurts so much, it’s so cold. Shiro doesn’t know how long he lies shivering on the floor of the cell, feeling every injury throb with each beat of his heart. When the door slides open, *so much quieter than the holding cell door*, and a Druid’s crisp-rustling robes enter the room, Shiro rolls over onto his side, peering up at the narrow-eyed mask.

“No, please... no,” he whispers faintly. It drains the last of his strength. When the Druid descends and wraps long, cold fingers around Shiro’s wrists, he can’t protest. It turns him over onto his back as if he’s no more than a paper doll, probing at his body with sharp fingertips. Each jab into his ribs elicits a hiss of pain, every poke at a sore muscle a groan, the brush of fingertips across cuts and scrapes a whine.

“Bring him to a healing pod. Set it to the baseline measurements we took from his species earlier,” the Druid says over its shoulder in a strangely warbling voice. It reminds Shiro of speaking underwater.
With that, the Druid leaves the cell. Two guards come in and pick Shiro up by the shoulders. The only thing he can do is give a breathy groan of pain as the action tugs at his cracked ribs. They haul him down corridor after corridor, each colder than the last. Shiro knows where he’s going as the chill seeps into his bones. He’s going to the Druids’ labs. Haggar’s lab.

“No, no,” he breathes. The guards either don’t hear him or pay him any heed.

The lab isn’t as blindingly bright this time. Shiro’s vision starts to swim, the pain clouding his head and making his breath come in short, tight gasps. A glass dome covers a table in front of him. A Druid slides its fingers along the glass. The dome parts along an invisible seam, hissing with the release of pressure. One guard moves to take Shiro’s arms, the other his legs; this time they set him gently on the table unlike the other times where they’ve sent him sailing unceremoniously through the air.

The Druid’s pointed mask is the last thing Shiro sees before the glass closes and seals itself, the pod going dark. The metal table underneath Shiro warms from his body heat. Hissing fills his ears, chalky air seeps into his lungs. His eyes close of their own accord.
A Small Human Comfort

When Shiro’s eyes open, his heart leaps with instant panic, but he sits up slowly, blinking around his cell, trying furiously to gain his bearings though his head is spinning in circles and his body feels brittle as glass, but whole. The cell he’s in is dimly lit. It’s plain. He’s sitting on some sort of cot, suspended above the floor by wires. A thin, prickly blanket is draped haphazardly over his legs. His slave rags are new. No scratches from the fight. None of Myzax’s blood.

Myzax’s blood. Shiro shivers, chilled on an emotional level. I killed someone. I killed an alien for sport in an arena. With spectators. People watched me kill someone. He looks quickly at the floor in the center of the cell. His spit and blood has been scrubbed away, leaving no trace. At least there’s that.

He stands slowly, putting his feet down on the floor. It’s cold, as everything seems to be on this ship. Galra must be warmer-bodied than humans, Shiro supposes. If they’re really all covered with fur like the ones he’s seen, it makes sense. The temperature is still shocking after the desert-like heat of the arena underneath the flood lights.

What do I do now? Do I just wait for them to come get me? Will they make me fight again? It’s a slow and sickening realization. I killed Myzax. I’m a gladiator now. They’re going to keep me and make me fight until someone else kills me.

Shiro shivers, and it has nothing to do with the temperature of the cell.

The shivers become racking tremors.
The tremors become sobs, muffled behind his hands.

Act now, feel later, Shiro tells himself, fully knowing now has become later. Every emotion comes crashing down on him, held back long enough to become putrid. The grief, pain, terror, horror feels like a hot infection spreading through his brain. I’ve been kidnapped by aliens and separated from my crew. I don’t know if Sam and Matt are even alive at this point. Matt—oh god, I hurt Matt. Shiro doesn’t even want to think about the consequences of his actions, but the thoughts come anyways. I could have sent him to his doom. If he’s too injured to fight or work they’ll just kill him. I killed Matt.

Tears drip down Shiro’s cheeks, off his chin, pattering quietly on the blanket in his lap. His breath hitches and hiccupps and he fights it as hard as he can, but his traitorous voice comes forth with quiet wails of grief. There’s no other sound in the cell apart from Shiro’s broken weeping.
Nothing from outside the cell. He’s stuck alone with the sounds of his own mind breaking down.

After a long, bitter time, Shiro’s tears stop. He has to wonder if he’s dehydrated to the point where he can’t make tears anymore. His throat burns, parched, gritty as if filled with arena sand. Shiro’s head is empty. It’s the emptiness of moors, foggy and haunted and deathly ill. Soggy. Lifeless. He raises his head to see a tray of food on the floor in front of the door. He has no clue when that arrived.

When he manages to get on his feet and pick up the tray of food, Shiro realizes it’s cold. It must have been there for a while. It’s far more food than was given to them all in the holding cell, but Shiro can’t find it in himself to be grateful. He goes for the water first and downs it in one go. He
can still feel the grit of the arena in his throat, the bitter taste of Myzax’s blood.

Shiro only eats the food once his stomach catches up to him and reminds him he’s absolutely starving. His rational brain is MIA. No thought that enters his head is coherent, fully formed. They’re all wisps of ideas he can’t quite grasp. His entire being feels untethered. Lost.

Gradually, Shiro comes out of his stupor. He measures time by food trays. By the third food tray, he can think again. And his first thought is shock at how long his facial hair is. I’ve nearly got a full beard, he marvels, running his palms over his scratchy face. It’s not one of his favorite feelings. Beards always seemed so… unkempt. As the product of a military upbringing and Garrison training, Shiro hated unkempt things. Clean-cut and tidy is the order of the day, every day. His hands itch for a razor and a mirror.

The next thought that occurs to him is the healing progress of the cut on his face. The scabs have started to peel up at the edges. It’s painful, so he knows the skin underneath isn’t fully healed, but it’s itchy as well. It’s definitely getting there. I must look like a monster. Cut face, dirty, bearded, Shiro laments. He runs his hands through his hair, adding shaggy and greasy to his mental list of appearance infractions.

Maybe I could ask the guards for a razor…? Shiro wonders, then immediately shakes his head. They wouldn’t allow a prisoner anywhere near a sharp object if they’re any degree of smart. So far it seems like they are.

That doesn’t stop Shiro from asking the next time a guard cracks open the door to push in a tray of food.

“Please?” he asks, sounding as naive and innocent as he can. That actually gives the guard pause as it sets the tray down on the floor. The visor obscuring its eyes gives Shiro no clue as to where it’s looking, but after a long moment, it slowly withdraws from the cell. Shiro tries not to feel too disappointed as he collects the tray. He takes a small portion of the water to try to wash his face, running his finger across his teeth to try in vain to scrub off the layer of film. He resolutely does not think about how disgusting a state he’s in.

The cell door bangs open and Shiro nearly jumps. He catches himself at the last moment, sets his tray down on the bed beside him, body instinctively tense as three guards enter the cell. One holds a pair of handcuffs; the others, the cattle prods that had been used to sort the slaves. Shiro knows they’re taking him back to the arena. He knows the cattle prods are because he’s proven himself to be dangerous. He stays carefully still as the three guards approach. They’re all equally wary of each other. Shiro very slowly raises his hands, palm up, so the guard can cuff him. No sense in making this any worse than it has to be, I guess.

Once cuffed, the cattle-prod-wielding guards take Shiro’s arms by the biceps. The third guard takes point, leading them down cell-lined hallways lit with the same purple light that permeates the ship with its sickly glow. With every step, Shiro’s trepidation and nausea grow, expecting to hear the whooshing roar of the crowd at any second, smell the dry heat of the sand. But it doesn’t happen.

Instead, he hears the babble of low voice, punctuated by guffaws and the clinking of metal. It sounds almost like… a dining hall? They round the corner to a sight so eerily familiar Shiro nearly reels with vertigo. It’s a military barber shop.

Purple-furred Galra soldiers are sitting in barber’s chairs, cloaked with black capes, as Galra
barbers trim their hair and fur, clip their ears, shave their faces, trim their eyebrows. The chatter is relaxed and genial. Soldiers call out to each other. Barbers crack jokes.

Shiro feels sick.

It’s too familiar.

It’s too human.

Some soldiers stop talking and stare at Shiro as he’s led by. He can feel their pupil-less yellow eyes following him. The guards escort him to an empty chair at the end of the row. A barber steps up, wordlessly throws the cape around Shiro’s neck. The three guards stand by, silently watching at a distance, but still close enough they could easily grab Shiro if he tried anything. So he doesn’t. He sits perfectly still as the Galra barber makes a couple of pensive loops around him, studying him from all angles.

“Pretty pale, innit he?” the barber finally laughs. One of the guards chuckles. “Stupid haircut, from what I can see. Hey gladiator, you want the same dumb haircut?”

The barber leans into Shiro’s view, over his shoulder. Shiro nods stiffly, resenting the comment, but surprised they’re actually giving him an option for his hair.

“Aight,” the barber grunts, reaching over Shiro’s other shoulder to grab clippers. Every normal, familiar thing only makes Shiro sicker. This could be a human barber shop on a military base at a PX. It could all too easily be the base where Shiro grew up in Okinawa, where he got haircuts with his dad ever since he was a young boy. Right now, he could look over and see his dad grinning at him from the chair on his left, getting his high-and-tight touched up. It could be his first haircut, when his mom came with them and sat off to the side, giving Shiro a big thumbs-up and snipped it right off his head. He could feel the fringe of his freshly-cut hair tickle his cheeks. He feels the buzz of the clippers on the back of his head. His eyes close to the sensation of the clippers vibrating through his skull.

“I think he likes it,” the barber laughs, snapping Shiro abruptly out of his memories. Eyes flying open, Shiro finally catches sight of himself in the mirror. He looks like a fucking wreck. He looks away so he doesn’t have to face that gruesome reality. The clippers on the back of his head, running from nape to crown, are comforting in a way, as long as Shiro can close his eyes and delude himself into thinking he’s just a child again, getting his first real manly haircut with his parents. It’s comforting as long as Shiro can ignore reality.

The barber turns the clippers off. Shiro hears the barber snap a different guard onto the clippers, then feels them vibrating across the top of his head.

“Wait,” Shiro blurts as the barber approaches his fringe. “Leave the fringe, please,” he begs. There’s a note of desperation in his voice that he can’t control. Carefully avoiding paying attention to himself in the mirror, Shiro meets the barber’s eyes in the reflection. The barber looks confused.

“What, this mess?” the barber grabs at the long tuft of hair hanging over Shiro’s eyes with two claws.

“Yes, please. Could you leave it long? Just trim it up to my eyebrows?” Hope soars in Shiro’s chest when the barber shrugs and exchanges the clippers for a pair of scissors.

“Alien hair,” the barber mutters, combing through the fringe and cutting it level with Shiro’s
When the barber’s done, one of the guards speaks up.

“He wants his face shaved, too.”

The barber looks down at Shiro. “You want your face shaved too?” Shiro nods. “You don’t want anything stupid done with that too, do you?” Shiro shakes his head. The barber sighs and walks away where Shiro can’t see, then returns with a straight razor, a few unfamiliar items, and a towel.

“Tip your head back,” the barber intones, then addresses the guards. “He’s cuffed, right?”

“Yessir,” one guard replies. “He’s been pretty smart. I think he knows he isn’t to try anything cute.”

Shiro suppresses an annoyed growl. He doesn’t know why he’s getting this privilege, but he isn’t going to push it, for risk of losing it.

“Filthy.”

Shiro sits very, very still as the barber lathers his face up and carefully shaves him with the straight razor. It’s a positively luxurious experience. Again, Shiro finds himself falling into memories of his first barbershop shave, when he finally started growing facial hair at 18. His father had taken him and though Shiro had been inordinately proud of the wisps on his upper lip and neck, he’d been even prouder when his whole face was clean-shaven with a straight razor. He’d soared on the wings of elation when his dad wrapped an arm around his shoulders, looked him in the mirror, and said they looked just alike. Shiro had laughed, pointed out the fact that his dad was white, and his dad had put him in a quick headlock to ruffle his hair. They’d both been laughing.

“Anything else *his highness* wants?” The barber’s question, directed at the guards, once again pulls Shiro out of his reminiscing. He raises his head to see the guards all shaking their heads. The barber nods once, clears all the tools away, removes the cape, and lets the guards collect Shiro.

As they put their hands on Shiro’s arms again, pull him upright, Shiro takes a risk.

“Can I shower? Brush my teeth?”

The guards exchange a look. The one without a cattle prod gives a one-shouldered shrug.

“He can’t go into general population and we already have him out. Might as well?”

Shiro sags in relief, though his emotions are at tense odds with his rational brain. The Galra are… alarmingly human, and Shiro can’t wrap his head around it even though his emotions are telling him to take comfort in the uncanny familiarity, to take comfort in any sort of familiarity, no matter how alien it is.

The guards lead him a short distance through the barber shop and through a changing room where other Galra soldiers are coming and going from the communal shower room. They take him into a side room.

“We’re gonna take the cuffs off. Don’t try anything cute, ‘cause we will put you down if you do,”
the guard growls at Shiro while unlocking the cuffs. “You won’t be out of our sight. Don’t get any ideas.”

Shiro nods, rubbing his wrists reflexively as he’s freed from the cuffs. He takes stock of the room, of the guards blocking off the sole entrance, of the shower head in the far corner, of the waist-high wall between the guards and the shower head. Small mercies, Shiro thinks. He peels his slave rags off behind the wall, praying the Galra don’t know enough about human anatomy to question him.

They say nothing as Shiro showers. He can’t tell if they’re looking at him or not, but he still showers self-consciously, keeping his arms as close in to his body as he can while rubbing the dirt off his skin with only his hands and tepid water. He doesn’t ask for soap.

He’s deposited back into his cell clean, shaved, and trimmed. His food tray is still on his bed, the food cold now. Shiro sits down next to it, picking halfheartedly at the food.

Is this all because I killed Myzax? he wonders. He thinks back to distant history lessons where he learned of the ancient Roman gladiatorial fights and the Colosseum. It’s really not so different. And it looks like I killed their top gladiator. I guess that’s why I can’t go into general population.

Because I made myself a target.

By Shiro’s estimate, it’s about a week before the guards do anything with him again. And thank god, because he’s been going out of his mind. Pacing the cell, doing push-ups and crunches, talking to himself, methodically distancing himself from his emotions, studiously avoiding another breakdown.

The door swings open without warning—there’s never any warning, Shiro thinks snidely—and sets him on edge. He’s tense, and the guards can tell the second they walk in the cell. In one smooth movement, they cuff him and point the cattle prods at him. One mutters to the other something Shiro can’t quite catch, and he realizes these are the same guards that took him to get cleaned up.

“Where am I going?” Shiro asks, more abrupt than he intended. He doesn’t want to give these guards any reason to use the cattle prods. Once was more than enough.

“The training deck. Gotta make sure you’re in fighting shape, right?” the guard responds with a rather nasty grin. Shiro sets his jaw and stares straight ahead, letting the guards lead him to the training deck.

He smells the training deck before he hears or sees it. The reek of sweat is so pungent, Shiro nearly recoils. Then he hears grunting, the clang of weights on racks, the whine of treadmills. He prepares himself for another uncanny sight.

There’s a sign next to the doorway Shiro can’t read. The guards pause in front of it, then one of them seems to realizes Shiro probably can’t understand it.

“It says you don’t talk to any of the other gladiators, you don’t touch ‘em, you don’t spar, you don’t use any one machine for more’n a varga, ‘n’ you don’t leave anything dirty, got it?” one guard says. Shiro nods, his body tight with anticipation.
They lead him into the gym and uncuff him, stepping into place to block the entrance.

Shiro breathes a sigh of strange relief at how alien the scene in front of him is. Sure, there are free weights which look the same as back on Earth, but the machines are clearly configured for alien anatomy, and there’s a wide variety of highly inhuman species represented. No memories of Okinawa float to the surface of Shiro’s mind. He distracts himself from that train of thought before he can get lost in any such memories.

It feels good to work out. It’s the easiest thing Shiro’s done since he’s been abducted. The training deck is nearly teeming with guards standing about the edge of the huge room, wandering between the machines, overseeing some prisoners’ exercises. As such, none of the gladiators so much as look at each other. Shiro keeps his eyes carefully on the floor, or a point high enough on the wall nobody could think he was looking at them, or on the ceiling. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see some truly unnerving aliens. He’s vaguely aware of the reality that they’re all here training together just so that they can fight and kill each other at a later time. He doesn’t think too hard about it. It’s a theme. Not thinking too hard about reality. Reality is too horrifying.

As Shiro is bench pressing a comfortable amount of weight, a guard comes over and impassively spots him, despite Shiro having set the safety bars on the weight rack. The visor prevents Shiro from seeing where the guard’s looking, though he has the uncomfortable notion the Galra is staring straight at him. Shiro closes his eyes.

When he’s done, Shiro sits up on the bench knowing he’ll be hurting tomorrow and relishing the idea. He casts about for any sort of water, eyes landing on another guarded doorway that looks like it leads to a shower room. He makes his way over and the guards stand aside just enough to allow him to enter a communal shower room. Uncertainty wells up in Shiro’s gut, but he wades through it and strips down, staring strictly ahead at the wall as he rinses the sweat off his body. He pushes back on the growing fear in the back of his mind of rape. *I can’t panic. If I panic, nothing good will happen. I just have to shower, dry off, put my clothes back on, and leave. None of the aliens here know about human anatomy. They don’t have that social conditioning. I’m fine, I’m fine,* he tells himself over and over again, trying to make himself believe it. He finishes his shower quickly.

Shiro is able to work out a schedule with his guards. He’s figured out these particular three guards are assigned to him. They’re relatively amenable to Shiro working out every day, getting a shave twice a week. Shiro knows he shouldn’t feel grateful that he killed Myzax, but he does.

The guards come for him late today. Shiro knows something is up. The guards don’t speak to him, don’t speak to each other. The air is charged. *Something’s wrong.*

When Shiro smells dry heat and hears rushing air, his heart drops into his toes. His blood chills in his veins. He balks. The guards drag him forward, undeterred.

“What happened to you? You were so bloodthirsty before,” one guard snaps at him, teasing. Shiro remembers the persona he conjured up to save Matt. *They respect me because of my bloodlust,* he realizes. It goes against every fiber of his being, but Shiro manages to call it up again, to puff his chest out, to strain forwards against the guards.

“Didn’t know I’d be fighting today!” he shouts, internally sickened by his words. The fear that he’ll start believing his own act is so real. The guards laugh.
“There’s our boy!” they holler. Shiro could vomit.

One guard thrusts a bladed weapon into Shiro’s arms after he’s been uncuffed. It’s not unlike the scythe he’d used to kill Myzax. He gets a solid nod from his guards before they push him out into the sand of the arena, lower the screeching metal grate from behind him. They call encouragements to him as they lean up against the grate, pumping their fists and whooping when Shiro looks over his shoulder at them. They’re like cheerleaders.

This is all so sick.

Shiro treads cautiously into the center of the arena. A thousand possibilities whip through his head. Every one of his senses is on high alert. Screeching metal draws his attention to a group of guards lowering the grate across another vomitorium. Shiro doesn’t see any other slave in the arena. His heart sinks even further as he entertains the possibility his opponent is invisible, that he’ll die today, gruesomely, as a spectacle for entertainment.

Flapping noises draw Shiro’s attention up. Leathery wings spread on top of the pillar closest to him. An emaciated face peers down over the side of the pillar. The wings disappear. Shiro takes several deep breaths.

Aerial attack.

The gladiator dives from above, screeching so shrilly Shiro swears his ears bleed. He only rolls out of the way at the last second, nearly cutting himself on his own weapon. The noises of the crowd get lost under the frantic pounding of his own heart.

Unlike Myzax, this gladiator attacks with no rhyme or reason. Shiro withstands five-minute-long barrages of dive attacks before the gladiator disappears for uncomfortably long periods of time. He understands the gladiator is resting, or analyzing Shiro’s strategy, during these disappearances. He hates knowing he has to take his opportunity during the next attack to kill this alien.

There’s the sharp crack of skin snapping taut, wings opening suddenly. A dive. Here it comes. Shiro braces himself, face turned skyward, only to see the gladiator descending on him like a winged skeleton. Ragged claws reach out for him and Shiro ducks through them, swatting at the gladiator’s limbs, only to be buffeted by the wings as the gladiator climbs again for the next dive.

Shiro knows what he has to do. He pushes down the bile in his throat and switches the weapon over to his left hand. His dominant hand has to be free for this.

The gladiator dives, screaming. Shiro steps just to the side, waits for the gladiator’s claws to come down, then like lightning seizes a bone-thin leg in his right hand. The gladiator reels, tries to climb again, but Shiro pulls it back down. In one motion, he throws it into the sand, steps on its chest, passes the weapon back into his right hand, and spears the blade through its head.

There’s no blood. There’s only a puff of smoke, spores, dust? Shiro can’t tell. The alien’s body doesn’t change at all in death. Nothing indicates it’s even passed other than the lifeless stillness of the body.

The cacophony of the crowd crashes back down on Shiro before his guards reach him. They clap him on the back and shoulders even as they cuff his arms behind his back and congratulate him.

“Climbing the ranks!” one shouts in his ear, but Shiro pays no mind. In somewhat of a daze, he allows himself to be escorted to the showers, warily uncuffed so he can clean up, then re-cuffed and returned to his cell. Makes sense they’d cuff me after a fight. I could still be high on
adrenaline, Shiro muses, staring at the familiar barren walls of his own cell. It feels so wrong, so fucking wrong, that he’s this calm after killing another alien for sport.

*You’re just doing what you have to in order to survive,* a treacherous (but not incorrect) voice whispers to Shiro. *It was going to kill you or you were going to kill it. Don’t pretend there were any other outcomes.*

“But why am I surviving? What’s the point?” Shiro hisses back at the voice. It says no more, leaving him alone with his thoughts, forcing him to wonder if he’s finally cracked.

Shiro knows, though, on some level, that that little voice is the smartest part of him.
In the next week, Shiro falls into an easy routine of exercise, food, pacing, and visits to the barber. The ease of the routine makes him uneasy. Every morning he watches for any minute changes in the manners of his guards that might give him just a few moments to prepare himself for a fight.

With the omnipresence of guards in Shiro’s new life as a slave gladiator, it’s not hard to understand why he feels constantly watched, but the one thing he can’t put his finger on is why he feels constantly scrutinized. It goes beyond watching to keep peace. He knows that every waking hour, someone is analyzing him like a specimen in a petri dish. Especially on the training deck. Those guards seem unusually attentive to Shiro’s need for a spotter. He can feel their eyes on him every time he touches a weight.

They’re studying you. There’s that smart voice again. It’s not wrong. Shiro is loathe to call it right, though, because that smart voice speaks for reality, which he is still doing his best to ignore.

So he lives out his days in forced ignorance, all the while feeling sick with the knowledge of what’s actually happening to him, what’s actually happening around him.

Once every two weeks or so, Shiro is thrown into the arena with a poor new gladiator. Sometimes it’s a vicious one-on-one fight that leaves Shiro at death’s door (like his fight against Myzax), other times it’s a free-for-all where a half dozen weak little aliens have been poorly armed and sicced on Shiro. The only constant, however, is that every fight is different. Every time he kills, he feels a little less, though that doesn’t mean it gets easier.

When Shiro’s guards come for him this morning, there’s a grim air around them Shiro hasn’t seen before. It’s not the restrained, oddly somber joy of a fight. It’s an almost mournful sense of foreboding. It makes Shiro break out in a cold sweat.

“What’s happening?” he asks as they cuff him.

“Druids want to see you,” one guard intones. Shiro’s blood turns to ice.

“No! You can’t do that, you can’t take me there,” Shiro shouts, writhing in the guards’ grips. He’s gotten strong enough that he can actually knock them off their feet—the second the guard’s armor hits the floor with a clatter, a cattle prod is buried between his ribs and thousands of volts of agony are ripping through Shiro’s body.

“We can, and we are,” the guard says coldly, removing the cattle prod and helping the fallen guard up. They haul Shiro to his feet and drag him through the corridors. Any sense of civility is abandoned in favor of harsh brutalism. It’s once again strikingly clear that Shiro is the alien slave, and these guards are the ones in power here—they will do with Shiro as they please, and he will comply or be punished. Shiro is frightened that this dynamic ever became so obscured in the first
The air grows steadily colder, more electric, as they press on. When they reach a tightly sealed blast door flanked by two Druids, Shiro’s guards shove him towards the towering, cloaked figures. The Druids swoop in and wrap their icy-cold clawed hands around Shiro’s arms. With a wave of the arm, one of the Druids opens the blast door. They lift Shiro over the threshold, into the electric air of the lab. The door closes with an oddly quiet and painfully final hiss behind Shiro.

Inside the lab, it’s dim. The only exception is a prepared surgical table, spotlit and surrounded by trays of tools. Shiro balks hard at the sight. His jaw is locked tight. No words can force their way out. The Druids don’t care one way or another. They toss Shiro up onto the table. Each moves with dizzying speed to secure straps around Shiro’s head, torso, legs, ankles, and left wrist. One Druid steps back and disappears into the absolute darkness of the lab. The other remains at Shiro’s side, holding down his arm with so much force, Shiro fears the bones are going to crack. He bites his tongue.

The Druid returns with an oddly familiar figure in tow. They step into the surgical light, the newcomer looming over Shiro’s face.

*Those eyes.*

Haggar looks into Shiro’s gaze with an inscrutable expression. She gestures for both Druids to back off and stupidly, Shiro makes a desperate pass at striking Haggar with his one free arm. With an almost lazy hand gesture, Shiro’s arm is pinned solidly to the table. He grunts, straining against the invisible bond, but to no avail.

“Begin recording,” she says to a Druid, eyes not leaving Shiro’s once. “Experimental procedure Traz 034: replacement of organic matter with synthetic prosthesis. Mark 034 powered by quintessence. Piece not formed before attachment,” Haggar speaks in her jagged voice as she moves around the table, absentmindedly touching the instruments. Horror grows within Shiro as the witch continues to narrate the operation.

“Procedure will begin with disassembly of the organic limb, then advance to preparation of the nerves to receive the prosthetic. The prosthetic will then be formed and attached simultaneously via quintessence infusion method. Estimated duration of procedure, 4 vargas. Is the subject prepared?” Haggar directs the last question at the Druids, who suddenly descend on Shiro.

“Subject is self-reported human, an advanced species from the local group 675-9GN,” Haggar’s voice continues in a flat, almost disinterested tone, as the Druids tape sensors to Shiro’s skin, carefully cutting away sections of his slave rags to make room for them. They prick needles into his veins and settle an EEG cap over his head. “Subject was chosen due to baseline statistics that indicated it would be an ideal candidate for an experimental surgery. Baseline is remarkably similar to Galra baseline; individual subject possesses excellent healing factor. Note the electrical activity of the brain during stimulation.”

With that, Haggar turns back around to Shiro. Her eyes almost seem to glow under her hood. Bright. Intelligent. Curious. Cruel.

