Seal It With A Kiss

by magisterpavus

Summary

No one would help him get to the bottom of Kerberos, and it had all reached a breaking point when Iverson threatened to terminate Keith’s scholarship if he kept snooping.

So Keith got what he came for, the little black book no one was ever meant to find, and stopped snooping.

Because now, he’ll have someone else to do all the snooping for him.

The situation isn’t ideal, Keith thinks as he slits his palm open and methodically draws the pentagram on the floor, placing the necessary items one by one into each point of the star.

But considering the circumstances, he thinks he’s done alright for himself. More importantly, for Shiro.

Notes
will there be a continuation to this?? well...idk, what do y'all think? yay or nay?
	his was absolutely created as a shameless shiro thirst fic, it's almost finals week and ya girl
needed some stress relief smut writin sessions ok. and also bc i'm just...very fond of
witch!keith au's, but there is some definite plot potential ;D tender demon sex? in my ao3?
it's more likely than you might think

support me on tumblr @saltyshiro
Chapter 1

Keith knows what he’s doing.

He knows why this book was hidden away in the Citadel’s most restricted section, and even hidden within that, shoved cleverly behind a book about the Great War and a frighteningly thick volume on the medicinal properties of human flesh. He knows why finding it took months of careful, innocent questioning and hours of sneaking about in the night and careful surveillance and eavesdropping in places Keith was never meant to be.

As a novice, there were many places he was never meant to be. No matter that he’d excelled above and beyond all others in his class, no matter that he’d passed every exam and trial with flying colors, no matter that he’d become a legend in his own right. They still told him, in soft and condescending voices as if he were a damn child, that there was nothing to be done, nothing at all. No one knew a thing about what happened in Kerberos, or what had happened to the brave heroes who hadn’t been seen since. No one would help him get to the bottom of it, and it had all reached a breaking point when Iverson threatened to terminate Keith’s scholarship if he kept snooping.

So Keith got what he came for, the little black book no one was ever meant to find, and stopped snooping.

Because now, he’ll have someone else to do all the snooping for him.

The situation isn’t ideal, Keith thinks as he slits his palm open and methodically draws the pentagram on the floor, placing the necessary items one by one into each point of the star. But considering the circumstances, he thinks he’s done alright for himself. More importantly, for Shiro.

That’s what he has to keep telling himself – this is all for Shiro. He resolutely does not think about what this ritual entails as he stands, incense lit, items placed, blood drawn, and begins to chant the long, complex spell from memory, because if Keith is going to do this, he is going to do it right.

Shiro will forgive him, when all of this is said and done. Or maybe he won’t. Either way, Keith will have done what it was he set out to do, and Shiro will be alright. His own feelings don’t factor into the equation.

The room darkens, candlelight snuffs into blue smoke. Outside, Keith swears he can hear the distant rumble of thunder, though that seems a tad overdramatic. He forces himself to breathe and keep chanting, sucking in a sharp breath when he finishes and the symbols on the floor flare to life, bright-white and glowing, the items incinerating instantly, the incense blooming in a strong, overpowering miasma before dying out altogether. The center of the pentagram is wreathed in shadows, but they aren’t menacing – they’re curious, flickering outwards experimentally, like hundreds of black tongues, tasting the air.

Keith calls the being’s name in the most authoritative voice he can muster and it laughs, as if it finds it hilarious that he thinks he holds any power over it by using its name, a name which is in all likelihood not its true name, because something this powerful would never allow a secret so dangerous to be preserved in a book, however hidden that book might be.

Keith knows the book was hidden not for the being’s sake, but for his own.

You are young. The voice is ancient, and Keith feels it in the depths of his mind, searching to the
point of invasion. *But not a child.* More laughter. *As foolish as one, though.*

“I summoned you here to bind you, not to chat,” Keith retorts, and the voice falls silent, clearly displeased by his attempt to command it.

*You? Bind me? A pretty thought,* the voice coos, shadows rising higher, higher, too high, fuck – it’s breaching the main circle. Keith discarded all of his protective charms and pendants beforehand, knowing it was a risk but also knowing it was as necessary if this was to work. But maybe he should have kept something, at least a ward or two...though he doubts his novice wards would hold their own against this thing.

Keith was afraid something like this would happen – no. He is not afraid. He cannot be afraid, because if he is, then this thing will know. It knows too much already.

“Yes,” Keith says, and raises his hand. “I wish to make a contract with you.”

*Hmm. How do I know you’ll be worth my time? Lovely little face, but what really matters is what’s within.*

Keith grits his teeth against the innuendo as it chuckles at its own joke, rising ever higher. “You will do as I say,” he snaps. “Now –”

*I don’t like your tone,* the voice says, and breaks through the pentagram altogether.

Keith is slammed backwards, the wind knocked out of him as he hits the wall with terrifying force, surrounded by the shadows, which are slowly but surely taking shape, looming over him in the broad silhouette of a horned man. Keith glares up at him, it, whatever, and yellow eyes gleam back, a wide mouth full of jagged white teeth opening; it lunges for him.

Keith’s inferno spell catches the shadow square in the chest and it staggers, yellow eyes widening, jagged teeth settling into a small, intrigued smile. *So you do have some spark in you. That all you got?*

Keith snarls and strikes out, springing to his feet and following the inferno with three lightning strikes in quick succession; he knows he’s making too much noise but hopes and stupidly prays that the being will keep the others from hearing, keep its utterly forbidden presence here a secret. Keith could be imprisoned for life for simply having the bloody pentagram on his floor, he could be hanged if found with the book, he could –

“Get out of my head!” Keith shouts, flicking his wrist sharply upwards and sending a wall of red flames into the shadow’s path.

*No,* the shadow purrs, *I like it here.* And a huge, clawed hand closes tight around Keith’s throat, hauling him up against the wall, his feet kicking weakly as he squirms and punches uselessly at the being’s flexing arm. *But enough to stay...? That remains to be seen.*

Keith gurgles furiously, heat building in his chest, prickling along his skin, and the yellow eyes widen again as flames cover Keith’s body, a spell he has only used once before and which left him feeling like, well, he’d just set himself on fire. But the being is entranced, unbothered by the fire burning its hand, and tilts its head in genuine awe as Keith becomes a living conflagration. *Alright,* it says, *so there’s more than just a spark in you.*

“Hrrkk,” Keith chokes, and the hand on his throat loosens enough for him to gulp in hot, sulfurous air as the flames flicker out, but doesn’t release him. It’s throwing him a bone, and Keith, desperate, seizes it. “I want a contract,” Keith repeats in a low rasp.
Why?

It’s a simple enough question, and Keith tries to provide a simple enough answer. “I lost someone dear to me,” he says, “and I want to know what happened to them. In Kerberos.”

Kerberos, it repeats, drawing the word out long. I see. Is that all?

“I want to bring him back,” Keith says.

There is a long silence. The dead should stay dead, it finally says, and Keith is surprised by the thoughtful, almost sad quality of its tone.

“He might not be dead,” Keith says. He doesn’t want to imagine the possibility.

There are worse fates than death.

“Listen,” Keith snaps, “will you do it, or not?”

You want me to find out what happened in Kerberos and you want to bring back your lover?

Keith flushes. “He wasn’t my –”

Don’t lie to me. He would have been. You wanted him to be. And he will be, now.

And to Keith’s horror – and, yet, it is most definitely not all horror that he feels – the shadow settles on a shape, a familiar shape, the shape of Shiro. It hurts how accurate the illusion is. He – it – smiles, and Keith’s heart stutters.

“That isn’t what I meant, don’t twist my words,” Keith mutters, refusing to meet its eyes, Shiro’s eyes. “I want him back.”

“I know, I know,” Not-Shiro soothes in Shiro’s voice, and Keith tamps down the urge to scream as the thing keeps smiling at him, soft and sweet and an absolute fucking trap. He holds still as one hand cups his shoulder gently. “I agree to your terms, Keith. Do you agree to mine?”

Keith takes a moment to answer; his throat is dry and his chest aches. Surprisingly, Not-Shiro waits for him, waits untils he whispers, “Yes,” and then, when it still doesn’t move, “yes, fine, I said I agree!”

“Seal it with a kiss?” Not-Shiro asks, mock-innocent and hopeful, and Keith glowers, knowing far more than a kiss is required, goes up on his tiptoes, and kisses him. It.

Whatever.

Keith hates that he’s imagined this moment over and over again, and yet it’s never been as good as this; this reality that is not a reality at all, kissing this thing wearing Shiro’s face, Shiro’s body, Shiro’s skin, sliding a warm hand up to his cheek and into his hair, lips smooth and firm and perfect, tongue wet and sloppy as he presses deeper. It’s too easy to just think of Not-Shiro as Shiro, the Shiro who Keith had always wanted so badly.

And Keith, damn himself, melts into it, lips giving easily under Shiro’s, slumping against the wall as a solid, strong body presses against his own, oh, oh, yes, that’s Shiro’s cock.

And Keith, damn himself, melts into it, lips giving easily under Shiro’s, slumping against the wall as a solid, strong body presses against his own, oh, oh, yes, that’s Shiro’s cock.

Keith’s thighs part with little actual thought and Shiro’s chest rumbles in approval; he breaks the kiss to murmur, Greedy, aren’t we? and Keith hates that it makes his own cock pulse in his briefs, trapped against the increasingly uncomfortable seam. Shiro just chuckles again, and then palms are
sliding under Keith’s thighs and lifting him up, walking them across the room to Keith’s bed, and Keith can only cling weakly and try not to panic, try to tell himself, for Shiro, for Shiro.

He’s tossed onto the bed unceremoniously, and braces himself as Shiro clambers over him, clothes fading away from his body like mere smoke, touching Keith’s shirt and pants and doing the same to that fabric, too, whisking it away. Keith’s panic climbs higher; he didn’t except them both to be naked so quickly, but here they are. His vision is swimming and he can barely see Shiro’s body, ridiculously beautiful, sculpted, cock curving up huge and hard and red over his rippling abdomen. Somewhat hysterically, Keith wishes he’d chosen someone slightly smaller to fall in love with.

“Hush.”

The word is soft, not mocking in the slightest, and Keith blinks blearily. Shiro peers down at him, and it really looks like Shiro, it really – he swallows back the lump in his throat. Fingers card through his hair. “Keith,” Shiro says. It makes Keith want to cry.

“Just,” Keith whispers, “just get it over with, will you –”

“Was that an order?” Shiro asks mildly. His forelock of hair hangs into his face, black as soot, and suddenly Keith can’t speak, can’t look at him. It’s too much, too painful to remember, and his cock softens as he lays there inert, remembering what could have been, hurting.

“Oh,” Shiro says, and frowns. Keith closes his eyes, and when he opens them again, cautiously, after a strange buzz of magic through the air, he stares.

It’s Shiro, but...older? Different. Shiro, but with white hair hanging into his face instead of black, grown out a little longer, and with a faded pink scar slashed over the bridge of his nose, and other scars, too, scattered across his skin like rose petals, but most notably he’s lost his right arm. It’s been replaced by a metallic prosthetic of some kind, and when Keith hesitantly reaches out to touch, Shiro doesn’t stop him. Keith supposes they will be doing a lot of touching from here on out, anyway.

The prosthetic is warm, not cold as he’d expected.

“Do you like this better?” Shiro asks.

Keith stares up at him, blank. “Does it matter?”

Shiro’s answer disarms him. “Of course. This is your contract, after all.”

“And my soul you’ll be taking,” Keith mutters.

Shiro shrugs. “There’s quite a ways to go before we get to that part, darling.”

Keith winces. “Don’t call me that.” Shiro would never call me that.


“Don’t,” Keith warns, but his face is turning steadily redder; Shiro has him right where he wants him.

“Baby,” Shiro purrs, and nudges his scarred nose against Keith’s, and Keith can almost forget he’s an unimaginably powerful interdimensional fiend from the depths of Hell.

Almost.
Then Shiro pulls away, eyes glinting with the golden light that reminds Keith what it really is, and says, “You really are a virgin, aren’t you.”

It’s not a question.

“That was what the ritual specified, did it not?” Keith counters.

It’s not an answer.

“Yes, but,” Shiro noses into Keith’s throat and Keith wonders why he hasn’t been flipped and fucked already, “few actually fit that particular ‘requirement.’ It’s become more symbolic than anything else. You, though…” He pushes himself up on one flesh arm and one metal, and smirks. “This is going to be fun.”

Keith eyes him with apprehension.

Shiro’s smirk falters. “You aren’t just going to lay there and look at me like a kicked puppy, are you?”

“I don’t —” Keith scowls. “What do you want me to do?”

“Well,” Shiro drawls, “I want you to stop pouting, for one. This needn’t be some awful ordeal, Keith. It’s really supposed to be the opposite.”

“Then make me,” Keith says. He’s not in the mood for sweet talk and flirtation. He knows what this thing is capable of.

Shiro blinks, laughs, and then moves down Keith’s body. Startled, Keith tries to sit up but is held down by a single finger on his chest, and then there’s warm breath feathering over his cock. Shiro grins at him from between Keith’s thighs, lowering his large body to suckle teasingly at the head of Keith’s rehardening cock. Keith jerks, eyes widening, absolutely not expecting that. He had prepared himself for a quick, rough, careless coupling, not this.

“Quick and careless? You wound me,” Shiro murmurs, licking under the foreskin until Keith squirms, deft fingers playing around the base and tracing over veins in light, maddening touches. “Rough, though...that, I can do. Another time.”

Keith shakes his head, hands fisting into the sheets. “Just — hurry up —”

“But it’s your first time,” Shiro croons, laving his tongue in a long, wide, wet drag down the side of Keith’s cock as it bobs up and fills out, a pearly bead of precum caught on the demon’s lips. “Don’t you want it to last?”

“Just fuck me!” Keith hisses. “I don’t want…” He gestures vaguely to Shiro’s mouth on his cock. “You don’t want it to feel good?” Shiro sits back on his heels and shakes his head in disapproval. “Well, that’s too bad. Because I plan to see you come at least thrice before the night is through.”

Keith gawks at him. “Three times?! I can’t possibly!”

“You can,” Shiro says with surety, “and you will. I’ll make number one easy for you, hm?”

And he sucks Keith’s cock into his mouth in its entirety.

Keith barely manages to muffle his cry in his palm, hips stuttering up into warm wet heat and the lengthening tongue curling and flicking relentlessly, drooling saliva which runs in rivulets down
Keith’s cock and pools on his balls. Shiro spreads the wetness around with the metal hand and chuckles in a torturous series of vibrations; Keith moans and squeezes his eyes shut.

Shiro squeezes his thigh. “Look at me,” he murmurs, pulling off and licking his messy lips.

Keith shudders, struggling to keep his eyes open as Shiro sinks back down again, the head of Keith’s cock bulging out in Shiro’s cheek, then Shiro’s throat works around it, constricts without even the slightest gag, and Keith can’t look away. He’s imagined this before, imagined Shiro on his knees in the library, the two of them hidden in a distant alcove, Keith’s nails digging into lacquered wood and Shiro’s scalp, hips working his cock shallowly into Shiro’s mouth, pink lips stretched wide —

Shiro groans, pleased, and Keith knows he heard the fantasy. He knows there’s nothing he can really hide from this thing, and accepts it with a kind of dull defeat, panting breathlessly as Shiro hollows his cheeks and guides Keith’s hands to his head. Keith’s fingers close around the forelock and tug, sharp, his other hand scrabbles uselessly through Shiro’s undercut, struggling to find purchase. He never does.

Keith’s toes curl and his back arches up from the bed as Shiro swallows around the tip and lifts Keith’s thigh up and over his shoulder, leaving Keith open and exposed and coming with a shaky gasp that feels torn from his throat. Shiro takes it, milks his cock dry until Keith is twitching from over-sensitivity. Shiro pulls off, but does not back off; gives Keith’s softening cock a few more fond licks as Keith flaps his hands uselessly to ward him off.

“See?” Shiro purrs, sitting back on his heels, still stroking Keith’s cock, preventing it from softening fully. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“S-stop,” Keith pants, “oh, f-fuck —”

Shiro stops touching Keith’s cock but moves closer, close enough that his cock drags over Keith’s thigh, just a brush, but Keith flinches and eyes it as if it will bite him at any moment. Shiro snorts. “You know, one would almost think you hadn’t realized you were making a contract with an incubus.”

“I realize that,” Keith mutters. “But this is…” Wrong. Not him. It was supposed to be with him.

“Ahh,” Shiro says, knowing. “Very well. Shall we pretend, then?”

“Pretend?” Keith echoes. “How —”

“Keith,” Shiro says, voice lowering, expression serious, eyes fixed on him and only him. “I want you, so much.”

Keith’s gut roils. “You are a cruel being,” he whispers.

Shiro’s brow creases, he strokes Keith’s hair out of his face. “Cruel? Because I denied you this for so long?” He shakes his head. “I was denying myself too, you know. You have no idea how many moments I wished to just…” Shiro sighs, longing, and kisses him.

Keith is weak; only the weak make deals with demons; and so he kisses back. He hates himself for wanting to pretend, to play along, because he knows that will make this so much easier.

Worse, but easier.

Shiro settles more heavily atop him as their tongues meet, and Keith moans softly into the kiss,
wrapping his legs around Shiro’s waist, unthinking. Shiro hums and grinds downwards and Keith’s nails scrape across Shiro’s shoulders, raising thin pink lines on already-scarred skin. “Baby,” Shiro murmurs against his lips like a secret, and Keith’s lashes flutter, heels digging into his lower back. “I wanna hear you,” Shiro adds, mouth slipping down Keith’s jaw, teeth dragging over his neck and tongue lapping at his throat. “Be loud for me, baby.”

“Ngh,” Keith grunts, shaking his head furiously, “shut up,” and then lets out a strangled yelp when Shiro bites down on one of his soft nipples, tugging at the pink bud between his teeth as Keith writhes and swears. “Augh! What’re you – why –”

“You’re prettier when you’re flustered,” Shiro tells him, licking and sucking alternately over his nipple as it peaks into hardness, teasing at the other with his metal fingertips. “Let’s try something – I think you’ll like it.” And before Keith can so much as open his mouth in protest, the metal hand is whirring with vibrations, buzzing against Keith’s nipple and through his chest, and it’s warm, too, heating up steadily, coupled by Shiro’s tongue as he leans down to lick and mouth happily at Keith’s nipples again.

Keith gasps wordlessly, his cock hardening in stages, nudging against Shiro’s erection as it does so. The friction makes Keith whine, and Shiro continues to play with his nipples and rub his cock over Keith’s until Keith is flushed and aching again, shocked by his body’s eagerness...and yet barely shocked at all. It may not really be Shiro, but it looks like Shiro, feels like Shiro, and Keith would do anything for Shiro.

“Anything, huh?” Shiro chuckles, low and dark, and Keith glowers at him. There’s no fire in it. He tenses as the metal fingers’ buzz fades and they glide over his skin, bypassing his cock altogether and dipping instead between his thighs, over the tight pucker of his hole, circling. Shiro watches his face, gaze heavy. Keith bites his tongue and spreads his legs wider, hoping to rile up the stupid thing into finishing this already, but Shiro just laughs at him.

“I think you’ll find I can be very patient,” Shiro tells him, magic swirling through the air and gathering a slick substance on the metal fingers, clear warm ooze that tingles on Keith’s skin. “More patient than any human, anyway. Mm, I could make you beg for it. What a sight that would be.”

“Don’t,” Keith breathes, and he sounds pathetic even to his own ears. His eyes are watering and he refuses to call them tears.

Shiro’s eyebrow arches, but he shrugs, and says, “Rain check on that, then,” and rubs his slick finger over Keith’s hole. “Have you touched yourself here, before?” he asks, as casual as if he were discussing the weather.

“No,” Keith mutters. He’s wanted to, but he hasn’t.

Damn, he needs to control his thoughts.

Shiro smirks. “Good luck with that. I think you should do the honors.” He takes Keith’s wrist and guides his right hand down, lifting up a leg for better access, and Keith opens and closes his mouth like a fish. Shiro snaps his fingers and more of the slick ooze drips from thin air over Keith’s hand, coating his fingers liberally in it. “Well? You wanted this over with, get it over with.”

Keith bites his lip, glares, and blindly searches, feeling awkward and filthy when his index finger finds Shiro’s fingers, then his hole, and he presses as hard as he dares, working it inside. The sensation is uncomfortable and strange, and Keith shifts, looking resolutely at the ceiling, sliding
the finger inside up to the second knuckle and refusing to acknowledge how easy the ooze makes it. His body clenches too-tight around the digit, and Keith winces, gritting his teeth. This was a mistake. He thought he could do this, he thought he knew what he was signing up for, but this...he can’t do this.

“Yes, you can,” Shiro murmurs, looming over him, petting his hip. “You can do this, Keith, breathe; open yourself up for me, baby.”

Keith shudders, belly sucking in sharply, finger curling as the ooze tingles inside of him and the demon’s fingers grip his ass firmly, holding him open, allowing him to slide a second finger inside. It’s not pain, but pressure that he feels, body adjusting slowly to the intrusion, cock remaining hard and heavy on his belly. Keith glances at Shiro’s leaking erection and clenches tight again, doubtful and apprehensive.

Shiro clicks his tongue. “Relax,” he murmurs, nails turning claw as he caresses Keith’s side, hand trailing a path of heat from Keith’s hip to rib cage to throat, and Keith shivers at the unbidden thought that this thing could tear him from limb to limb if it so chose. Shiro falters, looking surprised by this particular thought, then sly. Keith wants to sink into the blankets until he disappears from this realm.

A sharp claw taps at his chin. “Huh,” Shiro says. “You like the thought of me hurting you?” Keith stiffens, fear trickling coldly down his spine, and Shiro’s lips form a small ‘o.’ “Or, no...not that, not quite. You don’t want me to hurt you, but you like knowing that I could.” Keith does not answer and Shiro grins. “That’s it, isn’t it? Heh. You humans do love a power trip.”

Keith has no idea how to explain that it’s not a power trip at all, because with Shiro it was never about power, it was never about give and take; it was only ever about looking into Shiro’s eyes and understanding quietly but completely that no one had ever looked at him the way Shiro had, and Keith had never felt for anyone else what he felt for Shiro, and probably never would again.

The demon either does not understand this or simply ignores it, because he does not comment; he just presses one of his metal fingers inside of Keith and turns up the vibrations.