She reaches for a tool not unlike a laser pointer, but decidedly more sinister-looking, and makes her way back around the table to Shiro’s right side, where his arm remains pinned by an overwhelming invisible force.

“Beginning disassembly.”
Haggar lifts Shiro’s arm straight into the air. It stays where she puts it; Shiro grapples soundlessly and futilely to move it. The arm doesn’t feel like his anymore, completely out of his control. Then, with the laser pointer, Haggar draws a straight line around Shiro’s bicep, just below the head of his deltoids. Nothing happens.

Then—

Pain so intense it almost doesn’t register as pain—something more, something completely fucking inhuman—spears through Shiro’s right arm. He screams through clenched teeth, eyes screwed shut, head reeling with the intensity. His arm goes numb, like nothing’s happened—then his eyes fly open and fix on his raised arm.

The skin is cadaver-pale. There’s a fine red line in Shiro’s skin from Haggar’s laser pointer. But that’s not what has him staring unblinkingly in profound horror, trying to physically recoil away from his own body, to shrink through the table and run away from this abomination.

Shiro’s fingertips are undoing themselves.

The skin of his fingerprints is winding off in thread-thin ribbons, disappearing up into the light. Tiny droplets of blood float up and away with the fingerprints. Five wet popping noises—forever seared into Shiro’s memory—signal his nails have detached. They rise from his hand. Fingerprints fully unwound now, the skin of each finger peels back like a banana being opened.

Fat globules of blood float upwards into the light. The delicate muscles of each finger wriggle away from the tendons and bones of Shiro’s hand like fat red worms.

The pain hits him again, all at once.

A thin, white thread running underneath the muscles lifts away from the bone, unspinning gently into strands finer than hair.

It’s savagely unreal.

Fire, hotter than hell, scorches through Shiro’s nerves, searing his brain. He whites out in the agony.

Shiro screams, the rest of his body thrashing violently against the restraints as he’s forced to watch the flesh of his hand literally falling off his bones. It all floats upwards towards the light like gruesome confetti. A Druid reaches out and plucks one plump finger muscle out of the air between its claws.

“Don’t—” Shiro manages to get out, before his voice turns to incoherent shrieks of agony. The Druid pops the muscle into a small vial and pockets it.

By the time Shiro’s arm is fully de-fleshed up to the line on his bicep, Shiro is sobbing uncontrollably.

A Druid steps in with a pair of scissor-like pruning shears. Shiro wails as he realizes what’s coming.

“No no no no no,” he begs, screaming through his tears. The Druid cuts clean through Shiro’s humerus. The other Druid pulls the skeleton away. Shiro is left staring at empty space where his arm was just minutes ago.

My arm, they took my arm, it’s gone, my arm is gone—my whole arm, my healthy arm, my right
“Begin attachment and formation of the prosthesis,” Haggar cries above Shiro’s sobbing. A Druid approaches the stump with a drill, drives a pin deep down into the remaining bone. Shiro’s voice breaks, scream going silent and choked. This pain defies description. There aren’t words awful enough.

Haggar and the two Druids are each holding a circular metal device with purple-glowing triangular ports now. Fine streams of glittering dust are issuing from the ports, floating around the stump. A pin sticks straight up out of the core of Shiro’s severed humerus, bleach-white in the light and in contrast to the bloodied bone around it.

Shiro fights for air, gasping each breath desperately, as he watches the dust dive down into his open veins and tissues. *It burns.*

Metallic tendrils burst forth from Shiro’s flesh, wriggling like worms as they wind themselves together into cables. Shiro’s screams are broken and rasping. Layers upon layers of metal glaze over the cables, interlaid with fine vein-like threads. It’s a metal mockery of the arm they have just destroyed.

Each thrashing cable clicks as it solidifies, separates, rotates to form finger bones. Shiro watches in sick, horrific fascination as the metal arm fleshes itself in shining grey steel and dull black silicone. The Druids and Haggar lower their devices, setting them down on the trays. The only sound is Shiro’s ragged, shallow breathing.

“Commencing neural connectivity testing,” Haggar intones and picks up a thin, needle-like wand. She inserts it into the joint between hand and forearm, what’s supposed to be the underside of Shiro’s wrist, and Shiro cries out in shock and revulsion when he feels something thin and sharp poke the soft underside of his right wrist—the wrist he just watched be picked apart. Haggar pokes several other places on the arm, and Shiro is freshly horrified each time when he feels it as if his *real* arm was still there.

“Procedure is complete. Functionality testing will be conducted at a later date after sufficient recovery time. End recording.”

“Sedate him so he can’t remove the prosthesis. We don’t want a repeat of Mark 033.”

“What—no—” Shiro gasps, right as a Druid’s mask is shoved in his face and his world goes black.

Shiro sits upright in bed with a fierce ache in his right shoulder. He rolls it, trying to stretch some of the soreness out. *I guess I went too hard on the shoulder press yesterday,* he thinks as he yawns and looks over to the door in anticipation of breakfast. He doesn’t have to wait long before a guard opens the door and slides in the tray, giving Shiro a cryptic look before wordlessly closing the door.

*Strange.* Shiro shrugs it off; stands to retrieve the tray, immediately staggers to the right. *The hell?* His right arm is oddly heavy. He looks down, and his blood runs cold. His arm. *It’s metal. That’s not my arm. What is this? What happened to me? When did this happen? Who
Panic rises like fire in Shiro’s throat and he falls to his knees, horrified when the arm moves as normal, as Shiro wants it to, as it should be moving. *No, no! This isn’t mine! Where’s my arm?!*

Shiro staggers to his feet and throws himself at the door, pounding on it with his real arm. “What happened to me?” he bellows, hoping in vain someone with an answer will hear him. “What did you do to me?!”

Nobody comes.

He turns away, holding the fake arm out in front of him. His body shakes, shivers, trembles with fear and rage and horror and violation—the arm does not move. “Get it off,” he mumbles, pulling at the forearm of it. “Get it off, get it off! *Get it off me!*” he screams, ripping and clawing at the metal and silicone, gasping with the pain as it feels like he’s tearing into his own real skin.

Despite the pain, Shiro gets his fingernails under the edge of a silicone patch on the elbow and rips it off. A scream tears itself from his throat, tears welling up in his eyes. When he looks down at the ragged strip of torn black silicone, he expects to see blood, to see his own skin grasped in his hand. It makes him ill—there’s no blood, no abused skin, no wound. It shouldn’t feel like this, it shouldn’t feel like anything, it shouldn’t feel like this alien abomination is his because it’s not mine, it’s not mine, it’s wrong! It’s not mine—

“*Knock it off!*” a guard slams something heavy into Shiro’s door, the impact ringing around the room. Four of them fling the door open; it hits Shiro and knocks him into the wall. He gets to his feet and rounds on them, fists already swinging, ducking under the cattle prod to land a kick to a guard’s knee, stupidly opening his guard to throw a brutal haymaker into the side of a guard’s helmet. The impact reverberates up the fake arm; Shiro feels the dull ache of it in his bones, forgetting the arm isn’t his own, isn’t his bones, until he flexes his hand to grab the handle of the cattle prod and realizes his fingers aren’t broken.

Two guards down, Shiro grabs the cattle prod and rips it out of the last guard’s hand, flipping it around to electrocute the Galra. The downed guards grab at Shiro’s ankles and he stumps on their fingers, heedless of the crunching of bones and their screams. He bolts through the open door, looking around the hall wildly, expecting to see more Galra coming for him. The hall is empty of people, but filled with the shouting of the downed guards like sirens. Shiro sets off at a dead run. He rounds a corner, only to run face-first into the chest of a Druid.

Shiro is on the floor, writhing in agony. Cold, black lightning lances through every nerve in his body. It happened so quickly it takes Shiro’s brain several harsh moments before he realizes the Druid stunned him. The pain leaves aftershocks running through his limbs, paralysis heavy over his body. The Druid bends down and plucks the scrap of black silicone from Shiro’s clenched left fist, holding it up for inspection before taking the fake arm between its long, thin fingers and turning it to see the ragged spot where the silicone had been ripped from.

“You should not have done that,” the Druid warbles. Shiro still can’t move. From fear, paralysis, or pain, he can’t tell. The Druid straightens up, tucking the silicone into its robes, and snaps its fingers. Within moments, a veritable platoon of guards, all armed, comes rushing down the hall. They manhandle Shiro onto his stomach, cuffing his arms behind his back, chaining up his ankles, stuffing a black cloth bag tight over his head. Something hard—a boot, who knows—hits him in the temple and Shiro reels, unable to even struggle as they pick him up and carry him roughly down the hall. The electricity of the cattle prods crackles on Shiro’s skin. He knows they must be only inches from his skin, waiting for Shiro to struggle, to give them an excuse to hurt him again and again.
There’s the whoosh of a door opening, then the air becomes cold and dry. *The lab.* Shiro keeps perfectly still, his sense of survival going quiet. Coming out swinging didn’t work out well. The guards swing him and toss him up onto a hard surface (*a table?*), his arms pinned underneath him, shoulders crunching painfully, forcing a groan from between Shiro’s clenched teeth. The bag is suddenly ripped off Shiro’s head and the rush of cold, electric air into his lungs burns. He gasps like a fish out of water, until his lungs adjust. Impassive guards stand in a ring around him, no Druids in sight. It’s at that point Shiro realizes he’s not in the lab. He’s in a medical room.

The walls are white and sterile, brightly lit. Metal cabinets line one wall. Between the guards, Shiro catches a glimpse of alien machinery.

“Stand aside,” a surprisingly soft voice says. The guards part for a Galra in medical whites to step up to the table. Shiro squints up at him. His fur is so pale, so fine, streaked with white. His expression is severe as he surveys Shiro. “What did you do to yourself?” he mutters, less of a question to Shiro and more of an observation as he takes Shiro’s jaw in one hand, turning his head this way and that. Shiro keeps silent and still, keeps his jaw clenched.

“Uncuff him,” the doctor says to the guards. The soldiers hesitate a moment, obviously wary of Shiro, before two step forward to remove the cuffs from Shiro’s wrists. He pulls his arms out from underneath him, wincing at the strain in his shoulders. He yelps as the doctor suddenly slaps bracelets around his wrists that bind him down to the table, arms outstretched. Shiro’s fighting instinct returns and he pulls against the binds, lifting his arms a centimeter off the table before the bracelets snap back down to the table with the groaning of metal which speaks to powerful magnetism.

“Please cooperate. It will make this process much more pleasant for both of us,” the doctor says as he pulls a penlight out of a pocket on his long scrubs. He holds Shiro’s eyes open with two fingers, shining the light into his pupils. “Follow my finger with your eyes only.” The doctor holds up one finger in front of Shiro’s face, watches intently as Shiro tracks the moving finger with his eyes. The Galra doctor runs blunt but precise fingers over Shiro’s head, then moves on to tapping his ribs, and finally manipulates both knees before returning to Shiro’s head.

“It appears you have a concussion,” he says, looking down into Shiro’s face while eyeing the guards sideways.

*Soft eyes,* Shiro thinks. *This Galra has much softer eyes. Maybe it’s just because he’s so pale.*

“While the sample size for your species is disappointing, the witch did gather excellent neurologic baseline readings from you, *if not much else,*” he mutters the last part under his breath, so no-one but Shiro can catch it. “So I can say with confidence you are concussed. Your initial trip to the healing pod after your first fight seems to have been effective. There is no evidence of lingering hairline fractures in your ribs.”

The doctor turns and addresses the soldiers, “if you ever want him to fight again, he needs at the very least twelve quintents’ rest. Anything sooner and he could suffer permanent brain damage.” They don’t move. “Well? Run off and tell your officer, whoever oversees the arena. Be prompt,” he barks, and half the guards hurry out of the room.

“And as for this,” the doctor once again turns to Shiro, this time lifting the fake arm off the table with no difficulty. He pulls a cable down from the ceiling and secures the bracelet to it. Shiro is still held immobile, arm out in front of him. A dizzying sense of deja vu crawls over him. The doctor scrutinizes the arm for a few moments before concluding, “this is a Druid matter.”

“No,” Shiro gasps, finally finding his sense of resistance. The doctor meets his eyes, expression
blank and inscrutable. He detaches the cable from the fake arm and attaches it back to the table. Then he gives a nod to the guards and exits the room.

The guards swarm Shiro, binding and bagging him with incredible efficiency that leaves him reeling as they carry him from the room. The heat of the hallway is startling after the chill of the exam room, but it isn’t long before the icy, stinging, electric air of the Druids’ lab hits him. He feels the guards exchange him over to the Druids. Their claws prick his wrists and ankles.

Then he’s up on the table, unbound and able to see suddenly—the Druids snap those magnetic bracelets back on him, dragging the fake arm up into the air to examine it. The déjà vu is sickening now. I’ve definitely been here before. The Druids definitely did this to me.

The Druids murmur to each other; Shiro can’t catch what they’re saying. One of them pulls the silicone scrap out of its robes, holding it up to the area from which it was ripped. The second Druid pins it to the fake arm with a single claw. Shiro can feel the pressure of the touch in his elbow. It’s not real, it’s just a phantom sensation, he tells himself. The first Druid then holds up a circular device with a glowing purple hole in the center. Glittering dust issues from the hole and Shiro instinctively recoils because a deep, animal part of him knows it hurts. He shakes his head, trying to push himself away from the dust, but he’s pinned too well in place.

The second the dust touches the fake arm, Shiro feels a prickling-burning heat on his elbow. The silicone itches as it fuses back to the fake arm. The Druid’s claws are sharp enough Shiro feels like it should be puncturing his skin, but the silicone does not give way.

Seemingly satisfied, the Druids vanish and the guards converge.

“Wait.”

Haggar’s voice rings through the lab and the guards freeze.

“Let me see him.”

The witch approaches the table, dwarfed by the Druids and soldiers. Her authority is absolute, power unmistakable. She holds one hand out over Shiro; his vision goes blurry, head stuffed with cotton, unable to form a thought.

“Keep him sedated for the period Ulaz ordered for his recovery. It’s clear he can’t be trusted with his new arm. If he damages it again, however, it will be your heads for letting it happen,” Haggar growls, dropping her arm and swooping back into the darkness of the lab. Shiro’s head clears marginally, though still dazed from contact with the Druids’ and Haggar’s magic.

Something pricks his neck and within seconds, Shiro’s vision closes down to pinpoints, then goes completely black.
Shiro bobs in and out of consciousness.

Like twilight, everything is dulled. Occasional flashes of purple light smear across his vision.

Noise is warbling, gurgling, like listening to a bathtub drain underwater.

When he finally surfaces, it’s not with a gasp, but a groan. Shiro winces at the scratchiness in his throat, scrubs his hands over his face to feel unkempt stubble on his cheeks and chin. He sighs. **Wait.**

That hand—

Shiro is gripped by oddly familiar, visceral horror at the sight of a metal arm in place of his right arm but abruptly, the panic is smoothed over by calm acceptance that is not Shiro’s own. Impassive, he regards the metal limb, flexing its fingers, admiring its responsiveness, almost delighted by how touch-sensitive it is. _They did a good job_, Shiro thinks—he knows that thought isn’t his own, but he can’t call up another thought to replace it. It’s only foreign, positive thoughts and emotions about this arm.

Then his attention slides right off the arm like water across a bird’s feathers. It’s hard to focus on it for too long, something alien buried deep in Shiro’s mind discourages him from it, makes him give up.

It takes Shiro a long moment to gather himself enough to stand. Every bone and muscle in his body aches, as if he’s been sitting still for far too long. That’s also when he notices a bracelet around his left ankle. It’s a dark, dull metal with a luminous purple line running around it. The second his feet touch the floor of the cell, it begins flashing. Dread settles heavy on Shiro’s shoulders.

Moments later, three guards enter into Shiro’s cell to find him sitting calmly on his bed, hands settled on his knees in front of him, staring far into the unseen distance. “How long have I been out?” he asks calmly, eyes refocusing on the guards as he lifts his gaze. The guards look at each other in mild confusion—this is a very different prisoner than the one before.

“About fourteen quintents,” one answers. Shiro nods.

“What happened to me?”

“Uh—” one guard starts, but another one cuts in suddenly.
“You got concussed. You’re healed now though.”

Shiro’s eyes narrow in suspicion. He raises his right hand. “What about this?”

_I know I didn’t come here with this, but I can’t remember when or how it happened, and I know you know._

The guards shift nervously. Haggar hadn’t given them any instructions on this other than to keep the subject from learning about the procedure.

“We don’t know. That’s above our pay grade.”

Again, Shiro’s eyes narrow, but he lets his head droop, chin touching his chest. His right hand drops back down to his knee. “Alright, then. Do whatever you’re going to do with me.”

The guards cuff Shiro.

His mind has been messed with. Shiro knows this is absolutely true. _Whoever did this to me altered my memories. I don’t know how or why, but I know my thoughts aren’t mine anymore._

He’s learned to think in very careful circles around the subject of his new arm. Concentrating too hard on it is fruitless, resulting only in a headache and frustration as his concentration, maddeningly, keeps slipping.

He’s settled back into the routine established after his fight with Myzax, before the fight with the alien he called the Banshee. They haven’t made him fight again—yet, his mind supplies—but the guards, or whoever oversees the guards, have been very enthusiastic about Shiro’s exercise and nutrition. Shiro knows he’s being fattened up, so to speak. They’re putting more muscle on him than he’s ever had before. It forces him to ponder whether or not the Galra know about testosterone, or his implant.

This time, Shiro knows he’s going to the arena before the guards even cuff him. He stays silent, stoic, preparing himself for the fight. He’s well aware he could die. It borders on hyperfocus, how keenly Shiro is aware of his own mortality in the moments before a fight. Sure, he’s six for six in fights. The spectators scream “Champion! Champion!” every time he’s thrust into the ring. If Shiro had more presence of mind out on that hot, blinding sand, he’d abhor the name.

The metal grate goes screeching down behind Shiro. His opponent is yet to enter the ring. In a sudden flash of panic, Shiro becomes aware of the fact they haven’t given him his scythe.

“Hey!” he shouts, turning back around to face his guards. They don’t respond to him. “I need a weapon!”

“You got one!” one of them shouts back. Shiro looks around his person, then the arena, searching frantically for a weapon lying in the sand. The arena is empty. There’s still no other gladiator in the ring. The crowd is roaring—Shiro learned long ago to tune it out, but now it’s overwhelming, ringing in his ears.

Then the grate on the other side of the arena groans. Shiro whips around to see his opponent, and his heart leaps, panicked, into his throat. The gladiator staring him down two hundred yards away is big—as big as Myzax—and covered in spines. Even from this distance, Shiro can tell he’d be eviscerated if he caught its wicked-looking claws.

_I can’t do this—I have nothing to defend myself with—fuck—_

The gladiator drops onto all fours and paces forward, carefully, into the center of the ring. Its gait
is apelike. Shiro freezes, still only a few paces from the vomitorium. His guards are jeering at him, shouting derogatory comments.

Then it all snaps into place.

The crowd and his guards fall away. Shiro’s vision fixes on the gladiator advancing towards him. He runs. The only option he has is to use the same strategy he did with Myzax until he can figure out how to kill the gladiator. Unlike Myzax, though, this gladiator pursues him.

It’s startlingly fast given how stocky it is, bounding at Shiro with a roar as the pilot throws himself behind the nearest pillar, rolling over his shoulder, springing back up onto his feet—the gladiator only meters behind him, claws extended—

It takes Shiro a good ten seconds to realize he’s been hit. Blood running down his abdomen and legs, dripping into the sand—he reels backwards, fighting for his balance as his head suddenly empties, going dizzy; he recognizes there’s a clock ticking now until he bleeds out. Shiro pushes himself harder, faster, trying desperately to come up with a strategy to not die. Nothing comes, his head frightfully empty, running only on survival instinct.

The gladiator is never more than three paces behind Shiro, pursuing him relentlessly, claws reaching out to catch the pilot, showing no signs of tiring. Shiro’s blood is spattered across its face and hands, sand sticking to the wetness of it. The sand in Shiro’s countless wounds stings.

*I can’t keep doing this, it’s going to kill me. I can’t think straight, I’m bleeding out—I’m going to die like this.*

Shiro’s back hits the wall of the arena. He winces at the impact, eyes going wide at the realization he’s cornered. The gladiator doesn’t slow it’s approach. The last thing Shiro is vividly aware of is the gladiator’s clawed hands reaching out at him. A scream tears itself out of his throat—he looks down, holding his guts in his arms—*it doesn’t hurt too bad*—his leg crunches, buckling beneath him—the gladiator’s gaping dagger-lined maw bearing down on him—

“No!” Fire lights down Shiro’s right arm; he’s so far gone with pain he hardly notices—something hot and squishy is in his hand. It takes him nearly a minute to process what he’s seeing. His right arm, glowing blindingly purple, is thrust up through the roof of the gladiator’s mouth. His hand closed in a fist around its brain. *Is that bone?* Shiro’s left leg is crushed, bent at the wrong angles in the wrong places, flesh torn off it in huge chunks. A vague stinging sensation all down Shiro’s back tells him it’s been savaged too—he took so many hits to the back to try to prevent this exact situation, to prevent evisceration. His breath comes in shaky gasps, louder than his weak heartbeat in his ears. It’s dead silent.

The pain crashes down on Shiro all at once like a thousand-ton weight. He screams, collapsing in on himself, blacking out before the guards can even reach him.

«Toshiko, are you awake?»

*Takashi opens his eyes slowly, blinking the grogginess from them to see his mother’s face, a soft*
grin on her lips.

“It’s Takashi, remember?” he croaks.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” his mother nods, sitting lightly on the edge of Takashi’s bed. The beeping of monitors around him is the only sound in the little hospital room. She takes one of his small hands between her warm ones, stroking his palm with her thumb. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” Takashi finds his voice. “I can’t feel my arm.”

“Of course not,” his mother chuckles, looking down at the cast on her son’s left arm. “You’ll be on quite some painkillers for a few days.”

“Hey, sport.”

Both Takashi and his mother look up as his father enters the room, closing the door quietly behind him. He has a bowl of ice cream in his hands. Grinning eagerly, Takashi reaches out for the ice cream, ignoring the tug of the IV at the crook of his right elbow. His father places the bowl carefully in Takashi’s lap, handing him a spoon.

“Surgery went great. Your arm’s all fixed up; now all you’ve got to do is heal.”

“Yay,” Takashi mumbles around a mouthful of ice cream, prompting a laugh from his father.

“Mom?” Shiro mumbles, opening his eyes slowly to the sound of beeping monitors. “Dad?”

“So you’re awake.”

Shiro’s eyes fly open at the blunt voice. A pale Galra is standing at the foot of Shiro’s bed, holding a translucent tablet. Shiro’s cognizant that he’s seen this Galra before, but can’t remember when or where. It’s the same sort of slippery inability to think that surrounds his right arm.

“I didn’t expect you to survive the surgery. Color me impressed,” the Galra deadpans, moving around to Shiro’s side. He shines a penlight into Shiro’s eyes, presses his fingers carefully to Shiro’s temples, reaches up to one of the unseen monitors above Shiro’s head.

“What happened?” Shiro’s voice is rough. He feels like he’s floating six inches above his body.

“Quite a fight. The witch was pleased.”

“The witch…?”

“Don’t concern yourself over it. You’re in my care right now,” the Galra says, just a hint of sharpness to his voice. “I am Ulaz, your primary doctor.”

“Huh,” Shiro mutters. I have a primary care doctor.

“If you have need of more pain medication or the Druids come, press this button to reach me. They are not allowed to see you right now while your body is healing from severe injury.” Ulaz presses a small clicker into Shiro’s left hand, then departs the room. In his absence, Shiro realizes there are two guards sitting in the corner of the room, watching something on a tablet between them.
It dawns on Shiro slowly that they’re watching his fight. He can only see a bit of the image, but it’s enough. There’s the sand of the ring, then that gladiator bounds across the screen. The crowd is quieted in the recording, the commentator babbling on at such a rate Shiro can’t keep up with the words. The camera refocuses and zooms in on Shiro crouched against the wall, staring down the gladiator. He’s bloodied and torn to shreds already.

With growing horror, Shiro watches the gladiator lash out with both hands, its claws sinking deep into Shiro’s abdomen, ripping it open. His guts spill out suddenly, Shiro lurching to catch them. Bloody drool drips from his mouth. Another swipe shatter’s Shiro’s leg and he goes down. The gladiator lunges in for the killing bite, then the recording goes into slow motion. Shiro’s right arm blazes with searing purple light, rippling down from his shoulder, lighting up hidden circuits. He throws his arm up in front of him to shield his face, but his hand slices through the roof of the gladiator’s mouth, into its brain cavity, like a hot knife through butter.

If he wasn’t so drugged up and high on painkillers, Shiro would feel something. But he feels nothing other than distant, morbid fascination. Part of him understands why this is entertainment. It’s brutal and savage, but thrilling to watch in a very sick sense.

“Even disemboweled, the Champion was able to kill his opponent! What is this alien, and where can we get more?” one of the commentators laughs from the tablet, voice tinny.

“Well I have to say, he would have been done for without that arm. What’s up with that?” a second commentator, deeper-voiced, chimes in.

“I heard—and now this is just a rumor—but I heard it’s an experimental weapon for soldiers.”

Shiro’s thoughts catch on the subject of his arm. He gains a foothold on the idea, the words ‘experimental procedure Traz’ coming to mind suddenly. I was experimented on. The painkillers dull the sense of violated rage that fills Shiro’s chest like a bloom of fire, like an explosion.

Then the rage is sucked away, exhaustion filling the vacuum. Shiro passes out.

The next time Shiro’s conscious and Ulaz is in the room, he speaks up. “Why didn’t you put me in a healing pod, like the first time?”

Ulaz turns to look at Shiro, lowering his tablet. “The Druids handled you after your first fight. They can’t fix a body, but at least they knew enough to throw you in a healing pod and hope it would fix you. The injuries you sustained in your most recent fight were too great for a healing pod to handle. They required surgical intervention. Once you are strong enough, we will put you in a healing pod to accelerate your recovery.”

Shiro gets the sense Ulaz doesn’t approve of the Druids.

In about a week, under the watchful eye of Ulaz and round-the-clock guards, Shiro is deemed ready to face the healing pod. Instead of being carried to the Druids’ lab, the healing pod is wheeled into Shiro’s room. Ulaz watches the guards like a hawk as they oh-so-carefully transfer Shiro from his soft bed onto the metal of the healing pod table.

Ulaz pauses before he lowers the glass dome over Shiro. “We estimate this might take up to seven quintents. I’ll be here when you wake up.” Then the glass comes down and soft hissing fills the
Shiro loses awareness with just a faint sense of reassurance from Ulaz’s promise.

Shiro first becomes aware of crisp snapping in his ears.

“Excellent. Are you awake?”

Opening his eyes to the sight of Ulaz’s washed-out face bending over him, Shiro groans, realizing Ulaz was snapping to wake him.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m alive,” Shiro grumbles, mouth dry and cakey. Ulaz gives a soft huff that, if Shiro didn’t know any better, he would call a laugh.

“I will give you a minute to collect yourself before I look over you to ensure you are fully healed. Have some water.” Ulaz thrusts a cup of water into Shiro’s hand as the pilot sits up slowly. Gratefully, Shiro sips the water and waits for the fog in his head to clear while Ulaz moves about the room. The guards are silent by the door, kept at bay by the doctor. When Shiro nods to Ulaz, the doctor comes over to him, penlight at the ready.

“Please remove your shirt.”

Shiro pauses. *This is new.* Ulaz waits pointedly. Shiro knows he doesn’t take no for an answer, so grudgingly he pulls his scrub shirt off over his head. He deliberately keeps himself from glancing down, knowing he’s not going to like what he’s seeing. Then Ulaz holds the tablet up, and Shiro recognizes that position: Ulaz is taking pictures.

“Why are you taking pictures?” Shiro snaps, flinching as he resists the urge to cover his chest.

“Documentation. Your healing abilities are unparalleled, even by Galra standards. I would be lying if I said you aren’t of interest to me.” Ulaz says, looking up from the tablet. Shiro grits his teeth. *Why did I expect him to be any different than the other Galra? They all want to use me, just in different ways. I’m just an experiment to them, a toy, disposable.* So he sits still, against his will, and Ulaz circles around him, moving his arms and tilting his head to take comprehensive photos of Shiro’s chest and back.

Then Ulaz moves in to begin touching Shiro. He does the concussion test Shiro has become so used to, then carefully examines the freshly-healed scars across Shiro’s shoulders.

“I will admit I am impressed at how little this graft scarred, considering how hyperactive your scar tissue is,” Ulaz mumbles, running a finger along the nearly-seamless line between Shiro’s skin and the metal of the fake arm. It makes Shiro shiver. On one level he can feel a difference between the metal and his skin, but on another level, the feeling that his arm is whole and organic glosses over the difference. It’s like seeing double.

Ulaz’s big, cool hands ghost down Shiro’s chest and abdomen, pausing at his nipples and navel. Then his hands return to Shiro’s pectorals. He taps Shiro’s chest with a finger.

“These are surgical scars.”

Shiro makes the mistake of glancing down.
His entire front is a twisted, ropy mass of scar tissue. Gnarled red scars strike across his skin from every conceivable angle, puckered, forming chasms and divots in the muscles of his body. Shiro’s head swims. A scar nearly three inches wide cuts his abdominal muscles in half. It’s exquisitely sensitive in a very uncomfortable way. Every scar feels raw, like flayed skin, like the inside of his body. He gasps, choking back a noise that’s somewhere between gagging and sobbing.

“What are they from?”

Shiro’s gaze snaps up to Ulaz’s eyes. The doctor’s face is startlingly close to Shiro’s, his fingertips still resting against Shiro’s pectorals. “Uh—” Shiro gasps, scrambling for words, “top surgery—mastectomy—”

“Pull yourself together,” Ulaz commands, flicking Shiro in reprimand. The pilot clams up immediately, his military training kicking into gear from the back of his head. He can rely on this. This is easier. “What is mastectomy?”

“Complete removal of breast tissue,” Shiro intones.

“What?” Ulaz presses, flicking Shiro again when the pilot dodges his gaze.

“I was born with breasts, but I had them removed.”

Ulaz leans back, seemingly satisfied. Then he reaches into a deep pocket on his scrubs and pulls out a vial with a small white plastic rod inside. Shiro can’t suppress his gasp. My implant.

“What is this? I found it in the inner skin of your left bicep.”

“It’s a testosterone implant—I need that back, put it back,” Shiro growls, gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles turn white.

“Why?” Ulaz asks again, and Shiro gets the maddening impression Ulaz is teasing him.

“I don’t naturally have enough testosterone in my body. The implant releases testosterone for four years. Without it, I’m—” Shiro cuts himself off with a grimace. “I need it.”

“And what is testosterone?” Ulaz is almost definitely mocking Shiro.

“I don’t appreciate this,” Shiro snaps. “I know you know the answers to these questions. Quit toying with me.”

Ulaz huffs softly again. “I cannot replace this implant into your skin. Within a few quintents I will have a suitable replica. While you were in the healing pod, I analyzed this implant and we in the lab—the medical lab, not Haggar’s lab—were able to successfully synthesize the hormone contained within it.”

Shiro relaxes marginally, still on edge despite the guarantee of continued testosterone.

“You may put your shirt back on. Roll the cuffs of your pants up, lie back down on the table,” Ulaz instructs. Shiro does as he’s told, relieved beyond belief Ulaz isn’t forcing him to take his pants off. The doctor pokes at the mass of scar tissue that is Shiro’s left shin, flexes Shiro’s knees and ankles. When he’s finished, he gives a satisfied nod.

“I’m clearing you to return to exercise. Be gradual, or risk slowing or disrupting your final stages of healing. Do not let the guards push you too much. I will be speaking with them and the Druids.” With that, Ulaz departs. The doctor levels the guards with a heavy look as he exits.
The guards are exceedingly careful cuffing Shiro. They walk slowly, not even daring to look at him. At Shiro’s cell, they hold the door open for him and uncuff him immediately, backing out of the cell. It doesn’t take long for another guard to come by with a tray laden with food.

Shiro’s stomach growls as he eyes the tray heaped with food. It’s more than he’s seen in a long time. He forces himself to eat slowly, resisting the animalistic need to wolf down everything he can for fear he won’t get this much again. Nothing has ever tasted this good; Shiro knows it’s because he’s famished after nearly dying, being eviscerated, going through surgery, and then spending two weeks healing while living off an IV.

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Shiro basks in the feeling of being clipped and clean-shaven again, tuning out the crass comments of the barber and other soldiers in the barbershop. The next day, he’s allowed access to the gym, but tailed by a guard who clears its throat pointedly every time Shiro picks up a weight which has apparently been deemed too heavy. However, there’s a new addition to Shiro’s schedule: a trip to an office Shiro hasn’t seen before.

It’s populated by soldiers, not unlike the barbershop, but has the air of a clinic. Triage? Shiro wonders, before he’s taken into a room in the back and guided to sit on a table, wrists kept cuffed. The guards stand back and a small, slender Galra steps into the room. It takes Shiro a minute to figure out what’s different, then he realizes she’s female. I should have figured there’s female Galra outside of the Druids. I guess I just didn’t see any, and assumed...

“Ilazhas ordered physical therapy and massage to help with your scarring,” she states plainly, jumping right in. “I’m familiar with the procedure, but I have been told you have… extensive… scar tissue. Please remove your shirt.”

“Ulaz has ordered physical therapy and massage to help with your scarring,” she states plainly, jumping right in. “I’m familiar with the procedure, but I have been told you have… extensive… scar tissue. Please remove your shirt.”

That’s the first time I’ve heard the word “please” from any of these Galra, Shiro remarks to himself, stripping his shirt off once the guards uncuff him. They move to re-cuff him, but the physical therapist holds out a hand.

“Don’t. His arms need mobility for what I’m doing.”

The therapist lays him down on the table on his stomach and works her hands over every newly-scarred lump in his back. It’s not comfortable, but also not painful. At this point, Shiro’s grateful just for the lack of pain. She then rolls him over onto his back and begins on his chest.

“Why are you doing this?” he asks. The therapist shoots him a cryptic look and Shiro finds himself wishing, for the umpteenth time, that he could tell where the Galra were looking directly.

“Ulaz’s orders,” she responds curtly, turning back to concentrating on Shiro’s flesh.

“Why does he care so much?”

“Good question,” she shoots back.

“Even if Ulaz didn’t say anything about this, the bookie would’ve,” one of the guards speaks up suddenly. Shiro tries to turn his head to see, but the physical therapist prevents him from turning his head and starts working on worryingly deep scars around his cervical vertebrae.

“Of course he would have,” the therapist mutters, then says to Shiro, “making a killing off of you, he is.”
Shiro wonders if the pun was intended.

“There are people that want me to win?” he wonders aloud, drawing a derisive laugh from the guard.

“And people who want you to lose, stupid. That’s the way these things go. You just got some good people on your side, they want to see you live a while longer. Won’t take too much more time before they get bored of you and—” the guard whistles, draws a finger across its throat—“you’re gone, just like your old buddy Myzax.”

An involuntary gasp escapes Shiro. The guard chuckles, but says no more, forcing Shiro to wonder exactly how many behind-the-scenes players have been keeping him alive this long. Forcing him to wonder how little control he actually has over his own life. Of course, he’d understood the second the Galra clapped him in irons, his life was no longer his own. Property. A slave. But the past weeks—months—who knows—had lulled Shiro into a false sense of security, that maybe he was more a prisoner than a plaything.

He knows what he has to do now: survive—on his own terms.
Within a few days, Shiro is back in Ulaz’s office, holding his left arm out as he sits on the table, Ulaz making a careful incision in the numbed skin of Shiro’s inner bicep. It’s remarkably similar to the first time he got the implant. He can feel the plastic rod sliding under his skin. It’s not a pleasant feeling, but it brings an enormous sense of relief, which he desperately needs. Shiro ignores the doubtful voice in his head that worries the Galra synthetic testosterone won’t be the right chemical, that his body won’t process it, that it won’t do to him what he needs it to do. There’s no room for that doubt.

Tugging on Shiro’s skin signifies Ulaz is stitching up the incision. Then the doctor wraps Shiro’s bicep in gauze and medical tape. “There. It will bruise. You should be able to use the arm as usual in two quintents.”

Shiro nods. Nothing new. Same instructions he was given when he got his first implant six years ago.

God I hope this is the right dose.

In the seclusion of his cell, Shiro toys with his right arm. Pushing past the unhelpful emotions and confusion that surround it, he knows it can do powerful things. The last fight, the one that nearly killed him, is so blurry in his memories, but Shiro recalls the scent of burning flesh and the feeling of fire, like an explosion going off in his palm, scorching his entire arm. It’s got to be tied to my survival instinct. Like when mothers lift two-ton cars to save their children, he rationalizes. I’ve just got to do that on call.

If Shiro had much of a sense of humor left, he would have laughed at himself for having this “superhero” moment of reckoning with new powers, but that was long ago crushed out of him. Impossible to say at what point, but there isn’t much, if anything, left in the world that would make Shiro laugh out of anything other than a sense of suicidal nihilism.

“Come on,” he growls, balling his fists and squaring his stance, forcing his body into the frenzied fear state of the arena. “He’s coming for you. He’s right on top of you. You’re gonna die, come on,” images of Myzax, of the Banshee, of the spiny ape of a gladiator who nearly killed him, flash through Shiro’s mind’s eye. His scars burn, each lighting up like tracks of fire across his skin, racing inward to the core of his chest until he should overheat—this is what he needs, now it just has to get to his arm.

Haggar’s face looms in Shiro’s vision, too sudden and too real.

With a strangled shout, Shiro falls backwards, scrambling, lashing out wildly with his right arm—glowing purple, blinding, hot as a star’s plasma—he doesn’t even see the melted gouges he tore through the door and cell floor as he fell because his awareness is a thousand miles away. Surrounded by cold, electric air, body out of his control, the Druids closing in, foreign instruments cutting and penetrating his body; Shiro lies shivering and glassy-eyed, spread eagle on his cell floor while his right arm burns on like a small star, casting everything in sickly Galra-purple hues.

The guards find Shiro hours later.
“Aw, what the hell,” one grumbles when the group opens the door to take him to the training deck. “Guys, get in here.” They stand around Shiro, looking down on the unresponsive human on the floor. One guard puts a careful foot on Shiro’s upper right bicep, pinning the dangerous arm to the floor, only to shriek when Shiro’s hand snaps up, closing around the guard’s calf. The other guards leap into action, beating Shiro’s shoulder and head to try to get him to release the screaming guard, dragging him across the floor by the ankles, pulling him away. In a fugue, Shiro lumbers to his feet and swings his arms wildly, fighting off attackers the guards can’t see.

“No, Ulaz! Remember what he said? He’d have our heads if this guy went to the Druids without his approval.”

“Well, then radio Ulaz fucking quick, because we need him here three dobashes ago.”

Ulaz arrives within minutes, two nurses in tow. The nurses shepherd the injured guard from the cell, while Ulaz very cautiously approaches Shiro. The human is standing slumped in the far corner of the cell, arm active and hanging loosely from the shoulder. His head is down, features lit by the violet glow coming off his arm.

“Calm down,” Ulaz says in a low, calm voice. “If you don’t return to your senses, I will be forced to sedate you, and I don’t think you want that.”

Shiro raises his head slowly, eyes blank and haunted.

Offhandedly, Ulaz wonders if it would be worth it to do a psychological evaluation on this subject. He continues his careful approach, hoping his gamble is correct and that the human will recognize him as someone who helps, not hurts.

_Act now, feel later; act now, feel later; act now, feel later._

With monumental effort, Shiro pulls himself out of his ghost state, forcing his eyes to refocus, his breathing to slow. His arm burns. Every deep breath drains a little more tension out of Shiro’s frame until the arm cools, its glow disappearing abruptly. In the absence of the bright light, Shiro is blind, phosphenes popping across his vision.

“Very good.” That’s Ulaz. “Are we going to have any more problems?”

“No,” Shiro breathes, shaking head as much in answer as trying to clear his vision.

“See to it you don’t.”

Ulaz always leaves so abruptly. He feels like the only ally Shiro has, albeit a prickly one. _No, Shiro scolds himself. Nobody here is your ally. They’re all holding you captive, keeping you as a slave. They’re all invested in you only as far as your ability to kill goes. You heard what the guards said. As long as people in power like you, you’re good, but the second they get bored of you, you’re dead._

The guards came for Shiro early that day, led him on a circuitous route through the halls as if they were trying to confuse him, to keep him from knowing his destination.
Now Shiro is led past a group of new slaves. He can tell they’re new: they don’t yet look broken, but they’re still terrified, still dirty from the holding cells and transport chain. They don’t know they’re about to face death in the arena.

A modicum of relief washes over Shiro as he looks over the dozen slaves assembled and sees no humans. The prison tattoos on their arms read 79. Vaguely, he wonders who they’re going to face in the arena. Some of the group look over at him, naive and childlike in their fear, and Shiro musters a small smile for them.

“It’ll be okay. You’ll get through this,” he murmurs, not knowing if any of them can even hear him. One dragon-like alien with big, bat-like ears turns to look at him, giving a tiny nod.

Then he’s turned away, led down a side corridor, brought into a vomitorium. At this point, Shiro barely feels anything before going into the ring. He’s started hoping he’ll go up against a gladiator he can’t take. A gladiator who will kill him, who will end this nightmarish cycle. There’s no way to sugarcoat it; Shiro is suicidal. He knows it. The guards know it. The Druids, Ulaz—they know it.

The guards uncuff Shiro as usual, but now they have to pause to fiddle with the tight, glowing cuff on Shiro’s right bicep. The human hisses as the needles withdraw from his skin, leaving pinpricks of blood. Sensation flows back into his right arm along with a sudden awareness of the power that can manifest in that arm. Quickly, the guards shove Shiro into the ring and slam the grate down before he has the chance to consider attacking them.

Calm as could be, Shiro makes his way into the center of the arena, facing the vomitorium opposite his, waiting for whatever new horror the Galra have decided to throw at him.

From the darkness emerges a group of gladiators.

*Maybe I’ll actually die this time,* Shiro wonders, but his survival instinct is still too strong and it still compels him to sink into a ready stance, to fight until the very end and go down swinging.

The group doesn’t act like Shiro expects. They stay huddled right in front of the vomitorium, one crying out as the grate is lowered. Suddenly, Shiro recognizes them. Group 79.

“No, no,” Shiro murmurs, truly horrified. *I’ve become Myzax.*

He whips around, turning to face his guards. “I won’t do it! I’m not going to kill them!” They don’t respond. All of a sudden, the roar of the crowd hits Shiro like a tidal wave. His usual ability to ignore it is gone. He turns to face the crowd now, putting his hands in the air, the human “don’t shoot” gesture, which is lost on the alien spectators.

“I’m not going to fight them!” Shiro bellows to the crowd. The announcer says something, booming voice echoing throughout the stadium. The crowd quiets, their cheers of “Champion! Champion! Champion!” dying, replaced by confused murmuring that rumbles like an earthquake.

“You hear me? I! Won’t! Fight!” Shiro shouts to the crowd, getting down on his knees and putting his hands now behind his head. The submissive position is unmistakable. Shiro doesn’t turn when he hears the screeching of the vomitorium grate or even when he hears the footsteps of the guards in the sand behind him.

“You’ll fucking fight, or you’ll get electrocuted,” a guard growls in Shiro’s ear, grabbing the longer hair on the top of his head, wrenching it back, holding a cattle prod to Shiro’s throat. The human grits his teeth, spitting out,
“No.”

Thousands of volts rip through Shiro’s throat and he swears to god he’s going to die.

His heart stops, nervous system burns like a fuse, brain explodes; body locked in place.

Then it goes empty, Shiro’s heart stuttering back to life, leaving him gasping, tears streaming from his eyes. The guard throws Shiro face-first down into the sand. A heavy boot lands on Shiro’s neck—a threat.

“You want to feel that again? You’re going to fight.”

Again, Shiro growls, “no.”

The boot crunches down on Shiro’s neck and electricity tears through his body again, an involuntary scream coming from between his clenched teeth. When it stops, he inhales sand and retches violently, a migraine splitting his head and neck suddenly.

“Fight.”

“Fuck you,” Shiro hisses, weak. Three kicks to the ribs. One cracks.


The guards drag Shiro from the arena, the crowd booing.

Next thing Shiro knows, he’s suspended by his wrists. His toes only barely brush the ground.

“The punishment for not fighting is whipping.” Shiro raises his head to see a hulking male Galra stroking the whip coiled in his clawed hands.

“I won’t kill innocents,” Shiro rasps.

The Galra laughs. It’s a deep, cruel belly laugh. “That’s rich, considering you’ve killed more than two dozen in the arena already.”

“They were different.” Shiro needs them to be different. He needs to cling to the tatters of his moral code.

“No. They were no different. Every gladiator you have killed is the same as you—a slave forced to fight. You’re not any better for refusing to kill this group. You’re not special,” the Galra hisses, uncoiling the whip and bringing it down across Shiro’s chest in one smooth movement.

“You’re a monster—” the whip cracks down on Shiro’s skin—“you’re a science experiment—” crack—“some sort of alien runt—” crack—“a killer—” crack—“a failure of a gladiator—” crack—“garbage—” crack—

Hot blood runs down Shiro’s back and chest. His vision swims with pain, delirious.

* I’m gonna die, let me die, kill me.

“That’s enough.”

Shiro blinks sweat from his eyes, too weak to even raise his head. He doesn’t really have to
anyways. He knows Haggar’s cold, rough voice.

“I’ll take him from here.”

“Ulaz—” the male Galra protests.

“Forget Ulaz,” Haggar snaps. “I have complete control over the Champion, as per Emperor Zarkon’s orders.”

“Yes, High Priestess,” the Galra defers, backing away from Shiro.

“Bring him to my lab. It’s time to follow up on some… intriguing comments the doctor made in his file.”

A dull sense of dread blankets Shiro, though he barely has any energy left to feel it.

Shiro lands roughly on the cold metal table of the healing pod. Gas fills his lungs. He’s gone.
The Examination

Chapter Notes

Non-consensual medical examination

“Prepare him for vivisection.”

Shiro is no stranger now to rude awakenings from healing-induced blackouts, but this one is by far
the worst.

Cold, wet gauze scrubs down the centerline of Shiro’s abdomen. A nurse wielding a syringe bends
over Shiro, injecting an unknown substance into the muscles of Shiro’s stomach. Shiro’s head feel
stuffed with cotton, mouth too dry to speak. It’s at this point he realizes he’s naked, his arms
bound over his head, legs spread open, feet tied into stirrups. No, no, no, oh god, please no.

He struggles against his bonds, trying to rip his feet free and close his legs, to kick away the nurses
and Druids milling about him. It’s no use. They’re too tight. Haggar enters Shiro’s field of view.

“Begin recording,” she dictates. “Subject 117-9875 is human, purportedly male. Upon review of
the baselines of the other two humans captured in local group 675-9GN, it became apparent the
subject possesses aberrant anatomy, which was later confirmed by Dr. Ulaz, who discovered a
testosterone implant in subject’s arm. Subject informed Dr. Ulaz he has had body modification
procedures to remove unwanted parts of the body. Subject additionally informed Dr. Ulaz of
hormone replacement therapy. It is my suspicion the subject is of contrapolar sex.”

Contrapolar sex? Is that the Galra word for transgender?

“The investigation will be comprised of a standard pelvic examination, followed by abdominal
vivisection, and will conclude with conscious craniotomy. Craniotomy is a separate investigation
into the function of the human brain, unrelated to the examination of contrapolar sex. Due to a
limited time frame, both will be carried out at once. Due to a joint interest between the Druidic
Order and the xenobiological medical team, the investigation will be conducted by Dr. ….”

Shiro tunes Haggar’s voice out, fighting to keep his breathing steady. He closes his eyes, trying to
ignore this reality, to transport himself anywhere but here.

At the first touch of something cold
and wet against his folds, Shiro’s eyes fly open to watch in terror as the unfamiliar Galra doctor
seated between his legs prods at him with gloved fingers.

His voice freezes in his throat and he screws his eyes tightly shut again, tipping his head back as if
he could somehow squirm away from everything. Something thick is forced inside him and Shiro
chokes, jerking in his binds. A big, heavy hand presses down on Shiro’s abdomen, incredibly
uncomfortable as his organs are pressed and squeezed.

Think of anything else. Anywhere. Just not this. Anything else, Shiro tells himself frantically,
tensing up as something presses against his ass. Then two thick, rigid objects penetrate his ass and
vagina at the same time. Shiro recoils, grinds his teeth, struggles to get away from the objects
inside him stinging him with the stretch. Don’t cry, don’t cry! Think of anything else!
Sickness grips Shiro’s heart in an iron fist as he’s violated. It crushes his lungs, leaving him breathless and gasping. Tears leak from the corners of his tightly-closed eyes and he bangs his head back against the table to distract himself from what is being done to him. It isn’t horribly painful—nothing like being mauled and eviscerated—but it hurts on such a profound, psychological level Shiro literally doesn’t know how to process it.

Finally the doctor withdraws whatever fingers or tools from Shiro’s body, leaving him trembling like a leaf. Shiro feels wet, open, violated. The bindings around his feet are undone and instantly he clamps his legs together. Hands roll him over onto his side, fingers trace down his back. Shiro flinches, anticipating another penetration.

But then there’s a pinch in his spine, then his entire lower body goes numb. It’s a bit of a relief, but equally as terrifying, because Shiro can no longer tell what the Galra are doing to him. He’s returned to his back and fear compels Shiro to open his eyes, raise his head just in time to see the scalpel sink into his skin. Eyes wide and fixed on the incision with paralyzed horror, Shiro watches as the doctor steadily cuts through the muscle and sinew of his abdominals. It feels like nothing.

The doctor peels back flaps of Shiro’s skin, tacking them down to his hips with surgical pins, and reaches into Shiro’s abdominal cavity. A Druid passes over a handful of vials and the doctor extracts chunks of bloody tissue. The warmth of them fogs up the inside of each vial. Shiro gasps, trembling, watching paralyzed and helpless as the Galra steal more and more of his body.

By the time the doctor stitches up the T-shaped incision in Shiro’s abdomen, he’s fighting for breath and on the verge of passing out. One of the Druids seems to notice this suddenly and gestures to the doctor. The doctor nods. The Druid reaches somewhere outside of Shiro’s peripheral and grabs a mask, snapping it over Shiro’s nose and mouth. Cold air flows into Shiro’s lungs and he quivers on the edge of thankfulness he’s about to lose consciousness so he doesn’t have to experience this anymore, and fear that he needs to stay awake to know what is being done to him. Yet he doesn’t pass out.

Then the Druid sets hair clippers in the doctor’s waiting hands and Shiro comes to the sudden realization of what a craniotomy is. Two Druids raise Shiro into a sitting position and hold him there. Shiro wishes desperately he could move or even feel his legs. Seeing them splayed numbly out in front of him is awful; a reminder of exactly how powerless he is in this situation. He closes his eyes as the clippers run roughly over his head. Chunks of black hair fall into his lap, though Shiro is only mildly surprised to see streaks of white. It’s not too much of a shock to him that the stress of this ordeal is turning him grey.

There’s the prick of needles in Shiro’s scalp and he assumes he should be thankful they’re at least numbing his head before cutting it open. It seems the doctors are somewhat better than the Druids with pain management. They’re almost humane about it. It’s like Haggar and the Druids actively want to make him suffer. The Druids’ clawed grips around his shoulders are the only thing keeping Shiro upright as he feels the dull sensation of something cutting his scalp. Then one of them grabs Shiro’s forehead in one massive hand, covering his eyes and holding his head still as the whir of a saw starts up. Shiro can’t move an inch in the Druid’s near-crushing hold, forced to hold completely still as the doctor saws through his skull. All he can do is grit his teeth and pant shallowly into the oxygen mask, hoping beyond hope this will end soon. Part of Shiro wishes the doctor would just grab a scalpel and plunge it as deep into his brain as possible and kill him.

Then suddenly Shiro smells buttered popcorn.

“What do you feel?” the doctor asks in a dry, nasal voice. It takes Shiro several long moments to
realize the doctor was speaking to him, and several moments more after that to gather his voice.

“Popcorn,” he whispers.

“What’s that?”

“Smell popcorn,” Shiro manages just a bit louder.

“No, I heard you the first time. What is popcorn?” the doctor clarifies, sounding annoyed.

“Uh… food.”

The doctor hums. Then Shiro tastes blackberries. He almost starts to cry with how real it feels, how sweet they are, how he’ll never get to taste them again.

“Now?”

“Taste blackberries,” he mumbles and there he goes, tears leaking down his cheeks from underneath the Druid’s hand.

“Is that food as well?”

Shiro would nod, but is forced to whisper, “yes.”

“Note, the surface of the right medial sextant is associated with olfactory and gustatory perception.”

The doctor moves around Shiro’s brain, sparking him to see colors, hear noises, feel touches across his body—even on his numb legs. Then Shiro feels parched, dizzy, sleepy, high, all in rapid succession. It leaves him reeling, knowing they’re making him experience all this by poking his brain.

Then, “beginning deep electrical stimulation.”

Shiro has a half second of realization, the wash of memories drawing a gasp from him before he’s sucked in.

The numbers on the page are unfamiliar to her. Toshiko makes her best guess at each problem before standing, the eyes of the whole class on her, and turning it in to the teacher at the front of the room. He looks over it cursorily, then back up at her.

“Toshiko, you must try harder than this if you want to be an astronaut. Do you know how much math they have to know in order to fly a spaceship?” He sounds almost disappointed.

“Yes, Sato-san.”