Keith shouts, back bowing and cock jolting, bracing his feet on the bed as he involuntarily bears down on the fingers, two of his own and one of Shiro’s, thick and solid and stretching him wider, impossibly wide with a second. Keith pants soundlessly and Shiro relents, cooing calmingly and easing Keith’s fingers out, replacing them with his larger and more talented ones. Keith’s cock is weeping precum on his taut stomach, puddling around the pink tip with every thrumming thrust of Shiro’s fingers inside of him. When Shiro finds his prostate Keith barely processes it; his senses are already overloaded, an extra stab of euphoria is lost amidst the rest of the dizzying wave.

“Second time,” Shiro urges, twists his fingers and curls them deep, vibrations shaking Keith to the core, fizzling up his spine endlessly. Keith comes with his mouth and legs wide open, splattering across his belly and chest. Shiro giggles and licks it up, and Keith swears that through his blissful haze he can feel magic crackling through the air around them, Shiro’s skin growing hotter to the touch, charging with power.

Power from Keith, probably – with Shiro, it was never about power, but this is not Shiro, and this is all about power. Keith may be more than a little stupid, but he’s not naive. He knows how this ends.

“Don’t ruin the mood, baby,” Shiro grumbles, and flips them.

Keith, stunned, braces himself on Shiro’s chest and stares down at him dumbly. He expected face-
down, and now he’s on top.

“I’ll fuck you face-down another day, don’t worry,” Shiro assures, lips quirking, hands closing around Keith’s hips. “Now, sit on my cock.”

Keith says, “Sorry?”

Shiro lifts him, and Keith struggles to no avail, finding himself moved until he’s straddling Shiro’s hips properly, Shiro’s cock under him. From this vantage point, it looks even more daunting, and Keith tries to clamp his legs shut when the wide, flared head brushes against his ass. He only succeeds in straddling Shiro more securely. Keith’s cock hangs soft, messy with his own cum, and he hisses when it brushes against Shiro’s belly, hisses louder when Shiro takes it in hand.

“Three times, remember?” Shiro says innocently, batting his eyelashes. Keith still wavers, shocked, and Shiro mutters something before sliding his metal fingers back under Keith and inside him. Keith whines at the different angle, biting his lip while Shiro stretches him open, because it’s too much, he’s come hard twice in, what, twenty minutes? But at the same time, he knows he wants more, and the longer Shiro spends playing with his loosened hole, the more appealing Shiro’s cock starts to look.

No, not starts. Keith found it appealing from the beginning, but it just didn’t seem like he could take that. But now Shiro has three thick fingers up his ass, ooze squelching loud and obscene between them, and Keith almost sobs as Shiro’s right thumb rubs slow and purposeful over his cockhead; again and again, claw teasing at the slit as precum begins to flow again, Keith is going to die.

“No,” Shiro chuckles, “you’re going to sit on my cock, and you’re going to ride me until you come, baby,” and Keith moans in helpless agreement, hole gaping as Shiro’s fingers withdraw. Keith can feel how open he is; it’s absurd, but it’s even more absurd how fucking incredible it feels when the head of Shiro’s cock catches on his rim, slides in slow, then pops inside like a fat plug; Keith’s mouth falling open and head falling back as the slide continues, hot and hard and thick and full. Sharp claws scratch at his hips and Keith trembles, thighs aching from the strain as he tries to keep it slow, tries not to bottom out hard and fast and all at once like a part of him really, really wants to. He doesn’t know how long it takes, but when Shiro’s fully seated inside him, Keith can barely breathe; his chest is tight and his body is tight sheathing Shiro’s cock, but not to the point of discomfort, this time.

Shiro groans under him, eyes half-lidded in pleasure, and, to Keith’s shock, glowing gold. “Good boy,” Shiro praises, and Keith turns scarlet, cock throbbing to the beat of his rapid pulse. “Warming my cock so well – I knew you could take it.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Keith grunts, voice coming out far less steady than he would have liked. He thinks that’s fair, considering he’s currently stuffed full of demon cock.

Shiro enjoys the snark, apparently, because he says, “Why don’t you try and make me?” and shifts under him, and it’s not a thrust, not really, but Keith bounces on his cock and is momentarily stunned by the sensation. Shiro looks far too pleased with himself, and Keith, panting and flushed, rolls his hips, shallow but eager, fast, and the claws on his hips draw blood. Keith doesn’t care; he’s already given his blood to this thing, it already has all of him.

But – and this is an important epiphany, for Keith – he has all of it, too.

Shiro’s eyes widen under Keith as Keith lifts up, then comes down hard, cock slapping his stomach and breath spilling harshly from his mouth, Shiro’s cock rocking and rubbing rhythmically inside
him with every movement. Keith claws at Shiro’s chest, pinches his dusky nipples between thumb and forefinger, and Shiro unexpectedly bucks, hard, and Keith cries out, writhing into it, pinching harder, hard enough to hurt.

“You little slut,” Shiro snarls, and it takes Keith a moment to realize what’s happening – Shiro’s spine buckles and spasms, every convulsion driving his cock deeper, in and out, and his skin vanishes into shadowy patches, and up close Keith can see it isn’t a void of empty black, the darkness is alive, and flickering with magic, little sparks like stars, the night sky incarnate.

The hands on his hips are rough, leathery, not like human hands at all, and Keith yelps when smooth, coiling muscle wraps around his torso – a tail, he realizes, with a blunt tip that forces its way past his lips and plunges into his mouth. Keith chokes, sucks on instinct, bewildered and overwhelmed, falling forwards in slow motion. He catches himself on Shiro’s chest, which is broadening, muscle flexing under his hands, the bed creaking under the added weight.

The tail pulses around his body, constricting and releasing, binding him, and stretches his lips around its tip as it wriggles deeper, shaping his throat. Keith drools and blinks back tears; the demon’s skin tastes sweet to the point of sickly, but he can’t stop, and he doesn’t think Shiro would let him.

Shiro’s cock is thickening and Keith is whimpering, body straining around the shifting erection which curls and strokes just like the tail inside of him, pulsing like it has a mind of its own, the head swelling wider, the base swelling, too, stretching Keith’s tender rim. Shiro’s hands cover Keith’s entire rib cage, thumbs meeting easily in the middle of his stomach, and Shiro fucks up into him relentlessly, yellow eyes glaring from a face that is Shiro but not, Shiro with the wickedly curving horns of a ram and the teeth of a predator and the tongue of a snake, and Keith thinks dazedly, This is what I’ve bound myself to.

Huge black bat wings erupt from Shiro’s wide shoulders, curling high over Keith’s head, enveloping them, and Keith wonders if he’s mad for thinking there’s something almost beautiful about the transformation.

His third climax catches him entirely unawares; Shiro’s tail is squeezing harshly around his chest and ravishing his mouth, claws are raking down his sides in a sharp sweet burn, and Shiro’s cock is splitting him open, and then Keith is screaming and coming, cock painting ribbons of cum across Shiro’s heaving chest, and Keith may have just made a contract with a creature from Hell but he feels like he’s just ascended.

Shiro groans at the sight and his tail loosens, withdraws from Keith’s mouth, and Keith slumps forward, only to be reminded at once that, yes, he is still stuffed full of demon cock. Thighs trembling and cock trying to soften, drained, Keith squirms, and Shiro groans louder, desperate, and Keith sees his eyes flicker in...confliction? Could it truly be that he’s wary of hurting Keith to reach his own end? It seems unlikely.

Shiro bares his teeth in frustration. “Come,” Keith commands, and Shiro stares at him in disbelief. His cock twitches inside Keith, and Keith squirms down onto it, gritting his teeth as it swells further, hotter, fatter. “I said, come,” Keith growls, and Shiro arches off the bed and does, pumping Keith full of cum that is far hotter than a human’s, at least from Keith’s limited experience, and Keith moans weakly and stares as his belly bulges outwards, the demon’s cock softening slowly as it spurts the last of it deep into his gut. Fuck. Fuck, Keith is so utterly fucked, and it’s his own damn doing.

Shiro’s eyes are hungry, and Keith cannot help the pitiful whine that falls from his lips as Shiro lifts him off his cock, cum flooding out, Keith’s hole winking in greedy contractions around
nothing. But then he’s straddling Shiro’s face and Keith’s eyes fly wide, and Shiro murmurs, “I said at least thrice,” before licking inside of Keith firmly.

Keith whimpers in both despair and indescribable pleasure, held up by Shiro’s flexing tail, and Shiro hums contentedly as he licks him clean, swirling his long, forked tongue through the mess of his own cum, teasing at Keith’s tender hole until he manages to coax one last, faltering orgasm from Keith’s spent cock, which he licks clean while Keith twitches uselessly, after which he finally relents. Shiro lets go and Keith collapses onto the bed beside him, nearly conking his head on the headboard. A clawed hand softens his fall.


“It is done,” Shiro purrs, and lifts his hand, pressing it to Keith’s cheek. Heat courses through him like electricity through copper wire, and something tugs in his chest, tugs him closer to the sated incubus. Keith is exhausted, but the magic settles within him, dormant for now. “Our contract is sealed.”

“Great,” Keith mumbles, and closes his eyes again. He does not expect to have a soft blanket draped over him, but he stubbornly keeps his eyes shut when it happens – he did what he had to, and he won’t be subjected to snuggling or whatever other post-coital shenanigans the incubus wants from him.

Four times. Good heavens.

Keith falls asleep fast, and when he awakes, late the next morning, it is to an aching body, an empty room, and all signs of the summoning erased.

But Keith stretches, winces, feels the phantom breath of infernal magic over his skin and inside him, and knows it was not a dream.
Three days pass, and everything is business as usual.

Minus the fact that Keith limps most of the first day, quietly cursing himself for choosing that particular kind of entity for this purpose.

It was a calculated choice, though, and Keith still thinks it was the best choice he could have made given his options. He has no desire to be consumed by the vengeance of a rage demon, nor be driven to ruin by a greed or envy demon. Drudes are an even less appealing option – Keith has enough nightmares as it is, thanks very much. A fury would certainly be good at stirring up trouble, but little else. No, Keith needed a greater demon, but one that would have motivation not to turn on him and rip him to pieces or eat him at the first chance. Thus, it only made sense to go after a demon who would have an investment in keeping his body intact. He had done his research, weighed his odds, and an incubus had been the apparent best bet. Not just any incubus, though.

The one Keith had summoned was called Kurobasanir, or at least that was the closest translation of its infernal name. He’d chosen Kurobasanir not just because of its particular reputation, but because Kurobasanir originated from a particular region of Hell – Kerberos. And because, by some lucky twist of fate, he’d overheard a certain conversation shortly after the Kerberos incident.

Keith had been wandering the halls of the Citadel, as he had been prone to doing in those early days, numb and in utter denial of the news he had received. He had expected to see Shiro around every corner, meeting him with open arms and an easy smile, telling him everything was going to be okay. But of course, that never happened.

Instead, Keith found Master Iverson speaking with a strange visitor on a secluded balcony.

Keith’s feelings towards Iverson were lukewarm at best, so his first instinct was to keep walking, but he’d faltered when he heard the second voice. It was the voice of Archmagus Honerva, a distinguished witch and pioneering alchemist from the royal court of Altea. Keith had grown up in the barren rocky desert to the west of the Arusian Mountains (the Citadel perched high among their peaks), but to the east lay the fertile valley kingdom of Altea.
Archmagus Honerva often gave talks at the Citadel, or at least she’d used to – in the five years Keith had studied there, her appearances had declined from four times a year to a mere one or two. Keith privately thought she looked increasingly haggard over time, long brown hair shot through with premature silver, but he was too polite to ever mention it, and she was too far above him in skill and hierarchy to even be approached.

But Archmagus Honerva had approached Keith several times. He had been bewildered but grateful when she’d cornered him after class – she’d praised him on the questions he asked of her lectures and gladly went into more depth on her studies of the very being of magic and perhaps life itself, quintessence. Keith was fascinated and very intimidated. He was also deeply unsettled by her in a way he could not quite name – maybe it was the way she looked at him, as if he were a potential experiment, a cryptic problem to be solved.

Anyway, Keith had heard her speaking with Iverson that evening, in low, subdued tones, about demons.

Keith had stopped walking, inhaled, and pressed himself close to the wall, listening.

*We have no way of knowing what occurred,* Iverson had said. *Shirogane and the Holts are gone, there is nothing more to it.*

*No,* Honerva had said, *there is always something more. The beings of Kerberos would know.*

*Absolutely not, archmagus!* Iverson had exclaimed. *You know as well as I that to consort with those infernal creatures would be a total breach of protocol and safety. They cannot be reasoned with, and would help us only for a steep price. Shirogane and the Holts are not worth such a thing.*

*Do not be so quick to jump to conclusions,* Honerva had retorted. *Not every Void-born is so savage and monstrous. Kurobasanir, for example –* *

*Do not speak its name,* Iverson hissed.

*SILENCE. I am offering you a solution and you would be wise to look into it. Kurobasanir is a greater incubus whose moral compass is significantly less skewed than others of his kind; he may even have a degree of humanity –* *

*No, archmagus, stop right there,* Iverson had declared. *There will be no more talk of this, and I will have you know that any and all texts we may have here in the Citadel on this creature are well-hidden and virtually inaccessible. There will be no summoning and no breaking of eons-old laws within these walls. And I am sorry to say, archmagus, that if you disagree with this, you will not be allowed to speak within these walls any longer.*

*So be it,* Honerva had said, shocking Iverson into silence as she turned on her heel and marched out.

Keith had tried to hurry down the hall, but did not make it out of sight in time. Honerva had seen him, and Keith had frozen in his tracks, but she had only inclined her head to him, winked, and continued in the opposite direction.

She had not appeared at the Citadel since, and Keith had begun his relentless search for the being she had mentioned. He was not disappointed.

The creature indeed had a history, from every text Keith had been able to find on it, for being very helpful if properly appeased. Incubi, like all demons, could be tricky and go against their word as long as no deal had been made, but apparently Kurobasanir was loyal. He was also clever, and,
perhaps most interestingly, was known to occasionally become quite protective over the human he was bound to.

Keith doubts this will happen; he’s unlikable to most humans as it is.

In any case, he’s relieved the summoning had actually worked. He’d come across several confusing accounts which claimed that Kurobasanir had been slain long ago, but those were evidently false – Keith’s very sore ass is proof enough of that. Still, Keith resolves to ask the incubus whenever it returns.

He also resolves to just refer to it as Shiro, since his belly twists unpleasantly when he thinks of it as anyone other than Shiro. Of course Keith objectively knows it isn’t him, but names hold power, and the thought of saying anyone’s name but Shiro’s while the incubus does what he pleases with Keith is upsetting, to say the least.

When Keith wakes up even sorer than before on the second day, he stomps over to the grimoire he keeps locked in his nightstand drawer, wrapped in a faded purple baby blanket, and searches for the strongest healing salve spell he can find. Healing is not Keith’s strong suit, so the best he ends up managing is a numbing agent. Good enough, if it means he can sit on the wooden benches in class without gritting his teeth and accidentally turning the poor potted plant on the windowsill beside him to ash. He tells himself he’s relieved that Shiro is keeping his distance and allowing Keith some recovery time.

By the third day, though, relief fades into worry. Did he do something wrong? Should he try to summon Shiro again? He feels stupid at the mere thought of calling out the demon’s name in his room, so he doesn’t do that. He tells himself he’ll give it a week.

But on the third night, when Keith is tucked away in the corner of the library surrounded by a small mountain of thrilling (not) books on intermediate toxin preparation and distillation, someone taps him on the shoulder and says directly into his ear, “Hi.”

Keith jumps a mile, knocking over his chair in the process. Shiro catches it easily before it, and Keith, crashes to the ground. Keith glares up at him and Shiro smirks back, anything but innocent. “Finally decided to show your face?” Keith grumbles.

“Finally?” Shiro’s smirk widens. “Did you miss me?”

Keith flips him off and turns back to his books, glancing around warily. “You really shouldn’t be here,” he hisses. “Someone might see you.”

Shiro snorts and leans back against the bookshelf. “Don’t fret. No one can see me but you.”

“Aren’t I lucky.” Keith sighs, making an effort to refocus his attention on a paragraph about toad poison, which is very difficult with an incubus breathing down his neck. Keith slowly turns to him, and finds himself nose to nose with the demon, who has no concept of personal space. “What.”

Shiro sniffs the air delicately, and makes a small sound like heh. “I see you’ve resorted to healing salves. Smart.” Keith opens his mouth to make a sharp retort but Shiro adds, “As a preemptive measure,” and takes Keith’s hand, pressing a small glass bottle into it. Keith blinks at the bottle, uncomprehending. The liquid within is black as ink, and it’s unmarked. Shiro folds his arms. “It’s for...certain aches and pains. A single sip should do you wonders.”

Keith eyes him flatly. “How do I know it isn’t poison?”

Shiro motions to the many stacks of books. “I would hope you were well-versed in poisons by
now. Studying hard?"

“No thanks to you.” Keith is about to tuck the bottle into his pocket but sees the incubus still staring, expectant. With a huff, he uncorks it and takes a tiny sip. The bottle refills itself when he corks it. It’s like drinking pure spring water, and it fizzes briefly in the back of his throat before settling cool and soothing. The effect is almost immediate – the pain is gone. Keith’s wide eyes make the incubus chuckle.

“You’re welcome,” Shiro says. “You’re going to need it.”

Keith shoves the bottle into his pocket with unnecessary force. “How fucking thoughtful.”

“I am, aren’t I?” Shiro tilts his head. “You seem stressed. Here I was, about to give you some interesting information I found, but alas, you don’t seem to want me around —”

“What information?” Keith interrupts, hating how obvious the desperation in his tone is.

A perfect eyebrow goes up. “Ah, so you are interested. Tell you what, I’ll tell you everything I know for a kiss.”

Keith slams the book shut and tips his head up. “Fine.” He purses his lips.

Shiro laughs, soft and maddening, and cups his face with a warm metal hand before leaning in, brushing his lips teasingly over Keith’s before properly kissing him, tongue sliding hotly over Keith’s and teeth sharp where they catch on Keith’s bottom lip, brief and stinging. He kisses like he’s got all the time in the world and none at all, sloppy and slow and incredible. Keith makes a valiant effort not to moan into his mouth but fails utterly anyway.

Shiro is smug when he pulls away. Keith is hard and scowling. Shiro pinches his cheek lightly and says, “I found out what happened to the silly humans in Kerberos.”


Shiro settles gracefully in the chair opposite him, steepling his hands under his chin. “You know of the Galra, yes?”

“Yes.” Keith swallows. “One of the largest factions of demons, ruled by Zarkon.”

“Mm, more to them than that,” Shiro replies. “The Galra are chaos entities born of the Void.”

“Isn’t that where all you lot come from, more or less?” Keith asks, interested despite himself.

Shiro makes a face. “Broadly speaking, yes, but some of us are more refined than your average Void-born.”

“Refined,” Keith repeats doubtfully, thinking of Shiro shifting into a winged beast and fucking the living daylights out of him, knowing Shiro will hear the thought loud and clear.

Sure enough, Shiro flushes and narrows his eyes. “That was a low blow,” he says with a sniff. “Anyway, the Galra are rather base beings concerned with war, bloodshed, power, and general domination of others. They’ve built up what they call an Empire in their land, Daibazaal, and Kerberos was one of their...colonies, I suppose you could call it.” He pauses. “Not every Galra is seething with pure raw Void chaos, but most are, and Zarkon certainly is.”

“Alright,” Keith says, “so what does this have to do with Shiro and the Holts?”
“Oh, now you care about the other two,” Shiro says, rolling his eyes. “All three of them were taken by the Galra.”

“Taken?” Keith repeats in a small voice.

“Spirited away, kidnapped, stolen, et cetera. I asked around, and no one’s seen your Shiro, so likelier than not they’ve brought him to the very depths of Daibazaal…” Shiro trails off.

“What else,” Keith presses. “I know there’s something else.”

“There is,” Shiro admits. “Rumor has it that Zarkon’s witch, Haggar, is conducting horrifying experiments there – and this is horrifying by Hell standards, so the bar is set quite high. It does not bode well for your Shiro, considering he’s probably one of her experiments.” Keith’s blood roars in his ears. He’s forgotten how to breathe. “Powerful one, was he?”

Keith says nothing, mind spinning with thoughts. Zarkon has a witch? The incubus leans across the table and pokes his shoulder, brow furrowed. “Hello? You still in there, baby?”

“An experiment,” Keith says, mouth dry as the desert. “So he’s alive.”

“Mmm…debatable.” Shiro bites his lip. “Remember what I said about ‘fate worse than death’?”

“I don’t care what you said,” Keith snaps, “our contract still stands. We’re going to find him and bring him back.”

Shiro shakes his head. “Not yet, we’re not. We don’t even know for certain if he’s there, and rushing into Daibazaal would be a suicide mission. Suicide is not covered under the terms of our contract, just so you’re aware.”

“Then you will find out more,” Keith mutters, “and do so soon.”

Shiro grins. “Yes, sir.”

Keith throws a book about bees at him.

Shiro catches it and shelves it neatly in what is definitely not the correct section.

Then someone gasps, “Master Shirogane?!”

Keith looks up. Shiro looks up.

There is a trio of novices standing in the next section over; a scrawny pale girl with messy brown hair and glasses, a big guy with dark skin and an expression of utter confusion, and a skinny guy with brown skin and huge blue eyes fixed directly on Shiro.


“Smite?!” Keith yelps. “No! No smiting, what – he can see you?”

“You’re dead,” the skinny guy whispers. “You’re...how...what…” He looks at Keith then, accusingly. “Have you been hiding Master Shirogane from everybody?!”

Keith, sweating, says, “Huh?”

Shiro says, “Keep your voice down,” and the skinny guy opens his mouth, only for no sound to come out – he gapes like a fish and clutches at his throat frantically, eyes wide with panic, and the
small girl and big guy look thoroughly freaked out.

“Lance?!” the big guy hisses, grabbing at his friend’s arm. “Lance, buddy, what’s wrong?”

Keith, quickly realizing the gravity of the situation, mutters, “Don’t let them leave.”

“Noted,” Shiro says grimly, and snaps his fingers. The trio stands immobile, none of them apparently able to speak or move an inch. Not what Keith meant, but he’ll take it. “I can erase their memory of this moment,” Shiro offers. “Only a small chance of accidental insanity or a vegetative state.”

The trio screams silently at Keith, their eyes huge and pleading and terrified.

Keith winces. “No, don’t do that. I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

Shiro gives him a look of pure incredulity. “You sold your soul to a demon,” he says.

The trio stare at Keith with matching expressions of horror. “Oh, wonderful,” Keith snaps, “tell the whole Citadel about my capital crime, why don’t you?”