Toshiko returns to her seat under the heavy eyes of her classmates, ashamed.

Her skin is so soft under Takashi’s hands. Her weight is solid, warm in his lap. The smile she gives him is gentle. Takashi slides his hands up her sides, resting them on her hips. She puts one hand on his cheek, the other on the back of his neck. Takashi’s vision narrows down to her lips. He licks his own, subconsciously, and leans in. His eyes close right before their lips press
together gently. She sighs softly against his mouth. Euphoria erupts in Takashi’s chest like fireworks.

“Takashi Shirogane?” Takashi winces at the butchering of his name, but steps forward dutifully anyways.

“You got an English name, son? Anything easier to pronounce than this?” The sergeant walks over to Takashi. Subtly, the eyes of all the cadets follow him, without breaking the line or turning their heads.

“No, sir.” Takashi resists the urge to get smart, to say ‘nobody at the base in Okinawa had any problems with it,’ or ‘that’s my name, learn to pronounce it.’ He has a feeling these Americans wouldn’t take kindly to that.

“A nickname?”

Takashi’s never really had a nickname before. Some kids in school used to call him Shiro, because of how many syllables his family name had, but it wasn’t something he readily answered to. Regardless, he offers, “Shiro, sir.”

“Shiro. I can work with that.”

Shiro steps back into line, sighing heavily as the sergeant walks away.

“Happy birthday, Ca—” The cadet cuts Shiro off sharply.

“It’s Keith.”

“Keith?” Shiro parrots, a bit lost.

“I’m a boy and my name is Keith,” he insists, crossing his arms across his chest. His glower is fierce, especially with the fat lip and cut across his nose. Shiro nods, pleasant surprise welling up in his chest at finding another man like himself at the Garrison.

“I see. Happy birthday, Keith. This is really one way to celebrate, isn’t it? How about you tell me why you did it?” Shiro already has an inkling why this cadet would pick such a fight. Abandoned, rejected, a grudge against authority, kicked around the foster system—Shiro’s seen his type before.

“I just wanted to go for a ride. I didn’t think Namouh was going to deck me over it.” Keith’s voice is sullen.

“You did steal his speeder,” Shiro points out evenly, watching the way Keith’s eyes flash dangerously as he protests,

“I didn’t know it was his speeder. I thought it was the Garrison’s. Didn’t damage it anyways.”

It’s at that point Shiro realizes he’s got a lot of work to do with this cadet.
“Good luck. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Keith’s eyes are shining when he finally looks up at Shiro, the line of his mouth so firmly set it’s clear he’s holding back tears. Shiro gives him a soft smile, working to keep his emotions in check at the same time.

“Of course,” he says. The finality of the situation falls on them like a thick blanket.

*His eyes are purple,* Shiro realizes distantly as Keith’s eyes flutter closed.

Shiro’s eyes close reflexively as he feels warm breath on his face.

Oh.

*His lips are soft.*

In the flash it takes for Shiro to wrap his head around the fact that *Cadet Keith Kogane, my mentee on whom I’ve been crushing for months, is kissing me,* Keith is already drawing away.

“No, wait—” Shiro murmurs, one hand falling to the small of Keith’s back, the other to smooth his hair over the nape of his neck— “please…”

Shiro draws Keith in for another kiss. He feels Keith’s arms lock behind his back, but that barely matters when their lips and noses are touching, Shiro’s thumb stroking over Keith’s cheek. Their lips meet again and again in a languid series of unhurried kisses, each sending electric sparks shivering down Shiro’s nerves.
The End Of It All

Chapter Notes

This one's rough yall. Graphic depiction of rape and suicide

Shiro comes to on his bed in his cell. A dull feeling of pain, kept at bay by medication, washes over him like waves at low tide. He blinks slowly at the ceiling, trying to remember whatever new stretch of time he knows he’s missing, but at the same time not wanting to remember, for fear of the new horrors the Galra might have done to him. It doesn’t take him long to catalogue all the recent changes to his body. For starters, his head is shaved completely bald. Then there are new incisions on his lower abdomen. Countless shallow cuts across his chest and back. That seems to be it, until Shiro sits up and the movement sends a blunt ache through his groin. He hisses, and then it all comes back to him.

Being whipped by that cruel soldier. Taunted. Yelled at. Thrown down onto the table by the Druids. Tied up, stripped naked. Violated by that doctor. Having his skull cut open. The Galra literally poking around in his memories—his memories—

Each memory relived is vivid, clear as day, fresh and new as if they’d only just happened yesterday. Chief in Shiro’s mind is his recollections of the Garrison. He’d nearly forgotten about the Garrison. Some part of him had actively tried to shut that out to prevent nostalgia from taking over. But now—now Shiro remembers, and hatred wells up inside him. Hatred for the Galaxy Garrison that sent him on this mission. Hatred for the Galra. Hatred for the Druids, for Haggar. And then it’s tempered by shame. Abject humiliation.

I failed the Garrison. I failed humanity. Now I’ve become a killer. I’m so broken.

Shiro puts his heavy head in his hands, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes until phosphenes erupt behind his eyelids like fireworks. He wishes he could scrub every feeling out of his body. It would be so much easier to not feel.

“Act now, feel later,” Shiro whispers to himself in the lonely silence of his cell. He very deliberately does not think about that cadet’s name. Too many feelings there.

The next time the Galra throw Shiro into the arena, he’s ready. His skin is thick with layers of scar tissue, his right arm a deadly weapon, half his bones metal-reinforced at this point. Anything the arena can give him, he can take. And take he does. He takes the lives of every single opponent released into the ring against him.

One at a time, each unfortunate bastard runs up to Shiro. Some of them are armed, others scream, a few fight like they actually have a chance. Every time, Shiro weaves through their shoddy defenses, dodges whatever blows they throw haphazardly at him, and ends the confrontation with a quick slice to the head. The gore burns right off Shiro’s arm. Not a trace of any kill remains on it when it cools.
Revolving slowly, Shiro takes in the field of corpses lying about him. He feels nothing. The guards snap the needle cuff on Shiro’s right shoulder, handcuff him, march him out of the arena. Ulaz is waiting in the vomitorium. His fingers fly over Shiro’s body with cursory feather-light touches before confirming Shiro took no damage. Then Shiro is returned to his cell.

Shiro’s feet touch the sand of the arena as he breathes in a deep sigh. The scent of the arena—sandy, hot, dry—is never truly clean of the trace scent of death, no matter how hard the Galra try to decontaminate it after each fight. Death is one thing you can’t scrub out. The smell is so routine by now, Shiro barely notices it. However, he doesn’t fail to notice the crowd has a different air about it this time. Their cheers of “Champion!,” normally so fanatic, are cautious. It sets Shiro on edge.

If it’s a big, brutal gladiator, Shiro can take it. Hell knows he’s taken it before and somehow managed to come out the other side. Group 79 flashes to mind. That’s one thing he still doesn’t know if he can do. The way they’d trusted him, taken reassurance from him—the way he’d truly believed he was helping them, just a little bit, by consoling them. And then he was supposed to kill them after telling them it would be okay? No.

Out from the shadows of the vomitorium steps a small figure. The slave rags hang off their body, drowning them in a veritable sea of fabric. Shiro takes a few cautious steps forward, right arm raised and ready. Then he realizes what he’s looking at. He’s looking at a child. An alien child, but unmistakably a child. Big, liquid, dark eyes look up at Shiro. Six pudgy little hands twist nervously in the fabric of the tunic. Their tiny feet shuffle in the dust of the sand. Four pointed ears prick up hopefully at the sight of Shiro.

“They told me I’d see someone scary,” the child says in such a soft, high voice. “Are you going to keep me safe from the scary one?”

The dam holding back all of Shiro’s emotion quivers, threatening to break. He shakes his head mutely.

“I can’t kill you,” he whispers. The child cocks their head. How could they understand they’re only here to be murdered in cold blood for the entertainment of this barbaric crowd?

Then he pivots on his heel, stalking back towards his own vomitorium. “Beat me, whip me, do whatever you want to me—I’m not going to kill a kid,” he bellows at the crowd, at his guards. Shiro’s got a storm of furious words ready, his arm heating up to match, and his guards spring into action, sensing trouble. In a flurry of motion, Shiro is restrained and removed from the arena.

They don’t even bother electrocuting him like they did the first time he refused to fight. They just hang him up immediately and bring in that big, brutish Galra that whipped Shiro before. Shiro’s alert enough this time, driven by pure anger, to notice the Galra’s huge, fuzzy ears. His armor looks more important than the normal guards’ armor Shiro is used to seeing. He’s got to be at least eight feet tall.

“You think you’re a pacifist?” he taunts, pulling the whip taut between his hands. “I’m going to see to it that’s beaten out of you.”

A dozen strikes later, and Shiro is bleeding through his shirt. He screams in pain as the whip
comes down with such force it rips the shirt off his shoulders. The lash shreds the skin of his back.
“Still feel like being peaceful?” the Galra barks in Shiro’s ear, getting right up into his face. Shiro doesn’t respond. “Answer me!”

Shiro raises his head slowly to fix the Galra with a dead stare. “I will never kill a child,” he hisses.
Stars erupt in Shiro’s mind as the Galra’s fist hits him in the temple.

“You are property of the Galra Empire and you’ll do as you’re told,” the Galra growls. “If I say, kill a kid, you kill the fucking kid. Got it?”

Shiro spits. Pain ricochets through Shiro’s skull like a dart as the Galra hits him again. Then he sways, looks up as he realizes the Galra is undoing the chains suspending him.

“You think you’re so pure, so moral. You’re filthy and violent and broken. You have no right to be proud of not killing a kid.”

The tone of the Galra’s voice chills Shiro’s blood like ice in his veins. Shiro is thrown to the floor like a ragdoll. The Galra’s armor clatters as it hits the floor. Shiro looks around frantically for any escape. The Galra kneels on the floor, grabbing one of Shiro’s ankles in each hand. He spreads Shiro’s legs into a near split that has Shiro almost screaming. Shiro knows exactly what’s coming, and he can’t do a fucking thing to stop it. The chains are still wound tight around his wrists, tangled up into a hopeless mess above his head. The Galra’s grip is like iron on his ankles.

“You are property of the Galra Empire and you’ll do as you’re told,” the Galra growls. “If I say, kill a kid, you kill the fucking kid. Got it?”

Shiro spits. Pain ricochets through Shiro’s skull like a dart as the Galra hits him again. Then he sways, looks up as he realizes the Galra is undoing the chains suspending him.

“You think you’re so pure, so moral. You’re filthy and violent and broken. You have no right to be proud of not killing a kid.”

Shiro jerks reflexively as claws part his folds. “I heard you were a girl, but I just had to see for myself,” the Galra says with a sickening smile, eyes boring into Shiro’s head as he lines himself up and slams into his body. Shiro howls.

It burns. Long, jagged screams tear themselves from between Shiro’s clenched teeth as the Galra pounds into Shiro like a jackhammer, each thrust bringing a new wave of pain that sweeps through his abdomen right up into his soul. Something inside Shiro rips. That pain is sharp, like a spear. Shiro screeches. The Galra laughs. He hunches over Shiro, thrusting harder and faster into his abused body, grunting in his ear.

Shiro growls back at the Galra, turning his head away. Then the Galra gives one final rough groan and stills, forcing himself so deep into Shiro, he swears he can feel the monster’s cock in his throat.

“See, now you know what you are. The broken whore of the Galra Empire,” the Galra pants, grinning. A switch flips in Shiro’s brain.

Shiro’s right arm lights up, burning through the chains. He wrenches his legs free and kicks the Galra hard in the stomach, forcing his cock out of Shiro’s body. The Galra stumbles backwards, gaining his footing, and roars. Shiro staggers to his feet, slices the chains off his left arm whips the chains around at the Galra; they catch him in the side of the head and he nearly falls. Shiro leaps at him with a primal scream, his star-hot right hand clawing down across the Galra’s face.
The monster roars and falls back into the wall, clutching his eye. Then he rounds on Shiro and charges, throwing him clear across the room. Shiro hits the floor hard but rolls with the impact, spitting as he forces himself to his feet again. He ignores the wet heat running down the insides of his legs. The Galra lunges for Shiro; he braces himself for impact, ducks at the last second, jams his right hand up into the Galra’s armpit and doesn’t stop forcing it until he sees his glowing fingers come out the top of the shrieking monster’s shoulder. Then Shiro curls his fist around the bone and rips.

The bloody limb goes flying, spattering where it hits the floor. The Galra howls with pain, stumbling blindly around the room, spurring blood everywhere. Shiro slumps in the corner.

It’s at that point the guards burst into the room.

“What the—” one shouts, while another yells down the hall, “Get the medical team! We have an emergency!”

In the uproar, Shiro nearly manages to slide out the door undetected—at the last second, a pair of hands close around Shiro’s neck and hair and drag him back into the torture chamber with a growl of “oh no you don’t.”

Shiro is once again thrown to the floor, but this time he’s barely able to sit up on his elbow. He clamps his legs shut, holding his right arm protectively in front of himself.

“The fuck did you do?” the guard screams in his face. Shiro recoils. The guard growls, annoyed, but backs off and barks, “someone fucking get Ulaz.”

Ulaz does come, eventually, but by that time Shiro is chilled and shivering and unresponsive on the cell floor. He’s also largely forgotten, as a full medical team rushes into the chamber and bundles the Galra onto a gurney. Quietly, Ulaz picks Shiro up and spirits him away.

Shiro’s head bumps against Ulaz’s shoulder, arms wound around the doctor’s neck as he’s carried through the halls. All Shiro can hear is his own heartbeat and the creaking of Ulaz’s shoulder joint. Then he’s being set down on a table. The setting is familiar—it’s the office, Ulaz’s office. Shiro watches blankly as Ulaz moves about the office before returning to Shiro. He says something—his voice filters through a thousand feet of water, garbled and faint by the time it reaches Shiro’s ears. Ulaz’s hands land on Shiro’s body, manipulate him on the table until Shiro is lying back, arms crossed over his chest. He sighs, mind going dark and fuzzy, until he feels something touch his inner thigh.

Shiro bolts upright, arm burning white-hot instantly. He’s confronted by the sight of Ulaz, hands up defensively, holding a couple of cotton swabs between his fingers. Again, he says something which is completely lost on Shiro. Several tense moments pass until Shiro cools his arm, but doesn’t lie back down. He trusts Ulaz enough, but he isn’t stupid. He knows Ulaz only cares about him as far as the doctor can get more research data out of him.

Very matter-of-factly, Ulaz opens Shiro’s legs and then parts his folds with two fingers, inserting the swab. Shiro hisses at the sting. The swab comes away red. Ulaz tucks it into a tube, screws the tube shut, sets it on the counter.

Shiro checks out of his own body.

Everything is cold and distant. Shiro feels so profoundly alone, so deeply starved for touch that isn’t meant to injure or probe. I want to go home. I want my mother. Shiro can’t even cry at this
point. There’s nothing more left of him to give. Every last store of willpower, of survival, of emotion—it’s all empty. He’s a husk of his former self, a shadow of a human. The Galra have well and truly taken everything from him.

They take his consciousness from him too, then.

The beeping of monitors is too familiar to Shiro. He wakes without remembering any dreams or memories. He still feels separate from his body. With faint anger-sadness-illness, he recognizes the incisions on his abdomen have been re-opened and stitched freshly back together. *I don’t even want to know what they did to me now.*

Shiro lets his head fall limply against the bed. His eyes roll to where an IV leads into the crook of his left elbow. *What would happen if I pulled that out? Would I die?* Sluggishly, Shiro raises his right hand, then clumsily yanks the IV out of his arm. The beeping of the monitor melts into one sustained tone as Shiro pushes himself upright, his eyes automatically hunting around the room for something that could work.

He manages to stagger across the room to the counter, hands landing clumsily on a scalpel laying there. There’s no hesitation in any part of Shiro as he uncaps the scalpel and digs the blade in deep to his left wrist. He feels the sensation of it only very faintly. It’s like he’s watching it happen to another person and feeling their phantom pain. It’s easy to ignore.

The blade wrenches to the side, completely buried, and viscous cherry-red blood wells up around it. There’s so much of it. It flows down his fingers in thick rivulets, splattering onto the floor with each weakening pulse of his heart. Darkness constricts around Shiro’s vision and a sense of warm relief embraces him. *Finally, and end to this nightmare.*

It’s as easy as falling asleep. Shiro’s gone before he hits the floor.
To The Escape Pod

The long, upset whine of the monitors is the first thing that alerts Ulaz that something has gone wrong. He’s bolting down the hallway to the recovery room where he left the Champion before he can even excuse himself from his conversation with the officer on duty. Rounding the corner, the smell of blood hits Ulaz in the face like it would during a surgery. The IV is dangling from its stand, bed empty, blanket hanging off the edge. A veritable lake of blood is seeping across the floor, crawling through the lines of the tiles, pooling around the feet of the bed.

“No,” Ulaz gasps, splashing through the blood to grab the limp body of the Champion. Then he spies the scalpel embedded deep in the human’s flesh wrist. “I leave you alone for ten dobashes, and this is what you do?” he growls. The Champion’s body feels too light in Ulaz’s arms. Probably because most—if not all—his blood appears to be on the floor.

Ulaz kicks the panic button on the wall and sets the Champion’s lifeless body back on the bed, already hunting around for a fresh port. The nurses arrive with horrified gasps. “Get me a healing pod and three liters of the blood replacement serum now,” Ulaz shouts, sending the nurses flying off immediately. He settles for a port, grabs an alcohol swab. The Champion’s skin is already too cold, too pale from lack of blood. When Ulaz presses his fingers to the Champion’s neck, there’s no pulse. He curses.

“I just received new intelligence that I need you for,” Ulaz hisses even as he wipes down the Champion’s neck with the alcohol swab. “You’re not allowed to die yet.” He pierces the port into the Champion’s jugular vein.

The nurses return with the supplies. Ulaz barks orders as the healing pod is prepared. The nurses connect the first blue bag of blood replacement serum to the port in the Champion’s neck as Ulaz quickly stitches up what he can of the human’s severed wrist. The Champion’s complexion takes on a cool cast that looks sickly given his pale, yellowish human coloration. One entire bag drains into the Champion’s body. The nurses hook up the second bag. The healing pod dings, signaling it’s ready to accommodate a human. The veins begin to stand out on the Champion’s arms again.

“Good enough,” Ulaz snaps, disconnecting the port and sliding the Champion into the healing pod in one rapid movement. He can only hope he was fast enough to keep this human from dying. It’s the only one he has ready access to, given the unknown location of the other two in the work camps. His entire organization is depending on this human’s ability to survive and to secure the Blue Lion before the Empire does.

The healing pod gives a low, flat tone. It’s saying the body inside it is dead. Ulaz nearly jumps over the bed to get to it, but restrains himself in front of the nurses and walks around the bed, hands immediately flying to the pod’s controls. He manually engages resuscitation procedures, watching the pressure levels inside the pod spike rhythmically as the system attempts to force the Champion’s heart to restart. Hope is the only thing Ulaz has, slim as it is.

After seven agonizing dobashes of resuscitation, the pod beeps twice and begins picking up a heartbeat. Ulaz sighs, slumping against the pod in relief. Then he turns to the four nurses he realizes have been watching him this entire time, and scrubs a hand down over his face.

“Plate samples of this blood,” he instructs. They hesitate. “What?”

“It’s contaminated, doctor,” one protests.
“We only need enough to recreate the chemical structure, it doesn’t matter if it’s contaminated,” Ulaz grinds out, trying not to sound as stressed as he is. He fails. The nurses share dubious looks before doing as they’re told, collecting a half-dozen samples of the cold blood pooled in all the cracks of the tiles. “And one more thing, send in the biological decontamination team,” Ulaz adds tiredly as the nurses exit.

It takes Ulaz a moment before he can summon the strength to wheel the pod out of room 26 down the hall to an empty room. He leaves a trail of blood all the way there. Only after the pod is hooked up to all the necessary cords and cables, set up for long-term maintenance of the Champion’s current state, does Ulaz report for proper decontamination. The team is not happy with him for smearing the biohazard of alien blood all over the place. They’ll learn to live with it.

Over the next five quintents, Ulaz and his lab team work tirelessly to synthesize the proper proteins in the Champion’s blood, then work another two to get it to the proper concentrations. It takes almost a week before they have the requisite amount. The end product is nearly indistinguishable from the real blood.

Ulaz places the bags of synthetic blood very carefully into a hot water bath before wheeling it all down to the Champion’s room. He’s still barely alive, clinging to the healing pod for life support. Ulaz grits his teeth, knowing the stunts he pulled have drawn attention to him. The officers are looking into his actions surrounding the Champion, all the special care he’s ordered for this slave who is just the latest in a long line of hardy, bloodthirsty aliens who do well in the arena before eventually succumbing. It’s so very risky and Ulaz knew the Leader would not approve of it, but the Leader also doesn’t understand exactly what is special about this one human—other than the fact that he is the only human the Blades of Marmora have access to. This human can lead. Ulaz had seen those brief moments—either in person or on tape—where the Champion inspired others, sacrificed himself for them, consoled them, saved them.

It’s that knowledge which compels Ulaz to hook up the synthetic blood bags to the pod, to very carefully disengage the healing process for just thirty ticks, just barely long enough to hook the blood up to the jugular port and install another port to drain the replacement serum. The three ticks it takes for the pod’s systems to start up again and beep out the signature of the Champion’s heartbeat are the longest three ticks of Ulaz’s life.

He leans heavily against the pod. “Please, please be well-healed when you emerge from this,” Ulaz breathes, desperate like a prayer. His breath fogs the glass of the pod.

Gradually, the Champion begins to stir. Ulaz waits patiently until his eyes are open and beginning to process the world around him. The dazed confusion in the Champion’s look is normal. The
anger that replaces it is not. Ulaz barely has time to step backwards before the Champion lashes out at him, struggling into a sitting position. The look he fixes Ulaz with is one of loathing.

“Why am I still here,” he rasps. “How long are you going to keep me alive just to keep killing me on the inside?”

“I had to save you—” Ulaz starts, but the Champion cuts him off.

“You’re playing with me. I just want out and apparently you can take death away from me too.” The Champion’s voice becomes stronger. He leverages himself into an almost standing position, leaning heavily on the pod bed. Ulaz makes a snap decision and steps forward, slapping the Champion across the face. He leans down into the Champion’s space.

“You need to listen to me right now. We have a varga at most. The officers are already suspicious of me.” Ulaz casts a glance over his shoulder and lowers his voice even further. “Zarkon has located the Blue Lion on your home planet, Earth. You need to find it and bring it to these coordinates.”

Ulaz holds up the navigator; it flashes the coordinates briefly before he presses it up against the Champion’s prosthesis and covertly encodes the coordinates in the circuits of the technology. The Champion looks at him, blank and stunned.

“There’s an escape pod nearby. Thace will escort you there and have it take you to Earth. Then you need to get the Blue Lion.”

Finally the Champion speaks. “Blue Lion?” he asks incredulously.

“Yes, of Voltron. There isn’t enough time to explain, other than to say it’s absolutely imperative Zarkon does not get his hands on that machine. The coordinates I gave you are for one of our outposts. I will be stationed there. Champion, you must trust me.” Ulaz grabs the Champion’s left shoulder, meeting his dark eyes.

“Trust you…” he mutters, eyes darting away from Ulaz’s. “…I guess—I can do that.”

“Good.” Ulaz reaches for his communicator. “Thace, we’re going to need that escort now.”

Shiro’s reeling again, but this time not from injury. From information overload. Three Galra enter the room. Two are basic robot guards Shiro sees around every day. The third is short—maybe a few inches shorter than the towering Ulaz, but still taller than Shiro—and distinguished-looking. He’s got streaks of grey at his temples, a goatee, and deep lines around his mouth. Ulaz grabs his forearm briefly by way of greeting. “Thace. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Thace mutters, hard eyes looking over Shiro. “You sure he can get the Blue Lion to the outpost?”

“Look at all that he’s survived,” Ulaz says imploringly. “He’s more than strong enough, and the Blue Lion has to recognize that. It has to understand.”

“You might be putting too much stock in a sentient weapon, Ulaz.” Thace’s words aren’t harsh, but pragmatic. “But that is still Kolivan’s overarching goal, and you have presented the best possible solution. Regris is standing by in case the human fails.”

Shiro’s best understanding of the situation right now—which is, admittedly, rather fuzzy—is that
Ulaz and Thace are members of or sympathizers with a rebel group that wants to steal a sentient weapon named the Blue Lion which is apparently on Earth. He clears his throat, drawing the Galras’ attention.

“If I’m understanding this correctly, you need me to get back to Earth and pilot a weapon to your base, right? To keep it away from this Zarkon?”

Thace nods. “We need to move, now, before any of the Empire catch on to us. Ulaz here,” Thace growls, side-eyeing the pale doctor, “made sure everyone was plenty suspicious of how favorably he was treating you. Right now we have the advantage, but the window is closing. The robots will cuff you now.”

Obediently, Shiro turns to allow the robots to cuff his arms behind his back. He understands this is his way out, the nightmare is ending now, and his cooperation is imperative. It all seems so surreal. Then Thace leads Shiro and the two robots from the recovery room. Ulaz starts after them, but Thace stops him at the threshold. The robots continue on, dragging Shiro with them, even as he turns to see what the problem is. Thace says something to Ulaz, low enough that Shiro can’t catch it, then Ulaz wraps a hand around the back of Thace’s head and pulls him in to press their foreheads together. Shiro turns around quickly as Thace breaks away and strides to catch up with the robots. That could be just a standard greeting of their organization. A cultural thing, a friendly gesture, Shiro tells himself, but he has the suspicion he witnessed something far more intimate.

“What makes the Blue Lion so unique?” Shiro asks Thace as the Galra marches him down the hallway.

Thace shoots him a quick little look, then makes sure nobody else is listening. “It’s one part of Voltron. Individually, it is sentient and adaptable and we don’t even know the limits of its power. Zarkon already has the Red Lion.” Thace hesitates, as if he wants to say more, then decides against it. He stares straight ahead, impassive, as they come upon a pair of lounging guards. Thace ignores them. They stare at Shiro as he goes by, their eyes narrowed. Then Shiro is brought around the corner and the guards disappear from sight.

They enter an elevator, which drops rapidly. Shiro fights against the vivid memory of being brought down to Haggar’s lab on that first ship. The doors open to a wide hallway, empty except for a lone guard. The left side is lined with doorways to escape pods. As Thace approaches, the guard looks up and snaps into a salute.

“Lieutenant Thace, sir,” it says mechanically. Thace returns the salute perfunctorily, then grabs the guard’s head and slams it down into his knee. The sudden violence surprises Shiro. He waves the robots over and they bring Shiro with them.

“We have about ten dobashes now. I wasn’t expecting there to be a guard here,” Thace hisses. “You need to destroy these robots and kill this guard so that I’m not implicated in your escape.”

“I can’t—” Shiro starts.

“Don’t tell me you can’t, because you can. I’ve seen you. You must.” Then, as if sensing Shiro’s deep reluctance at the command to kill, Thace softens. He grabs the back of Shiro’s neck in a gesture that strikes the man as oddly fatherly. “It’s not ideal. Nothing in this war is. You’ve already proven yourself worthy of the respect of the Blade of Marmora.”

Shiro returns Thace’s small smile hesitantly. Then the Galra breaks away, his expression once more sliding back into hard neutrality, and he steps back from Shiro, giving him a single nod.
Shiro takes a deep breath. He knows what he has to do. The cuffs melt off of him and in an instant he’s plunging his star-hot hand through the chest of one robot and flinging it into the other. They go skidding across the hall. Before he can think, Shiro smashes his fist into the guard’s helmet. He doesn’t look at the body. When he raises his eyes, though, Thace is gone.

The door directly to his left is flashing green. Shiro rises from his crouch right as someone shouts at him,

“What are you doing here? Stop!”

Shiro turns in alarm to see the two guards he’d passed earlier. “Fuck,” Shiro curses under his breath. One of the guards raises a gun. “Fuck.”

“Freeze, or I’ll shoot!”

Shiro glances at the distance between him and the pod bay doors, which have started to flash orange. That can’t be good. It’s maybe a hundred yards. He can sprint that.

He kicks off in a flash, making it six steps before the ground in front of him explodes, electricity washing over him. Shiro backpedals frantically, only to find the other guard bearing down on him with a cattle prod. His arm heats up and he grabs the prod, snapping it in half. With a brutal motion, Shiro stabs the broken prod back through the guard’s chest, then javelins the prod at the other guard. It spears the guard through the torso. The doors are flashing red now.

Shiro staggers over to the doors, dazed by violence and death, before the wall behind him explodes. In the second before rubble hits his head, Shiro sees the speared guard slump to the floor, gun discarded. Then concrete slams into his temple and he falls onto a hard, metallic ground and it all goes black.
A New Life

The roaring of the pod burning up pulls Shiro into instant high alert. He has maybe twelve seconds to brace himself before the pod slams into the ground. The impact throws everything in the pod loose and rattles Shiro’s aching brain hard in his skull. But then it’s all so still. Shiro lies quietly on the canted floor of the pod, gazing around remotely at the debris inside the pod.

Evidently, he lies there for quite a while, because Shiro is thoroughly startled when something bangs on the outside of the pod. Exhaustion collapses in on Shiro at that very second. God, what happened to me? Where the hell am I? Then—

“Shirogane?”

Shiro tips his head all the way back to see one of his former fellow officers, clad in a biohazard suit, silhouetted in the doorway of the pod. Confusion is the first thing that hits him. Why is she dressed in biohazard whites? What’s so wrong with him that warrants this protocol? Did he crash an experimental fighter or something? Then a bizarre sense of relief swells within him, as if his subconscious knows something he doesn’t. Instead, all he gives is a small, befuddled smile.

A team of people he knows—his peers, coworkers, friends—carry Shiro from the wreckage of the pod. They’re all dressed in biohazard suits and cautiously friendly and Shiro has to respect them for following protocol, but when they lead him into a hastily-constructed containment dome and seat him on an exam table, it all becomes too familiar. Shiro’s animal hindbrain starts to panic, screaming at him, I don’t know where, but you’ve been here before and it wasn’t good! It hurt then and it’s going to hurt now and I don’t know what happened, but it was awful and that’s what’s going to happen now!

“Uh, hey, what’re you doing?” Shiro laughs uneasily, making the team pause. They’re in the process of putting a tourniquet on Shiro’s right arm, muttering anxiously about the strange metal prosthesis that Shiro has absolutely no recollection of getting.

“We have to do this, Shirogane. Please understand.”

“Please don’t,” Shiro insists quietly, an edge of desperation to his voice. They continue slowly tightening the rubber band around his bicep. Right before all the feeling goes from Shiro’s strange technological arm, liquid fire races down its circuits and it blazes into brilliance, startling the team back from him. “I said, don’t,” Shiro repeats. He doesn’t mean it as a threat, he has no clue why his arm is metal or why it’s burning like this, but it most definitely comes off as a threat.

In a whirl of hands and shouting and apologies, Shiro is forced down onto the table and kevlar straps are secured across his body, pinning him down so the most he can do is shout and wriggle ineffectively. Then Iverson, the old battleaxe, is standing over Shiro. His breath fogs the face shield of his biohazard suit.

“Do you know how long you’ve been gone, Shirogane?” he asks.

“I don’t know, I can’t remember,” Shiro responds honestly. The fog of amnesia in his head is starting to clear ever so slightly, thinning in patches, and Shiro wonders if it’s from the crash alone or if there’s more to it.

“You were gone for over a year. Where were you? Where are the Holts?” Iverson demands.

“I don’t know, I don’t know,” Shiro says again, but the words stir something in him. Fractured
pieces of information rush to the forefront of his mind, spill out in disjointed fragments. “Aliens —” one of the others in the room snorts, but Shiro plows on. “There are aliens and they’re coming here, coming to Earth, to find some weapon that’s hidden here—they’re coming and they’re hostile — please believe me, you have to let me go. I have to find the weapon and get it out of here—” Shiro cries. He doesn’t know who told him, but he knows it’s absolutely imperative he finds this weapon, this blue weapon, and take it far away from Earth before the aliens can do to his family and friends what they did to him.

“No! You have to listen to me! Don’t do this!” Shiro shouts, bangs his head against the table uselessly, but there’s nothing he can do against the slide of a needle into his vein or the miasma of medication closing in.

Not again.

At this point, Shiro hates waking up. He can’t remember a time when waking up didn’t mean suffering somehow. He actively ignores the beautiful childhood memories where waking up was a joy because he could see his parents, because those memories are suffering too, just in a different way.

Rising into consciousness this time is different. There’s a warm weight against Shiro’s right hip, a soft surface under his back and head. His body knows those are things it hasn’t felt in a long time, even if his head can’t remember. Gingerly, he opens his eyes, not knowing what to expect.

He’s in a cabin. It’s dim and dusty. Sitting up, he finds himself on a worn couch in front of a coffee table composed of plywood set on cinderblocks. The far wall is draped with a sheet. Defunct electronics litter the perimeter of the room. Shiro looks down to find a thermos resting against his hip. He opens it up, sniffs it, tips his head back with a small sigh of pleasure at the scent of coffee. Looking further down his body, Shiro sees a roughly-folded pile of clothes at his feet, on top of the thin blanket he’d been draped with.

Those are my clothes.

The incongruence is like an itch.

How would my clothes be in this cabin where I’ve never been before, out here in the desert somewhere near the Garrison, after I’ve been gone for over a year because I was abducted and tortured by aliens?

In lieu of scratching it, Shiro takes a hearty swig of the coffee (not even put off by the bitterness of it; he’s really just grateful to taste the damn stuff again) and dresses, stuffing the odd rags he’d been dressed in between the couch cushions. He figures whoever owns the couch can forgive him, seeing as they must have stolen him from the Garrison to get him here. Then Shiro looks out the window and sees a red-and-white speeder bike.

Keith.

A deluge of memories hit him with such force he lurches, one hand dropping to his stomach to try to settle the butterflies that have suddenly appeared there.

Keith saved me...?
Shiro wanders out the back door of the cabin, finding himself next to the speeder bike under a small tree. The bike is cool. Shiro must have been out for a while. He wanders a little further away from the cabin, staring into the sunset. His thoughts grow louder the longer he stands in the silence of the desert. Then he hears footsteps behind him. Shiro glances over his shoulder to see Keith approaching him slowly. Keith gives him a small half-smile and Shiro schools his weakness and racing thoughts into a calm expression.

“It’s good to have you back,” Keith murmurs, reaching up to place a friendly hand on Shiro’s shoulder. Keith’s voice is so much deeper than the last time Shiro heard it, when they had kissed in the hall outside Keith’s room before the launch of the mission. He knows what Keith’s been up to; he’s happy for him.

“It’s good to be back,” Shiro returns the half-smile a little sadly. “It’s gonna take me a bit to get used to that new voice of yours. Suits you, though.”

Keith’s smile becomes a bit more genuine. “Thanks.”

“How long have you been on T?” Shiro asks after a few moments, eyes scanning Keith subtly. It looks like the cadet’s filled out, arms and thighs corded by lean muscle.

“Ten months,” Keith answers, looking away from Shiro and into the last vestiges of the simmering red sun on the horizon. “Still got voice cracks, all that jazz.” Shiro huffs with soft amusement.

“I remember that. Felt like going through puberty all over again—”

“—except this time, the right puberty,” Keith finishes. “Yeah.”

Silence slips in between them again, but not uncomfortably so. Keith stands close enough Shiro can feel his body heat radiating. The warmth is grounding, especially as the chill of the desert night begins to set in. The crying need for friendly touch rears its head in Shiro. Despite his head not remembering, his body knows it’s been far too long since a gentle touch. He glances down at where Keith’s arm barely brushes his, then looks down at the prosthesis. The phantom feeling of liquid fire comes to mind, the knowledge that Shiro doesn’t know how to control it coming with it. It’s dangerous. I can’t risk hurting Keith with this.

“If you need something, you know you can ask, right?” Keith says then, as if reading Shiro’s thoughts. He looks at the cadet with a modicum of suspicion, then sadness settles over his features.

“I—” He sighs. Keith doesn’t press him any further, but surprises Shiro by wrapping his arms around the man. It takes everything in Shiro’s power to not cry. He turns in Keith’s embrace and wraps his arms around the cadet, still so small compared to himself, but impossibly warm, fierce. Fiery. Shiro buries his face in Keith’s hair. He feels the soft, almost hesitant, press of lips to his neck.

“Was that okay—” Keith mumbles into Shiro’s shoulder. Shiro hugs him tighter, presses a kiss into Keith’s hair.

“Yes, yes, absolutely,” he whispers fervently, unable to keep the desperate relief out of his voice. If he pulls away now, Keith will see the tears in his eyes. They stay like that for several more long moments until Shiro feels ready to compose himself. Then he drops another kiss to the top of Keith’s head and takes a half step back, keeping his hands on Keith’s shoulders.

“I missed you,” Keith whispers. He sounds as wrecked as Shiro does. Shiro only nods. Then
Keith is kissing him. His lips are warm, slightly chapped. One of Shiro’s hands curls around the back of Keith’s neck, the other around his waist. Keith’s hands are both fisted in the short crop of Shiro’s hair. Their lips part and meet again, over and over, just feeling and tasting each other ardently but with no real goal in mind. By the time Keith drops back down onto his heels and rocks backwards, Shiro feels almost sedated: calm, warm, complacent, safe, loved.

Being told he is to be a Paladin of Voltron—the glorified pilot of an archaic transforming ship—by an alien princess of a dead civilization and getting catapulted into a ten-millennium-long intergalactic war isn’t what Shiro was expecting to end his day with. Part of him thinks he should have known something like this would happen. You can’t be one of the first men to reach the edge of the solar system and then get abducted by a hostile alien empire and still expect to live a normal life after that, he tells himself. And now here he is, his newly-formed little ragtag team surrounding him in their giant, purring lion ships, all facing the doors behind which Shiro’s own lion supposedly stands. They’re almost impossibly tall. How big is this ship? The Princess Allura mentioned the Black Lion is the largest of the five and with a quick glance at the towering shapes of the Yellow and Blue Lions, Shiro can’t imagine anything much bigger than them. They’re already the size of aircraft carriers on their own.

Four Lions’ roars echo deafeningly in the confined space but Shiro doesn’t flinch. He knows he has to be present for this. This moment is just as important, if not more important than, the launch of the Kerberos mission. Shiro tells himself that over and over as the roars fade, holding himself at attention as the doors drag themselves open. Cloaked in ancient darkness, the Black Lion isn’t immediately visible. Then yellow eyes spark to life and a blue glow flushes down the lines of its body and limbs. It raises its head, stands, and takes a step out of its ten-millennia prison, so heavy it shakes the entire castle. Awe and pride soar in Shiro’s chest. He openly admires the Lion who dwarfs all the others, who stands tall as a skyscraper and broad as a mountain, and basks in its answering roar. Then it dips its head, opening jaws that have to be as wide as a city avenue, to admit Shiro as its Paladin.

The sense of power Shiro has the second his hands touch the throttles is heady. Addictive. The Black Lion’s alien consciousness is like a physical presence around him. She—Shiro knows the Black Lion is a she, now—purrs at him, and he can’t be sure if it’s something he’s hearing in his mind or the low thrum of the engines. “Well done, Paladins!” Allura cries over the comms, sounding almost overwhelmed with joy. Shiro smiles to himself. “With Voltron once again defending the Universe, we can finally stop the Galra Empire!”

All the giddiness of the previous moments melts away suddenly. Shiro is torturously aware of how high the stakes are. How many billions of lives are now depending on him as the leader of Voltron. The Galra desperately need to be stopped, before they can savage anyone else’s life the way they did Shiro’s. He won’t ever let that happen to another being.

So when the first Galra warship sets its sights on the Castle, on the innocent and peaceful planet of Arus, it’s almost too much for Shiro. He doesn’t have the privilege of thinking the Galra will only kill the Arusians, like his teammates do. He manages to hold it together long enough through the briefing as not to arouse suspicion, but the moment Allura is done informing the team of the dangers of the Galra—understating them, in Shiro’s opinion, but he is not going to be the one to tell his young, naive teammates the true horrors of these monsters, not now—Shiro strides purposefully from the bridge to his room under the guise of suiting up. Once he gets to his room, he does suit up just for something to do. The armor makes him feel more ready than he actually is.
“Act now, feel later,” Shiro mutters through gritted teeth. “People are depending on you now. It’s not just you anymore, Takashi.”

It doesn’t take long before one of the other Paladins comes knocking at Shiro’s door. They’re all still just cadets, and they all know Shiro either in person (as Keith does) or in legacy (as Lance, Hunk, and Pidge do) as a commanding officer. They look to and rely on him in a way that Shiro finds flattering, but exhausting. I can barely hold myself together most of the time. How am I supposed to keep this team together, especially when Keith and Lance are at each other’s throats for no reason, and Pidge is keeping secrets? Still, he says “come in,” out of a sense of responsibility rather than an actual desire to talk to anybody.

The door opens to admit Allura. Shiro blinks in surprise. He’d not been expecting the Altean princess.

“Shiro,” she says graciously. “I noticed you left rather swiftly from the briefing. Is everything alright?”

Internally, Shiro curses. He’s not ready for people to start interrogating him on his year in captivity with the Galra, not when he hardly remembers it himself, not when what little he does remember is the worst pain and humiliation he’s ever endured in his life. “Yes, Princess. I’m just… wary… of facing the Galra.”

Allura perches on the edge of Shiro’s bed, sweeping her skirts underneath her in an elegant maneuver. “I am too,” she confesses. “The last interaction I had with the Galra, I had to watch as —” Allura cuts herself off suddenly, covering her mouth with a hand. She takes a deep breath, smooths over the cracks that were starting to show in her diplomatic bearing. “My apologies. The last interaction I had with the Galra, I witnessed atrocities you cannot imagine. It’s not foolish to feel anxious. It is wise.”

Shiro nods. “I don’t remember much, but ‘atrocity’ is a good word for what I do remember.”

“If you don’t mind my inquiring, what do you remember?” Allura asks. Shiro tenses, hoping it doesn’t show outwardly.

“I… don’t know if I’m ready to talk about it just yet,” he says, dropping his gaze to the floor. Just the thought of it—some of the memories lap at the edges of his awareness, drifting across his mind like ghosts, chilling him. Pain and shame and fear.

“I see. Forgive me for asking.” Shiro nods again, grateful for the princess’s tact. “Just know, if you ever do feel ready to talk about it, I am ever your confidant. I can understand in ways your fellow Paladins, as wonderful as they are, cannot.”

“Thank you, Princess.” Allura dips her head, waiting a moment before standing.

“Well.” Her manner becomes businesslike again, as it was on the bridge. “Coran and I will see to it the castle is prepared for the warship’s arrival. I want you and the other Paladins to get to work on forming Voltron. He will be sorely needed in this fight to come.”

“Yes, Princess.” Shiro gives a small salute as Allura departs, despite knowing the action is likely lost on her. After taking a few more moments to re-strengthen the walls holding back the intrusive thoughts and memories, Shiro sets out to find his team.
While Shiro wouldn’t necessarily classify this as a disaster, it’s not a good situation. They’d managed to shakily form Voltron and bring down the ugly Galra cruiser in a flaming wreck, but they’d failed to take out the Galra commander who had identified himself as Sendak. And now that’s coming back around to bite them.

Sendak’s second, Haxus, breached the castle and sent a bomb to the bridge. It had destroyed the crystal and nearly destroyed Lance. For fifteen awful minutes, Shiro had watched Lance teeter on the brink of death, obviously suffering from severe internal injuries. Then Allura had taken over, shepherding Shiro down to the healing pods as he carried Lance. They’d packed him into a pod and set the healing cycle up right as alarms went off indicating Sendak had arrived.

“I’ll get Sendak, the rest of you focus on taking out Haxus,” Shiro commands, already sprinting from the pod room to intercept the Galra commander. He meets him in the courtyard. A bad feeling creeps over Shiro as he finds the Galra standing still in the center of the courtyard, grinning darkly at him as he emerges from the castle.

“Champion,” Sendak purrs. “Fancy meeting you again. As a Paladin of Voltron, no less.”

That voice sounds too familiar. Shiro frowns and liquid fire races down his arm of its own volition. Something dark and primal in Shiro is spooked; it knows Sendak is evil.

“Aw, don’t you remember me?” Sendak taunts, launching himself at Shiro. The Black Paladin dodges, swinging and missing with his prosthetic hand. Shiro knows Sendak has to have been a part of his year as a slave, if this is the way the Galra is talking.

“Enough!” Shiro barks, making another pass at Sendak. The commander leans to the side to dodge the strike, then his monstrous prosthetic arm lashes out, the energy chain holding it to his shoulder extending to grab Shiro. His fist closes around Shiro’s waist and slams him into the ground. The air is forced from Shiro’s lungs on impact, leaving him gasping for breath, but Sendak flings him up into the air again like a ragdoll. The second time Shiro hits the ground some of his ribs creak dangerously, threatening to crack. The paladin armor is the only reason they haven’t broken yet.

“See, I’ve got a prosthetic too. Mine’s the newer model,” Sendak says smugly. “The research that went into yours is what makes mine possible. So I suppose I should thank you.” He laughs, and there is some genuine sick amusement there. “Even though you’re the one who took my arm from me.”

The realization hits Shiro like a freight train. That voice—that laugh—the prosthetic arm—the missing eye—

Flesh memory slithers across Shiro’s body, dirty and horrible, of Sendak’s hands around his ankles, the whip biting through his skin, his hand searing through Sendak’s flesh, hot blood and alien semen running down his legs.

Shiro screams.

Sendak laughs.

“I’ll kill you!” Shiro howls. Blazing with fury, Shiro weaves through every hit Sendak throws at him until he can close his plasma-hot fist around the energy chain of Sendak’s arm. He rips at it with all his strength and the chain stretches, frays; Shiro clamps all the way down on it, and it breaks. The brutal metal of the prosthetic drops to the floor uselessly and Sendak roars. Shiro
pushes back hard on the anxious terror that sound pulls out of him, forcing himself forward through it, driving at Sendak one last time until his fist strikes the Galra in the temple.

The Galra goes down heavy. Shiro lands on top of him, but Sendak’s not out yet. The two grapple in the dirt and Shiro tries not to panic—god, he tries—but it’s inescapable when Sendak flips them over and it’s too much. Shiro is screaming, screaming for his life, screaming in anger, in fear, in pain.

“You want the rest of the Paladins to see you like this?” Sendak bellows. “You want them to know what I did to you, how I broke you?”

“Fuck you!” Shiro spits, fighting to pull his knees up to his chest. Sendak’s weight is crushing him.

“Isn’t that what you said last time? Remember how well that worked? You still ended up with my co—” Sendak is cut off by Shiro kicking him hard in the gut, winding him and throwing him ten feet clear across the courtyard. Shiro scrambles to his feet, gets to Sendak before the Galra can rise. He delivers a vicious kick to the Galra’s head—then another, another, another, until Sendak is limp and unresponsive. His hand lights up again, burning hotter than ever before with fury and pain and revenge. Right before he can plunge his hand through Sendak’s face, hands and arms wrap around Shiro, terrified screaming rings in his ears. Shrii voices saying,

“No, Shiro, don’t! He’s down, stop! Shiro, please!”

He thrashes in their grip, shrugs some arms off, before two constrict around him like an iron vice, pinning his arms to his sides.

“That’s enough!” Allura shouts in his ear, picking him up off the ground so Shiro flails uselessly in the air. She carries him back into the castle and every single one of Shiro’s instincts are screeching at him to get this attacker off, she’s too strong, she’s going to hurt you too! He’s set down in a chair, two strong hands pinning his shoulders to the back of it. He kicks out with one foot—it connects with a knee, forcing a cry of pain out of someone and that earns him a slap across the face.

“Pull yourself together, Shiro! This is no way for the Black Paladin to behave!” Allura barks.

“Allura, back off!” Keith shouts suddenly, and the hands disappear from Shiro’s shoulders, replaced by much gentler ones on his cheeks. “Shiro, it’s me, Keith. You’re safe, it’s okay. Sendak’s gone.”

Shiro looks at the person holding his face and finally is able to see again. Keith’s features are wracked with concern as he holds Shiro’s face.

“I’m,” Shiro pants. “I’m good. I’m okay.”

“You owe Pidge an apology!” Allura snaps, cutting in. Before Shiro can respond, Keith rounds on her, bristling like an angry cat.

“You can’t just manhandle him and slap him like that when he’s in the middle of an episode! He doesn’t know what’s happening! He’s in a full panic, and you go ahead and hit him? That doesn’t fucking help!”

Allura looks sufficiently cowed, but recovers quickly. “It’s still not appropriate behavior given his role as a Paladin,” she sniffs.
Shiro responds before Keith can berate her again. “I’m sorry, Allura.” Then he turns to Pidge and holds out a hand. “I’m sorry about kicking you, Pidge.”

“I understand,” Pidge says, still rubbing her knee.

Taking a deep breath, Shiro once again addresses the princess. “In the future, when I have an episode, please refrain from hitting me again. Like Keith says, it doesn’t help. I don’t know if you can understand, but…” he trails off, shakes his head. “Just… some compassion, please.”

“I, too, apologize for hitting you. I didn’t realize.” Allura bows her head. The atmosphere is still tense.

Finally, Hunk breaks the strained air. “How about you go get some food goo, Shiro, while we take care of, uh, the other stuff.”

Shiro rises, grateful for Hunk’s tact, and Keith comes to his side immediately. Pidge and Hunk make to leave the room, then stop when they notice Allura hanging back by Shiro and Keith. “Allura, we could use your help patching some things up,” Pidge says with a wave. Allura opens her mouth to say something, then hesitates a moment before closing it and walking over to the trio.

“Of course. Show me what you need and I’ll assist.”

“I’m off to the bridge, then.” Coran excuses himself, leaving Shiro and Keith alone. Shiro sighs, waiting for Keith to ask questions. When the Red Paladin doesn’t, instead taking Shiro’s hand and leading him to the kitchen, a relieved little smile finds its way to his face.

That night, as Shiro is getting ready for bed, Allura knocks on his door again. Right off the bat, she apologizes.

“Shiro, I’m deeply sorry for my actions earlier today. I was the one who behaved inappropriately.”

The Black Paladin blinks, surprised. That’s… not what he was expecting Allura to say. “Apology accepted, Princess.” He wonders who talked to her. Maybe Pidge.

“I wasn’t aware of post-traumatic stress disorder until Pidge informed me of it, and now I know I should not have acted the way I did, given you were not in control of yourself and can’t be blamed for your reaction.”

So it was Pidge. Shiro takes a moment before responding. It makes sense to him, that he should have PTSD considering what he remembers going through, but at the same time he’s hesitant to apply that label. PTSD is something for old veterans. It’s a demon that haunts you, cripples you. PTSD requires a therapist and a service dog and people treating you with kid gloves—that’s the last thing Shiro wants. Then he shakes his head.

“Thank you for your apology, and I’m glad you understand now, but I don’t want you to treat me any differently. I don’t want anyone to treat me differently. I’m just going to need some time, but I’m still me in the meantime. I’m still the Black Paladin, I can still lead Voltron. Don’t think of me as weak… please.”

Allura nods. “Of course.” She softens, then says, “you are, in fact, exceptionally strong for surviving the Galra for that long. I won’t ask you again what happened, but I know you are more than capable of leading Voltron and freeing the Universe from Zarkon’s tyranny. I have absolute trust in you.”
Shiro dips his head at the praise.

“Now, good night. Sleep well, Shiro.”
I Love You

The hall of containers is dark, cold, and barren. It prompts Shiro to wonder how common these memory-transference procedures were in the Altean days, but he doesn’t chase that rabbit. He stands square, arms crossed, and faces down Sendak. The Galra looks as if he’s sleeping with his head just bowed and one remaining eye closed. It sets Shiro on edge.

He keeps on with his questioning of the unconscious soldier, pressing him for information they can use against the Galra later. “Where is Zarkon moving troops? What is his plan? What were your orders?”

With each question, another bright burst of light representing captured memories spurts into the containment unit next to Sendak’s. Then, suddenly, they stop. “Why aren’t you answering me?” Shiro growls. “You’re a broken soldier, give it up!”

“No, Champion, you’re the broken soldier.” Sendak’s dark voice rolls through the hall like a wave, buffeting Shiro. He staggers back from the containment tube. “You were captured and used and broken and now all the Empire knows about you. All your dirty little biological secrets belong to us now. We know everything. You belong to us.”

“No, no, not true!” Shiro protests, clutching his head to try to block out the rough, dark, sounds of Sendak’s voice. It grinds through Shiro’s eardrums, corrupted and evil.

“It is!” Sendak sounds delighted. Shiro pushes himself upright and lurches towards the tube again, pounding his right fist into the surface of the glass—a spiderweb of cracks races across the surface—shouting back at the Galra even as he continues to taunt, “you can’t deny it, Champion! You’re a product of the Galra Empire now. You have a number, a name, a role… a research subject. We’re more alike than you think.”

“Stop it!”

Sendak’s eye opens, a vicious smile cuts across his face. Shiro screams. His fist finds the release button before he can even think.

The hall goes deafeningly silent before the chute that evacuated Sendak’s tube closes with a soft click and the hiss of air signifies it repressurizing.

The absence of the hulking Galra body in the tube is at once a relief and an incriminating marker of Shiro’s weakness.

“Shiro… are you alright?”

Shiro turns, trying to breathe and collect himself, to see his whole team standing behind him. Lance has stepped forward, one hand halfway extended in a concerned gesture. Shiro nods mutely, still needing a moment. Lance gets it and takes a step back. Straightening up and letting go of the button that ejected Sendak into space, Shiro looks into the faces of Team Voltron and sees nothing but genuine concern for his wellbeing. The need for touch bubbles up in Shiro’s chest at that moment and he holds his arms out wide.