Shiro shrugs. “Smiting them is still an option.”

The big guy is crying. Keith folds his arms, stands up, and walks over to them. Shiro watches expectantly from the table. “Alright,” Keith says, “listen up. Do you want to be smited?”

The three of them shake their heads frantically.

“Thought not. Lucky for you, you won’t be smited, as long as you keep your mouths shut about this. Understood?” The trio nods just as frantically. Keith glances back at Shiro and says, “If they try to run or scream, smite them.” He thinks, *Don’t you dare hurt anyone.* Shiro inclines his head, and lifts the spell.

The trio gasps for air and clings to each other fearfully, looking at Keith as if he’s the Devil incarnate. They’ve got to be first-year novices. They don’t make a peep, and then the middle one, the seer named Lance, squeaks, “That’s not Master Shirogane, is it.”

“Brilliant deduction,” Shiro says. “The Citadel’s really full of the best and brightest these days, isn’t it?” He peers at Lance. “Though, your Sight must be decent enough to see past my glamour, I’ll give you that much.”

“I don’t see anyone,” the big guy ekes out. “Are you a ghost?”

“He’s a demon,” Keith sighs, figuring he’s fucked anyway.

“Shit,” the girl whispers. “What kind?”

“The best kind,” Shiro purrs, rising from his chair and snaking an arm around Keith’s waist.

Lance’s eyes bug out of his head and he splutters, “Dude! You sold your soul to an incubus that looks like Master Shirogane?!”

The big guy’s jaw drops and the girl looks very green. “That is so messed up,” the big guy says, faint.

“I did it to find Shiro,” Keith retorts defensively, elbowing the incubus away. He allows it, though Keith can feel its eyes on him. “To find him, and save him, and bring him back.”
The trio exchanges glances. “Hate to break it to you,” Lance says, “but he’s dead.”

“We don’t know that for sure,” the girl mutters. Keith frowns at her. She looks familiar.

Shiro looks at her, too, and smiles. “I see we have another vested interest. Could there be another contract in my future, I wonder?”

Keith glares at him in disbelief and the girl takes a step back in disgust. “Vested interest?!” she snaps. “What d’you mean?”

“Your father and brother were in Kerberos, too,” Shiro says, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

The two guys gawk at her. She turns white as a sheet.

“Ah,” Shiro says. “It seems we all have some explaining to do.”

*  

In a private study room which Keith practically herds everyone into, he discovers the novices are first years, and their names are Lance, Hunk, and Pidge, who was apparently pretending to be a boy but who did not fool Keith and who is actually Katie Holt, son of Samuel Holt and Matt Holt, who disappeared in Kerberos along with the real Shiro.

“Why do you call it Shiro? ” Lance bemoans for the fifth time in five minutes, “That is seriously fucked up!”

“It’s a nice name,” Shiro says, “and I like it. So does Keith. Don’t you, baby?”

“I will murder you,” Keith warns.

“Murdering me is not covered under the terms of our contract, and frankly, I’d like to see you try,” Shiro says sweetly.

“What is covered under the terms of your contract?” Pidge slash Katie asks.

“Considering my offer?” Shiro asks slyly.

“No!” Keith says at the same time as Pidge. Shiro blinks at Keith in mild surprise, chuckles, and drops the subject.

“Only Shiro is covered under the terms of our contract currently,” Keith admits. Pidge’s jaw works. Keith is a little scared of her.

“But contracts can be amended,” Shiro drawls, “for a price.”

Hunk puts his head in his hands and groans, “Gross,” with feeling.

Keith thinks, _You have no idea, buddy._

Shiro winks at him.

Pidge’s hands curl into fists and she says, “Amend the contract.”

Keith says, “Why?”

Hunk lifts a finger tentatively. “A contract saving three people instead of one would be a lot more, um...demanding.”

“Correct,” Shiro says, eyes too bright.

“Amend it!” Pidge snaps, leaping from her seat. The novices are sitting a safe distance away from Keith and Shiro, at the end of the long table, but Pidge storms up to Keith fearlessly. “You’re really gonna leave them behind?!”

“I didn’t know them,” Keith says. “Just Shiro.”

Her lip quivers. “Then I’ll have to make my own contract,” she declares.

“Pidge, are you insane?” Lance exclaims. “You can’t!”

“Well, not with you, obviously,” Pidge says to the disappointed incubus. She paces, face set in determination. “Maybe a fury —”

“It’ll kill you,” Keith says with certainty. Shiro gives him a sidelong glance. “This one almost killed me.”

“You’re still breathing, aren’t you?” Shiro says, but otherwise doesn’t deny it.

Hunk says worriedly, “Katie, Keith Kogane is top of our class, and if he almost got smited, then sorry, but you really don’t have a chance.”

Shiro smiles, intrigued. “Top of your class? I’m so proud.”

Pidge fumes silently. “I’ll find a way,” she mutters, shaking her head, “I haven’t found anything any other way, so, why not, what have I got to lose?”

Keith recognizes her manner. She’s desperate, and she’s going to do something stupid, he can see it in her eyes. “Your life,” Keith tells her.

She whirls on him. “Excuse me?!”

“You asked what have you got to lose, and the answer is, your life,” Keith says. “How old are you? Fifteen?”

“Sixteen,” she says, wary.

“So you’d lose, what, sixty years at least?”

She blanches. “Well – well how old are you, huh? You’re no ancient, yourself, and you threw away your life, too!”

“Nineteen,” Keith says. “But that doesn’t matter, I’ve already made my choice.” He’d made it a year ago, in fact.

Shiro gazes at him steadily. Keith wishes he knew what the demon was thinking, too.

“You can’t stop me,” Pidge retorts fiercely. “If you get your Master Shirogane back, then I should get my family back.”
“I’ll amend the contract,” Keith says, defeated.

“Will you, now?” Shiro says, tilting his head. “I think we still have to discuss the terms of that.”

Later, Keith thinks firmly. Not here.

Shiro holds up his hands in mock surrender, even though he’s won. Pidge says, “You – wait, really? You would do that?”

“You’ll die if you try to make a contract.” Keith knows this. He knows there are many reasons for banning witches from making deals with demons and one of the biggest is that few even survive the summoning. “I already have a contract and I’ve already cut my life shorter.”

Pidge glances uncertainly from him to Shiro and back again. “But...are you sure? I mean, you don’t...okay. I...thank you.” She bites her lip and blurts, “Do you know anything so far?”

They fill her in, and Keith’s chest aches at the hope in her eyes as she learns they may still be alive. He wants to hope, too, but when he looks at the Shiro who is not the one he knows and loves so dearly, Keith can only feel dread.

* 

“You realize this increases the intensity of the contract overall, not just this one time,” Shiro says.

They’re sitting on Keith’s bed, Keith against the headboard with his legs tucked close to his chest and head turned resolutely away, Shiro cross legged and eager at the end of the bed.

“Yes,” Keith says.

“Demanding more from me means me demanding more from you,” Shiro adds, really trying to drive the point home.

“Yes,” Keith says again. “I know how it works.”

“And you agree to it?” Shiro presses.

“I don’t know what I’m agreeing to,” Keith says quietly.

“More,” Shiro says.

“More than four?” Keith quips weakly. He’s shaking.


“How often?”

Shiro shrugs. “Once a day, more or less.”

Keith stares at him. “You can’t be serious.”

“Ah, but I am,” Shiro says. “You’re a young, virile man, why the long face?”

“I can’t – you have to fuck me every single day!?” Keith splutters.

“Fuck you?” Shiro chuckles. “No, baby. Just make you come.”

Small mercies. “And you?” Keith lifts his gaze.
“My release is less important; I gain energy only from yours,” Shiro replies.

“Do you lose energy from your own?” Keith asks.

“I think that’s enough talking,” Shiro says, and pins him to the bed. Keith doesn’t fight it, he’s tired. “But I am going to fuck you right now,” Shiro informs him.

“Fine,” Keith says, resigned.

“Now, that attitude won’t do,” Shiro replies, and switches their positions, so that he’s the one sitting up against the headboard and Keith is kneeling between his legs, startled by the sudden manhandling. Keith eyes the incubus warily – he thinks he knows what it wants, and he’s not thrilled about it.

“Smart boy,” Shiro purrs, and waves a hand, his clothes dissipating away. Keith’s clothing, though, stays on. Keith shifts, trying and failing to avert his gaze, and he needn’t have bothered anyway, because Shiro grips his jaw, forcing him to look at his mostly soft cock, and says, “Suck.”

Keith swallows back bile. “Fine,” he says again, and Shiro’s eyes flare. The incubus guides him down with the metal hand, and Keith barely manages not to cringe when his lips brush silk-smooth skin, skin which firms and fills out under his tentative half-kisses – Keith has no idea what he’s doing.

A sudden, vivid, shockingly explicit image of Keith’s lips wrapped around the incubus’s cock flashes through his mind and Keith makes a strangled sound; Shiro smirks and repeats, “Suck, baby,” and Keith takes a deep, steadying breath, and tries.

He remembers how the incubus got him off this way, so starts by licking around the tip of Shiro’s cock, finding some strange satisfaction in feeling the flesh harden under his tongue. Keith is mildly frustrated that his tongue is so much smaller than the incubus’s, yet the incubus’s cock is so much larger.

Shiro laughs at the thought, fingernails scratching over Keith’s scalp in what could be a fond gesture or a warning to hurry up. Keith doesn’t hurry, he opens his mouth as wide as he can and fits it over the head as it emerges from the slippery foreskin, trying to figure out how far he can go down before he chokes. He doesn’t think it’s going to be very far.

Shiro has other ideas, and shoves Keith’s head down. Keith gags, lips stretched wide and throat working around the tip, drooling uncontrollably and struggling to breathe through his nose. But he doesn’t choke. Shiro purrs, tugs on his hair hard, and Keith closes his eyes, hollowing his cheeks and sucking. The incubus rocks his cock up into Keith’s mouth and throat, each thrust hardening it further, stretching Keith’s lips wider and making his jaw ache.

Keith’s sweating; there’s something intoxicating about the sensation of being barely able to breathe around his mouthful of cock, heavy on his tongue and filling his senses with salt-musk-sickly sweet scent. Yet, the taste isn’t bad. It’s...Keith supposes he shouldn’t be shocked that a sex demon’s cock tastes good, but he is, because it does, and when a hot trickle of precum slides down his throat Keith almost bites him in surprise. It tastes like Keith’s favorite fruit, cherries.

Shiro laughs again, strained this time. There’s an undertone of dark chocolate, another one of Keith’s favorites, and he wrenches away from Shiro’s grasp to splutter, “Seriously?”

“I don’t see you complaining,” Shiro retorts, nodding to Keith’s tenting pants. Keith hadn’t even noticed he was hard. Just from sucking the incubus’s cock...
Shiro’s eyes darken; his grip on Keith’s head changes, gentles, stroking his hair softly as Keith sucks the incubus’s fully hard cock into his mouth again, body awash with arousal. “Just like that, baby,” Shiro murmurs as Keith licks and sucks in earnest. “Now, I’ll admit, I’m a little angry you deprived me of a second contract...but it was awful sweet of you to take the fall for Katie Holt. Such a noble, selfless little human you are.” He tugs sharply on Keith’s hair and Keith does choke then, eyes widening and watering in panic; Shiro doesn’t relent while Keith struggles to breathe.

Keith tries to pull away but Shiro holds him down firmly. Keith’s nails rake over Shiro’s thighs and the incubus hisses, but not in pain. Keith glares at him through his tears and decides to bite him.

Just before he does, Shiro’s claws are at his neck and the incubus coos, “Now, now, be good.”

His claws are sharp enough to slit Keith’s throat.

Keith’s vision is spotting, but his cock is harder than ever. Frustration coils tight and hot in his chest and in a split second, Keith decides to make the incubus come as hard as he possibly can.

Shiro blinks at the thought, taken aback, and Keith drags his teeth over the sensitive foreskin mercilessly. Shiro grunts, hips bucking up, choking Keith further, but Keith is beyond air; he sees red. He grabs blindly at the meat of Shiro’s ass, yanking him up to Keith’s mouth, leaving red lines in his wake.

“*There’s* that spark,” Shiro gasps, grinning wide and sharp. Keith squeezes at his balls as hard as he dares and Shiro’s groan twists into a growl, wind rushing through the air around them as his wings unfold. The incubus fucks Keith’s mouth and Keith takes it until his throat is raw, too angry to feel the hurt. Drool is spilling from the corners of his swollen lips and down between Shiro’s thighs, and Keith gathers the spit with two fingers and presses them under Shiro’s balls, firmly inwards.

Shiro’s body gives and the incubus arches with a snarl, grabbing Keith’s hair until his scalp stings. Keith squeezes harder and twists his fingers harshly inside, grazes his teeth, licks and moans and makes a mess of Shiro’s cock until the incubus jolts and yanks Keith off just before coming all over his face.

Keith is momentarily stunned, and humiliated, too; hot cum dripping down his cheeks, his lips, his chin, even his damn eyelashes. Shiro sits up, lip curling. “You,” he says, low and dangerous, “need to be put in your place.”

Keith wipes a hand across his face in disgust, spitting directly across the incubus’s heaving chest. “And what,” he pants, “is my place, *exactly*?”

Shiro lunges at him, and Keith is slammed down onto the bed, kicking and thrashing under him. The incubus’s hand finds the bulge of his cock and cups it with purpose through the tight fabric of Keith’s pants, sharp claws inches from it.

Keith, needless to say, goes very still.

“Your place,” Shiro tells him, “is that of a human. A mortal. You are at my mercy in this contract; make no mistake about that.”


Shiro snorts. “Oh, we shall see who is *bound*,” he retorts, and rolls Keith onto his belly as he magicks his clothes off and away. Keith opens his mouth to shout but finds himself gagged; then
his arms are forced behind his back and tied there in thick cord around his wrists and forearms. His legs are free, but Shiro holds him by each calf, keeping him down.

Keith trembles, jaw working around the gag. He won’t deny he’s afraid. He doesn’t think the demon is going to make this pleasant, and waits tensely, messy face half-smushed in the pillow.

Hot breath tickles the back of his neck and Shiro says, “You look good like this, baby. I like knowing that no one else has ever seen you like this – only me.” His lips brush over Keith’s shoulder like a brand and Keith jumps, hating the helplessness of being unable to move. But his cock is still hard between his belly and the sheets, and he hates that even more.

“Aww.” Shiro nuzzles at the small of his back and Keith’s breathing shortens, shallows. “You don’t like being tied up? Heh, personally I enjoy it quite a bit. If you behave, you can tie me up, sometime. Imagine it’s your pretty Shiro at your mercy.”

Keith makes a pathetic sound around the gag at that. Now especially, he does not want to be reminded that the thing keeping him helpless is not Shiro.

“Hm,” it says. “You’re afraid. Now why is that, I wonder? I know you don’t want me to hurt you, and I won’t. Don’t you trust me, baby?” Claws trace down Keith’s spine and Keith’s heart pounds, and he thinks, as loud as he can, _How can I ever trust you?_

“You can trust,” Shiro murmurs, “that I will always bring you pleasure. That much, you can trust.”

He lifts Keith’s hips up from the bed and Keith chews on the gag as his leaking cock is enveloped in the incubus’s warm, leathery grip. Keith thrusts into it instinctively and Shiro’s metal palm catches him across his ass, sudden and stinging and hot, and Keith yelps, eyes flying wide in disbelief. Shiro chuckles close to his ear and says, “Behave, baby.”

Keith glares into the pillow and tries to wriggle out of his grasp. Shiro smacks his ass again and Keith cries out, hips jumping forward, cock dripping precum into his palm, _fuck, Keith likes this, why does he like this and how did Shiro – no, no, not Shiro – know?!_

“I think you wanted your Shiro to do this to you, didn’t you, baby?” Shiro murmurs. “Lay you out across his lap, ass up, and let him hit you there until your pretty pale skin burns red and you come all over his thighs?”

Keith whines and shakes his head, writhing under the incubus, face stained as red as his ass when Shiro slaps it again, and whispers, “I can see everything you want, baby, in here,” and taps Keith’s temple, Keith drops his head down, hiding his face, and surrenders. Shiro squeezes where he’d slapped seconds before and Keith sucks in a sharp breath, sharper when Shiro spreads him and teases his thumb at Keith’s hole, circling and rubbing around the pucker as Keith waits, cock still trapped in Shiro’s other hand.

“Or did you want him to tell you what a good boy you were?” Shiro continues, leaning forward and kissing the curve of Keith’s hip, then his ass, mouth cool against the hot skin. Keith trembles. “Did you want him to hold you close and stroke your needy little cock,” and Shiro strokes his cock as he says it, “and tell you how beautiful and precious and perfect you were for him?”

“Please,” Keith whispers, incomprehensible around the gag, and doesn’t even realize he’s said it until the incubus chuckles.

“I’m afraid I’m not very good at sweet talk,” Shiro says, and a shadow falls over Keith on the bed, and when he cracks his eyes open he sees the incubus’s wings rising up, primed as if for flight.
“But I don’t think you want sweet talk. I think you want me to tell you what a sweet little slut you are.”

Keith grinds his cock frantically into the incubus’s palm and thinks he could cry when Shiro takes his hand away, and then – then he snaps his fingers and Keith feels a tight, building pressure around the base of his cock. Confused and apprehensive, Keith looks under himself, and his mouth falls open – the incubus has affixed a golden ring to the base, and then, as Keith watches, another appears around his balls, squeezing them tight together, and Keith gasps and Shiro laughs and forces his tongue inside of Keith.

Keith makes a sound that is embarrassingly similar to a squeal and Shiro hums, long forked tongue flickering in and out of Keith’s hole, and the pain might be gone but Keith’s body remembers this preparation and opens to it far too easily. Keith’s gut tightens, expecting a climax – he’d come from Shiro fingering him, last time – but he can’t. Keith realizes what the incubus has done to him and lets out a despairing moan; Shiro grins and fucks his tongue deeper.

The gag is soaked through with spit and Keith may be bound but he jerks and writhes on Shiro’s tongue and then a finger, crooking deep and thick; Keith’s bound cock jumps uselessly against his belly. His arousal throbs solely in his cock, in the trapped blood and heat there, and he cries out, muffled, when it brushes against the soft sheets; even that small amount of sensation is torture.

“Shhh,” Shiro soothes, licking around Keith’s loosened entrance as he works him open with two fingers, taking his time. “I’ve got you, baby.”

Keith doesn’t think that’s possible. He thinks Shiro is trying to kill him.

“So dramatic,” Shiro sighs, curling his fingers, working them in and out with wet sounds as Keith arches his back and curls his bound hands into fists. “But if I was going to kill you, this would be the way to do it...you are rather pretty, for a human. Pretty, and powerful. A good combination – I would want to enjoy you before destroying you.”

Keith doesn’t want to beg but he thinks, if this goes on much longer, that he will have to do just that. He’s suddenly grateful for the gag; that way Shiro won’t be able to hear his pleas –

The gag vanishes. Shiro giggles, sits back on his heels, and says, “I’m waiting, baby.”

Keith shudders and shakes his head. Shiro shrugs. “We can do this all night,” he says, twisting his fingers leisurely, rubbing all three, now, into all of the most tender places, thumb teasing at Keith’s rim as they continue their thorough exploration. “Or you could just tell me exactly what you want me to do to you…”

“Fuck me,” Keith gasps, voice ragged with want.

Shiro’s fingers curl slower. “More specific. Politeness wouldn’t hurt, either.”

“Please,” Keith grits out, closing his eyes against the shame and the overwhelming ache in his cock. “fuck me. Hard.”

Shiro’s metal hand pets his ass gently, yet Keith knows the lingering touch brings the threat of another slap. “Getting warmer…”

“Shiro, please, please fuck me,” Keith begs, biting his lip hard enough to bleed; he can’t say anymore than that, he can’t, this is too much already.

“We’ll get there someday,” Shiro mutters, and withdraws his fingers. Keith wants to scream in
frustration, but goes slack in relief when Shiro presses the head of his cock inside, replacing his fingers with something both better and worse. Keith thinks he loses consciousness for a second, because he isn’t aware of the slide in, and when he blinks in bleary awareness Shiro is seated fully inside of him and his cock is drooling all over the sheets.

Apparently noticing Keith’s brief blackout, Shiro murmurs something soft and wordless and Keith finds himself lifted until both of them are kneeling, Keith with legs splayed on either side of Shiro’s thighs and Shiro’s front pressed all along Keith’s back and bound arms. He’s sitting on Shiro’s cock again but it’s different, this time – Keith can do little more but slump into the shifting muscles of Shiro’s chest as he wraps an arm tight around Keith’s middle and fucks up into him, as hard as Keith pled for.

Keith’s head lolls back against Shiro’s shoulder and Shiro sucks bruises into his neck in a collar of red and violet. Keith whimpers and rolls his hips into each heady thrust, cock neglected by the incubus, even by his twisting tail mere inches away. He knows his desperation to come is making him all the more needy on Shiro’s cock, because he swears if he can just get Shiro to move a little harder, a little deeper, then maybe he will finally find relief –

“Or maybe I’ll just leave you like this,” Shiro whispers, and Keith freezes, an unexpected lump forming in his throat at the thought of being abandoned. “Maybe I’ll leave you unsatisfied, wanting, needing, until you’re ready to beg properly –”

“No,” Keith snaps, the word little more than a harsh noise ripped from his lips.

Shiro’s claws curve warningly into his hip, into the soft flesh of his belly, but in that instant Keith doesn’t care if he’ll be gutted alive. “No?” the incubus questions, tail flicking up to drag across Keith’s jaw, cool and menacing.

“Let me come,” Keith snarls, though what he really means is, Don’t leave me.

Don’t leave me like he did.

“I don’t think you’ve earned that yet,” Shiro starts, claws digging in, but Keith is not here to earn jack shit. The incubus may have bound his arms but Keith has other ways of casting, and with a muttered word he electrocutes Shiro’s hands everywhere they touch him.

The incubus hisses, startling back, and Keith braces his feet on the bed for leverage and kicks while arching his torso to send the incubus tumbling onto his back on the bed. Shiro grunts and tries to grab at Keith but lightning arcs from Keith’s skin and he grinds down hard on the incubus’s cock, riding him backwards, half hoping to come down hard enough to make it hurt, to drive through the maddening, endless haze of elusive orgasm.

When Keith glances over his sparking shoulder Shiro is staring at him open-mouthed, teeth like straight razors and eyes like gold coins, glittering through the air as he and Shiro toss them into the Citadel fountain, making wishes that will never come true –

Keith sobs, moans, he doesn’t know which, only knows that Shiro gasps, “Come, baby, come for me,” and the rings vanish and the pressure with them, released as Keith’s body bows and he comes like a punch to the gut, cock pulsing without stopping. Keith mewls and crumples and Shiro’s hand works him through it, milking his cock and grinding inside Keith until he spills, swelling and softening.

Keith trembles in the aftermath, his cock twitching weakly at the barest breath of air over it, and Shiro brings him to a second climax seconds after, and Keith is definitely sobbing, then.
He falls forward onto the bed and Shiro tries to pull him back upright but Keith hurls another bout of electricity at him; the incubus lets go. Keith flops face first into his pillow, ass smarting, cock limp and wrung-out, cum spilling from his hole as Shiro’s cock slips free. Keith barely registers it. He makes his body an electric wire, a live reactor, an open outlet, a bright yellow sign with warnings written in black. It works; Shiro doesn’t touch him.

He does say, quietly, “I accept the amendment to our contract.”

Keith drags in an unsteady breath, struggling to ground himself. The cord unwinds from his wrists, fades away into nothing, and Keith’s arms fall slack at his sides.

“Get out,” Keith whispers.

It goes.

Keith lays there, alone and empty and aching for what he cannot have, and falls asleep out of little more than sheer exhaustion.

*

Keith draws up a bath the next morning, and though he’d feared Shiro might show his face once Keith was naked and soaking in the steamy water, he does not, and Keith is allowed to bathe in peace. Relative peace, anyway – he is rarely untroubled, these days.

He leans his head back against the porcelain edge of his small bathtub and wonders, not for the first time, if what Archmagus Honerva had said was true. Is it possible for demons to have humanity, morality? Keith has always been taught that the defining difference between beings born of the Void, demons, and beings born of flesh, humans, is that humans have souls and demons have none. Souls are humanity, then, so it would be impossible for demons to have such a thing at all.

Keith thinks idly of Honerva’s theory of quintessence and stretches, dipping his fingers through the soapy film of the water, turning it briefly blue, then purple, then green, then bright, nauseating pink. He leaves it pink, and snorts when it darkens to red, because it makes him look as though he’s bathing in blood. A cliche, really.

He stares at the ceiling and wonders what Hell will be like.
Shiro finds him after his last class that day, and sucks him off in an empty broom closet. Keith muffles his groans in his fist and strokes Shiro off with his wet palm afterwards. Keith shoves him away as soon as they’ve both come – a part of him wants to push Shiro away before that, but unlike the incubus, Keith isn’t cruel.

“I resent that,” Shiro says, hand on his hip as his pants lace themself up. “I think I’ve been rather kind to you, so far.”

“Leave before I electrocute you again,” Keith mutters, thinking he should invest in a pair of self-lacing pants, and maybe some occlumency lessons.

Shiro lifts his hands in surrender, smirks over his shoulder, and saunters out.

It goes on this way, day after day.

Keith eventually persuades Shiro to contain most, uh, activities to his dormitory, but some days Keith finds himself sneaking down dark corridors, cornered in secluded alcoves, and, a few times, stumbling into empty classrooms. Once, Shiro carries him off to the greenhouse and fucks him to near-incoherency in the tropics section while curious butterflies flit around them and land in Keith’s hair, blissfully unaware.

“I like butterflies,” Shiro says afterwards, brushing them from Keith’s head as Keith glares weakly up at him. A large lime green luna moth lands on Shiro’s horns and the incubus cocks his head, eying it as it cleans its front legs with feathery antennae. Keith braces himself to see the moth crushed and killed and perhaps eaten, but Shiro gives him a scandalized look and coaxes the moth onto his claw, lifting it up in front of his nose and nearly going cross-eyed as he peers at it.

“I don’t eat moths,” Shiro says matter-of-factly. “Or butterflies.”

“What do you eat?” Keith asks, and immediately wishes he hadn’t when Shiro shoots him a wolfish grin. Keith slumps back against the palm tree and shakes his head. “Nevermind.”

“No, no, since you asked,” Shiro chuckles, playfully licking his cheek. Keith wrinkles his nose and would move away, except that his legs are wrapped tight around Shiro’s waist, Shiro’s cock is still inside him, and the only thing holding him up is the unsteady palm tree and Shiro’s far steadier hands. He’s a bit stuck.
“I ate human souls, certainly, in the earlier days,” Shiro muses, and Keith shudders at the slight scrape of sharp teeth over his earlobe and neck. “Other Void-born, too. Does that make you feel better, or worse?”

“Doesn’t make me feel any sort of way,” Keith retorts, tipping his head back. Annoyingly, Shiro’s mouth is pleasant on his skin there, kissing and adding to the already ridiculous amount of bruises scattered there. Shiro’s potion does not heal hickeys.

“I also eat cum,” Shiro adds matter-of-factly. Keith chokes on air and he smirks. “Can’t subsist entirely off of it, of course, but it’s like...dessert.”

“That’s disgusting,” Keith says.

“Oh, granted, yours doesn’t taste like cherries and chocolate,” Shiro chuckles. “But I enjoy it. It tastes like...potential.” His lips quirked. “Say, if you hadn’t sold your soul to me, would you have had children, eventually?”

Keith shakes his head, gaze fixed on a nearby orchid that looks very phallic, and is also bright orange. “I don’t think so,” he says.

“No? Set your sights on Shirogane for eternity?” The incubus pats his head. “Can’t say I blame you, he’s quite the specimen.”

Keith says, suddenly, because he wants to talk about anything but Shiro, “You know, when I was researching you, before, multiple sources claimed you’d been slain.”

Shiro’s brow furrows. “Slain?” he repeats. “By whom?”

“Dunno. Just said you were dead and gone.”

“You are abysmal at pillow talk, baby,” Shiro says, shaking his head. His expression flickers, troubled, but clears soon after. “Obviously those sources were misinformed,” he says. “Considering the state of affairs, and all…”

“But why would those texts say such a thing in the first place – ah!” Keith’s back arches as Shiro’s cock thickens again, stretching him open anew. “It’s barely been five minutes!” Keith squawks, his own soft cock twitching in weak interest against his thigh.

“Oh, come now, concepts such as recovery times are entirely arbitrary to me, baby,” Shiro purrs. “I am a being of pleasure unconstrained by time; my cock could stay hard for hours on end if I wished.”

Keith shakes his head. “I am constrained by those things,” he argues faintly. “You already made me come once today –”

“I’m not hearing a no,” Shiro laughs, and rolls his hips smugly when Keith grabs onto his horns for leverage, toes curling and breath catching in his throat.

“You never do,” Keith mutters, and freezes when a clawed hand closes around his throat. The incubus looks serious and expectant. “I’m listening now, aren’t I?”

Keith licks his lips, torn. He doesn’t want to want this. But he does. And the incubus knows it.

“Say it,” Shiro urges, claws crooking under Keith’s chin; he tilts his head up obligingly towards
Shiro’s face, their lips inches apart. “Yes, or no?”

“Yes,” Keith whispers after a long beat of silence, and moans into Shiro’s mouth when the incubus kisses him, sweet and messy, and fucks him against the palm tree until he cries.

*

The novices do not tattle on Keith, but they do trail him like hopeful puppies, Pidge especially. She catches Keith after lunch most days, pressing him for new information, and Keith is always honest. There is nothing new, not really – Shiro continues to ask around Kerberos and the surrounding areas, and gets bits and pieces of reports on the human prisoners, but they have still been unable to find out for certain if Shiro and the Holts are truly in Daibazaal with the witch Haggar.

Shiro does learn some interesting things about the witch after Keith urges him to. She’s a figure surrounded by a great deal of mystery and an even greater deal of fear, and though Keith supposed she’d made a contract with Zarkon, Shiro’s sources say otherwise.

“They fell in love,” Shiro declares after eating Keith out and fucking his mouth.

“Whaa?” Keith croaks. “The demon and the witch?”

“Yes.” Shiro curls a lock of Keith’s hair around his finger. “Seems Emperor Zarkon is quite smitten with her, or at least was. They don’t see each other much, these days – she’s quite consumed by her...work.”

“Demons can’t fall in love,” Keith mutters, rubbing his eyes. His entire body feels like jelly.

“I would agree,” Shiro says. “Love may be a romanticization. Lust may be more accurate.”

“But without a contract...?”

“The witch Haggar had been dabbling in the, ah, darker forces for quite some time, from what I hear,” Shiro adds. “Some said she originates from Altea. Wouldn’t that be something?”

Keith blinks, bewildered by the thought. “King Alfor wouldn’t allow such a thing.”

Shiro snorts. “What do you know about King Alfor? You’re just a little Wastes brat.”

Keith flinches, because it’s true. “I know lots of things,” he mumbles. “I read. A lot.”

“Do you?” Shiro makes a thoughtful sound. “I have a library, you know.”

Keith hadn’t known. “What? Where?”

“In Hell, obviously,” Shiro says, rolling his eyes. “You’re not very bright after you come, are you?”

Keith ignores the jab. “You have, what, a house there?”

“House is a close enough description, yes,” Shiro says. “It is my place of residence. I may take you there, once our business is concluded.”

Keith swallows. “Are...are there others, there? Others like me?”
“Past contracts, you mean?” At this, Shiro pauses, and gets a very queer look on his face. “I...I don’t know.”

Keith sits up, disconcerted. “What do you mean?”

“No,” Shiro says. “They are all gone.”

“Gone?”

Shiro turns to look at him with eerie slowness, and to Keith’s horror, the features of his face melt away, into their original form of shadowy space, golden eyes glaring. “Gone,” he repeats, in a hollow voice that is unimaginably ancient, and undeniably not Shiro’s. Keith scrambles back, and the demon does not pursue him, just sits there, cool and statuesque.

“Where...where did they go?” Keith whispers.

The demon leans in, then, slow and inevitable, and Keith shudders in what should be revulsion when a long black tongue flickers out from between needled teeth and slides over his lips like a serpent. “You’ll find out.”

“So you’ll kill me, then?” Keith presses, heart pounding.

“Did I say kill?” The demon shakes its head and laughs, low and dark and rumbling through the air like the crackle of energy before a storm. “No. Keep, not kill.” Keith’s eyes widen; there’s a golden collar and leash around his neck, leash pulled taut and collar constricting as a claw yanks him forward; he tumbles into the demon’s lap.

“Your soul will be mine, and I will do as I please with it,” the demon purrs, tail winding tight around Keith’s middle, wings curving around and over him, wrapping him in a cocoon of shadows. Keith can’t breathe, the collar digs into his throat mercilessly. “Mine, for eternity.”

“You aren’t just going to eat it?” Keith gasps, and the demon laughs at him.

“I could consume any soul I pleased, with far less effort than a contract,” it retorts. “But to control a soul entirely, forever...now, that is true power.”

Keith doesn’t want to imagine it. He’ll cross that bridge when he gets there. “I know what I signed up for,” he mutters, and the demon, evidently put off by his lack of fear and opposition, releases him.

“You have no idea,” it hisses, “what is in store.”

Then it vanishes. Keith won’t deny he’s shaken, but he’s also confused – how can it be that Kurobasanir seems to have two completely different personalities? Are most incubi like this – one half playful, snarky, almost human; the other half ominous eldritch being?! Keith doesn’t know, but it’s unnerving, to say the least.

He’s just glad the daily orgasm ritual is over and done with; he has three hours of homework to do and has somehow been roped into a group study with the meddling novices. Keith screams into his pillow for a good five seconds, gets dressed, and tries not to slam his textbooks down onto his desk too hard.

*  

Keith manages to endure the incubus’s demands for three weeks, and then he cracks.
It’s unsurprising that he does, given that he wakes up numb, dreading the day ahead; because it is exactly a year to the day that Shiro vanished off the face of the earth. Keith feels more automaton than human, going through the motions and nothing more – he always pays attention in class but finds himself helplessly drifting that day, staring out the window or at the wood grain of his desk or at nothing at all, missing Shiro so terribly that it hurts, manifests as a physical ache in his chest.

It just isn’t fair; that’s the single thought that keeps returning, reverberating through his skull in an unwanted echo. Of all people, why did it have to be Shiro? Keith is selfish; he knows that. But is it selfish to think that he should have taken Shiro’s place? He would have, if it was at all possible. That’s exactly what he’s trying to do now, Keith supposes.

They make love potions in Organic Chemistry, because of course they do. Keith completely botches his, and the mildly frightened professor declares his boiling, bubbling, poisonously red concoction to be of impossibly high toxicity, and extremely caustic to boot. Immediately after she says this, the potion eats through the glass vial and sends the class scattering as it sizzles onto the wood and all over the stone floor. The professor manages to stop it before it gets to the floor below, but just barely.

She talks to Keith sternly after class, and with a great deal of worry, as Keith is one of her best students. Keith keeps his head down, nods, apologizes, shakes his head, tells her it won’t happen again.

She pauses, clearly hesitant, then says, “Novice Kogane...your gift is among one of the most promising I have ever encountered. But please be careful with it – you’re a good young man, and you could help so many others with this gift of yours, and I hope you will choose to take that path instead of...any alternate routes. Do you understand?”

Alternate routes, Keith thinks dully. You mean, for instance, demon summoning?

But he says, “Yes, ma’am. I understand. I’m very sorry, I’ll do better next time.”

“I trust that you will,” she says with a small smile, and awkwardly pats him on the shoulder. “I also realize today is...a difficult day for you, Novice Kogane, all things considered. I know you and Master Shirogane were close friends –”

“Thank you, professor,” Keith says, stepping away stiffly, “I appreciate the thought.” He leaves before she can offer any more condolences.

He doesn’t want condolences. He wants Shiro.

*

Keith expects the presence behind him after he curls up on his bed, squeezing his eyes shut and trying to banish the nausea coiling inside him like an adder about to strike. It doesn’t work, and he only feels sicker when a clawed hand wraps around his throat slowly, hot breath joining it shortly after.

“Stop,” Keith whispers, but the demon only chuckles and presses closer, faltering only when Keith twists away, nearly tumbling off the bed in his haste. “Stop,” Keith repeats, shaking his head, “not...not today.”

The demon wearing Shiro’s face tilts its head, eyes narrowing down at him. “Every day,” it reminds him, “that was our agreement.”

“I know, I know,” Keith mumbles, shaking his head and curling away again, “you can – make up
“Baby –” the incubus starts, hands sliding down his body, and Keith shoves it away, electricity prickling along his skin as he does so, furious tears filling his eyes though he had tried so hard to hold them back.

“Don’t call me that!” Keith snaps, and the demon does startle back, then, seemingly confused by his anger and grief. “Get away from me, just – just leave me alone, for once! You’re not him, you’ll never be him, so just – stop pretending!”

Keith trembles in the silence that follows, fully expecting to be laughed at and ravished despite his wishes. But instead the incubus draws itself up, and says, expressionless, “Is that an order?”

“Yes,” Keith whispers, and almost sobs when Shiro’s face fades away into shadows, and the demon swirls away in a wisp of grayish mist, leaving him be. Keith flops onto the bed in relief, though he is crying harder than before, and does not stop until the sun sinks below the horizon.

*  

When he wakes, he is disoriented and it is dark outside. Keith doesn’t care what time it is; he is awake and so he rises, throwing on a cloak and slippers and leaving his dormitory silently. The halls are quiet; everyone else is asleep, so he has no fear of being discovered. He has memorized the path and thinks he could trace it in his sleep, though he is oddly alert as he walks it now. Upstairs, down the hall, to the left, up the tower, on the right.

Shiro’s room is locked but Keith made a key for himself ages ago, and unlocks it now, stepping inside the room and resisting the urge to slide down against the closed door in defeat. Everything is more or less untouched, just the way Shiro left it, and though Keith knows that eventually his things will be packed up and shipped off to his family or else auctioned off to whoever will take them, Keith makes sure that all the most important things stay with him.

He walks over to Shiro’s desk, a hulking mahogany structure which looks like a sleeping beast in the gloom. Keith reaches out to it, to a faint gleam that could be the beast’s eye but which is really a framed photograph, moving, of Keith and Shiro less than a week before Kerberos. Shiro is smiling and waving at the camera; Keith is at his side, lips parted and eyes wide. He was saying something, his lips move infinitesimally, but for the life of him Keith cannot remember what it was.

Shiro’s arm is draped heavy around Keith’s shoulders, and Keith remembers the familiar and comforting weight of it. He longs to have that again – to have a Shiro he can come home to, a Shiro who is all softness and warmth and kindness so genuine it seems impossible, yet who is firm, too, when Keith needs him to be. Firm when Keith is not, when Keith is crumbling – Shiro was always there to catch him, and keep him standing.

But Shiro is not here now, so Keith falls, hard to the ground, and sits there folded in on himself like the origami cranes Shiro used to make out of scraps of parchment. Keith kept every one of them; he smooths out their creased wings and blows the dust gently from their papery feathers. Shiro had tried to teach him how to make them, but Keith never could get them quite right. His were always lopsided, more like paper ducks than cranes. But Shiro had kept them all the same.

Keith knows, theoretically, that telepathy over great distances is possible. So he sits there and focuses, as hard as he can, on Shiro. He thinks, as loud as he can, I’m going to save you. It’s going to be alright. Just hold on a little longer. I miss you. I love you. I love you so, so much. Where are you? Can you hear me? Please, please tell me you can. Just give me a sign, something, anything.
There you are, a voice says, Shiro’s voice, and Keith’s eyes fly open, hope blooming in his chest.

But the demon is sitting in front of him and Keith nearly cries all over again, from sheer rage and frustration.

“What are you doing here?!” he screams, but quietly, because he’s really not supposed to be in here.

I could ask you the same, the demon says. It doesn’t look like Shiro, anymore, but it still sounds like him. If Keith had to say who it looks like, now, he wouldn’t be able to describe it – it is a suggestion of someone, anyone, no one. But I’ll answer, instead – you called me.

Keith’s jaw works. “No,” he grits out, “I was trying to call Shiro. Not you.”

Hey, now, the demon reproaches, there’s no need for that tone.

“If you touch me, I will blast you across the damn Citadel,” Keith warns, though he doubts he could even blast the demon across the damn room.

The demon holds up its clawed, smoking hands in surrender. I can catch a hint. I see you are...distressed.

“Excellent observation,” Keith bites out. “Don’t suppose you can see that I want you to leave, too?”

Do you wish to stay here for the night?

Utterly taken aback, Keith stammers, “I – stay? But – but it’s – they clean the room routinely, if someone were to find me here –”

No one will find you here under my watch.

Keith squints suspiciously at the demon through a film of tears. “If you’re hoping to seduce me via kindness, you’ll be disappointed.”

The demon sighs loudly. You are in no state to achieve climax, and therefore it is in my best interests to help you reach a healthier and more stable state, it snaps. Will staying here help your current mental and physical state? If so, then I will make certain you can stay here undetected and undisturbed.

“Oh,” Keith says, ducking his head. “I, um...I think...that might help.”

Fine, it says, and steps away with a distinct air of grumpiness. Keith stands slowly, cautiously; it still makes no move towards him, not even when he approaches Shiro’s bed and lays down on it. It feels wrong, almost, to pull back the quilt (made by Shiro’s grandmother years ago) and slip under the cool sheets, pulling them close and tight around himself.

The demon still stands in the center of the room, arms crossed, brooding.

I am not brooding, it mutters, formless and fuming.

Keith peeks over the edge of the quilt and says, “You know, I didn’t mean what I said, earlier, about...not looking like him anymore. I...I do prefer it, when you look like him.”

Even though I will never be him? the demon says, and there is something almost sardonic in its tone; Keith can’t quite place it.
“It’s better than not having him at all,” Keith says honestly, and the demon does pause at that, knowing Keith means it.

He watches as it shifts back into Shiro, this time into the original Shiro, the Shiro in the photograph, the Shiro who left him. It is surreal to watch that Shiro pace the length of his own room, striding over to the desk and picking up one of the paper cranes, a red one. “I made these?” he says.

Keith keeps the blankets tucked close like armor and doesn’t know how to feel about the demon using first person pronouns in relation to Shiro. “Yes,” Keith says. “Lots of them.”

“Hmm,” he says, and plucks a square of paper from the little box Shiro kept on his desk shelf, and begins folding.

Keith stares. “How did you know he kept the paper in there?”

Shiro shrugs. “Just guessed. Here.” He tosses a paper crane, this one purple, at Keith. Keith catches it in his cupped hands. Shiro wiggles his fingers. “Your human crafts are not so difficult to figure out.”

Keith holds the crane close to his chest and says nothing because he feels incapable of speech.

Shiro looks at the framed photograph. He says, “You were quite close. But did he know?”

“Know?” Keith asks.

“Know that you lusted after him,” Shiro says bluntly.

Keith flinches as if struck. “It wasn’t – it was more than just. That. I didn’t – I’m not...he didn’t know but...it wasn’t like…”


Keith sinks back down into the mattress. “Yes,” he says, because he cannot very well deny it at this point, after everything he’s done in the name of loving Shiro.

“Love is foolish,” Shiro tells him, shaking his head. “You have thrown your life away for it.”

“But saved his,” Keith argues.

“Was his worth more?” Shiro retorts. “I think not. I think love has made you a poor judge of your own worth, and of what you thought you were worth.”

Keith’s brow furrows. “Since when are you the resident love expert?”

“Since never,” Shiro says. “I’m only an expert on making others come. Sleep tight.” And with that, he leaves, and Keith lays there with the paper crane, unsure of what just transpired, but missing Shiro just slightly less than before.

*  

He wakes with a heavy weight curled at his back, and yawns, hazy and confused, freezing when he sees the metal arm draped securely over his waist. Shit. How long has it been here – while he was sleeping...was this all a trap?

“Calm down,” Shiro grumbles. “You’re overthinking this.”
Keith does a mental inventory. His pajama pants seem untouched…

“Good grief.” Shiro presses his face into the nape of Keith’s neck and Keith blinks rapidly. “I didn’t fuck you in your sleep. Can’t a demon snuggle without being questioned around here?”

“Snuggle?” Keith repeats. He eyes Shiro over his shoulder; the demon looks disgruntled and his hair is a mess. He is, however, fully clothed in a loose shirt and sweatpants. “Are you trying to coddle me into sex?”

“Is it working?” Shiro asks. There are bags under his eyes.

Keith realizes with a start that, rather than feed on some other hapless victim in the night, the incubus waited for him. It’s choosing to only take Keith’s lust, energy, whatever – why?

“Fantastic question,” Shiro mutters, “because I’m getting awfully antsy. Do you feel like coming anytime soon?”