Pidge is the first one to get it and rushes in to wrap her little arms around Shiro’s waist. Then Hunk and Keith, then Lance, Allura, and Coran. Surrounded on all sides by the warmth and love
of his team, Shiro can feel their touches erasing the ghost of Sendak’s abuse. The brutal Galra has been ejected into space. Shiro is finally safe. He’ll never again have to live with the thought that his rapist and torturer is alive, hunting him down to whip and brutalize him again. Sendak may have been able to draw Shiro into flashbacks, make him feel the lash bite through his skin, make him feel Sendak’s claws in his thighs, make him hear the Galra’s voice taunting and screaming at him, but Shiro had the last word. Shiro had taken his eye, taken his arm, taken his life.

Sendak’s gone now, and Shiro has his new family. The adage that sustained him, *act now, feel later*, comes into his head then and Shiro knows it’s later. He can feel now.

Amidst the tight hug of his team, Shiro allows himself to crack a little bit and let the tears flow down his cheeks. He knows his family will be there to dry them.

Shiro breathes deeply, relaxes into the mattress, deliberately pushes the tension out of his muscles. Keith’s hands are oh so delicate across Shiro’s chest as he catalogues his mess of scars. There are raised, puffy streaks from the whip; thick, knotted lines from teeth and claws; pitted craters from electricity and quintessence; ruler-straight chasms of surgery. Some are frighteningly sensitive, ticklish almost, and make Shiro suck in little surprised gasps when Keith runs his fingertips across them. Others are devoid of feeling. The only indication Shiro has that Keith is laying hands on them is the dull sensation of deep pressure.

“What?” Keith looks up at Shiro through his lashes, meeting his eyes.

“I love you,” Shiro murmurs. Keith grins, leaning over to press a kiss to Shiro’s chest right over his heart.

“Roll over,” Keith instructs, moving his hand to Shiro’s flank to help him onto his stomach. Shiro lays his head on his crossed arms as Keith straddles his hips, kneading into Shiro’s shoulders with the heels of his hands. A contented sigh escapes Shiro and his eyes drift shut. The way Keith works through the thick scar tissue and down into Shiro’s muscles isn’t as professional as the physical therapist, but it’s so much more intimate: done out of love rather than obligation, and that makes it all the better. Slowly, Shiro is overwriting the memories inscribed in his skin, filling up those voids and purging painful thoughts with affection and care.

Every little thing means so much to Shiro. He recognizes everyone cares for him in different ways. Hunk makes him food, going so far as to cook him a new dish when he wanders into the kitchen late during the night cycle unable to sleep and finds the Yellow Paladin there getting a midnight snack. Pidge’s help can be difficult, but Shiro appreciates it nonetheless when the young Paladin hooks his Galra arm up to the computers and sorts through its data, de-junking it and making sure all the circuits are scrubbed clean of malicious influence—it’s peace of mind for Shiro, despite how emotionally taxing it is. Lance is a wonderful distraction when Shiro gets stuck inside his own head; the boy’s goofy antics always get Shiro to crack a smile, even when he tries his hardest to look stoic and disapproving, and his enthusiastic chatter interspersed with genuine compliments is his way of saying ‘I love you.’ Allura’s compassionate but structured manner is easy to fall back on, allowing Shiro to think a bit less and worry not quite so much—the princess has it handled, whatever it is, yet somehow she’s always got a smile and a moment for Shiro to share his thoughts. Even Coran, the universally capable personal assistant to everyone, makes sure Shiro isn’t alone
when he needs company, sometimes bringing the Black Paladin down into the inner workings of the ship when it needs maintenance and chitchatting with Shiro just to keep the intrusive memories at bay and ground Shiro in the present.

And then there’s Keith. Keith gives Shiro every ounce of love in his heart in his own sometimes-ineloquent, protective way. Shiro doesn’t expect poetry from him, because he knows Keith speaks more with his actions and hands, he knows that every kiss says volumes and that every glance in his direction is a safety blanket. Keith is Shiro’s champion, his bodyguard, his confidant, his lover, his rock, his right-hand man. Keith is everything Shiro could ever ask for.

The way Keith’s hands move pulls the strain out of both Shiro’s muscles and Shiro’s mind until the soreness there feels more like a good workout than constant stressed tension. Shiro gives a content hum when Keith runs his nails all the way up Shiro’s spine into his hair, scratching the crown of his head.

“’M gonna fall asleep if you keep doing that,” Shiro mumbles through a smile. Keith leans down to whisper in his ear,

“That’s the idea.” Shiro can hear the soft laugh in his voice. Keith’s weight disappears from his hips, only to be replaced by the heavy blanket Shiro so loves to swaddle himself in. He indulges himself by wriggling further down into the softness of the mattress and takes comfort in Keith’s hand on the back of his neck as he drifts into dreamless sleep.

This is definitely Shiro’s favorite place on the castle ship: his room, but only when Keith is there too. Curled up in bed with the Red Paladin, drifting in and out of sleep as Keith watches videos on the holographic tablet. This is good. Keith’s presence is, in a way, an addiction for Shiro. Not just for the simple fact that he loves Keith, but because Keith makes him feel safe. Of course the rest of Team Voltron does too—Shiro trusts everyone aboard this ship with his life and more—but Keith offers a kind of intimate emotional safety Shiro wouldn’t be able to find with anyone else. Their shared bond is too deep.

As Keith sits up against the wall with Shiro leaned back against his chest, Keith’s idle hand not holding the tablet finds Shiro’s prosthesis, his fingers moving along the smooth contours and seams of the metal. It used to bother Shiro, how much Keith wanted to touch the thing, but with Shiro’s increasing control over it has come greater peace of mind touching others with the prosthesis. That, and when he closes his eyes, it’s easy enough to forget it’s a prosthesis at all with how real the sensations feel. So Shiro indulges, taking in the soft and warm and fluttering feelings of being wound up in Keith.

After a while, the urge to speak wells up in Shiro like a bubble from the depths of the ocean. He lets it rise, waiting cautiously to see what it turns into.

“I’ve been thinking about what the Galra did to me,” Shiro’s mouth says on its own. He’s surprised at how gently it comes out, how there’s no rush of hurt-anger-terror-pain-violation that comes with the words. "The more I think about it, the more I can remember," Shiro continues softly, opening his eyes to watch Keith's fingers trace the lines between his mechanical joints.

"Then don't think about it," Keith protests. He clicks the tablet off and sets it down on the floor next to the bed, wrapping his newly-freed arm around Shiro’s chest.

"No, I have to." Keith's hand stills. "I'll never be able to undo what the Galra did to me, but I at
least need to know what happened so I can heal."

Keith doesn't say anything for a moment, instead fidgeting with Shiro’s thumb. "What do you remember?" he asks finally.

"Fighting in the arena," Shiro’s eyes go distant, lost in memory. "Electricity. Cold tables... Haggar cut me open. She took tissue samples. I think she took my ovaries."

"Not like you needed those anyways." Keith tries to lighten the mood. Shiro glances up at him appreciatively, and the Red Paladin presses a kiss to Shiro’s forehead.

“I remember killing people. So many people, I can’t count. I couldn’t have counted.” Shiro doesn’t look up again. He doesn’t want to know the expression on Keith’s face. “There’s a vivid memory I have. It comes up in my dreams sometimes. I’m standing in the arena and it’s hot from the lights. It has this smell—sandy, but not like the desert—and there are just bodies all around me. Dozens of them. And I killed all of them.”

“Shiro…” Keith murmurs. Shiro misses the note of distress in his voice.

“I know I refused to fight a couple of times. It’s impossible to say what was worse: killing innocent people, or getting whipped. The Galra who whipped me—Sendak… he was a monster, he—” Shiro swallows the brutal memory down. “He raped me—”

“Shiro, please!”

Keith’s hand clamps down on Shiro’s prosthetic arm and he sits up immediately, twisting around. Keith’s eyes are screwed tightly shut, mouth a hard line. He’s shaking his head. “I’m sorry, I—I just can’t hear that.”

“Oh, oh, no,” Shiro breathes, cupping Keith’s face in his hands. “No, I’m so sorry for saying it, I didn’t realize…”

Keith gives a tight nod. “Maybe later, but not—not right now.” Shiro pulls Keith in to his chest, holding him close with a hand combing slowly through his long, black hair. Then Keith mumbles into Shiro’s shirt, “I promise I’ll be better in the future for you.”

Shiro wants to protest, to shush him, to tell Keith he doesn’t have to be better because he’s already the best, but instead Shiro just hums and scratches at Keith’s scalp. The Red Paladin sighs, winding his arms around Shiro’s waist. Shiro feels Keith’s lips moving against his shirt, but he can’t tell if it’s kisses or words. Then Keith’s arms tighten around him and Shiro falls backwards, giving a surprised “oof” as his back hits the bed. Keith crawls right up on top of him, lying down on Shiro’s chest to wind his legs around the Black Paladin’s and put his hands on Shiro’s cheeks.

“I won’t ever let them hurt you again, not like that, not ever,” Keith says, earnest and disjointed. “You’re—safe, you’re here, you’re mine— They’re not going to touch you ever again, Shiro.”

His eyes are bright, filled with fire and tears.

“I love you.” Shiro says it like a prayer, like Keith is his god.

Keith’s lips come crashing down on Shiro’s mouth. He’s not sure which one of them whines. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” Keith breathes harshly against Shiro’s lips. “I’ll always be here for you. I’ll keep you safe.”

Shiro is definitely the one who whined; he whines again. He tangles his fingers in Keith’s hair,
pulling him closer, arching his back to press up against Keith as much as is humanly possible. All that exists in this world right now is the hot weight of Keith on top of him, the smooth slide of their lips together, the smell of Keith’s deodorant and sweat, their love like an almost tangible presence around them. Keith presses his face into the crook of Shiro’s neck, his lips to Shiro’s pulse point, and mouths wetly at the beating of Shiro’s heart. It sets his nerves alight; he gasps in the warm air of the room and tightens his hands in Keith’s hair.

“Keith, Keith,” he whispers, voice ragged. Keith surges up to meet Shiro’s lips, grabbing the man’s bottom lip between his teeth. Shiro groans, kisses back with everything he can muster. All at once, though, the desperate fire in Shiro’s nerves burns itself out and leaves behind only slow smoldering warmth. Shiro slumps back against the bed, letting his fingers comb out of Keith’s hair and stroke down the man’s back. Keith quiets against Shiro too, kissing at the corner of his mouth, then his cheek, then his temple, as he lays his forehead down on the bed and pants quietly in Shiro’s ear. He toys gently with Shiro’s white fringe, alternating between twirling it and scratching his nails across Shiro’s scalp.

“What are we?” Keith asks finally, propping himself up on one elbow even as he lays on Shiro’s chest, so that he can look him in the eyes. Shiro opens his eyes and offers a one-shouldered shrug. He’s got no anxiety to label what exists between him and Keith. There’s attraction, sure—physical, emotional, intellectual, romantic, sexual, *everything*—but there’s also a deep companionship and a complex, unspoken understanding by virtue of their shared experiences with gender. No need to ask any questions, no need to feel different or unusual. Just normalcy. That, in and of itself, is sometimes more of a gift than Shiro feels he deserves.

“I’m yours, and you’re mine,” Shiro rumbles, reaching an almost-sleepy hand up to touch Keith’s pink lips. The man gives him a soft smile.

“I guess we are, aren’t we?” He kisses Shiro’s fingertips. Then he takes Shiro’s fingers into the soft, wet heat of his mouth and sucks a groan out of Shiro. Keith’s heather eyes are dark when he looks coily at Shiro through his lashes. The shape of his lips around two of Shiro’s thick fingers is obscene, makes Shiro wonder what those lips would look like around his dick. Heat rolls through him at the thought and the blood rushes out of his head straight to his hardening cock. Keith lets Shiro’s fingers go, a glistening line of spit connecting the tip of his tongue to the tips of Shiro’s fingers. He grins and winks at Shiro, and Shiro’s head falls back onto the pillow with a moan.

“I haven’t even touched you yet,” Keith teases and that’s a fucking lie, but Shiro doesn’t have the presence of mind to argue it.

“Then touch me,” he retorts instead, rolling his hips up against Keith’s stomach. Keith tries to pull away and deny Shiro that contact, but the heavy weight of his hand against Keith’s lower back holds him in place. He swings one leg in between Shiro’s, pressing his knee up into Shiro’s dick, the friction distracting him for long enough Keith can buck his hand. A hot, heavy kiss lands on Shiro’s mouth as a hand slides up underneath his shirt and finds one of his nipples and rolls the bud between two fingers. Shiro barely contains a whine and gets bitten on the lip for his troubles.

“I want to hear you,” Keith growls into his mouth, and Shiro whines at that. Keith grinds into Shiro’s crotch again, dips his head to bite his pulse again. He sucks a hard, dark mark into Shiro’s skin and the man fists Keith’s shirt with a breathy sound. “How much do you want?” Keith whispers in Shiro’s ear, teeth grazing his skin. Shiro shivers.

“I want everything. Wanna feel you inside me.”

“Good boy,” Keith murmurs and nibbles Shiro’s earlobe then bites a line of marks straight down Shiro’s throat while Shiro whimpers. It feels so good, endlessly good, to not think.
To just feel good. Pleasure. Safety. Then his shirt is pushed up under his armpits and Keith’s tongue laves over a nipple and Shiro makes a high, helpless noise, hands flying to Keith’s head. His fingers tangle in the man’s shaggy hair, holding his head there as he licks and sucks the sensitive bud and drives Shiro crazy.

Keith smooths one hand down Shiro’s abdomen, edging his fingers under the waistband of Shiro’s sweatpants. Shiro nods, rasps a breathy “yes, god, please,” instinctively reaching for Keith’s shirt to make him feel good too.

“No.” Keith bats his hand away, releasing Shiro’s nipple to scold him. “You’re going to lie here and take everything I give to you and you’re going to thank me, aren’t you?”

Shiro is soaked at those words. He nods fervently, forgetting words until Keith arches one brow. “Yes, yes, I am,” he gasps. A grin curls across Keith’s lips.

“What’s the right answer. With one final nip, Keith sits up, straddling Shiro’s thigh, and strips his shirt off. Shiro groans appreciatively at the sight of Keith’s toned body, wanting so badly to touch but knowing he can’t. Keith moves enough that he can pull Shiro’s sweatpants off then slides down between his legs, kissing and licking Shiro’s inner thighs. He feels like he’s burning up, Keith’s mouth is so close to where he wants it, but Keith keeps moving away at the last second. “Fuck, Keith, please.” Shiro begs quietly. Keith’s hand on his hip tightens. He shoots Shiro a look and holds eye contact as he lowers his head so his lips are barely touching the head of Shiro’s dick.

“No.” Keith bats his hand away, releasing Shiro’s nipple to scold him. “You’re going to lie here and take everything I give to you and you’re going to thank me, aren’t you?”

Shiro is soaked at those words. He nods fervently, forgetting words until Keith arches one brow. “Yes, yes, I am,” he gasps. A grin curls across Keith’s lips.

“What’s the right answer. With one final nip, Keith sits up, straddling Shiro’s thigh, and strips his shirt off. Shiro groans appreciatively at the sight of Keith’s toned body, wanting so badly to touch but knowing he can’t. Keith moves enough that he can pull Shiro’s sweatpants off then slides down between his legs, kissing and licking Shiro’s inner thighs. He feels like he’s burning up, Keith’s mouth is so close to where he wants it, but Keith keeps moving away at the last second. “Fuck, Keith, please.” Shiro begs quietly. Keith’s hand on his hip tightens. He shoots Shiro a look and holds eye contact as he lowers his head so his lips are barely touching the head of Shiro’s dick.

“God, yes, please, oh god,” he babbles and Keith pushes his finger in. The feeling of having something inside is absolutely delicious but one isn’t enough. “More, more, please—”

Keith shakes his head and Shiro whines until Keith crooks his finger, pressing against the front wall, and the pressure makes Shiro melt. His body goes lax, still holding onto Keith’s hair as he releases Shiro’s cock and suddenly pushes his tongue inside Shiro alongside his finger. Shiro’s whine breaks into a wrecked, broken sound and incoherent babbling. Keith hums something against Shiro’s soaking entrance and the vibrations are incredible.

“What do you need?” It’s as much a tease as it is a genuine question.

“I need your cock, I need to be filled, I need to be inside you,” Shiro begs, cupping Keith’s face in his hands. He starts to sit up, to pull Keith up to him, but Keith pushes a second finger inside him suddenly and Shiro stops with a choked cry.

“I can fill you.” Keith’s voice is low and dark and in a flash all sense of safety evaporates—
Sendak is between Shiro’s legs with his claws and cock ready to hurt Shiro—he kicks wildly and there’s a startled yelp and the thud of a body hitting the floor as Shiro scrambles backwards, into the corner of the bed, grabbing at the blanket to wrap it as tightly around him as he can, pressing his legs together until there’s no memory of there ever being space between them.

“No, no, no, nononono,” Shiro babbles, wrapping his arms around his head as he curls into the fetal position. His body aches with uncounted bruises, still-healing surgeries, raw cuts from the whip; wrists pulled and chafed by chains.

“Shiro,” Sendak taunts; Shiro feels him come closer and fire races down Shiro’s right arm.

“Get back!” he barks, raising his arm in defense. Sendak recoils, holding his hands up. “Get back!” Sendak takes a few steps backwards, then turns and flees the room.

Shiro lets his arm cool, knowing he’s only got a few minutes to escape before Sendak returns with a vengeance. But his body won’t move. It just won’t listen. Panic has gripped him too tightly, leaving his mind racing in circles stuck in a paralyzed, useless body.

Sendak comes back into the room. His footsteps are so light—that’s not right.

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“Takashi,” he says, and his voice is too high. Too familiar. “You’re in your room in the Castle of Lions. It’s me, Keith.”

“Keith?” Shiro repeats, trying to blink some semblance of clarity into his vision. He squints hard and sure enough, Keith is standing in the center of the room, shirtless, with a cup of water.

“Yeah, it’s me.” He doesn’t come any closer, doesn’t say anything else for a long moment. He looks uncertain. “Can I… come closer?”

Shiro takes a couple deep, clarifying breaths, then nods. Keith approaches the bed cautiously, holding out the cup of water for Shiro to take. He drinks it gratefully, letting the coolness of it bring him back to the present. Acting is over, it’s time now to feel. “I’m in my room in the Castle of Lions. I’m on my bed, there’s a blanket wrapped around me, my toes are cold,” Keith says quietly, vocalizing what he feels and knows to be true in order to push any sort of memory out of his mind. “Keith is standing at the edge of the bed. I have a cup of water in my hand.”

Keith watches silently, nervously patient, until Shiro finishes and pats a spot on the bed beside him. He crawls up onto the mattress carefully and settles himself a respectful distance away from Shiro. Then he says, “I’m so, so sorry,” and he sounds completely devastated. “I should have asked, I just assumed, and you had just told me—”

“I really didn’t mean to,” ‘trigger a flashback,’ Keith leaves the second part unsaid, but they both know that’s what he means.

“I know you didn’t. I didn’t know it was going to happen.” Shiro basks in the feeling of Keith’s fingernails for a moment before adding, “I’m sorry I threatened you.”
“Don’t blame yourself,” Keith assures him quickly. Silence falls again. Then, eventually, Keith asks, “will we ever have sex again?”

Shiro suppresses a laugh. “Yes, just… not right now. In the future we’ll be more careful, okay?”

“Okay.”

Shiro pulls his head away from Keith’s hand. “Hey. I can tell you’re beating yourself up. Don’t do that.”

“Yes, sir,” Keith mumbles through the faintest of smiles.

“Let’s get to sleep. It’s late.”

Shiro spoons Keith, curling up around the lean man and basking in his incredible warmth. Automatically, his lips press kisses into Keith’s hair and he whispers, “I love you,” before he falls asleep.
“Let me show you something,” Keith says, eyes bright and smile sharp as he grabs for Shiro’s hand.

“Okay,” Shiro chuckles, allowing himself to be pulled along towards the Red Lion’s hangar. They’re still in their Paladin armor after the latest reconnaissance flyover of a Galra-occupied planet, but Keith is raring to go again.

“You haven’t flown until you’ve flown the Red Lion,” Keith says cockily, stepping into the Lion’s jaws when Red lowers her head to admit them. “She probably won’t let you pilot her, but you can come along for the ride.”

Shiro smirks back at Keith. “Let’s see what she can do then.” He braces himself against the back of the pilot’s chair, wishing he had a five-point harness like Keith did. “No barrel rolls,” he cautions.

“Can’t make any promises.” Keith shoots a devilish grin over his shoulder. “Hold on.”

Shiro tightens his grip on the chair right as the Red Lion lunges forwards, blasting out of the hangar at a speed that can’t be safe. They clear the Castle in half a second, galloping through space at a pace Shiro had never even imagined. Red bounds off of asteroids, shattering them under the force of her claws and it’s at that point Keith unbuckles his harness, rolling his neck and readjusting his grip on the throttles.

“Watch this,” he growls, voice deep as the resonant thrum of Red’s engines. Shiro can’t help the shiver that runs down his spine. Keith rolls forward into Red’s gallop, pushing the throttles in time with her strides, breath in sync with the rise and fall of her roaring engines. Their pace increases and Shiro’s heart rate skyrockets as the stars around them become long smears of light across the viewport.

Then it shatters into a million crystals.

They break the speed of light with an ear-splitting crack that surges through Shiro’s viscera and turns his bones to jelly. It steals his breath and time crawls to a near-halt. And Keith is still pushing her faster. Red’s engines drop into an impossibly low register that rattles Shiro’s very thoughts and she pours on the speed. They’ve got to be breaching the edge of this reality.

Suddenly Keith pulls back on the throttles and the deceleration throws Shiro forwards into the chair with an ‘ooof’. Red screeches to a halt, skidding across the surface of a rocky asteroid. Around them is nothingness. Not even any stars. The only light is the blue glow from Red’s thrusters throwing the craters of the rock into relief.

“Where are we?” Shiro murmurs, swaying slightly due to the weakness in his knees.

“The edge of the universe,” Keith says softly, looking out the viewport into the absolute void just before them. It’s humbling beyond belief to realize just how tiny they are, standing on the precipice of non-existence. Shiro feels laid bare, scrubbed empty, insignificant, untouchable. It’s purifying.

There’s nothing more to be said, nothing that can be said.

Shiro forgets to breathe until the hiss of Red’s pneumatics reminds him. His heart beats with her
idling engines. He is a part of Red, nearly seamless with her.

Eventually, Keith tightens his fingers around the thrusters and breathes out a measured sigh. “Ready to go home?” he asks, as much to Shiro as to Red. She purrs in response, already kicking off the dark surface of the rock. Red effortlessly strides into the speed of light, racing the stars with a victorious roar that Keith echoes, his voice raw.

When they pull up short in the hangar once more, Red’s breath and heart are thunder in Shiro’s ears before she quiets and dips her head to let the paladins exit. Shiro stands in awe for a long moment, looking up at the lion he had once considered useful but small, now seeing her for her true power. Her eyes flash and Shiro turns to Keith, seeing his lion reflected in him.

“You’re amazing,” Shiro says to both of them, starstruck. Keith’s grin says, ‘I know.’

Then Keith’s everywhere, all around Shiro, all heat and teeth and tongue and hands and Shiro grabs at Keith dizzyly, biting back and pulling hair and unlatching armor. Shiro’s back hits a hard surface and Keith strips him of his chestplate, deftly undoing the hidden zipper of the flight suit underneath. Shiro fumbles with Keith’s suit, thoroughly distracted by the tongue tracing the shell of his ear, the teeth nipping his neck, the hand toying with a nipple.

“Ah, Keith,” Shiro breathes, blindly catching his fingers on the edge of the fabric and pulling. The sound of ripping fabric splits the air and Keith breaks away suddenly, looking stunned at the hole Shiro ripped down the abdomen and crotch of his suit, but Shiro doesn’t have time for that. He grabs Keith back immediately, biting him on the side of the neck, leaving marks of his own until Keith is hissing in his ear. A bare hand slides into Shiro’s suit and cups his dick, one finger sliding through the wetness of his folds. Shiro groans and bucks his hips forward, impaling himself on one wandering finger. Keith bites at Shiro’s mouth and Shiro works one hand out of a glove so he can grab Keith’s cock. He’s rock hard and soaking wet and that alone has both of them moaning. Shiro wraps two fingers around Keith’s dick and jerks him, whispering, “make sure you stretch me out good for your cock, baby.”

Keith shudders, going weak against Shiro for a moment before he adds another finger and Shiro begins to feel so deliciously full, panting with how good it feels to be completed. Dipping the tip of a finger into Keith’s slick entrance draws the most beautiful gasp out of him but before Shiro can do any more, Keith’s fingers disappear from inside him and he’s being spun around and pushed to his knees.

“Want to get me ready?” Keith purrs, looking down on Shiro with eyes so dark and wanting. Shiro nods furiously, putting his hands on Keith’s thigh armor as he dives in without hesitation and licks a line up the underside of Keith’s dick. He was so lucky; he got a couple inches of growth, long and thick enough to actually penetrate Shiro and god Keith’s cock makes Shiro weak. Wrapping his lips around Keith’s cock and sucking lightly has Keith groaning and threading a hand into Shiro’s hair. “Oh baby, so good, baby,” he murmurs, head tipping back against what Shiro now realizes is one of Red’s front legs. Somehow, he can’t bring himself to care that they’re fucking up against the lion. He blames the power of boners.

He keeps working over Keith’s cock, taking it all the way into his mouth, savoring it, swirling his tongue over the head. Then Shiro dips his tongue into Keith’s folds and he cries out, bucking into Shiro’s mouth. Shiro hums encouragement, bobbing his head and sucking to make Keith come undone.

“Oh god, oh, oh,” Keith pants, sounding just about undone when he abruptly pulls Shiro off his cock. Shiro strains for it, lips wet and swollen, but he looks up at Keith hopefully. “Oh, good boy.” Keith strokes the side of Shiro’s face, voice soft in praise. He slides down to the floor and
pulls Shiro down with him, putting his hands on Shiro’s hips to direct him until the man is straddling him. “That’s it, baby. You want to sit on my cock?”

“Please,” Shiro whines, bracing against Red’s leg as he leans in to kiss Keith sloppily. Keith guides his hips down until Shiro feels his cock breach his folds and he sighs in anticipation, trembling. “Keith, please.” His voice is high and desperate and he doesn’t care.

Keith thrusts up into him at the same time as Shiro slams his hips down and he cries, voice echoing through the hangar shamelessly as Keith’s cock fills him so perfectly.