Keith snorts, feeling oddly giddy. “You need me to come,” he says, and snorts again, shaking his head.

“Well, yes, those were the terms of the contract,” Shiro says, miffed. “You’re lucky I’m the sensitive sort, most incubi would have wrenched it from you by this point, or else ended the contract.”

Keith’s eyes widen. “End the contract?!”

“I’m beginning to consider it –”

“No, you can’t!” Keith exclaims, shaking his head and sitting up. “That’s – could you do that?”

“With some effort,” Shiro says, and does not elaborate. “But I do enjoy making you cry on my cock, so I’d rather not let it come to that. What will it be?”

Keith’s eyes narrow; he does not appreciate ultimatums. “What time is it?”

“Nine-thirty-three,” Shiro says, and then furrows his brow and adds, “I’m not your personal timekeeper!”

“I have half an hour before class starts,” Keith tells him, climbing out of Shiro’s bed and padding over to the attached bathroom. “You have until then to do your worst.”

Shiro hops off the bed at once and trails after him like an overeager puppy.

Keith rolls his eyes, shedding his clothes as he goes and letting out a low, appreciative whistle once he steps into Shiro’s bathroom. Keith had always complained about why in the world Shiro was allowed such a huge bathtub, but he’s not complaining now, especially not when he turns on the water and the jets on the sides. They bring bubbles to the top, steam rising slowly from the pool, and Keith’s entire body praises the heavens when he dips his toes into the water.

He steps in warily, half-anticipating to be pushed by a certain impatient entity, but it’s keeping its distance for now. Keith is glad for it, and settles against the side of the bath, fumbling with the bar of soap left on the edge and pausing as he lifts it to his face. He inhales; it smells like Shiro. Sort of earthy, but fresh and clean like rain. Something else, too, that he can’t quite name. A sharpness, like a spice or a chemical...the closest scent he can think of is ozone.
Keith begins to wash his hair methodically, pausing as Shiro walks into the bathroom. Keith almost inhales his tongue. He’s shirtless, still wearing the sweatpants, which are pushed low on his hips, and do nothing to conceal the thick bulge of his cock between thicker thighs, bouncing tantalizingly as Shiro takes a step towards the bath and hooks his thumbs into the waistband.

Shiro arches an eyebrow, nonchalant. “Don’t mind me,” he says. “Keep washing your hair.” It isn’t a request.

Frowning, Keith continues, keeping an eye on him all the while. He’s staying in the form of the original Shiro, and Keith doesn’t feel nearly as opposed to it as he did in the beginning. White-haired, metal-armed, scarred Shiro is the one that fucks him; this one hasn’t, yet. Keith thinks that’s probably about to change in a few minutes.

Shiro chuckles, low and rich and dark. “A little presumptuous, are we?”

Keith stops washing his hair; his cock is stirring in the warm bathwater and his eyes trace Shiro’s rippling muscles as he advances. Shiro doesn’t break eye contact as he eases down the sweatpants, his cock springing free and curving to attention over his muscled stomach. Precum is already dripping from the shiny head, glistening where it clings to his foreskin and slides down slowly into a nest of dark curls.

Keith wonders, idly, if Shiro’s cock really looks like that.

Shiro laughs. “You think I exaggerate? Mm, no. Every inch the truth.”

“I don’t believe you,” Keith says. Shiro’s gaze flickers.

“If I were you,” Shiro murmurs, “I would keep my mouth shut. You’re already in trouble.”

“But you’re not me,” Keith retorts, “so I’ll do what I like with my mouth.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’d like to do quite a few things with your mouth,” Shiro teases, swinging a leg over the edge of the bath and wading into the water, thigh-deep, towards Keith. Keith leans forward, tips his chin up; body language as much a challenge as it is an invitation.

Shiro leans in slow, expression perfectly neutral, stance relaxed and steady. Keith can’t read him at all; it’s unnerving.

So he doesn’t expect it when Shiro strikes, grabbing him around the middle and flipping him so that he’s braced against the side of the tub, hands scrabbling at the edge while Shiro yanks Keith’s hips up and settles the lower half of his body in Shiro’s lap, legs splayed and ass pressing down against Shiro’s cock. It’s almost funny how easy it was for the demon to do it. Almost, but Keith’s not laughing.

He struggles to steady his breathing, wheezing against the porcelain, and shakes when a strong hand slides up and around his neck, applying light pressure that only makes it harder to fill his lungs. Keith pants shallowly, heart pounding, trying to banish the lingering panic.

Shiro curves over him, chest flush to Keith’s back, and kisses his cheek, fingers stroking lightly at his throat. “Breathe,” he whispers, and Keith’s lashes flutter as he tries to comply. Shiro nuzzles into his hair, rubs soothingly at Keith’s hip where he holds him fast. “Shhh, I’ve got you, breathe for me, baby.”

Keith lets out a small, involuntary sound and easily tips his head to the side when Shiro urges him to. Shiro’s teeth drag across his neck in silent reward, and Keith’s breath hitches when fingers trace
down his spine, slick and warm when they press to his entrance. Keith arches his back and Shiro rumbles in approval, sliding one finger inside. Keith almost cracks his head against the side of the tub; Shiro clicks his tongue and tugs hard on Keith’s hair to keep his head up.

Keith’s eyes water and his scalp stings from the rough treatment but he moans, loud and surprised, when Shiro adds a second finger much too soon. Shiro bites his neck, mouths over the bruise, and Keith squirms, body adjusting too eagerly around the intrusion. He supposes it has gotten quite used to accommodating Shiro’s cock over the weeks.

Shiro’s growl is loud and feral in his ear. “Slut,” he whispers, nipping at the lobe, and Keith squeezes his eyes shut. “If you’re so ready for it, sit.”

Keith doesn’t think he’s ready, even with Shiro’s thick fingers stretching him open and making a mess of oil between his thighs. But at the same time, he wants to see if he can take it. So he bites his lip and shuffles back, Shiro’s fingers sliding out and holding him open, lining him up with Shiro’s cock.

Keith comes down hard, too hard, tears pricking at his eyes, but Shiro doesn’t give him time to adjust. Keith crumples forward against the side of the tub as Shiro grabs his hips and fucks him, driving Keith’s knees into the porcelain with the force of his thrusts. Keith clings to the side, his cheek pressed against the cold surface, blinking blearily as Shiro growls and grunts above him, his cock splitting Keith open wide and hard.

Then the demon’s hand is around Keith’s neck, lifting up his head, thumb digging into the soft, vulnerable space right under his Adam’s apple. Keith scrabbles at the tub, water splashing as he struggles halfheartedly, and Shiro laughs in his ear. “It’s cute, watching you try to get free from me. Because you’ll never get away, baby. I’ll always have you, right,” he wrenches Keith’s hips back so roughly that Keith howls, “here.”

Shiro fucks him with no attention to Keith’s pleasure, only chasing his own climax, and yet Keith’s cock throbs between his spread thighs, teased by the faint friction of the water and the much firmer friction of Shiro’s thighs. Keith’s body bows, and Shiro shoves him down, down, down, until Keith’s head is level with the water and he remembers to panic.

“No,” he gasps as Shiro urges his head down to break the surface, heart pounding and body twisting in genuine fear, “no, please, no —”

Shiro bites down hard on his earlobe and tugs with his teeth, never faltering in his thrusts. “I’m sorry, baby, what was that? You don’t want me to push your pretty little head under?”

Images flash through Keith’s head in a sudden and shocking burst of memory. He is falling — no, he is being pushed, pushed off a high ledge into the churning whitewater below, and he is screaming, clawing at the air uselessly with his small hands, desperately trying to find purchase on something, anything. He fails, and hits the water with a gasp — it’s cold and endless and terrifying, and Keith thinks in perfect clarity, I am going to die.

But he doesn’t die — fire explodes from his fingertips, turning the water to steam, blasting it back just enough for Keith to reach the rocks and grab ahold of them as the deadly current carries everything else past him, tumbling hundreds of meters over the sharp rocks fifty feet downstream. Keith shakes violently, the flames licking over his skin, drying his sodden clothes and dripping hair. Above him, the villagers scream and point and say, We were right, we were right; that boy is a witch to the bone.

Keith closes his eyes, and burns.
Shiro has gone very still.

Keith is limp in his grasp, cock still hard but breath uneven, eyes glassy, heart loud where it thuds under Shiro’s palm as it slides over Keith’s chest. “Baby,” Shiro whispers. “They hurt you.”

“Yes,” Keith says when the silence stretches too long and he can no longer bear the still fullness of Shiro’s cock in him. “Witches float.”

Shiro growls, and this is a different kind of growl, not pleased at all but furious, dangerous, possessive. “You would have drowned.” Claws cut into Keith’s skin and he sucks in a sharp breath; Shiro seems to notice he has drawn blood and loosens his grip, holding Keith more gently with his needle-sharp claws. Keith shivers when a forked tongue slides over his neck. Shiro whispers, “I will kill them all.”

Keith’s eyes widen. “You didn’t even know me then, I was but a child —”

“They tried to kill you,” Shiro hisses, hips hitching into a rhythm that leaves Keith breathless. “Why?”

Keith gasps, “Because they thought — thought I consorted with demons —”

“But you didn’t,” Shiro snarls, and Keith’s head falls forward like a rag doll as Shiro fucks him relentlessly; Shiro keeps him up, keeps him safe from drowning, Shiro would never let him drown. “You were pure before you summoned me, untouched by my kind, I am the first and I will be the last.”

“Yes,” Keith whispers, because he can say nothing else, “you are, you are —”

“Say it,” Shiro growls, and Keith’s cock twitches, warning, he’s so, so close, all he needs is a single touch —

“You’re my first and you will be my last.” Keith manages, and arches as he comes...but he never does. The terrible ring is back around the base of his cock. Keith stares in dumb disbelief, and then Shiro groans and comes hard inside him, and keeps coming — Keith is held close by sharp claws throughout, his hips wriggling uselessly, Shiro’s cock spilling in hot gushes of cum that Keith swears he feels in his fucking throat.

“Hold still, baby,” Shiro orders, hands clamping down on his hips. Keith’s cock is aching, and Shiro’s is softening but Keith is still full, and he thinks they are going to make a mess of the bath water when Shiro pulls out...but Shiro never does.

Or, no, he does, but as soon as his cock is out, something replaces it. A plug. Keith’s stretched hole practically sucks it in, and Shiro purrs in satisfaction, tracing a claw around the rim and tapping the plug lightly. Keith is so full, his stomach looks as if he’s already eaten a complete breakfast, but he hasn’t eaten anything. The smallest movement makes him feel the cum inside of him, kept hot by his own body. He breathes unevenly, already knowing what Shiro is going to say, but dreading it.

“You’re going to keep my cum inside of you all day,” Shiro coos, “and you’re not going to come until I say you can. Understood?”

Keith shakes his head, nails digging into his own thighs. “I can’t —”

“You can and you will,” Shiro interrupts, and Keith nearly sobs when a claw caresses his poor cock. The incubus giggles when it twitches. “How many classes do you have today, Mr. Top Of His Class, hmm?”
“Th-three,” Keith whispers, wanting to scream.

“Which ones?”

“Please don’t make me,” Keith says, throat tight. “Shiro, please —”

“Shhh,” Shiro says, stroking his hair, claws raking through it in the best way. “Good boys get good rewards. Don’t you want to be a good boy for me, Keith?”

Keith closes his eyes tightly and says with gritted teeth, “I hate you.”

Without missing a beat, Shiro grabs Keith’s tightly bound balls and tugs viciously. Keith does scream then, the sensation jolting through him one of raw pleasure and pain so blurred he can’t even name which he’s feeling. It’s made worse by the cum sloshing inside him as he jolts forward, a constant reminder of how he’s let himself be used.

“Okay,” Keith sobs in defeat, “okay!”

“Okay, what?” Shiro says, innocent, cupping Keith’s balls sweetly as if they aren’t still smarting and heavy with the edge of orgasm.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” Keith mumbles. “Don’t make this worse than it has to be.”

Shiro clicks his tongue, and shakes his head, kissing Keith’s shoulder and circling a claw around the nearly-purple head of his cock. “This doesn’t have to be bad at all, baby,” he says. “It’s a game. And games,” he gives Keith’s trapped cock one last tap, “are fun.”

Then he vanishes.

Keith is late for class.

*

Shiro has shitty taste in games, Keith thinks.

Staying hard for hours on end would be bad enough, but staying hard with a plug up his ass and an ass filled with demon cum is infinitely worse. Keith swears everyone around him knows, somehow, even though he took special care to wear the loosest robes and tunic he owns. He looks awful and he knows it, and knows also that his face must be perpetually red.

Lance, of course, just has to comment on Keith’s disheveled state. The novice trio happens to be in one of Keith’s classes, Thaumaturgy, which has always been one of Keith’s weaker areas of study.

He’s already in a sour mood, for obvious reasons, so when Lance leans over the table and says, “Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed, huh?” Keith can do little more than glare and ignore him.

Lance doesn’t pay attention to “leave me alone” cues, which Keith has unfortunately learned time and time again. “Hellooo,” Lance says, brow creasing, “are you in there, or did your fake Shiro finally take over?”

Keith stiffens, tightening around the plug, jaw working in sheer frustration. “Lance, stop it,” Hunk says nervously, nudging his friend. “Nobody’s possessed. Right?”

Pidge mutters an incantation that Keith recognizes as a ward against Void-born, and his glare intensifies. “Nope, think he’s clear,” Pidge says. “Are you clear?”
“Yes,” Keith mutters. “Focus on your mirage.”

“Focus on your mirage,” Lance parrots, though there are beads of sweat on his brow as he struggles to keep his spell steady – they’re supposed to be making mirages of cats, of all things, since the professor is fond of felines to the point of obsession. So the classroom is filled with cats on varying levels of believability. The professor looks rather regretful, considering many first year novices are casting cats without fur, tails, ears, whiskers, or eyes, or else just descending so far into the Uncanny Valley that their cat could never be mistaken for a real one.

Keith’s is more of a black and white blob, at this point. The first year novices aren’t doing much better.

Lance is far more interested in Keith’s squirming than in his blobby cat, though. “Seriously,” he mutters, “what’s up? Heard you made a sulfuric acid love potion in Organic Chem the other day...anniversary of Kerberos, yeah?”

Keith’s fingers twitch. He is controlled. He is so controlled, and absolutely not going to snap. “Lance,” he says, “shut up.”

Lance leans across the table and Keith leans back to get away from him, only to bite his tongue hard enough to draw blood as the plug wiggles inside of him and the fabric of his pants brushes agonizingly along his aching cock. Keith must be making a pained expression, because Lance leans forward further and reaches out, probably about to flick Keith’s furrowed brow or something...but is abruptly stopped by a clawed hand which closes tightly around Lance’s slender wrist.

Lance freezes, and so does Keith as the unmistakable bulk of Shiro presses up behind him on his chair, one arm sliding heavy and proprietary around Keith’s waist, the other arm outstretched, still holding Lance firmly in place. No one else in the classroom has reacted – only Keith and the seer can see the incubus.

Is he bothering you, baby? Shiro asks, and Keith barely bites back his moan when the incubus gently rubs his belly, shifting the cum around inside.

Lance tries to yank his hand away but Shiro doesn’t let up. Hunk and Pidge are eying Lance oddly. Keith whispers, “Yes,” and Shiro bares his teeth in a low growl. Lance’s eyes widen in terror.

“I wasn’t – let go! I’ll stop, I’ll leave him alone!” Lance exclaims too loudly. Hunk’s eyebrow goes up. Pidge mutters the incantation under her breath again, and Shiro shudders behind Keith, his golden gaze sliding to her.

“Don’t,” Keith warns, and his mouth falls open in a silent moan when Shiro’s hand cups his cock and squeezes, a promise of things to come. Lance’s eyes follow the movement of his hand and he flushes, ears turning scarlet and breath shortening. Keith can’t even be ashamed of the way he rocks his hips up subtly against Shiro’s palm, frantic for release.

Shiro grins, digs his claws into Lance’s wrist enough to draw five points of blood beading up, and says, You’d better. Then he kisses Keith’s neck and whispers, low enough that only he can hear, If you’re good, I’ll let you fuck me until I’m as full as you are, baby.

Then he melts into the shadows, and Keith’s blobby black cat transforms in a victorious spike of magic that ripples through the room, making the professor look up in bewilderment as the black cat becomes a snarling tiger, sending students scrambling as it stands imperiously upon the table and eyes the class hungrily.
"Novice Kogane, that was not the assignment!" the professor exclaims, though he’s beaming.

"Sorry," Keith says with a shrug, not sorry at all.

In the corner, Shiro watches, finger to his chin, gaze warm with approval.

* 

It is a very long day, but Keith manages to get through his classes without losing too much sanity. The incentive Shiro gave him certainly helps, although Keith has a sneaking suspicion that the incubus may have just been trying to rile him up. Regardless, Keith is so hard he’s limping by the time he gets back to his quarters, and the cum inside him has the consistency of jelly – it feels unpleasant, to say the least. Keith’s skin is soaked in a thin sheen of sweat, and as soon as the door is shut behind him he starts shedding his robes, nearly ripping buttons and laces off in his haste.

Shiro laughs from the bed and Keith’s head jerks up so fast he almost gives himself whiplash.

The incubus is nude and sprawled invitingly across the sheets; he is white-haired Shiro again, all bulging scarred muscle and nonchalance, and Keith is too far gone to be embarrassed by the way he practically sprints to the bed once his clothes are all finally removed. Once on the bed, though, Keith is uncertain – he wants to be good, he wants to come; but he also wants to tackle Shiro to the bed and just touch him already.

Shiro laughs again, light and easy, and takes Keith into his arms, pulling him close and nosing at the sweaty line of his neck. “Mmm,” he sighs, inhaling happily. “So wanting, so eager.”

Keith groans quietly, rutting against Shiro’s taut belly. “I waited,” he mumbles, “you promised –”

“I made no promises,” Shiro counters, and Keith’s stomach flips. He pulls back and looks at Shiro, betrayed and uncertain, and the incubus rolls, pressing Keith down against the sheets under him. Keith swallows. He doesn’t know what he will do if Shiro just leaves him here, like this – he did what Shiro said, he didn’t even touch himself, not once. He doesn’t want to be punished for doing as he was told; that just isn’t fair.

Shiro makes a soft shushing sound, petting Keith’s jaw, then letting his hands wander down, skirting Keith’s cock entirely and dipping instead between his thighs. Keith gasps in surprise and discomfort when the incubus tugs on the plug, teasing the edges against Keith’s rim. Keith’s cock throbs at the stimulation, expecting more to follow, and it does – Shiro tugs the plug out and Keith whines pitifully, pressure released and cum oozing out at once, coating his thighs and the sheets in sticky warmth. Shiro slides his fingers through it, then inside of Keith, and Keith swears, face burning at the loud squelching sounds, body clamping down on Shiro’s two fingers with humiliating eagerness. His cock looks nearly purple from the strain.

“You look so good like this, baby,” Shiro purrs, hips swaying as he lines his cock up with Keith’s sloppy, tender hole again. Keith doesn’t resist when the incubus lifts up his legs, and his hole twitches as Shiro eyes it, lips quirked. “You think you want to come, but I think you just want to be filled with my cock again. Is that it? Keep my cock warm like the greedy little slut you are.”

And Shiro pushes an image into Keith’s head – an image of Shiro atop some kind of throne, black and thorny, with Keith in his lap, riding his cock in shallow, helpless rolls of his hips, cock bobbing back up into hardness despite the layers of cum dripping from it, and the thicker cum dripping out from where Shiro’s cock breaches him, again and again, never softening, never allowing him respite; he was made to be used like this.
Keith grunts, belly sucking in sharply, just as Shiro fucks into him. “Good boy,” Shiro purrs, and Keith whimpers, because the incubus has found his prostate on the first thrust, and the second, and the third, and his cock is leaking uncontrollably but he can’t come, his balls throb and tighten and Keith sobs when Shiro touches them, stroking teasingly, hitching Keith’s legs up higher as he fucks harder, hitting Keith’s prostate over and over again. Keith claws at the sheets and Shiro pins his hands and Keith claws at his wrists instead, eyes rolling back in his head. His cock pulses, strains, but the ring doesn’t give, and Shiro doesn’t let up.

It’s torture.

Keith’s vision is blurred with tears by the time Shiro groans and comes again, though this time he pulls out before he does, and Keith flinches weakly as his front is splattered in heat, some of it catching on his cock and balls. Shiro licks that off, and Keith twists, pleading wordlessly, overwhelmed by arousal. He can barely even feel the wetness of Shiro’s tongue on his overheated skin.

Keith doesn’t understand what’s happening at first; the world is spinning on its axis, and suddenly he’s kneeling over Shiro, who rolls onto his front much too obediently, spreading his ass to Keith’s shocked and uncomprehending gaze, and says, “Your reward, baby.”

Keith gawks. Shiro’s already prepared, rim slick when Keith reaches out tentatively, finger sliding in easily. Shiro shifts back into it, raising an eyebrow at him over his shoulder. “Well? Are you going to fuck me, or not?”

“Oh,” Keith says. His cock weighs him down as he shuffles closer, and yet even like this, as fucked up as it all is, Keith still doesn’t want to hurt Shiro.

Shiro groans into the pillow under him. “Baby, come on, look, I’m ready for you, just do it already.”

But Keith isn’t about to go that easy on him. He rubs the wet head of his cock against the incubus’s rim and Shiro stills, startled. “Tell me,” Keith says, voice so low and rough he barely recognizes it, “tell me what you want.”

“Heh,” Shiro says. He doesn’t sound at all upset by the turn of events. “So it’s going to be like that, is it?”

“Tell me,” Keith growls. He wants nothing more than to drive his cock into Shiro’s body, but if he had to work for it, so will Shiro.


“Ask nicely,” Keith says, and Shiro grins wider.

“Fuck me, baby, pretty please,” he murmurs, fluttering his eyelashes up at Keith. “Don’t you want to shut me up? Don’t you want to come inside me – mmph!”

Keith pushes Shiro’s head down into the pillows and Shiro bucks under him as if to get free, but Keith can still see him smiling, so he doesn’t hesitate before grabbing a handful of Shiro’s ass and forcing it back onto his cock. Shiro moans as Keith enters him and Keith makes an inhuman sound, arms nearly giving out where he’s braced on the bed over Shiro.

Shiro laughs, body shaking with his amusement, and Keith grits his teeth and starts moving, biting back the embarrassing sounds building in his throat. Shiro is tight and hot and perfect around his
cock and Keith has never needed to come so much in his life, but all he can do is keep moving, rocking his hips shallow and fast, then deeper, deeper until his hips slap against Shiro’s ass and the incubus is writhing under him, meeting Keith’s thrusts without fail.

Keith doesn’t stop, not even for a second, he can’t; the friction is too good, a delicious sweet slide in and out every time, and he’s so hard it hurts, but he can almost forget about that when he sees Shiro under him like this. He’s as beautiful as ever, strong back flexing as he arches onto Keith’s cock, arms bulging as he grabs blindly at the sheets, ass clenching around Keith’s cock, hungry for it. Keith gives in to the urge to lick the sweat gathering between Shiro’s shoulder blades, his mouth tracing upwards, teeth dragging over the nape of Shiro’s neck, gathering up the skin there and sucking until it reddens with the beginnings of a bruise.

“Good boy,” Shiro gasps, and Keith groans and snaps his hips forward, remembering that, ah, yes, Shiro has a cock, too, and pawing blindly under him until his fist closes around the incubus’s erection. Shiro mewls and bucks into his clumsy grip, and says, “Make me come and I’ll let you come,” and it’s like a switch is flipped. Keith ups the pace until the bed is creaking and Shiro is moaning in surprise and arousal, eyes half-lidded and mouth wide open, cock thick and dripping in Keith’s grasp. “Yes, yes, yes,” Shiro pants, and Keith growls, bites down hard on his shoulder, and Shiro comes with a faint gasp, and as he does, the ring disappears, and the pressure releases.

Keith comes with a guttural cry, hips pumping through it as he comes, vision whiting out and ecstasy sparking through every nerve ending he has. It feels like it lasts a long time, and he’s vaguely aware of Shiro squirming under him, but all he can feel is heat, blooming like magic, like flames, in his chest and gut and all down his spine. Keith doesn’t realize he’s actually on fire until Shiro groans, “Keith, Keith,” and then Keith realizes his cock is still hard, even though he’s fucking it through his own cum inside Shiro. Well. He has been hard all day, so he’s got some catching up to do.

Keith grins down at him, all teeth, and says, “This is your own damn fault.” Shiro huffs, lifting his ass higher so Keith can have a better angle, though at this point he’s just rutting mindlessly, watching the way his flames dance over Shiro’s skin. It doesn’t hurt the incubus, not like it would a human, which Keith figures is probably for the best because there may or may not be flames inside of him at this point.

Shiro giggles at that, then moans when Keith shoves at his shoulder and flips Shiro onto his back, so that they’re face to face, and fuck, fuck, Keith was not prepared for that.

Because it looks exactly like he’s fucking Shiro – Shiro’s lower lip is caught between his teeth and his head lolls back against the pillows and his legs cling tight around Keith’s hips, heels digging into his lower back, broad chest rising and falling unevenly, scarred skin flushed pink. Keith stares at where his cock slides in and out of Shiro’s stretched hole, below where his soft cock rests against his belly, clearly beginning to harden again. A lump gathers in his throat – the illusion is so...so real. Too real. His cock shudders inside of Shiro and then he’s coming again, slumping over him, finally spent. The sea of euphoria ebbs and flows through Keith’s body, blessed coolness spreading over him, the heat fading and the flames fading with it.

“Takashi,” Keith whispers, tucking his head into Shiro’s neck and knowing, truly and painfully, that it isn’t him.

But Shiro wraps his arms around Keith like it really is him, legs unwinding from his waist and resting on the bed with soft thumps. Keith doesn’t want to pull out, but his cock is near-numb with oversensitivity. He thinks he better not test his limits, and lifts himself slowly, reluctantly, off of Shiro. Pearly rivulets of cum trickle out, and nonsensically, feeling the mess drying on his own
“Keith,” Shiro murmurs, and it sounds so like him, warm and kind and good, that Keith sunders to it, burying his face against Shiro’s skin, trembling. He feels like crying but his eyes stay dry; perhaps he’s used up all his bodily fluids.

Shiro holds him tighter, closer, and Keith’s heart crumples in on itself when hands turn to claws, scratching lightly over his back, and then he feels the flick of a tail over his legs, and then the cold shadow of wings spreading over him, their leathery tips brushing over his shoulders and ribs in a strange caress.

“It’s not fair,” Keith whispers, closing his eyes so he will not have to see the creature’s disdain for him, for this broken mortal boy it sees as little more than a toy to be used and perhaps discarded.

The demon’s chest rumbles against his cheek and a warm palm rubs his back, tail winding around Keith’s calf, the tip flicking restlessly like a cat’s. “Life is seldom fair,” it says. Keith can hear no disdain in its tone. He doesn’t know what he hears.

“He was the only one who ever stayed, who ever gave me a chance,” Keith mumbles, knowing he’s babbling, and not really caring. “He was the only one who was there for me...and now he never will be again, never.” Keith hiccups on a breath, and wonders why the demon is still holding him – their business is done. But the demon doesn’t leave, and so Keith’s mild hysteria climbs higher. “I think,” he gasps, “I think it was me, I think it was my fault that this happened to him; I’m cursed, I must be, everyone close to me leaves, or is taken, just like he was, it was my fault, it was all my fault –”

“No.” The demon’s voice is not loud, but it is authoritative and final, leaving no room for disagreement. It sits up, and Keith expects to be tossed off, onto the bed or perhaps the floor, but instead it cradles him, even as it stands, wings curving almost protectively forwards, around Keith. Keith doesn’t know what’s happening.

“This was not your fault,” it says as it walks, and Keith blinks in confusion – where are they going? What...they’re not in the Citadel anymore. Keith’s skin prickles uneasily, and then his breath leaves his chest in a rush because he’s falling, landing with a yelp on the softest surface he’s ever felt. Like cashmere and silk and something else, something otherworldly. Keith lays there, stunned and sinking slightly into the...pillow? Mattress? He has no idea.

Then Shiro is over him, Shiro with horns and wings and a lashing tail, and Keith shrinks back; his body is far too tired for more, but he can’t fight the incubus off, especially not here where Keith is its prisoner –

Guest, the demon corrects, and touches his hair carefully, brushing it out of his face with a tenderness incongruous to its hulking and clearly demonic form. Keith stares up at it, pleading and confused. Relax, it says. You were good for me, very good; let me be good for you.

Still misunderstanding, Keith shakes his head frantically, curling away. “I – I can’t, I can’t come again, please, I’m sorry –”

The demon sits back on its heels, head tilted and expression strangely soft. Oh, dear, it says. Little one, you gave me what I needed and more. I did not bring you here to take, only to give.

Keith uncurls slightly. He’s still confused, but less scared, more...curious. “What...what do you mean?”
Close your eyes, the demon murmurs, and trust me.

Keith is not good at trusting, but he supposes if it wanted to rip him apart it could do so whether his eyes were closed or not, so he closes them.

The demon clicks its tongue. No, it sighs, you are not good at trusting at all, are you?

Keith hates that the disappointment in the demon’s tone makes him cringe in shame; he should not want its approval, it isn’t Shiro, but it is the closest thing he has to Shiro now.

Oh, you are an unfortunate little being, the demon says, and Keith cringes further, eyes still squeezed shut. So much hurt all tangled up in here. It taps his chest with a claw. It is no wonder you turned to me; I’m only surprised you didn’t do it sooner.

“I’m not weak,” Keith says, weakly.

I never said you were, the demon replies, sounding faintly surprised. Truth be told, I think you are quite the opposite. If I thought you were weak, I never would have agreed to a contract with you. I certainly never would have brought you here.

“Where is here?” Keith whispers, since the demon seems to be in a chatty mood.

It chuckles. Hell, of course.


It heaves a sigh, louder than before, and pushes him to lay back down with a stern look. Quiet. You are in no danger, and neither is your soul – I am well aware of the terms and conditions. I only felt I would be better equipped to take care of you in this realm, my realm.

“Take...care of me?” Keith stammers.

Eyes, close them, the demon snaps, and Keith does. Yes, take care of you. I may be an infernal being, but I am not an inconsiderate lover.

“Lover?” Keith whispers.

I will gag you if I must, it warns. Keith keeps his mouth shut, trembling, and a large palm strokes over his chest, a brief yet soothing touch. Your body is so prepared for pain, it muses. We shall have to change that, I think.

Keith isn’t sure what it means by that.

Others have hurt you, it adds. Who? Who else do I have to kill?

“Um,” Keith says. “Please don’t kill anyone.”

Ugh, the demon grumbles, this is your problem. If you just killed the people who hurt you, they would stop hurting you.

“I...I don’t think that’s how that works,” Keith ventures. “And, um, murder is...generally frowned upon.”

You still haven’t answered my question, it says.
Keith furrows his brow. “Don’t see why I gotta bare my soul to you; you’ll see everything soon enough.”

The demon falls silent at that, and Keith thinks warily that he might have angered it, but then there’s a warm cloth between his legs, and the incubus is gently wiping away the cum there, pausing whenever Keith winces or tenses.

Keith is so taken aback by the gesture that he blurts out, “You talk about murder a lot more than Shiro ever did.”

_Hm_, the demon says after a pause, though it never falters in its thorough cleaning. _Would you prefer it if I talked about murder less?_

“...Yes,” Keith mumbles, unsure if it’s a trick question or not.

The demon makes a thoughtful sound. _Most of the contracts I make are with quite evil people_, it says conversationally. _They get off on talk of cruel things...and on cruel things themselves_. Keith shivers and the demon drags the cloth slowly over his soft cock – it should feel clinical, since it isn’t at all sexual, but it doesn’t, not at all. It feels weirdly comforting, the sensation magnified with his eyes shut.

“I don’t get off on that,” Keith says.

_No, and you are not evil_, it says. _They make contracts with me for power, for personal gain – but your contract is bizarrely selfless. I might understand it more if you and Shirogane were actually lovers, but..._

“We were best friends,” Keith says, and then, with a sliver of doubt, “I think. I hope we were.”

_Let me see_, the demon urges, and Keith does his best to remember.

A million moments flicker behind his eyelids – Shiro’s laughter, loud and bright; Shiro’s soft gray eyes steady on him as he talks; the rise and fall of Shiro’s chest as he sleeps beside Keith on the divan; the warmth of his hand in Keith’s as he takes it gently and squeezes; the low, calming timbre of his voice cutting through Keith’s panicky haze; the two of them sitting on a hidden turret watching the stars, naming the constellations like each one is an old friend; drinking tea in handmade ceramics on lazy mornings; studying together in the library and making faces at each other over piles of spellbooks and ancient tomes; riding through the woods at sunrise; picnicking in a hidden clearing where the sunshine kisses Shiro’s face and makes it glow; going home with Shiro in the summer and wondering at the simplicity of his family, a family with missing pieces yet one that feels so whole; Keith wants to feel that whole –

_That’s enough_, the demon says, sounding shaken. Keith cracks an eye open – it’s sitting a few feet away, a hand to its head, mouth twisted.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

The demon shakes its head and looks at him. _He had a family?_

“Has,” Keith says, tilting his head. “His grandparents.”

_His grandparents outlived their grandson?_ The demon whistles. _Now, that’s cruel._

“I suppose,” Keith says. He doesn’t want to think about it.
Abruptly, his stomach rumbles, and the demon glances at him sharply. *Have you eaten?*

Keith gives him a flat look that says, *I had demon cum and a plug up my ass all day; what do you think?!*

The demon looks properly chastised, folding its arms and scowling. *Fine, fine,* it mutters, and snaps its fingers, summoning up a platter full of...all of Keith’s favorite foods? How did it know that?!

*I can read your mind,* it says with a sniff. *Speaking of which, I would prefer that you stopped thinking of me as an ‘it,’ it’s very degrading.*

Keith flushes. “Aren’t you an it, though?”

*I am an incubus,* it growls, *therefore, male.*

“Oh,” Keith says. “I, uh, sorry?”

It grumbles and reaches for the platter, only to glare at him again. *You’re still doing it.*

“Sorry,” Keith says. “Can I have some bread, please?” It – he – eyes Keith, but breaks off a chunk of the bread and lifts it to Keith’s lips. Keith blinks at him in disbelief. “I can feed myself, thanks,” he says.

*Open your mouth,* the demon says. *Right now, I’m feeding you.*

Keith opens his mouth, eyebrows drawing together as the demon places the bread on his tongue. “Why?” he asks, mouth full of bread.

*Don’t talk with your mouth full.* The demon hesitates, then adds as he breaks off some more bread, *In Hell, it is customary for servants to feed their masters.*

Keith’s eyes bug out. “Are you saying I’m your master?!”

*You did summon me, and I am doing your bidding...more or less,* he says. *So for now, yes. It would seem that way.*

Keith swallows the bread and stares at the ceiling, or where the ceiling should be – it’s just stars. The demon follows his gaze. “Pretty,” Keith says.

*You think so?* He preens a little. *My domain is the night, so, it seemed only fitting.*

Keith watches the stars twinkle above him while the demon continues to feed him morsels of food – buttered bread, roasted potatoes, fried rice and egg, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, savory slices of steak so thin they practically melt on his tongue.

Keith eats until he’s full and his eyelids are heavy. “Thanks,” he mumbles. “You’re a good cook.”

*Hmph,* the demon says, and lays down beside him. Keith blinks at him, questioning but no longer afraid of his intentions. *Was Shiro a good cook?*

Keith chuckles. “No,” he says, lips quirking. “Absolutely dreadful. He could barely make toast without burning it.”

*Not even with magic?*
Keith shakes his head. “Shiro’s magic was...very specialized. Mine is fire, pyrokinesis, whatever, but his was precognition.”

The demon’s lips part. Seeing the future? A very rare gift.

“Yeah.” Keith sighs.

The demon nudges him. What is it?

“He was always better at seeing others’ futures,” Keith explains quietly. “He would have these...these dreams, about complete strangers, and would go out of his way to either change their fates or at least warn them what was coming. That...that was how Shiro met me.”

He dreamed of you?

“Yes,” Keith says. “He saved my life.”

Ironic, the demon says. Considering the current state of affairs.

Keith glowers at him. “And he could make lightning. He taught me how to do that, so you can thank him for getting electrocuted by me.”

Plasma manipulation and precognition? I’m not surprised Hell snatched him up.

Keith rolls away from him, onto his other side.

Hey, the demon says. Don’t be like that, I made you dinner.

“You want to talk about cruel things?” Keith whispers. “How cruel is it that someone who could see the future couldn’t see his own?”

The demon wraps his arms around Keith from behind, tucking him close to the curve of his body, blanketing him with a wing. I do not know why cruel things happen anymore than you do, he replies. And it will do you no good to agonize over them. It will, however, do you good to sleep. So sleep.

“We will find him,” Keith mumbles, half to himself. “We have to.”

Yes.

Keith falls asleep without seeing the demon’s troubled expression, as if he is trying to solve a puzzle he has not found the pieces to yet.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

the plot is thickening now....

if you think you know what's happening, well, we'll see...it's quite a tangled mess ;)

thank you for all your comments and kudos <3 they bring me a lot of joy

Shiro doesn’t know what he’s doing.

Floating, he thinks — or maybe drowning.

He’s trapped, either way, and has been for awhile, though he has no real concept of time. He struggles to pry his eyes open, but when he does all he sees are shadows, twisting purple and black, and he knows with every ounce of his being that it’s dark magic, ancient and powerful and inescapable. The witch’s magic? He turns his head blearily, only to find that his body is...not quite there. Not quite corporeal. His skin looks ghostly, everything translucent and illuminated by a faint purple glow.

Well, that’s not good.

Even more not good is the way the shadows curl around his violet skin, slow but purposeful, and Shiro has a sneaking suspicion that they can do more than just curl. Wherever he is, he needs to get out.

“Hello?!” Shiro calls into the shadows, not knowing what else to do. He’s not standing on solid ground, nor is he physically bound, but he is suspended, and can’t seem to move much in any direction. He thinks of insects trapped in amber, and shudders.

SILENCE. The voice thunders over him, through him, and Shiro’s eyes widen – it’s as ancient and powerful and inescapable as the shadows, and though it makes no sense, he thinks it is the shadows, because they tighten around his limbs and darken, pulsing menacingly.

Shiro struggles, and to his surprise he breaks free of the shadowy tendrils, which seem startled by this course of events. This emboldens him— maybe this thing isn’t as powerful as he thought.

“What am I?” he demands, shoving the shadows away as they rush back towards him, “What are you?”

YOU DON’T REMEMBER? The shadows flicker as if conflicted. He eyes them warily, but they don’t try to restrain him again.

“I remember being captured,” Shiro mutters, “and I remember the witch...Haggar. She works for Zarkon, for the Galra...she wanted something from me.” He shakes his head, frustrated. “What was it? What happened?”

IT DOES NOT MATTER, the voice says. YOU ARE HERE NOW.

“Where is here?” Shiro presses.
**NOWHERE**, it says.

Shiro hears Keith’s voice.

*Can you hear me? Please, please tell me you can. Just give me a sign, something, anything.*

He whirls around, reaching out instinctively, towards where Keith should be, but there’s no one there, only more shadows. “Keith!” he cries, and looks accusingly at the shadows, readying for a fight though his hands are shaking. “Where is he; what have you done to him?!?”

To his horror, the voice begins to laugh, cold and mocking and...bitter? *IT IS BETTER YOU DO NOT KNOW,* it says, and then everything goes black, and Shiro is nothing once more.

*

Shiro knew Keith long before he’d met him in person.

He hadn’t known, exactly, who the beautiful man with sparking fingertips and wild black hair was; he only knew that he was to spend his life with him, and Shiro was more than happy with knowing that. He had so many awful dreams, so the nights when he dreamed of Keith were a blessed respite and Shiro always awoke with a faint smile on his face afterwards. He’d always wondered when Keith would come into his life, and how, but his dreams never even gave a hint of the answer to that.

But then he’d had the dream that changed everything — the first nightmare about Keith. He was a mere boy in the dream, a gangly teenager who might have still had baby fat if he had ever had any fat to spare (he had not). Keith was running, glancing periodically over his shoulder, breath coming fast and hard and skin soaked in sweat — he’d been running for a while. Behind him, Shiro could hear the sounds of people shouting and the pounding of feet. They were chanting something, and as Shiro strained to hear it, his blood ran cold: *Kill the witch!* they were saying, over and over and over again.

Keith strained to run faster, messy hair plastered to his brow and the back of his neck, color high in his face. He couldn’t run much farther, Shiro knew, and he was filled with fear as Keith scrambled to a stop in front of a sheer cliff — a canyon, through which flowed a rushing river complete with jagged rocks and white rapids.

“No,” Keith whispered, voice ragged and defeated.

The mob came closer, closer, and Keith turned to face them with a grim expression. Shiro knew he had magic, he had a gift, but no sparks issued from his fingertips. He was hiding it, Shiro realized. Even now, he was trying to deny their accusations against him, trying to prove he was innocent though he never could be in their eyes.

“There’s nowhere left for him to run!” one of the villagers crowed triumphantly. They were a motley lot, all as lean and sharp-faced as Keith, skin mottled with red desert dust and sweat and hands roughened by work. They were carrying what looked like farm tools, mostly blunt shovels and wooden poles, but some had sharp knives and axes, and when Keith saw them his eyes widened. He looked more betrayed than afraid.

“Wait,” he said, lifting up his hands, “you don’t want to do this —”

“That a threat, boy?!” the lead villager demanded, his face twisted in an ugly scowl. “We don’t take kindly to threats from witches.”
“It’s not a threat, I don’t want to hurt any of you!” Keith exclaimed. “Please —”

“How do we know that?” one of the women demanded. “How do we know he won’t turn ‘round and kill us all if he gets the chance?”

“I always knew Kogane consorted with evil forces,” another woman muttered. “And we all know that peculiar warrior woman hung around his farm more oft than not. The child’s cursed.”

Keith swallowed hard. “I’m not,” he whispered, “I’m not cursed, my father —”

“Ain’t here now, boy,” the leader snapped, lifting his axe high. “Time to do what we shoulda done sixteen years ago.”

But before he could strike and draw the blood he so lusted for, another villager, a young girl with long brown hair, rushed forward and shoved Keith hard in the chest.

Keith fell into the canyon.

Shiro had awoken with a cry, as sweaty and panicked as Keith, and found himself scrambling out of bed and tugging on his boots and cloak before he could even think. He had to save Keith from that mob, he had to get to him before they did.

He’d ridden west for three days straight, resting his horse briefly and pacing anxiously in the meantime, never knowing if he was too late or not. Shiro wasn’t even sure where he was meant to go, but when he finally saw the canyon in the distance, he knew he was at the right place. Then he’d seen the mob, running alongside the top of the canyon with shovels and axes raised, and urged his tired horse into a full gallop at once.

His frantic eyes found the figure struggling in the river below — he had managed to use his gift to escape the worst of the current and cling to the rocks, but his desperately sparking hands were wet and slipping, and his position was precarious at best. The mob was catching up to where the river had swept Keith downstream, and Shiro knew what they would do when they found him; he knew.

He could see it in his mind’s eye, as often happened when the impending event came so close to happening — whitewater stained red with blood, canyon walls charred black, villagers screaming, Keith screaming — Shiro could not allow it to happen.

“Heart!” he’d shouted, and Keith had looked up from his precarious position and stared at Shiro with unabashed incredulity and utter confusion. The villagers faltered, too, at seeing a stranger on a black horse wearing a long black cloak which Matt had always said made Shiro look ‘regal or villainous, hard to say.’

Keith’s mouth opened, then closed. “Who are you?” he’d shouted back. As Shiro rode closer to the cliff’s edge he could see Keith’s fingers trembling from the strain of gripping the rocks.

“A friend!” Shiro told him, and dismounted from the saddle, grabbing the length of rope he’d packed in his bag and throwing the end down to Keith. “Come on, I’ve got you!”

Keith did not grab the rope; his eyes flicked wildly back and forth like a trapped animal, clearly weighing his options and finding very few, even fewer which were good options.

“We don’t want no trouble, stranger!” one of the villagers called across the canyon, the leader with the axe. Shiro’s jaw tightened at the memory of him raising the axe, ready to bury it in Keith’s head. “This kid here’s our business, and we’d appreciate it if you let us deal with it ourselves!”
“I don’t think so,” Shiro retorted, and extended his free hand, striking the spot right in front of the restless mob with the loudest, brightest lightning he could muster.

The villagers screamed and startled back. The leader dropped his axe; the river washed it away.

Keith grabbed the rope and climbed up.

Shiro gave him a hand as he scrambled up and over the edge of the canyon, and Keith took it, his eyes wide and shining with awe. “You’re a witch,” he said.