“What, baby, you’re going to cause a scene,” Keith growls in Shiro’s ear and Shiro clutches at the sound of his voice, making Keith grunt in response. Shiro’s head falls against Keith’s shoulder and he nuzzles into the Red Paladin’s neck, nipping at the skin there. Keith moves Shiro’s hips up and down, fucking him on his cock and Shiro bites down on a groan when Keith takes one hand off a hip to grab Shiro’s dick. He tries unsuccessfully to stifle a whine when Keith dips his fingers into Shiro’s slick in order to jerk him off easily; that has Keith surging up to capture Shiro’s lips again.

Keith cums with a shout, bucking up hard into Shiro and that pushes Shiro over the edge, his walls fluttering around Keith and he bites Keith’s lip hard enough to draw blood. Panting through the aftershocks, Shiro realizes what he’s done when Keith mutters a quiet, “shit,” looking at the bright red blood on his fingertips as he pulls them away from his mouth.

“Okay then.”

Then Shiro reciprocates, which Keith clearly wasn’t expecting him to do, judging by the startled cry and laughter. Shiro stands, knees a little stiff from kneeling for so long, and stretches out his clean hand to help Keith up. Keith grabs it with his dirty hand deliberately, pulling himself up fast enough he almost leaps into Shiro’s arms and presses their lips together in a kiss that tastes like sex and Shiro and Keith all together. It’s filthy and Shiro loves it.

“Aaaaand now we actually have to get cleaned up.”

Keith looks at him like he’s crazy. “How am I supposed to walk out of here like this?” He gestures to his torn-open flight suit and the wetness that seeped into the fabric, leaving a huge dark spot over his stomach, crotch, and thighs.

“I’ll carry you?” Shiro offers, bemused. Keith looks torn on the edge of a frustrated sigh and laughter.

“Oh, because that’s not conspicuous at all—” but Keith doesn’t get to finish that thought because Shiro sweeps him off his feet bridal-style and marches out of the hangar, ignoring Keith’s flailing.
They’re only halfway down the hall from the hangar before they hear voices.

“Fuck!” Keith hisses, writhing harder. Hunk and Pidge are drawing closer.

“Keith, stop squirming or I’m going to drop you!” Shiro hisses back. “Act dead!”

“What?”

“Act dead!”

The Green and Yellow Paladins round the corner to see a sweaty, ruffled Shiro holding a limp, equally sweaty Keith.

“What happened?” Hunk blurts, concern written all across his face.

“Uh—we went for a joyride, and Keith pulled too many Gs,” Shiro explains, starting to edge around Hunk. “I’m just going to take him—”

“To the med pods?” Hunk interrupts. “I’ll walk with you.”

“No, no,” Shiro says a little too quickly. “He just needs to lie down. I’m taking him back to his room.”

Hunk nods. Then Pidge, ever the critical thinker, speaks up. “Where’s your armor? And your gloves?”

Shiro curses himself internally as he realizes they left their helmets, chestplates, and gloves on the ground next to the Red Lion like idiots. “He was overheating, and I had to make sure he cooled down,” Shiro lies uneasily, slipping by the Green Paladin. “Really, I need to go, you can come check on him later, he’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Pidge says, skepticism heavy in her voice. Shiro rounds another corner and disappears.

Pidge glances up at Hunk. “Those two think they’re being smooth,” she mutters.

“What—wait, why?” Hunk raises an eyebrow.

“You didn’t notice how Keith’s suit was ripped, or that he was just faking being passed out—badly, I might add?” Hunk shakes his head.

“I just… trust people.”

“Oh my god,” Pidge shakes her head. “Okay. We’ll work on this later.”
The Blade of Marmora

How did this happen?

Shiro spins in a circle, trying wildly to keep his attention on Haggar, but she keeps multiplying, closing in on him, dozens of her—her voice taking him back to the cold table of the lab, the bite of instruments piercing his skin, the horrors of vivisection—

A cold hand wraps around his throat, clawing him, threatening to rip away all the progress he’s made, tearing him back down to the broken mess he was. Jagged heat tears through his side and Shiro’s eyes fly open only to see himself—rabid, yellow-eyed, monstrous, the Champion—and darkness chokes him into blindness; he falls into the void.

It’s all a blur after that.

Motion, light, pain, adrenaline, fear, screaming alarms—

The next thing Shiro is consciously aware of is the abnormal cant of the cockpit floor. The five-point harness of the pilot seat digs into Shiro’s shoulders, but when he moves the action draws a hiss of pain out of him. Very delicately, he extracts himself from the harness and falls against the dashboard. The viewport is blank. Black is unresponsive. Shiro sucks in an uneasy breath, panic starting to rise.

“Shiro?”

Keith’s voice startles Shiro, then he realizes their radios are still functioning. He nearly goes weak with relief.

“I’m here,” he responds, hoping he sounds steadier than he feels.

“Oh thank god,” Keith blurts. “You’re hurt—I’m coming to you.”

“Alright,” Shiro breathes, leaning heavily against the console of his Lion. He concentrates on deep breaths. Keith is coming. At the same time, though, a hard and immutable truth makes itself known.

I might not make it out of here.

It’s not a thought born out of pity, but pragmatism. Shiro glances down at the glowing gashes in his flank. They’re worse than anything he suffered in the arena or surgically, not the least because they’re agony, but because they’re glowing like they’re infected with quintessence. And Shiro can feel it eating away at him, spreading through his body like a disease. He has no idea if this is curable by the healing pod, or if he’ll succumb to this infection.

Even if I do make it, I’m a broken soldier.

Haggar had torn Shiro down to his knees, breaking and cracking every support he built up in those months post-escape. He feels raw and fragile and shattered all over again. Only this time he’s bitter, mourning the shards of progress that now lie like broken glass around him. He’s angry, knowing he’s going to have to do all that again and more just to regain some semblance of being even somewhat okay.
I’m not fit to lead.

Shiro’s thoughts are interrupted by several loud bangs against Black’s hull and the low creaking of metal under strain. “Shit,” he curses, struggling against the extreme tilt of the floor to get to the hatch on top of Black’s head. He pulls himself up the ladder, gritting his teeth against the stabbing pain in his side, and cracks the hatch open just enough to see what the hell is going on. He’s greeted by the sight of a half-dozen scaly, wolf-looking creatures crawling over Black’s head, scratching at the seams of her hull, hell-bent on getting inside. Right as one catches sight of him and lunges, Shiro slams the hatch shut. With a yell, he locks the hatch, just barely edging the creature out. Its claws gouge the metal just inches above Shiro’s head and he slides down the ladder, retreating into Black’s throat to figure out a plan.

That took far too much effort out of him. Shiro’s entire body is damp with a cold sweat, his hair sticking to his face under his helmet. His breath is coming in harsh pants, which Shiro suddenly fears Keith can hear. He doesn’t need the Red Paladin worrying about him any more than is necessary, given Red must have also crashed into this god-forsaken planet. Keith could be dealing with any number of things right now, including another pack of these predators.

“There’s gonna be a bit of a delay,” Keith’s voice crackles through the comm system. He’s breathing hard. The transmission cuts off quickly.

“Roger,” Shiro responds. If I go out the belly hatch and all those creatures are on Black’s head, I could get to cover, he thinks, wincing at each loud bang of the creatures’ feet against Black’s armor. They grow increasingly frenzied, whipping Shiro into a panic. He makes the snap decision to bolt for the belly hatch. Forcing his way through the pain, Shiro hauls open the hatch and drops the twenty feet down onto the ground, landing with a shout as his ankles roll beneath him. The creatures’ banging on Black’s head stops suddenly, and Shiro’s heart drops down into his toes. They know where he is.

Shiro runs for his life.

The creatures catch up to his easily, making threatening clicking noises as they surround him. Shiro’s arm hums to life, its glow reflected in each creature’s eyes. There’s a tense moment where Shiro struggles against falling back into the arena in his head, paralyzed, and the creatures assess him with cold, bestial intelligence. They spring all at once right as a bolt of adrenaline strikes Shiro like lightning. He blocks one with his arm, burning its teeth, and twists out of its grasp at the last second before another creature comes down in him. It takes all Shiro’s strength and reserves he didn’t think he had to kick the creature off of him, slicing at its face with his hand. He strikes a deep gouge across its nose and it howls, reeling away from him. A gap opens up and Shiro rolls to his feet, crying out as his wound sends a fresh wave of pain through him but he pushes through it, forcing his feet to move faster than ever before.

The creatures are hot on Shiro’s heels and he spots a tiny opening in the cliff twenty yards to his left. He dives for it, clawing his way through the crevice into a small cave. Thwarted, the creatures growl in frustration for a moment before digging into the rock, jaws snapping at Shiro through the slowly widening gap.

“Not to pressure you, Keith, but now would be an excellent time to get here,” Shiro radios, unable to keep the distress out of his voice.

“Got it—” the comms cut out, crackling, then Shiro hears Keith grumble in frustration before sighing and muttering, “patience yields focus.”

“That really stuck with you, huh?” Shiro chuckles, leaning back against the wall where he can
watch the creatures’ progress. One jams its face up against the crevice, staring at Shiro with three beady eyes, then thrusts a clawed hand straight through the gap, swiping for Shiro’s face. He recoils, pressing himself flatter into the wall. The adrenaline is giving way to exhaustion and Shiro knows, grimly, that it won’t be much longer until he succumbs to either his injuries or these predators. He figures he’s got maybe ten minutes before the predators get into his little cave. *Please hurry, Keith*, Shiro prays.

Another creature reaches an arm into the cave and Shiro gives a surprised shout as its claws graze his chestplate. His arm surges to life and he bats the predator’s hand away, amputating three of its fingers in the process. He kicks them away with one foot and falls limp against the wall. The arm deactivates and darkness begins to close in on Shiro’s vision. He blinks it away furiously, slapping himself across the face, as he groggily realizes the arm is draining the life right out of him. *It pulls the quintessence out of my body and weaponizes it,* he understands with a small amount of apprehension. *It could kill me.*

The ground shudders suddenly and Shiro knows it could only be one thing: the Black Lion.

“I’m here,” Keith shouts through the comms before he’s drowned out by a thunderous roar and the sound of the creatures shrieking and fleeing. Black’s huge golden eye flashes through the gap in the rocks, drawing away briefly before a single claw comes down and very precisely excavates Shiro’s hiding spot. The Black Paladin looks up at his beautiful lion, who lowers her head to allow Keith to come scrambling out of her jaws, shouting for Shiro.

“I panicked,” Keith demands. It comes out harsh and Shiro winces involuntarily, but he knows it’s because Keith is scared.

“I panick,” Keith offers. It’s his only explanation. “I just… ran.”

Keith’s eyes soften. He understands. “Let’s get you back to Black. You’ll be safer there.”

Keith’s head snaps up and he kneels in front of Shiro again, grabbing Shiro’s face in his hands. His eyes are furious, but Shiro knows how to read the fear hidden there. “No, don’t say that; you’re going to make it.” The ‘you have to’ goes unspoken, but they both know it’s there. “I can’t lead Voltron,” he confesses, “I would never be as good a leader as you.”

“You’d be better,” Keith breathes. Keith shakes his head, hiding his face to keep Shiro from seeing the tears welling up in his eyes.

“No, no.”

Shiro insists, “yes. Keith, I’m broken. I can’t… fight the Galra without having flashbacks, …can’t look at this arm without remembering what they did to me. I don’t know how to heal, because… every time I see Haggar… it feels like every step I’ve made gets destroyed…”

“You will heal,” Keith implores him, meeting Shiro’s eyes again. A trembling thumb strokes
Shiro’s cheekbone.  “Please, Shiro; I love you—we love you, everyone loves you.”

“I know.  Promise me, Keith, you’ll take over if I can’t lead.”  Shiro’s voice is barely audible.  He can’t keep his eyes open any longer and lets his head lean heavy into Keith’s hands.

“I will, I will.  Here,” Keith murmurs sadly, gently letting Shiro’s head go.  Then Shiro feels his hands undoing the latches of his armor, stripping the Altean polycarbonate off of him.  It clacks quietly as Keith sets it on the floor, then works on the latches of his own armor.  Keith’s warm body presses up against Shiro, and he recognizes then how chilled he is.  With gently cajoling hands, Keith rearranges Shiro in the pilot’s chair so that he’s curled up against Keith’s chest, head tucked underneath Keith’s chin.  One hand cards slowly through Shiro’s hair, the other arm wrapped around Shiro to hold him close.  Shiro listens to the steady, muffled sound of Keith’s heartbeat.  It lulls him away, right as Keith whispers into Shiro’s ear, “don’t die on me, Takashi,” and presses a kiss to the shell of Shiro’s ear.

Ulaz.

The name flashes into Shiro’s mind, the one coherent thought he has while drifting in the strange existence of the Altean healing pod.  It’s so different than the Galra healing pods, but Shiro doesn’t like it any better.  Memories play like a movie on the inside of his eyelids, sending his heart rate soaring on the edge of panic.  Medical rooms.  The glass dome closing over him.  The bitter hiss of gas seeping into the pod.  Blood.  Blood, so much blood.  Dying, letting life slip right through his hands.  Exhaustion, relief, Anger.  Ulaz took my rest away from me.  Confusion.  Ulaz saved me.  Killing again, one final time, hand sinking through the guard’s helmet like a hot knife through butter.

Shiro half expects to open his eyes to the sterile white tile and brutalist architecture of the Galra medical compound, but instead he’s greeted by the sight of his team smiling in at him, eyes damp with relief he’s pulled through.  Once he’s stretched out a little and is sitting on the steps of the pod room with a blanket around his shoulders, Shiro looks down at his prosthetic, then confesses,

“How can we trust him?” Allura snaps, also on the defensive.  “Where are these coordinates?”

“He coded them into my arm somehow,” Shiro says, and all eyes turn to Pidge.

“That can’t be.  I’ve gone through all the code in your arm a thousand times, Shiro.  I would have seen coordinates,” she objects.

“We should look again.  When can you hook me up?” Pidge sighs and shakes her head.

“Give me twenty minutes to get the system configured.  Meet me in Green’s hangar.”  She stuffs her hands in her pockets, slouching out of the room.

“I do not like this,” Allura says pointedly, crossing her arms.

“I know you don’t, Princess, but this group can help us.  I can’t remember too clearly, but there are other members of this resistance group embedded in Zarkon’s hierarchy.  They want to take him down as much as we do.  The least we can do is talk to them,” Shiro implores her.  Allura’s mouth is set in a firm, displeased line, but she lowers her head in grudging deference to Shiro’s decision.
Shiro meets Pidge in her hangar. She’s already standing waiting at her computer bank, the leads that hook to Shiro’s arm draped across the table. Shiro takes his seat and lets her connect the wires into the hidden ports on the otherwise-seamless arm. They tingle, the sensation strange like double vision, where Shiro can feel something touching the ghost of his real skin, but at the same time feel the wire plugged into the circuitry of the metal that is now his body. The coding of his arm pops up in the program Pidge created specially for processing Shiro’s prosthetic. She shakes her head as she scrolls through it, glasses reflecting the lines of Altean numbers that make no sense to Shiro, but Pidge can read it like a third language.

“It looks exactly the same as the last time we went through it. There’s nowhere in here you’d be able to tuck a data packet containing coordinates.” Pidge looks over at Shiro, her expression a mix of puzzled, frustrated, and apologetic. “I’m sorry, Shiro, but maybe you remembered incorrectly.”

“No,” Shiro mutters. “I very distinctly remember Ulaz putting the coordinates in my arm. He pressed this device up against my forearm and said the coordinates were encoded.”

Pidge sighs again, scrubbing her hands over her face in a gesture approximately fifteen years too old for her. “Okay. Fine. I’ll look through the data again and run a program looking for potential patterns. If anything’s hidden in here,” she waves a hand at the mess of numbers on the screen, “that should catch it.”

“Thank you, Pidge,” and Shiro really means it. He knows the coordinates exist somewhere in his arm, and he’s lucky enough to have as sharp a mind as Pidge’s to find them.

So he sits and he waits and Pidge sits and waits, slumped on one elbow while staring at her screen. The silence between them is tired. Then suddenly Pidge bolts upright and hits several keys. “Hang on!”

Shiro moves to look at the screen. “What is it?” It’s still indecipherable to him.

“There is something hidden in here, holy crow,” Pidge says, leaning in so her nose is inches away from the screen as if that’ll help her understand it better. She clicks a chunk of numbers and re-runs the program on them. It pulls digits out of the chunk and rearranges them rapidly, and Shiro has absolutely no clue how it knows how to do that and how it’s not completely scrambling the coordinates by making a word jumble out of them.

Apparently Pidge can read Shiro’s befuddled expression better than he thought, because the Green Paladin starts explaining the process. “It’s going through and looking at the chronological order the numbers were added to the code,” she says, pointing to a ticker in the upper left-hand corner of the screen, which is rapidly flicking through dates and times. “There’s tiny differences in when each digit was input due to the way Galra molecular coding works, so it’s sorting through it to figure out the order in which they were added, because they’re completely scrambled right now. These coordinates are hidden well. I doubt even the Galra would be able to find them, if they hooked you up like this and looked for them.”

Shiro winces, and Pidge shoots him an apologetic look, mouthing ‘sorry.’ The numbers go still on the screen and now Shiro can understand them. They are most definitely coordinates—very detailed ones, at that. Pidge copy-pastes them into her universal mapping system and a little red dot pops up in the next arm of the galaxy they’re currently in. “Huh,” she mutters, grabbing for the radio behind one of her monitors.

“Guys, I found the coordinates,” she says into the radio, and Shiro hears the echo of her voice over the castle intercom outside the hangar.
Within minutes, Team Voltron is assembled on the bridge and Coran is bringing up the coordinates on the large holographic projection. Allura’s frown deepens as Coran zooms in on the point in space.

“That’s a xanthorium field,” Allura says. The Paladins look to her for further explanation. “Large crystals of a highly volatile nature. To take the castle into there would be suicide.”

“We should at least go to the edge and see if the base is visible,” Shiro reasons. Allura gives him a long, hard stare.

“I really don’t like this,” she says, neither a concession or a dismissal. “You’re lucky I like you so much. Coran, take us there.”

“Right away, princess,” Coran chirps as Allura assumes her position at the controls and opens a wormhole.

The xanthorium crystals are deceptively pretty. Shiro is positive either Lance or Pidge would accidentally get themselves blown to smithereens with some overenthusiastic investigation if they didn’t know the danger of the crystals.

“This doesn’t look right,” Shiro whispers. “It’s supposed to be right in front of us, right?”

“These are the coordinates Number Five gave me,” Coran says. Pidge bristles.

“Hey, my decryption is solid!”

Screeching alarms split their heads open at that exact second. Shiro jumps nearly a foot into the air; Keith shoots him a look right as Coran yells, “intruder in the castle!” In no time flat, the Paladins are suited up and combing through the lower decks of the ship.

“How could someone just sneak on board the castle like this?” Lance mutters through the comms.

“I don’t know, but keep your eyes peeled,” Shiro replies low and steady, right arm raised and ready.

Then Lance screams, “I got him! Oh shit—I don’t got him!” and all hell breaks loose.

In a wild frenzy, Shiro finds himself with a blade at his throat and a throat at his hand, stock-still on a hair trigger facing off against the intruder. Then the intruder drops their blade and the mask over their face shimmers out of existence.

“Champion.”

“Ulaz.”

“So it appears the gamble we made on you worked out.”

Shiro cools his hand and lets it fall to his side. The sight of Ulaz’s pale, angular face is bringing back too many memories and Shiro nearly falls back on act now, feel later until he sees his team around him. He takes a deep breath, steeling himself against the barrage of emotion and recollection. “My name is Shiro,” he says evenly. Ulaz inclines his head, right as Allura arrives at the scene, fire in her eyes.
“Cuff him,” she commands, and nobody moves for a long moment. Allura levels her sharp gaze at Shiro, pinning him with a look that says ‘well, what are you waiting for?’ but Shiro only gives a minute shake of the head. He can’t. He can’t bring himself to cuff another the way he had been, especially the Galra who freed him. Slowly, Hunk steps forward and apologetically snaps cuffs around Ulaz’s wrists and ankles. The Galra does not protest.

“We should bring him to the bridge,” Shiro says, and the team moves to obey until Allura snaps a counter command,

“I will not have a quiznaking Galra soldier on my bridge!”

They freeze, torn between Shiro and Allura. Shiro bows his head. “Yes, Princess. Bring him to the lounge instead.”

Hunk and Lance lead Ulaz to the lounge. Shiro follows behind so he can see everything. Keith slips one warm hand into Shiro’s left hand. He gives a reassuring squeeze, which Shiro returns. They break apart once they cross the threshold into the room and Ulaz is seated on the couch, but Keith stays close so Shiro knows he’s grounded in the present. That way he won’t become unmoored and lost adrift in the flashbacks Ulaz’s face brought on.

“Allura says sharply once they’re all assembled again. She once more looks at Shiro.

“I don’t remember much, but this is Ulaz. He was the doctor who took care of me. He freed me,” Shiro explains.

“Allura mulls over his words for a moment. “That may be, but I don’t trust him.”

“If I wanted you dead, you would be dead by now,” Ulaz says simply and Allura’s gaze snaps to him, burning.

“And that’s supposed to make us trust you?”

“I don’t need your trust. I’m trying to win this war, and Shiro is the most progress we’ve ever made.” Ulaz and the princess are still locked in a staring contest and though Allura looks coldly furious, Ulaz’s expression hasn’t once changed from an aloof look of near-boredom.

“There was another who helped free me. Who was it?” Shiro asks.

“Thace,” Ulaz responds quickly, breaking eye contact with Allura. “Though there are many others within Zarkon’s regime, at every level and station. Together, we are the Blade of Marmora and we have been fighting to bring the Empire down for thousands of years.”

“Where is your base then?” Shiro asks, giving a nod to Allura. She pulls up a holograph of the view from the bridge.

“Right in front of us,” Ulaz says simply. “In a pocket of space before that xanthorium crystal.” That’s much less simple.

“How?” Of course Pidge’s voice is full of wonder.

“A reclusive genius named Slav designed a gravity generator which folds space in on itself to conceal the Blade of Marmora communication base Thaldycon,” Ulaz says with the slightest hint of pride. “Now if you will release me, I need to make contact with headquarters to let them know I have coordinated with Voltron.”
Shiro’s head hits the pillow heavily that night, his hair still wet from showering. He’s just on the edge of sleep when there’s a knock on his door. “Come in,” he grumbles, forcing his eyes open. The door opens to admit Keith, and Shiro can’t help the small smile that pulls at the corners of his mouth. Wordlessly, Keith crawls into the bed and tucks himself against Shiro’s side, laying his head on Shiro’s right pec like it’s a pillow.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks, one hand coming up automatically to stroke Keith’s hair.

“How could you tell?” Keith mumbles into Shiro’s chest. Shiro chuckles.

“I can read you like a book, Kogane.”

Keith doesn’t respond immediately, and Shiro can tell he’s chewing on the words, probably not sure how to say them.

“I don’t know if I’m going to like what I find at the Blades’ headquarters.” He’s referring of course to Ulaz’s cryptic mention of “knowledge or death” as he alluded to the origin of Keith’s knife. They know now it belongs to the Blade of Marmora, that much is blatantly obvious, but nobody has any clue how it ended up with Keith at a young age. Ulaz had hinted though that someone at headquarters might know. Shiro also knows that if Keith wasn’t here right now, he’d likely be marching down to the locked room where they had put Ulaz for the night to interrogate the Galra further about the organization and his blade. Instead, Keith slings an arm over Shiro’s chest and sinks back down into his quiet thoughts. One of his hands traces over Shiro’s stomach, moving in idle circles so light they almost tickle. Shiro drifts off to sleep with that sensation.

The screen flickers and Shiro physically winces, clenching his fists as Keith takes another brutal hit. It’s almost impossible for Shiro to watch, it’s too much like the arena. “Is this really necessary?” he growls, shooting the stoic Kolivan a glare out the corner of his eye.

“Knowledge or death,” Kolivan replies as if that’s explanation enough. Shiro finds it uniquely infuriating that such an advanced group still thinks in such stark binaries, especially when it endangers Keith’s life. Over and over Keith is hit, thrown to the ground, slammed into the walls. His pained grunts set Shiro’s teeth on edge and every blow ratchets Shiro’s stress levels higher until he’s ready to snap. Then Keith pulls a brilliant maneuver, sends his knife whirling through the air, drops down into safety. Shiro breathes again, believing Keith is finally in the clear. It quickly becomes apparent that’s not the case. The physical abuse has merely become psychological.

Shiro has to watch, hesitant but curious, as he steps on screen, helping Keith up off the floor. The hesitance turns into anger as Shiro’s double berates Keith for trying. *I would never,* Shiro thinks.

“Is that a hologram?” Shiro asks, not daring to take his eyes off the screen.

“The suit has the ability to create a mindscape that actualizes the wearer’s greatest fears and desires. And right now, your friend desperately wants to see you,” Kolivan rumbles, turning his head to assess the Black Paladin’s reaction. Then the double rejects Keith, turning his back and walking away, even as Keith cries out “Shiro!” after him and Shiro’s heart breaks into a thousand pieces. If his pain is visible on his face, Kolivan makes no comment.
Finally, the pain visible on Keith’s face gets to Shiro. He snaps to Kolivan, “this is over. I’m ending it.”

“You can’t,” Kolivan protests, but Shiro has made his decision and he’s already marching out of the room. He flies down the stairwell to the lower level, pausing breathlessly when he sees Keith sprawled limp and weak on the floor. Shiro tells himself not to run to Keith and he only barely succeeds, pulling Keith up a little too enthusiastically so that the man crashes into Shiro’s chest. “Sorry,” he says, holding Keith tightly under his arms. Keith nods weakly, patting Shiro’s chestplate with an absent hand. It only takes a moment for the rest of the Blades to arrive.

“You’ve failed,” Kolivan announces, and Keith breaks away from Shiro. He’s standing under his own power only through sheer stubbornness and anger.

“Fine, I failed. Then take it.” Keith holds out his dagger towards the leader of the Blades. Pride gleams in his eyes, but it’s not pride in his fighting—it’s a hard proudness stemming from obstinance that prohibits Keith from being beaten. If he’s going to lose his dagger, he’s going to lose it on his terms. Kolivan strides forward and right before the Galra’s hand envelops the weapon, it flashes purple—like my arm, Shiro thinks—and the Galra rocks back a step. One of the assembled Blades whistles long and low, impressed. Gripped tightly in Keith’s hand is a recurved single-edge sword with a long handle, a luminous purple stripe racing parallel to the cutting edge. Sexy is the first word that comes, perhaps somewhat inappropriately, to Shiro’s mind.

“You’ve activated the blade,” Kolivan says under his breath, surprised.

“Galra blood runs through your veins,” Antok chimes in, Keith’s eyes snapping to the giant lieutenant.

“What?”

“The blade would not activate if you did not have Galra blood within you,” Kolivan explains, reaching for his own blade. It shifts from a stiletto to a long, thin, jagged sword.

“Galra blood,” Keith whispers, eyes going distant for a second before the sword in his hand returns to its dagger form. Nobody says anything for a very long moment. “I’m done today.” Keith sheathes his dagger.