And you’re the man I will fall in love with, Shiro thought, hoping Keith wasn’t also a telepath. “Yes,” he said, casting a cool glance at the cowering villagers who gaped at the smoking crater in the earth before them. “I’m from the Citadel.”

“How...how did you know who I...where I...” Keith looked so hopelessly lost, and Shiro wanted so badly to wrap him up in his arms and tell him everything, but he knew Keith well enough to know that was an excellent way to get himself punched in the face, or perhaps severely singed.

“Hush,” was all he said, kindly, because Shiro had learned that this world did not have enough kindness, and that even just a little went a very long way. He never wanted to treat Keith unkindly. “My name is Takashi Shirogane, but please call me Shiro. I have the gift of precognition, so I see people who are in trouble before the trouble happens, and I do my best to stop the trouble from ever happening.”

“Could have gotten here a little sooner,” Keith mumbled, and then covered his mouth, face red with shame, looking away. “Sorry. I. Um. Thank you...Shiro.”

“Could have gotten here a little sooner,” Keith mumbled, and then covered his mouth, face red with shame, looking away. “Sorry. I. Um. Thank you...Shiro.”

“My apologies for the timing,” Shiro said, with genuine apology, which made Keith look up, brow creased and lips pursed like he was trying to figure out if Shiro was a desert mirage or not. “I only dreamed of this event three days ago, and incidentally it is a three day ride from the Citadel to...er, forgive me — where are we?”

Keith licked his dry lips; they were chapped and Shiro suddenly realized how stiflingly hot it was here in the Wastes — his cloak was made for the cold Asphodel Peaks, not the desert. “The town’s called Blackwater,” Keith said.

Shiro blinked at him, then at the decidedly not black river below. “But...the water’s not...”

“I didn’t name it,” Keith said, folding his arms.

“Right, of course not. Uh...listen, Keith, do you have a...a family? A parent maybe —”

“No.”

Keith frowned, looking away. ““My father left on my sixteenth birthday. Dunno where he is, don’t really care, either way he ain’t here.”

“And your mother?” Shiro tried.

“Never knew her,” Keith said, shortly.

“Ah,” Shiro said. “So you’re on your own?”

“Yes.” Keith sighed, looking reluctantly across the canyon to where the mob still seethed, though
more warily than before. “I ought to get my horse...can’t stay in town anymore.” He bit his lip. “Maybe I’ll head north to the coast; always wanted to go to Cabao, and I hear they’re more tolerant of —”

“Cabao?!” Shiro exclaimed. “Keith, no, that’s — I’m here to take you back to the Citadel.”

Keith took a step away, mouth settling into a thin line. “Are you, now?”

Shiro held his hands up and his heart hurt when Keith flinched back. “Not by force, that’s not what...the Citadel is a wonderful place for our kind, Keith. They’ll be able to teach you there, to show you how to use your gift, and to control it.”

Keith eyed him. “Why would they do that for me? I’m just a Wastes brat. I got no coin to pay for fancy books and cloaks and things. All I got is my fire and my horse.”

“They would do that for you because I told them to,” Shiro said. Keith faltered. “Because I saw you there, in the future, and you were happy and the most talented witch in your class.”

“Me?” Keith whispered. “Really?”

Shiro nodded. “I promise if you’re dissatisfied there, I can help you find passage elsewhere — to Cabao, if you like, or perhaps to Altea or the Gyrgan Foothills?”

Keith hesitated for a long moment, then nodded quickly, ducking his head, and said, “Thank you. That...I would appreciate that, very much.”

“Alright,” Shiro said, offering Keith a smile. Keith didn’t seem to know what to do with it. “Shall we fetch your horse, then?”

“I can get her myself,” Keith said, but then he looked at the mob and looked less certain.

“I’d rather not risk you nearly drowning again,” Shiro said. “Fair?”

“Fair,” Keith said, cracking a weak smile.

Shiro wanted to see that smile every day for the rest of his life.

STOP, the voice booms, edged with panic.

Shiro opens his eyes, though he can’t remember ever closing them. The shadows pulse around him in distress. “Keith,” he breathes, struggling to keep his eyes open. The shadows are trying to put him back to sleep.

I DO NOT WISH TO SEE THESE THINGS, the voice snaps. It sounds almost pleading.

“Which things?” Shiro snaps back, twisting around and shoving the shadows away. “My memories?”

HIM, the voice says. THE WITCH YOU SO PATHETICALLY LUST OVER.

Shiro’s vision goes momentarily white with rage. “Lust over?!” he exclaims, and on a whim grabs the closest shadow. It screeches and squirms in his grasp but he doesn’t let go. “How base a being must you be to think that I simply lust over him from that memory?”

YOU DO, the voice continues, a bit desperately, YOU WANT TO FUCK HIM, YOU WANT TO HOLD HIM DOWN AND MAKE HIM SCREAM —
Shiro releases the shadow as if burnt. “What,” he whispers, a terrible suspicion stirring in his mind, “are you?”

The voice laughs, sensing it has regained the upper hand. YOU KNOW, it purrs. AND IF YOU TRY TO REMINISCE ANYMORE, I WILL MAKE YOU SORRY.

“Why?” Shiro presses, knowing that the voice does not have the upper hand, because he’s found its weakness. “Why don’t you want to see my memories of Keith?”

In response, the shadows rush towards him furiously, obscuring his vision, his breath, his senses. Shiro thinks of Keith as everything goes black.

*

Keith isn’t exactly sure how it happened, but he thinks he may have made some friends.

The first year novices have their irritating moments, but it’s nice to not have to sit alone at lunch and dinner, and they do prove helpful when it comes to studying. At least, Pidge and Hunk do. Lance...Keith’s still not sure about him.

The seer seems to think he and Keith have a legendary rivalry or something. Keith doesn’t get it. He’d never even seen the kid before Lance stumbled upon his library table and exposed Keith’s secret to his friends. That being said, Keith thinks he’s allowed to treat Lance with a certain degree of frostiness, especially because Lance’s nosiness really knows no ends.

“So how is it,” Lance asks one day while Keith is genuinely struggling with a griffin decoction recipe, “having an incubus in your bed?”

Keith almost drops his glass vial, and resolutely ignores him.

“Lance,” Pidge mutters, “some of us are actually trying to work over here.”

Lance shrugs. “I finished my homework ages ago. So? Spill. What are sex demons like? Who knows, maybe someday I’ll summon a succubus, that’s more my type –”

“You will not,” Hunk says without looking up from his geology book. “And you’re bi as fuck, Lance.”

Lance sticks his tongue out at Hunk. “Well, sorry if I’m not super keen on summoning something that could probably eviscerate me with its dick if it wanted to, buddy.”

“Succubi can have dicks,” Keith says, forgetting to ignore Lance for the sake of getting the facts straight. “Or just use their tails.”


“I mourn the day my friends all mysteriously vanished in the library one sunny afternoon,” Pidge says, eying them sharply. “It was such a tragedy. If only they would have shut up about demon tail-fucking, huh?”

Hunk covers his ears and begins reading loudly from his book. “Powdered and taken in large quantities, chrysolite is said to be a restorative and curative; an alchemist can make a dose out of three stones sufficient to temporarily check the progress of most diseases –”

“I think I’m going to go study somewhere else,” Keith starts.
“Don’t you dare,” Pidge warns. “We still have an entire chapter left to cover.”

“I don’t really see the point, honestly,” Lance says. “Keith’s not exactly gonna be around to use griffin decoctions in the years to come, y’know?”

“Lance!” Hunk exclaims.

“No, he’s right,” Keith says, only feeling a bit numb from thinking of his impending demise. “It’s what I signed up for.”

Pidge nudges him. “And how’s that going? Is the demon upholding his end of the bargain?”

Keith shrugs. “He’s been trying.” In truth, he’s not really sure, and that scares him. Kurobasanir has had little to say about Shiro’s whereabouts in the past week. He’s had little to say in general, actually – Keith swears he’s been moody. Sulking, for some reason. Keith’s not about to have a heart-to-heart with him over it.

Lance looks at him with sympathy that Keith doesn’t want. “Damn,” he says. “That’s rough. Still, it’s pretty cool that you’re doing all this for Master Shiroyane.”

Keith makes a noncommittal sound.

“Or are you just doing it to bang Master Shiroyane?”

Lance’s tone is joking; he doesn’t mean it, but he also doesn’t realize the seriousness of Keith’s feelings towards Shiro at all. So he doesn’t expect Keith’s hands to ignite, burning right through the cover of the stupid book and startling everyone at the table, Keith included. Keith stands up abruptly, nearly knocking over his chair.

Pidge looks at the book and sighs. “That was the last copy.” Hunk gives her a look.

Lance, for once, keeps his mouth shut.

“Now, I’m leaving,” Keith says, and this time none of them stop him.

* *

He runs into the demon when he’s sliding down the wall of a long-abandoned classroom – Kurobasanir catches his legs and wraps them around his waist with ease, preventing Keith from ever reaching the floor. Keith beats at his chest ineffectively with his fists, and then changes his mind and yanks him in for a bruising kiss. The demon responds eagerly, hands shaping Keith’s ass in a way that has become far too familiar, claws digging into the muscle as Keith arches into him.

“Bad day?” he murmurs when they part.

“Fuck me,” Keith says.

“Yeah?” The demon tilts his head. “Right here?”

“Over the desk,” Keith says, gesturing vaguely to the single desk remaining in the room, the one which would have been the professor’s. A filthy grin spreads across the demon’s face, Shiro’s face that will never be his face.

“Naughty,” Shiro purrs, but complies. He always does, and Keith hates him a little for it. The real Shiro would never do something like this so easily – he would get flustered, pink-cheeked and wide-eyed, he would stammer and gasp and perhaps even protest; he certainly wouldn’t carry Keith
over to the desk and bend him over it, no questions asked.

“Stop that,” the demon growls in his ear, already yanking down Keith’s pants and underwear just enough to press two fingers to his hole. Keith jerks in surprise; moans when the fingers shove in slickly. He’s still a little loose from yesterday, when Shiro fingered him in the bathtub, and made him come on only that.

“W-what,” Keith gasps, face scraping against the wooden desk, hips lifting higher as the incubus’s thick fingers work deeper inside of him. His torso is bared as Shiro magicks it away, but leaves his pants on.

“Thinking about him,” the demon hisses, and Keith blinks in bleary confusion. “He isn’t here; I am.”

“Who…” Keith’s brow furrows. “Shiro?”

“Shut up.”

Keith blinks harder, then yelps when a warm tail wraps securely around his torso, binding his arms against his back and leaving his upper body immobile. His feet scramble for purchase on the ground, only for the demon’s tail to yank him upwards, until Keith’s laying atop the desk, legs folded awkwardly under him, Shiro’s fingers stretching him open fast, hastily, like he can’t wait to get his cock inside of him.

Keith wants to know what the hell the demon meant just now, but he can’t focus on anything with blunt claws teasing at his prostate, his cock still trapped in his pants, a hard bulge of heat digging against his stomach and the unforgiving surface of the desk. He realizes, in a frightening rush edged with sick anticipation, that the demon is angry. He doesn’t know why, doesn’t know what he did, if he did anything at all; but either way it doesn’t matter because Shiro is going to take it out on him.

The tail flexes around his middle and the fingers curl inside of him, coaxing a soft whine from Keith’s lips. “You think I would do that to you?” Shiro coos, readjusting Keith’s legs with his free hand, settling them into a more comfortable kneeling position. Keith knows his knees will be scraped after this, maybe bruised, too. He’s not too upset about it. “You think I would make you pay for something you didn’t even do? Oh, baby. I’m not so cruel as that.”

Keith’s breathing is already uneven; there are three fingers inside of him and the tail constricts around him just enough to tighten his chest, to make his breath hitch harder, edging on danger, riding that fine, fine line. He likes riding that line; he’s discovered that with Kurobasanir…but it’s not what he wants most.

The demon’s breath is hot on his neck and shoulders. Keith thinks whoever claimed it was sulfurous was seriously misinformed; it smells like heat, like sweat and skin and exertion, but not unpleasantly. Keith doesn’t know how to describe it, only knows that it makes his lashes flutter and his head loll to the side; his cock throbs insistently and he thinks he maybe begs to be touched, because Shiro’s laughter tickles his cheek.

“Maybe if you ask nicely,” he hints.

Keith says nothing; his mouth falls open in a silent gasp when the three fingers withdraw. A cool draft wisps over his spine and Keith’s skin raises in goosebumps, fine hairs lifting. Shiro’s claws scratch lightly over them and his tail tightens further; Keith’s ribs ache. “So it’s going to be like that, is it?” Shiro clicks his tongue. “Very well.”
The head of the incubus’s cock nudges over his hole, and Keith braces himself for the usual brutal inwards thrust, but instead Shiro’s tail tugs, forcing Keith back onto his cock. Keith grabs uselessly at the desk for purchase, trying to find some semblance of control as he’s split wide, but it’s useless – Shiro’s tail is doing all the work for him and Keith’s squirming only makes it easier for the incubus’s cock to rock in and out of him.

“Fuck –” Keith chokes on the curse, eyes watering as the incubus’s tail drags Keith’s body onto the thick of Shiro’s cock again and again, thinner tail tip flicking over the clothed bulge heavy and aching between Keith’s spread legs, a tease with no promise of mercy. Keith feels the exact moment that his clenching, protesting body gives way, taking Shiro to the hilt in a single smooth motion that leaves both of them groaning.

“Good boy,” Shiro murmurs, and when Keith turns his head just so, he can see Shiro looming over him, arms folded over his muscled chest, abdomen flexing hard with every sharp intake of breath as his tail sinks Keith onto his cock. He looks like the definition of smug. Keith shudders and struggles to breathe, and it’s unexpected when the incubus’s tail loosens in reply. The tip dips under the waistband of his pants and Keith wriggles frantically; his desperation clearly amuses the demon.

“Something you wanted? But this is, after all, exactly what you asked for,” Shiro says, singsong. “I’m fucking you. If you want something else, you’re going to have to say so. Politely.” He taps a claw against Keith’s ass and Keith flinches hard; the incubus hisses as he tightens.

“Touch me,” Keith whispers, “please.” His voice is barely audible; he can feel precum dripping from the head of his trapped cock, soaking through the fabric, sticky on his stomach. It seems absurd that his pants are still on, and all his charms besides, all the stupid defensive wards and crystals and pendants that do nothing to stop the incubus from fucking him so hard he sobs and writhes on the desk until splinters catch and scrape on his shoulders, drawing blood.

It’s a shock when huge clawed hands settle upon said shoulders, a reproachful growl filling the air. Shiro squeezes lightly, and lifts Keith up slightly, leaning over him so that he can put his mouth over the injured flesh. Keith jolts when a warm wet tongue brushes over it, soothing the tiny cuts, licking them clean. “Careful,” Shiro murmurs, voice rumbling against Keith’s shoulders and against his arched back where their bodies meet. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“Isn’t that what you want?” Keith gasps, shivering as claws trace downwards, over the delicate skin of his trapped wrists, following veins which they could split easily given a bit more pressure.

Shiro pauses; his tail holds Keith fast. “No,” he says, or perhaps admits, and Keith doesn’t truly know whether to tense or relax at the admission. “This confuses you?” he questions.

“Of course it does,” Keith mumbles, wishing he could hide his face in his arms, which are sore from being squeezed. “Demons are sadists.”

Shiro makes a considering sound laced with indignation. “You expected this when you summoned me? To be either killed violently if I rejected the contract, or to be ravished violently if I accepted?”

Keith isn’t exactly in a great state of mind to be having a discussion this serious, but he nods jerkily, and bangs his head on the desk in the process because grace is not his forte. Shiro growls again; cradles Keith’s head in his hand like a velvet pillow for a precious jewel. Claws card through his hair.

“Yeah,” Keith whispers, and moans broken and hungry when Shiro’s tail curls closer to his
erection, feeling its way under the fabric, searching almost curiously. Keith tries valiantly to keep his train of thought. “I – I read enough to know, what to expect from...your kind, I thought, I never...never much cared for sex anyway, so I figured I could just...treat it more like a transaction –”

“A transaction,” Shiro repeats, and his tail abruptly yanks Keith back in the middle of an outwards drag, thrusting fully inside, wrenching the air from Keith’s lungs and another dribble of precum from his cock. “You thought I would take you rough and painful and without thought or feeling, like a damn beast?”

Keith pants, vision blurring, grateful for the soft pad of Shiro’s palm cupping his face; it grounds him. “I thought – Void-born were beastly, inhuman, that’s what I read, what I was taught; you have no soul –”

“So, what, we must then be callous and cold and cruel?” Shiro snaps, hips snapping with his words, tail working in tandem to keep Keith caught between its twisting bonds and Shiro’s thickening cock – it’s stretching Keith wider, swelling at the base, and Keith thinks Shiro may be taking the beast thing a bit too literally, shit, shit, shit.

“I didn’t – I didn’t know,” Keith gasps, spine bowing, cock still hard as ever despite the creeping pain throbbing inside him as Shiro’s knot expands. “I hoped – you might show mercy – you were the only one I found that seemed even a little likely to have humanity –”

“Humanity,” the demon snarls, teeth far too close to Keith’s neck for comfort. “And why is humanity so coveted, when it is the very thing which leads to your petty wars and murders and lies and corruption and perversion and cruelty? Oh, no, you humans are not above cruelty; you may in fact be the cruelest beings there are – it makes it all the more easy for us to manipulate your kind, to promise you what you most desire and make you do anything in order to get it.”

Keith resists the urge (or is it instinct?) to cower at the demon’s words; he resists the urge to believe them. Instead he snaps, “How can you say that? How – ah – how many like me have you killed, tortured, hurt for your own gain?!!”

Shiro’s claws dig into his scalp and Keith squeezes his eyes shut, but the incubus’s grip loosens and he murmurs, “I will do none of that to you.”

“Why,” Keith whispers back, pleading, “why?”

“Was he cruel?” Shiro asks suddenly, and Keith whines as his cock begins to change inside him, the tip tapering, growing slicker and raising veins and bumps along the length of it, textured sweet friction inside of Keith, rubbing over his prostate in undulating motions, drawing broken little moans from his bitten lips. “Shiro, your Shiro,” the demon presses, “what kind of human was he?”

“A good one,” Keith gasps, lashes sticking together, star-shaped, with his own tears. “He was never cruel, never, never cruel to me, he was good, he was so good, always –”

Shiro’s knot slides fully inside of him, round and hard and huge and Keith cries out, voice muffled in Shiro’s palm. The demon curves over him as if shielding him and soothes, “Hush, baby,” as he finally lets his tail curl tight and sure around Keith’s cock, gripping and stroking and wringing Keith’s orgasm from him with another, softer cry. Shiro lets him rut through it, chasing the friction, tail milking him dry as Shiro comes inside him with a loud purr. It is euphoric agony.

Keith expects the thick gush of wet heat, but does not expect the way Shiro’s cock pulses through it, like a live thing with a heartbeat of its own, and also does not expect the dark wings which
create a canopy over them, and most of all he does not expect the demon’s next words.

“You are a good one, too,” Shiro tells him, brushing the hair out of Keith’s face, nuzzling a warm nose into his hair. “I said you were unlike my other contracts and I meant it. You are not evil, you are not cruel, and though others may say making a contract with me has tainted your soul irrevocably, I can see your soul, I can feel it, and it is untainted, Keith Kogane.”

Keith finds this very unlikely, considering an incubus has just knotted his ass and is currently, uh...grooming him? Shiro’s tongue pauses where it had been lapping at his neck and he bites the skin there gently, more of a nip than anything else. “You require further persuasion? Hmph, I suppose I can provide that,” he muses.

Keith’s body is tired and covered in a thin sheen of sweat, but he wearily prepares himself to be coaxed into arousal once more. However, the demon only huffs at him, continuing to lick his skin, tail unwinding from around him. Keith’s arms are full of pins and needles and he sucks in a sharp breath when clawed hands grasp them gently, massaging sensation back into them.

“I know, and you have said, that you are more uninterested in sex than most,” Shiro hums. “Considering my nature, this is a difficult thing for me to understand, but I will not take more from you than you wish to give. The days on which I bring you to climax more than once will suffice to cover the days on which you do not wish to achieve climax. Does this make sense?”

No, Keith thinks numbly, none of this makes sense. What are you?

“You know precisely what I am,” Shiro says. “Just as I know precisely what you are – a beautiful little being I am glad to call mine.”

Keith flushes, brows drawing together. “I – beautiful?”

“Mm,” Shiro says, littering kisses over his shoulders. “If only you could see yourself, as you appear to me now – ah, wait.”

He pushes the image into Keith’s head and Keith makes a breathy sound of disbelief – it’s him, here, now, kneeling on the desk, his back a smooth white curve flowing into the ink spill of his hair where it falls over the desk top, skin mottled here and there with the demon’s marks, new bruises layers atop old and pink lines left by claws. His face is a mess of spit and tears and blotchy red but somehow, in Shiro’s eyes, he’s beautiful – cheeks glowing with the flush of climax, lips parted sweetly, and eyes half-lidded with faded pleasure.

He also sees how wide the demon’s cock splits him open, and it seems impossible, and Keith realizes that’s the demon’s thought – he looks at Keith with something akin to reverence, though the very idea goes against everything Keith knows. It makes no sense that a demon should revere a human, much less one who has bound it and one whom it regularly fucks to incoherency.

“Doesn’t it, though?” Shiro says, gathering Keith up against his chest, their bodies still joined by his knot, tail still looping itself around Keith’s legs and feathering over his softening cock. “You are powerful, beautiful, and good – a rare combination. One my kind flock to like moths to flame.” Keith shivers, and the demon pets his chest, hand sliding downwards, into his unlaced pants where they are stained and messy with cum. “I will kill any other moths who may take an interest,” Shiro adds, pushing Keith’s pants down and off the rest of the way. His fingers gather up the cum splattered over Keith’s belly and thighs and lift back up to Keith’s mouth. “Suck.”

Keith does, swallowing with difficulty as the bitter salt taste floods across his tongue, a taste he knows came from himself. Shiro’s chest reverberates with pleased purrs at the thought. Keith bites
his fingers after they are clean, but rather than punish him, as all laws of the universe state that he should, the demon only chuckles in obvious delight at his impudence, and whisks them away, elsewhere.

Elsewhere is, again, Hell.

“Making a habit out of this, I see,” Keith sighs. They’re laying on the strange silken surface, the incubus spooning him securely. They may be in Hell but ironically, Keith’s skin prickles with cold. At once, a heavy black blanket settles over their bare bodies.