The Blades take the two Paladins to a spare bunk to wait out the solar flares for another quintent before the path reopens to allow them back to the Castle of Lions.

The moment the door closes, Shiro combs through the room for audio bugs and cameras while Keith stands stock-still in the center of the room. He looks over his shoulder at Keith, noticing the Red Paladin hasn’t moved. “Keith?”

Saying his name seems to snap Keith out of his trance and he starts tugging the suit off with harsh movements, becoming frenzied when he can’t pull it off his hands and only stopping once the suit lays torn on the floor in a pile at his feet. His chest is heaving. He still doesn’t look at Shiro, so Shiro repeats his name again. Then he finally looks up and the crazy fugue in his gaze fades.

“What are you thinking?” Shiro asks. Keith turns his head, looking over into the far corner.

“Where’s my armor?” he ignores Shiro’s question. Dutifully, Shiro retrieves the armor from the duffel bag where the Blades had put it before the beginning of the Trials. Keith slides into his
paladin suit, leaving the armor in the bag. Back in his own clothes, the Red Paladin looks more comfortable. He sits down on the bottom bunk, elbows on his knees, face hidden in his hands.

Shiro snaps off his armor, tucking it into the duffel along with Keith’s, then takes a seat on the bunk next to him. Keith tenses as Shiro draws near and he doesn’t push it again, knowing Keith will speak when he’s ready, on his own time.

Ten tense minutes crawl by where Keith doesn’t so much as move a muscle and Shiro tries and fails to not fidget nervously.

“You don’t have to… do this, if you’re not okay with it,” Keith says eventually, voice muffled by his palms.

“This?” Shiro questions.

“This.” Keith raises his head enough to wave a hand at Shiro. He means the space—or lack thereof—between them.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with it?” Shiro is genuinely confused. Is there any reason he should suddenly shy away from his lover?

“Because I’m Galra,” Keith snaps, rounding on Shiro. Both men recoil immediately at the force of Keith’s words. Shiro blinks, stunned, and remembers himself Keith isn’t angry at him; it’s just that anger is the only way Keith knows how to deal with difficult emotions. Keith seems to be berating himself for yelling.

“I’m not… uncomfortable,” Shiro says, reaching out to put a reassuring hand on Keith’s shoulder. Part of him expects Keith to shrug it off, if he’s really that distraught, but Keith leans into it and puts a hand on top of Shiro’s, even though he doesn’t meet the Black Paladin’s eyes right away. “I don’t think I ever could be around you.”

“You don’t—” Keith stops himself, sighs. “I don’t want to be a reminder of what they did to you. Because now I’m one of them.”

Shiro falters for a second. He makes a snap decision, pulling Keith into his lap and wrapping his arms around the man’s waist, holding him tight and pressing his face into Keith’s shoulder. Keith is so tightly wound, almost ready to explode; Shiro keeps holding until Keith relaxes, the tension easing out of him slowly. He lets his head fall onto Shiro’s shoulder, breath warm on Shiro’s neck.

Shiro recognizes there probably aren’t any words for this situation. They’re not Keith’s forte anyways and especially not now when the man is so overwhelmed.

They stay like that for several minutes, until Shiro has to rearrange Keith more comfortably, taking the opportunity to kiss Keith’s cheek. Shiro pauses, then goes to kiss his cheek again only to find himself kissing Keith on the lips.

Shiro recognizes Keith’s neediness immediately for what it is. Acceptance. Reassurance Shiro won’t leave him now. So Shiro buries his hands in Keith’s thick black hair and kisses him as hard as he can, more than willing to give that. Keith lets out a surprised noise, parts his lips enough to let Shiro lick into his mouth and taste his tongue, still slightly coppery-tasting from where he’d bitten it during the Trials. Shiro’s hands make their way down from Keith’s hair, tracing over his ribs and neat waist before landing on his hips. Fingers trace the outlines of the glowing plugs on the suit; Keith shivers.

He squeaks as Shiro’s hands suddenly grab at his ass and the Black Paladin pulls him into his lap.
Shiro’s teeth find the column of Keith’s throat and he tips his head back, eyes closing as Shiro presses kiss after kiss to his pulse, biting and sucking hard marks into the delicate skin. He works his teeth and tongue thoroughly down Keith’s neck, leaving a necklace of purple and red like a choker. Keith is panting shallowly, his hands tight in Shiro’s hair. Shiro lets his fingers dip down, grazing the Red Paladin’s inner thighs and drawing a faint moan from him. It’s an invitation, a plea. Shiro obliges.

Laying Keith down on the bed, Shiro pauses long enough for Keith to open his eyes, a question held within his gaze. “You’re amazing,” Shiro says earnestly. The words bring a blush to Keith’s cheeks. Even clothed in the torn Blade suit, Keith’s a vision. Hair splayed out across the bed like an ink spill, a flush across his cheekbones, eyes hooded and dark, pupils blown wide, lean muscles in his arms standing out as he clenches and unclenches his fists in anticipation. “God, I want you.” Shiro swoops down to claim Keith’s lips, swallowing down his pleased gasp as he hitches the man’s legs up over his own hips. He grinds into Keith’s heat, groaning appreciatively.

Impatience takes over Shiro and he fumbles for any sort of zipper, seam, opening to strip the sweat-damp suit from Keith’s body. Keith stills Shiro’s hands and arches his back off the bed—Shiro tries not to moan at the sight—and deftly undoes a hidden closure at the small of his back. The glowing plugs of the suit give tiny electronic whines and the suit loosens suddenly, practically falling away from Keith’s milky skin. Shiro wants to eat him.

One hand pushes the suit down, baring Keith’s taut, shivering stomach and the dark happy trail leading further down. Shiro’s fingers follow it, skirting around Keith’s hard, wet heat. Keith hums breathily, reaching up to Shiro to tug at his paladin suit. In response, the Black Paladin pulls away barely long enough to rip his suit from his skin, giving Keith everything he wants. The Red Paladin surges up, locking his ankles behind Shiro, grinding hard into him. Shiro moans into Keith’s mouth, shoving the Blade suit all the way down to bare Keith’s firm ass and squeeze it.

Keith’s teeth hit Shiro’s ear with a hiss of “hurry up and fuck me already.” Shiro growls, almost gives in. Instead he pushes Keith back down onto the bed and slides down between the man’s legs, pulling the Blade suit all the way off in the process. The heavy fabric hits the floor with a dull thump. Shiro’s fingers dig into Keith’s thighs, holding them over his shoulders as he dives in.

Keith lets out the most delicious moan the second Shiro’s tongue touches his dick. Shiro licks a slow stripe all the way from Keith’s sopping hole to the tip of his dick and swallows it down, groaning at the musky scent of his arousal.

“Mm—god, Shiro,” Keith moans. Shiro glances up to see him grabbing at the pillow, trying hard not to grind his cunt into Shiro’s face. He lets go of one of Keith’s thighs only to feel it shake against his shoulder as he sucks Keith’s cock, swirling his tongue around it. His free hand slides down his own body to find and twist his fingers around his achingly hard cock. The moan he lets out pulls a response from Keith above him.

“It doesn’t take long for Shiro’s clever tongue to bring Keith to the brink of orgasm, Keith’s moans rising in pitch and volume. Then he pulls off with a wet pop, licking his lips.

“Fuck, Shiro!” Keith curses, raising his head to look down at the Black Paladin. His eyes are foggy with lust, expression open and needy. Shiro’s hole clenches, suddenly desperate to have Keith’s cock just at that look. “Just—god, fuck—”

Keith’s hands descend like the hands of god and haul Shiro up by his hair. “Sit on my cock. Now.” Keith’s growl is dark and intense and Shiro is helpless. He does as he’s told, sinking down on Keith’s length. The man cries out, coming almost instantly in Shiro’s silky wetness.
“You feel how wet you get me?” Shiro groans, rocking his hips. “How bad I need you?”

Keith’s answering cry is high-pitched, helpless. Shiro clenches around him, pulling more of those exquisite noises out of him. “Ah!—Shiro, I can’t—too much,” he whines, oversensitive from his first orgasm. Shiro lifts himself off immediately but lets a hand wander between Keith’s thighs, seeking out the man’s dripping cunt.

“This okay?” he murmurs, one finger tracing Keith’s entrance.

“Mm, yes,” Keith pants. Shiro pushes that finger in, breathing out a devout, “Oh my god,” at how Keith’s soaked velvet cunt sucks him in. “I need to fuck you.”

Keith moans in passionate agreement. Shiro adds another finger, pumping them in and out of Keith’s body. Obscene wet noises fill the room, punctuated by Keith’s whines and panting, quiet cries of Shiro’s name.

Sitting back on his heels, Shiro lines himself up, and slides in. “Oh, _fuck_, baby, you feel so good,” Shiro moans. Keith’s wet cunt swallows his cock up greedily. Shiro’s hands fall to the Red Paladin’s hips, gripping the bone hard so that he can grind deep into Keith. The man’s ankles lock together behind Shiro’s back and pull him in closer, hands wind into Shiro’s hair and pull him down so he’s curled over Keith’s body. Shiro tries to kiss him, but Keith’s too incoherent for that and can only mouth at Shiro’s neck and cheek blindly. He clenches around Shiro and bites his earlobe, pulling a low growl out of him.

“Keep that up and I’m going to come,” Shiro warns. Keith bites him again and Shiro feels one hand leave his hair, trace down his spine, over his hip, dip between his legs. One finger brushes Shiro’s entrance and he groans. Keith takes this as an invitation and press two fingers into Shiro’s soaked cunt. Shiro comes undone as Keith presses and stretches his insides in all the right ways. He drops down to his elbows, positioned on either side of Keith’s head, panting.

“Good?” Keith mumbles, bringing his fingers up to his mouth to suck them clean almost absentmindedly. Shiro nods and hums. Then he rolls off of Keith, retrieving a towel the Blades had given them, in order to clean them up a little bit. He gently wipes down the insides of his and Keith’s thighs, then gathers extra blankets before tucking himself back into the bed beside Keith.

It’s a long time before Keith seems ready to speak. Shiro lets him take his time, staring sleepily at the bottom of the top bunk, finger-combing Keith’s hair as always, feeling the warmth of Keith’s body everywhere their skin is pressed together. He’d allow himself to drift off like this, if not for how tense Keith is and how Shiro knows he’s about to say something important.

“It doesn’t… bother you… that I’m Galra?” Keith asks slowly, and Shiro looks down at him to watch his hands tracing patterns across Shiro’s skin. It takes Keith a moment to realize he’s inadvertently started tracing Shiro’s scars and when he does, he pulls his hand away quickly.

“Not at all,” Shiro replies, bringing his other hand into play to work a tangle out of Keith’s hair.

“Why?”

That gives Shiro pause. “Because you’re you, Keith. Knowing you have a Galra ancestor doesn’t change anything about you.”

Keith looks up like he wants to argue, but bites his tongue instead. Shiro knows what he wants to say. ‘ _Yes it does, because I’m one of the ones who hurt you._’
“You never have hurt me and I know you won’t. Keith,” Shiro cups his chin with one hand, “you’re my strongest protector and my right-hand man. You’ve saved me so many times and you help me to heal so much. I love you.”

Some of the argument fades from Keith’s look. “I love you too.”

“We’re both part Galra now,” Shiro observes, and Keith snorts quietly.

“Guess you could say that.”

“We should sleep,” murmurs Shiro as he pulls Keith gently up for another kiss. It’s soft and chaste. Keith is so tired he doesn't even bite at Shiro’s lips or try to deepen it. He just relaxes and lets his head drop when Shiro releases him. Within minutes, he’s gone, and Shiro isn’t long after him.
After liaison with the Blade of Marmora, events move unbelievably rapidly. Every single day, Shiro is thrown into meeting after meeting with Allura, Coran, Kolivan, Antok, Reyner, Slav—every ally they’ve made up until this point, every ally they’ll need desperately as their plans weave themselves together. The moment Kolivan had looked Shiro in the eyes and said “our timetable has moved up,” Shiro had felt a headache work up behind his eyes and he doesn’t think that headache has gone away since then.

He tries his hardest not to be too busy for his team, but it inevitably happens. They’re busy, too, but it sits badly with Shiro not being able to spend time with his team all together and one-on-one as the leader. He sees Keith more often, often seeking him out at night for his quiet, easy presence. Whenever he has a spare moment, though, Shiro checks in with Pidge on her technological projects, tinkers on the lions with Hunk, helps Lance with his target practice. He even finds enough time one night to have a drink with Coran and while he appreciates the advisor endlessly, he cannot stand the Altean’s drink of choice and spends the better part of the evening afterwards vomiting. Keith has several opinions about this, which he gladly informs Shiro of as the man gargles for the eighth time to try to get the taste of regurgitated nunvill out of his throat. At some point, said opinions veer off into the territory of “salty thoughts about everything” and while Shiro is amused that this is the most talkative he’s ever seen Keith, he does stop the Red Paladin there.

“I’m sorry, babe, but I need to sleep,” he says with a hand on Keith’s shoulder. Keith stops short, blinking, astounded.

“What did you just call me?”

“...babe?” Shiro repeats hesitantly, suddenly afraid he’s said the wrong thing. It turns out he’s completely unfounded in that fear because a shy smile splits Keith’s face and Keith leans up to peck the corner of Shiro’s mouth, despite the Black Paladin’s evasive maneuvers on grounds of “nuvill breath.” Keith doesn’t care. So Shiro gives in and kisses back for a moment before insisting,

“I was serious about the sleep.”

“Okay,” Keith relents, rocking back onto his heels and allowing Shiro to pass through the bathroom door frame. Shiro crawls into bed, but doesn’t get any further than collapsing face-down on the pillow. The last months have stretched him so thin, he feels completely see-through most of the time. It’s made what Shiro logically recognizes as his PTSD so much worse. Nights spent without Keith in bed are nights spent haunted by flashbacks, nightmares. Even though Keith keeps the night terrors at bay, Shiro doesn’t have his company every night. The few times Keith has challenged him on it, he’s insisted on grounds of preventing codependency, to which Keith had responded that Shiro’s health now was most important and he should do whatever he needs to in order to secure it—codependency could be solved later, when this was all over. But still Shiro had resolutely shaken his head and ended the argument. Perhaps it was a masochistic part of his brain that told him he wouldn’t be able to fight the Galra as well if he wasn’t in pain. He’d never admit to it, even if it was.

Now, though, Keith slides into bed next to Shiro and starts rubbing his fingers against the velvety
The texture of Shiro’s freshly-clipped undercut. It’s a tell of Keith’s, playing with Shiro’s hair. He only initiates it when he wants sex or has something to say. So Shiro turns his head to look at Keith with one eye and mumbles, “penny for your thoughts?” muffled as it is by the pillow.

“Pidge told me Olkari finished with the teladuv last night,” Keith says. Shiro nods. “So it’s really happening now, isn’t it?” Shiro nods again. He’s too tired for the real emotions required to have this conversation fully.

“I know telling you not to worry about it isn’t going to do anything, but you really shouldn’t worry right now at least. Worry about it in the morning after we’ve all slept. We’re going to have a meeting and go over everything in detail. The Blades will be there,” Shiro reassures Keith, eyes closing again. “But now, sleep.”

“Okay,” Keith murmurs, hand lingering in Shiro’s hair a moment longer before he turns off the light.

The Paladins assemble on the bridge of the castle early the next morning. Kolivan and Antok are already present, and it doesn’t take Reyner long to arrive afterwards. Slav is absent for whatever reason—probably some issue with another reality he has to solve by counting his hair follicles—and Shiro can’t say he is upset by the absence.

“We are all familiar with the plan laid out months ago,” Allura begins, summoning the diagram they’d created what felt like years ago. “But we should go over it to make sure. Kolivan, have you contacted your agent on the inside?”

“We have, Princess. Thace is awaiting our command, we contacted him just one varga ago,” Kolivan affirms. Allura gives him a nod.

“Good. Once Thace takes Zarkon’s ship’s defenses down, we will wormhole the ship into the next galaxy to eliminate the annoyance of his surrounding fleet. Then we form Voltron and strike the engines, the bridge, and the defense center.” Allura points to each spot on the hologram in turn, lighting it up.

“Cutting off the head of the snake,” Pidge says. Kolivan looks confused for a brief moment, but doesn’t ask.

“It will incapacitate the Empire long enough to cause instability. Then we mobilize and remove their forces from colonized planets, building our coalition,” Kolivan finishes. Allura nods again.

“Exactly. We have one shot, let’s make this count.”

“Alright, girl, you ready?” Shiro takes hold of the thrusters, settling himself into the pilot’s seat. Black growls in response. “Let’s go.”

He gets a good distance clear of the castle, then makes rather aimless loops in the general area where they want Zarkon’s ship. It doesn’t take long before Black growls again and an image of Zarkon, a feeling of malevolence, flashes through Shiro’s mind.

“Zarkon’s located the Black Lion,” Shiro relays to the castle.

“Understood. Starting the gravity generator now,” Allura responds and Shiro looks up to see the
castle and the enormous ring of the teladuv disappear as space folds neatly around them. Minutes after that, Zarkon’s ship appears and Shiro takes a deep, steadying breath as the first wave of fighters approach. Waves of possessiveness hit Shiro’s mind and he knows instantly it’s Zarkon. He can’t wrench control of Black away from Shiro anymore, but he can still get inside Shiro’s head and it’s immensely distracting as he’s trying to evade and destroy fighters. “I could use some backup!” he shouts into the comms.

There’s a near-instantaneous, unanimous response from Team Voltron and Kolivan comes on the comms to say, “Thace should be powering the ship down any moment now.”

“Roger,” Shiro grits as he barrel-rolls to dodge a cannon blast from an approaching battle cruiser.

“How’s it going down there?” Lance cries, and three fighters are vaporized right in front of him.

“Got it!” Allura shouts, and the castle materializes above the Galra mothership. The swirling blues of the wormhole swallow the ship from the top down; the Lions scramble to push away any stray, floating fighters and cruisers then dive into the wormhole after the ship. Just before they’re sucked away into another galaxy, Shiro feels the echoes of Zarkon’s rage and he mutters, “good.” Zarkon’s going to get what’s coming to him.

Everything emerges on the other side as planned, then Allura’s cry of dismay rockets through the comms and Shiro looks up to see the huge ring of the teladuv disintegrating. “It’s fine!” she quickly radios. “Just keep going!”

“Ahhhh!” Shiro yells.

Voltron comes together effortlessly and the thoughts of the team flow into Shiro’s head: nerves, excitement, determination, anger. He doesn’t have to ask; he knows they’re ready. They dive straight for the engines, Keith materializing the sword in Voltron’s right hand. The sword strikes home, plunging through the hull of the Galra ship to the hilt. There’s a brief flash of an explosion before the void of space sucks everything away, ejecting debris and bodies at speeds that would destroy anything less than Voltron.

The clock is ticking. Voltron kicks off of the ship, cratering the side of it, and lands with crushing impact on the defense system. That alone should destroy it, but Keith still carves an X into the ship and Shiro feels his satisfaction at the resultant explosion and destruction.

“Try not to enjoy this too much, Keith,” Shiro says and he doesn’t quite know if he’s joking or serious. Keith doesn’t respond, but Shiro can feel his devilish grin. “It’s just the bridge left. Let’s go!”

They turn to hit the bridge and stop dead when black energy starts glowing around it.

“I thought their defense systems were down!” Pidge cries.

“They are,” Kolivan snaps suddenly over the comms. “It has to be the witch.”

Shiro can’t help the wave of dread that hits the mental link. There’s an immediate pushback of reassurance and strength from his team, to which Shiro responds with gratitude. The glow around the bridge intensifies and there’s no time to bask in the feelings. Voltron only barely jumps out of the way in time as a bolt of black lightning lances towards them. Hunk forms the shoulder cannon
and fires at the bridge, but the black lightning absorbs the fire like it’s nothing.

Then Shiro’s being ripped apart.

The black lightning strikes Voltron and tears through them in agony. Screaming fills Shiro’s skull and he feels pain fivefold; the torture of every Paladin becomes his and the Lions too are roaring, crying out—the mental link is torn apart and exhaustion collapses in on Shiro like a black hole, choking the life out of him, vision narrowing down to pinpricks.

Then it’s all gone.

“Paladins! Paladins!”

Shiro comes around to ringing in his head and Coran’s voice tinny in his ears.

“I’m alive,” Shiro groans. There are grumbles of affirmation from Keith, Hunk, Lance, and Pidge too.

“Oh thank the ancients. You were hit by a beam of magic that drained your quintessence. If you take another hit from that, you won’t survive.” Coran’s worry is plain in his voice, then Kolivan chimes in.

“It’s called the komar. Haggar has been developing it to drain the quintessence from entire planets.”

“Brilliant,” Shiro mutters. “Team, form Voltron! Allura, can you give us backup?”

“Of course.” The castle moves in for the attack. “I’ll try to distract the witch.”

They reform Voltron and Shiro feels relief as his family’s presence rushes back into his head. Charging the bridge, Keith forms the sword again and they roll to dodge a blast from the komar. Keith drives the sword forward with all the strength of Voltron as Hunk and Lance throw on the boosters, putting on a final burst of speed that Shiro prays will be enough.

In one heart-wrenching second, the sword glances off the bridge. Keith shouts, anger flooding the mental link. Instantly, Lance tries to soothe him, tries to cool the anger, but Keith shrugs him off. “We have to take Haggar down another way. Someone has to go in,” he barks.

“I’ll do it,” Allura responds. Shiro doesn’t have time to protest before he sees a small pod jettison from the castle straight towards the bridge.

“Be careful, Allura,” please, god, be careful, Shiro cautions. Allura doesn’t respond. She can be as obstinate as Keith and it’s going to kill Shiro one day. There’s no chatter on the comms as the pod disappears into the black lightning. Then the sounds of Allura and Kolivan grunting crackles over the comms, heavy interference from the komar distorting the noises. Allura cries out and Shiro grits his teeth, knowing he’s radiating distress. Everyone is distressed; there’s nothing left to comfort each other.

“You will ne—rt... aga—” Allura’s voice cuts in and out. There’s a burst of blue light from inside the bridge, then the black lightning of the komar dies.

“Allura, Kolivan, get out of there!” Keith yells. “We’re coming in!”
Before Voltron can charge again, however, a massive bay opens in one of the legs of the ship and the lights flicker back to life. The Galra have overcome Pidge’s virus. They’re booting the ship back up. Dread settles in Shiro’s stomach. The silhouette of something Voltron-sized stands in the bay.

The doors close and Voltron comes face-to-face with Zarkon. Shiro quickly realizes it’s a mecha, like Voltron, but bears an uncanny resemblance to Zarkon himself.

“Draw him out into open space! We can’t maneuver as well in here!” Shiro commands, Voltron backpedaling to get out from underneath the Galra ship. The engines and defenses are down, so it can’t do much, but they still don’t want to be too close to it while it’s active. Zarkon chases after them, a chain sword flickering into existence in his hand. Voltron turns and blocks the swing at the last second and Shiro knows Zarkon has the Black bayard. The realization seems to strike the other Paladins then too.

“How can we get the bayard from him?” Pidge shouts, throwing up the shield to block another swing and a thrust by Zarkon. The entirety of the robot shudders with each impact. Black growls suddenly, an instinctual knowledge rippling though Shiro.

“I know what to do! Charge him!” Shiro yells. He can feel Hunk’s doubt and he pushes back against it, projecting confidence, showing everyone what Black showed him. Hunk and Lance push Voltron faster, almost approaching the Red Lion’s speed. Noise rings in Shiro’s ears, he distantly realizes it’s his own voice, and a sensation of weightlessness overtakes him, his mind flashing blank, then Voltron turns to see the back of Zarkon’s mecha. Shiro looks down to see the Black bayard in his hand.

“I’ve got the bayard,” Shiro says, slightly dazed. Lance whoops victoriously. He looks over at the hiss of electronics and sees a port for his bayard opening in the console to the right. He knows what to do.

Zarkon’s mecha turns, blasts towards them. Shiro slams the bayard home.

Blinding blue plasma flames explode along the length of Voltron’s blade, the tip turning wicked and hooked, a unanimous yell—five voices becoming one—and the blade punctures the chest of Zarkon’s mecha. There’s a tense, still moment in the span of two heartbeats, then Keith twists the sword.

The blast rips the Lions apart once more, sending them spinning through space amongst debris and streaks of plasma. Shiro groans, head pounding from where it snapped back against his chair and the sound of a second explosion through the comms draws his attention back to the bridge of the Galra ship, consumed in angry orange flames for a brilliant second before the vacuum clamps down on it and the detonation goes cold and quiet.

“Allura!” Shiro shouts. The comms rumble with static for a moment and Shiro fears the worst.

“We’re alright.” Her voice is faint. “The pod is damaged, but Kolivan, Antok, and I are all alive.”

“I’ll come get you,” Hunk offers immediately, the Yellow Lion jetting off towards the wreckage of the bridge.

Shiro looks out over the scorched, torn parts of Zarkon’s mecha. It’s all twisted metal, already frozen by space, until Shiro spies the body. It’s mangled almost beyond recognition. Shiro feels bad for approximately half a second before the rational part of his brain butts his emotions aside.
He was a tyrant, a despot, who cared for no life other than his own and coveted the Black Lion only for her power. He wasted millions of lives, innocent lives. Don’t pity him. Don’t mourn for him.

“Regroup at the castle,” Shiro says lightly over the comms, still lost in his thoughts. “We’ll deal with this once we’re all healed.”

“Roger, Shiro,” Pidge replies. The Lions return to their hangars. As Shiro exits Black, he turns to take stock of her own damages, then he lays a hand on her jaw.

“Thank you,” he whispers, meaning it with every fiber of his being. Black pushes a reassuring affection at him, a warm growl low in his mind. Shiro takes a deep breath, then winces at the various aches that suddenly make themselves known all at once. Evidently, he got more banged up than he thought, but nothing feels broken.

As Shiro makes his way to the bridge, something dawns on him. The Galra Empire is dead. The tyrannical empire which tortured and broke and destroyed him is dead. I beat them. It’s such a massive realization Shiro almost can’t wrap his head the entire way around it. He reaches the observation deck without realizing it. The whole team is already assembled, turning to Shiro as he enters.

“Shiro?” Allura calls softly.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Pidge supplies, not unkindly.

“The Empire is gone,” Shiro rasps, his throat inexplicably hoarse. His cheeks and eyes grow hot. His family rushes in to embrace him as his frame begins to shake and surrounded by their warmth and love he lets his tears fall. “I’m free,” he sob. “I’m free.”

Shiro knows he’ll never be rid of what the Galra did to him, that he’ll never be the same person he was before, but now he’s finally, endlessly free.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are! Sorry if the ending feels a little rushed; I'm not very good with endings and to be perfectly honest, this was just supposed to be Shiro torture porn but then it turned into my Nanowrimo project and necessitated an ending. Please consider leaving me a comment if you (somehow) enjoyed this fic!

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