“I have an impressive home; you’ll forgive me for wanting to show it off a little.” Shiro licks a wet stripe up his earlobe and Keith snorts, squirming in his grasp, ticklish. But he stills with a hiss when the knot tugs sharply at their joining. Claws cup his hip in warning and one taps his nose. “A few minutes more, baby. Patience yields focus, after all.”

Keith’s blood runs cold despite the warm body and blanket covering him. He elbows the incubus hard, sitting up as much as he is able and snapping, “Where did you hear that?!”

The demon tilts his head, the picture of innocence. “Baby?”

“He used to say – Shiro –” Keith scowls, shakes his head, lays back down. “Nevermind.”

“Speaking of Shiro,” the demon says. Keith is back up again in an instant, and he raises an eyebrow, amused. “I’ve gotten confirmation that he’s in Haggar’s laboratory as a prisoner in Daibazaal, and the Holts were also last seen there. Now, what his current status is, I don’t know –”

“We have to get him out of there,” Keith says fiercely.

Golden eyes narrow. “I’m sorry, did you say we?” He clicks his tongue. “No, no, no. You remember those moths to flame I was just talking about? Well, baby, Daibazaal is filled to the brim with fucking moths. And you will be a very, very bright flame down there. Not ideal when the goal is to get in and out undetected.”

Keith shakes his head. “I want to see him, I want to go with you. In case…” In case something goes wrong. In case he doesn’t get out. In case we can’t get him out. In case it’s too late.

The incubus heaves a dramatic sigh and waves a hand. “Oh, fine. Fine. What could possibly go wrong? I won’t answer that for you, the list is far too long.”

Keith says, “So when do we leave?”

“Ah,” the incubus says. “Yes, well, about that…we don’t. Not until All Hallow’s Eve, Samhain, whatever you humans call it these days –”

Keith’s heart skips a beat and he tears himself away from the incubus, resulting throb of pain and flood of cum be damned. “Samhain?! No, that’s months away; we can’t wait that long!”

“Only three months, cease your shrieking,” Shiro says, looking away from Keith’s ass with difficulty. “For your information, we must wait that long. To try to save your Shiro at any other time would be suicide, even for me, and as we know, that is not covered in our contract. So we wait.”

Keith swallows; he hates this. He hates knowing where Shiro is, knowing that there may be a chance that he is still alive, and yet being unable to go to him, to set him free. “Why Samhain?” he manages, gut churning. “I know the lines between realms are thin then, but you can go to Hell
whenever you wish, case in point.” He gestures to their surroundings.

“You’re not going to like this,” the demon warns.

Keith folds his arms. “Do I like most things that come out of your mouth?”

“Ouch. You wound me.” He rolls his eyes. “Well, you see...the witch Haggar’s experiments are ultimately to serve her own endeavors, yes, but they also play a role in Zarkon’s. The emperor is, how shall I put it...ah, yes. As you said: a sadist.” Keith winces. “And he is awfully fond of watching lesser beings fight each other to the death.”

“No,” Keith whispers. “He’s not –”

“From the sources I have received, yes; your Shiro is a gladiator in Zarkon’s fights. Enhanced via Haggar’s experiments, since a normal human would never survive in the arena –”


“I have no fucking idea,” the demon retorts. “But I’d be prepared for your sweetheart to be significantly less pretty. Or maybe prettier, depending on what you’re into – and as someone who can see into every nook and cranny of your mind, you’re into some pretty weird things, baby. No judgment.”

Keith shakes his head. “Get to the point already.” He'll love Shiro no matter what he looks like; that doesn't matter to Keith.

“Right, so, Samhain is a big day for Zarkon’s gladiators. All other fights, see, are very exclusive – Galra only, no outsiders, kept hush hush and heavily guarded. No chance of infiltrating any of those. But on Samhain, Zarkon holds the infamous Tourney. All of the best – and by best I mean surviving – gladiators are pitted against each other in a glorious bloodbath which is open to every creature who can find their way to the arena. Including you and me.”

“That’s it?” Keith demands. “That’s your plan? Go to the Tourney, hope Shiro hasn’t been murdered yet, and then what – leap into the arena and spirit him away while trying to find the Holts during our escape?”

“It needs some fine-tuning,” the demon admits. “But I have some friends in...low places.” He winks. “We’ll make it work.”

“You better,” Keith says flatly, and the demon’s smirk falls as Keith rolls away from him, curling into a small, seething ball. “And if he’s dead by the time we get to him…”

The threat hangs unspoken in the air between them.

Later, Keith wakes up in his own bed, the scrapes on his knees and shoulders fully healed, any pain gone, all bruises faded.

He thinks of Shiro fighting in a gladiatorial ring in Hell, and immediately wishes he hadn’t.
Pidge likes Keith Kogane. Even if he may be a self-sacrificing idiot who used his gift to summon and bind himself to a greater incubus which has taken the form of Master Shirogane and creeps her the hell out, he’s still nice to have around.

The older novice keeps her sane – Hunk and Lance are her best friends, yeah, but sometimes they get to be a little much. Keith, pyromancy and all, is ironically much calmer and quieter than they are. Usually. Pidge has learned that as long as nobody mentions Shiro, Keith’s temper is not nearly as short as Lance had previously led her to believe.

She knows precious little about the older novice. He’s a third-year, and if he hadn’t sold his soul to a demon, he’d be graduating into the journeyman class at the end of this year. It takes four years for most novices (at least), but Keith is infamously quicker than any of his peers. Pidge would be lying if she said she wasn’t jealous. Journeyman training can take anywhere from two to four more years – with Keith it surely would’ve only been two – and then he would’ve been a proper magus like Master Shirogane. The whole situation seems like a waste to her.

Then again, Keith has taken on the task of finding her brother and father as part of his own contract. Pidge really can’t fathom that – they’d only just met, and he owed her nothing. But he’d done it anyway. She supposes she owes him for that, so she does her best to stand up for him whenever Lance takes the dumb rivalry thing a bit too seriously or Hunk gets too nosy about Keith’s origins.

She won’t deny she’s curious about that – Keith is an enigma, really. Master Shirogane knew more about him than anyone else, and Matt had only told Pidge bits and pieces – Shiro rescued Keith from a small town out in the Wastes three years ago when Keith was sixteen, scrawny as a deer in winter, and full of fire. Far as she knows, he has no family to speak of, and no future besides the one at the Citadel, so it’s sort of unsurprising that he threw it all away for the one person who offered him a chance he never thought he’d have.

Pidge likes Keith Kogane, considers him a friend, and so she’s getting worried about him.

He’d told her a few days ago in clipped sentences that Kurobasanir had determined that Shiro was a gladiator in Emperor Zarkon’s arena fights in Daibazaal, and it was likely her brother and father were being held prisoner there too, though they hadn’t been seen in the arena. She was just as upset about waiting until Samhain as he was, but Pidge suspects Keith’s grief runs much deeper than he lets on.

In recent days especially, he’s been more quiet, reclusive, turning down invitations for dinner and leaving their lunch table early. His concentration slips in class, too, which can be dangerous for
someone with Keith’s skillset. Lance says he’s brooding, but Pidge knows better – he’s grieving. Getting the news that Shiro is a gladiator in Hell hit him hard – she sees it in the deep furrow of his brows, the thin and uncertain line of his mouth, the stubborn set to his jaw, the faraway quality of his gaze. He’s dwelling on it, and it’s not healthy for him.

Evidently this grief has been bleeding into Keith’s, er, relationship with the incubus, because Kurobasanir accompanies him to one of their bi-weekly study sessions in the library. The incubus trails Keith like a kicked puppy, albeit a very large, horned, fanged, clawed, winged, overall monstrous and terrifying kicked puppy. He’s made himself visible to them, for whatever reason. Lance blinks, and looks to Pidge, opening his mouth, but she gives him a small nod and the seer relaxes infinitesimally.

“Um,” Hunk squeaks as Keith sits down, the incubus draping himself over the back of the novice’s chair, “hi?”

“Hi,” Kurobasanir drawls, leaning obviously into Keith’s back. Keith ignores him and opens his satchel to get his books. “How are you today, therianthrope?”

Hunk opens his mouth, then closes it. “How did you know I…?”

Kurobasanir rolls his eerie gold eyes. “I know all of your gifts, don’t be silly. You are a therianthrope, a beginner who has not yet mastered the art of animal shapeshifting, but who will one day discover you are best at shifting into a brown bear.”

Keith pauses, the furrow of his brows deepening. Pidge asks his question for him. “You have precognition? I didn’t know incubi could see the future.”

Kurobasanir tilts his head, and Pidge swears she sees a flicker of confusion in his face. “Precognition? Oh, not so. I can sense your souls, and therefore your gifts, your magic, and the potential that magic contains.”

“A brown bear?” Hunk says, eyes wide. “That’s…that’s awesome!”

“I also see in you an above-average alchemist.” Kurobasanir shrugs, and nods to Pidge. “As are you, though your true gift is that of psychometry – the reading of objects. A rare and curious gift, to be sure. Are you the sort who receives only faint echoes of knowledge, or do you have vivid and violent visions?”

“Visions,” Pidge replies, warily. “Though that’s none of your business.” She also dabbles in some rather questionable herbology, but isn’t about to tell him so.

He inclines his head, and she gets the sense that he knows all her secrets. It rubs her the wrong way. Kurobasanir’s gaze settles then on Lance. “And of course the seer with an unnaturally powerful Sight.” He glances at Lance’s wrist, where his claws had left Lance bleeding in the middle of Thaumaturgy class a week or so ago – it’s healed completely. “Hmm. Have a healer friend, or is that your own doing?” the demon asks.

Lance, who leaps at the opportunity to show off, says, “Miss Plax is the best water healer in the Citadel, and she gives me private lessons – I’m her best student, just sayin.’”

“How can you be her best student when you spend most of the lessons fawning over her?” Hunk says under his breath. Lance gasps, betrayed, and blushes.

“Congratulations,” Kurobasanir chuckles, examining his claws. They gleam in the sunlight like obsidian knives, each curling to a wicked point. “Healing is a good magick to know...humans are
“So easily hurt, after all.”

“Uhh,” Lance says, “Hell’s that supposed to mean?” He exchanges a wary glance with Hunk.

“Whatever you’d like it to.” Kurobasanir yawns lazily. His teeth are sharper than his claws, Pidge thinks.

Keith glares down at his book. Pidge leans over – he’s not even reading the right section. “Hey,” she says, nudging him while trying to keep away from Kurobasanir, “you alright?”

The demon’s eyes are heavy on them and they both ignore it. “Yeah,” Keith says, quietly. Then he hesitates and admits, “Tired,” and then, “could be better.”

“You and Mr. Broody gonna share with the rest of the table?” Lance asks, eyebrows raised.

“I’m not brooding!” Keith retorts, far too loudly. Pidge hopes the librarians don’t kick them out; she’s trying to stay on their good side so she can call in favors later if necessary.

“Well, you are something,” Lance says. “Seriously, dude, you’ve been out of it lately.”

“Keith has been out of lately, hasn’t he?” Kurobasanir agrees, tapping his claws on Keith’s shoulder. “So out of it that he’s been neglecting to fulfill the terms of our contract for three days and counting…”

Keith turns bright red and elbows the demon sharply. “Shut up. That is not – you have no right –”

“Oh, I don’t, do I?” Kurobasanir folds his arms. “Well, maybe if you would just talk to me, this could have been avoided. Or you could have given me some sort of warning that you were planning on holding out on me so I could have wrung a few more climaxes out of you before –”

“La, la, la,” Hunk says, wrinkling his nose, “too much information, Fake Shiro.”

Keith buries his burning face in his palms. Pidge pats his arm awkwardly and says, “I really don’t think he was planning on ‘holding out on you.’ Not really how depression works.”

Keith stills and peeks at her from between his gloved fingers. “I don’t…”

Pidge shakes her head. “You do. Depression is part of the grieving process, after all. Second to last stage, so at least there’s that.”

“Oh, shit,” Lance says. He narrows his eyes at Kurobasanir, who looks very confused. “You been trying to pressure depressed Keith into sex? Not cool, man…demon…whatever.”

Kurobasanir blinks slowly. “What,” he says, “is depression?”

“You’re kidding me,” Hunk says. Nobody laughs. He blanches. “Fake Shiro, hold up, how old are you again?”

“Eons,” Kurobasanir retorts. “It must not be very important if I do not know of it.”

Face expressionless, Keith swiftly gathers up his books, shoves them into his satchel, and leaves the table. Despite being able to read Keith’s mind, Kurobasanir seems startled, as if he wasn’t at all expecting that reaction. “Nice one,” Lance says. “Five silver says you’re gonna have blue balls for another three days.”

Kurobasanir’s eyes flare in alarm, then narrow. “Not possible,” he snaps. “His body will begin to
feel the strain of being apart from me soon.”

Pidge’s skin prickles. “Sorry, what?”

Kurobasanir’s lip curls. “Don’t they teach you children anything? Nothing useful, I suppose.” He sighs, and it sounds more resigned than irritated. “The term ‘bound’ when used in relation to a Void-born is not used lightly, especially in contracts with greater Void-born such as myself. Keith is bound to me, and if he fails to frequently consummate our contract’s terms, the magic link between us will cause him unimaginable desire to do so…and then, if he still fails, unimaginable pain.”

“Does Keith know this?” Lance demands after a moment of horrified silence from the trio.

“I would hope so; he does love his research of the taboo,” Kurobasanir says coolly, unmoved by their horror. “Now, explain this depression phenomenon to me and why, exactly, it is interfering with Keith’s libido.”

Hunk mumbles, “Er...well, he’s not gonna want to do things when he’s, y’know, super sad. And numb. And stuff.”

“Sad and...numb?” Kurobasanir repeats, eyes widening slightly. “Is this an illness of some sort?”

“Yes, in a way,” Pidge says. “But it’s a mental one, not like a virus or plague.”

“So if it dwells in the mind, why is his body affected?” Kurobasanir presses. Pidge almost pities him for his earnest bewilderment. “He has been rather...unresponsive.”

Hunk rubs his temple. “Right,” he says. “Because he’s depressed, not horny.”

Nonplussed, Kurobasanir says, “Can the two not coexist?”

Lance throws up his hands. “Wow, you really could care less about his well-being, huh? Can’t say I’m surprised, demon and all, but wow, you just totally missed the point.”

Pidge knows Lance is in trouble as soon as Kurobasanir’s ears flick back, and then the incubus is lunging in a whirl of hissing smoke, sending Lance tumbling backwards, out of his chair, and down onto the hard floor. Hunk leaps to his feet in alarm, eyes gleaming a brighter brown than usual and mouth bristling with sharp, inhuman teeth – a bear’s, Pidge thinks. But even if he was in full bear form, Pidge doubts he could do anything to stop Kurobasanir.

Lance stares in cold terror as the demon roars in his face, bat wings beating at the air and tail lashing angrily, once clawed hand braced around the seer’s neck. You forget what I am, Lance Espinosa, he snarls, eyes flickering with fire. Save your snark for a being who is not capable of shredding your pathetic mortal body to bloody shreds in seconds.

“Okay,” Lance croaks, “okay, okay, please no shredding –”

But aren’t you the healer’s best student? Kurobasanir growls, broad chest heaving and claws poised to strike – fuck, Pidge thinks, he’s pissed. But why – at the implication that he doesn’t care about Keith? Pidge thought that was kind of a given, but…

“Let him go,” Hunk says bravely, voice quavering and raspy as fur sprouts over his skin. Kurobasanir glances at him, still fuming, but his grip around Lance’s throat loosens enough for him to squirm free.
“Please don’t, I’m not that good, I can’t heal s-shredding,” Lance stammers, and Kurobasanir glowers for a few more moments before shaking his head and releasing the shaken seer, who immediately hurries to Hunk’s side. There are scratches on his neck, but no blood, thankfully.

The demon sniffs, bringing himself up to his full height, wings folding neatly at his back. Study hard, but do not forget the lessons that truly matter, he warns, and then vanishes in a sulfurous swirl of smoke.

Lance wheezes, eyes huge, and then sees Hunk’s fur, canines, and clawed paw-hands, and grins widely, smacking him on the back fondly. “I think that’s the farthest you’ve gotten so far, awesome!”

“Thanks,” Hunk manages, brow beaded with sweat.

Needless to say, they don’t study that day.

* 

Pidge is combing her hair later that night when the demon appears in her mirror behind her.

If she was the kind of girl to scream, she would have screamed, but as it is she just releases a long and awful stream of curse words and whirls around, holding out her ivory comb like a knife. It could probably do some serious damage, if she tried.

You’re probably right, Kurobasanir says placidly from where he’s crouched next to her wardrobe. But I entreat you not to attempt to stab me with your comb.

“You can read my mind, too?” Pidge whispers. Her mouth is dry as the Wastes. Why the fuck is there a greater incubus in her bedroom?! Her mind works quick, quick as her pounding heart under her worn nightshirt, running through the possibilities and landing on only one terrible likelihood: the incubus is hungry, and Keith hasn’t been providing...so it went looking elsewhere.

Kurobasanir tilts his head, slow and almost reptilian, she thinks. Of course I can. And I am frankly offended you presume I would have such untoward intentions towards you, Katie Holt.

Pidge doesn’t believe him for a second. “Then why, exactly,” she grits out, “are you here?”

I do apologize, Kurobasanir sighs, and does look regretful. Nothing about this situation is ideal. But Keith and I cannot continue in this way.

Pidge gawks at him. “You came to me for...for contract advice?!”

If you must call it that, Kurobasanir murmurs. He is not receptive to any advances, nor does he have interest in many other things – not simply sex. Also food, and friends, and his studies –

“I don’t understand,” Pidge says flatly. “You’re a greater incubus. Don’t you just take what you need, and leave?”

Kurobasanir looks...hurt. He bows his head. I do not wish to take anything from Keith by force, he admits.

Pidge is speechless. “Um,” she says. “Isn’t...isn’t that kind of...the point?”

No, Kurobasanir mutters sullenly. I only require sustenance, not...not Keith’s suffering. Quite the opposite, really.
“Uh, wow, okay then,” Pidge says, cautiously setting down her comb. “That’s...very thoughtful of you? Weirdly thoughtful actually. What the fuck?”

Yes, Kurobasanir says, and he honestly looks pretty pitiful, all hunched over with his wings drooping and exhaustion clear on his face, which still resembles Shiro’s. What the fuck, indeed. I don’t know why I feel this. Keith is...endearing? Terribly endearing. It’s awful.

“Uh-huh,” Pidge manages. “So this is...a new phenomenon for you, then? Caring?”

Do not mock me, Katie, Kurobasanir grumbles, folding his arms and...is he seriously pouting?

“Nope, no, no mockery here,” she adds hastily. “It’s just...incubi aren’t known for taking into account humans’ feelings. At all.”

You do not need to tell me this, I am quite aware, he says, clearly aggravated. What you do need to tell me is how I fix this.

“Depression?” Pidge squawks in disbelief. “It’s not something you can ‘fix’ with a snap of your fingers.”

Then how? Kurobasanir presses.

“I’m not sure treating depression really falls under your role in Keith’s life —”

Does it look like I care? It does not look like he cares.

She swallows, and folds her arms. “Okay. Fine. But if I’m telling you, you’re going to listen, and you’re not going to butt in and say you know better than me on this, ’cause you don’t. Got it?”

Yes, he sighs reluctantly. Impart your wisdom, Katie Holt.

Pidge isn’t sure how she became a demon’s therapist. “Firstly,” she tells him, leaning against her desk and keeping the comb close at hand, “you need to talk to him. Be patient.”

My patience threshold is significantly lowered when I am starving, he mutters. She gives him a sharp look and he shuts up.

“He just found out his best friend is a gladiator trapped in Hell. Obviously he’s upset about that, and I’m not sure seeing Shiro’s face on you is helping him much.”

Kurobasanir looks stricken at this. You think it would be better if I took someone else’s form?


Alright. The demon concentrates very hard, his brow furrowing and mist curling from his skin. After an uncomfortably long pause, he looks up, pained and panicky, and whispers, I...I can’t.

“Can’t what?” Pidge snaps. “Shift into someone else? C’mon, every incubus can do that.”

I can’t! he exclaims, and Pidge falters – he’s serious. He shifts into Shiro, flickering between the Shiro that left the Citadel and the white-haired one with a metal arm. This makes no sense. I’m...stuck.

“Not the worst form to be stuck in,” Pidge offers.

He glares at her, but there’s no venom in it; he’s truly shaken by this. It is the worst form if it
means I am unable to seduce Keith, he snaps. Have any other great advice?!

“It’s not my fault you’re stuck as Shiro,” Pidge retorts. “And as a matter of fact, I do. You said he’s not eating? Well, bring him food. Has he been neglecting personal hygiene? When was the last time he bathed?”

Kurobasanir frowns. I...don’t think he has, lately. He tilts his head. I still do not understand this ‘depression’ concept. If Keith is so sad, why is he not weeping or showing other outward signs of grief?

“It’s more internalized,” Pidge says. “It’s not just sadness, anyway – also guilt, apathy, fatigue, stress, low self-esteem…”

Low self-esteem? Why would Keith have that issue? He is powerful and attractive; are those not human ideals? Kurobasanir is baffled.

Pidge shakes her head. “From what I know, he’s from a small Wastes town full of prejudice against witches and is basically an orphan; he hasn’t exactly been surrounded by support and kindness.”

Oh. Kurobasanir hesitates. Is lack of sleep also a symptom of this ailment?

“Yeah, why? Has he not been sleeping?”

Far less than usual. When he does, it is restless. He often has nightmares. Humans are delicate – lack of sleep can be very dangerous –

Kurobasanir is panicking again. “Slow down,” Pidge mutters, “I get it, you’re worried.” She actually doesn’t get it at all. Demons don’t worry about humans. All of this is backwards. But it does make her feel a bit better about Keith making this contract in the first place. The demon eyes her desperately, clearly wanting more advice. Pidge pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs. “Listen,” she says, “I’m no expert, but I think the best thing you can do, if you really want to help, is just be there for him.”

He does not want me around, Kurobasanir mumbles.

“Because all you do is try to fuck him!” Pidge exclaims, throwing up her hands in sheer exasperation.

Fair point...what else do you suggest I try to do?

“Oh, I don’t know, listen to him? Don’t bother him? It helps to not be cooped up, take him out to the woods, maybe. And if he wants to, snuggling can do a world of good. Or a hug. Or just touching. Intimacy can be good, doesn’t have to be sexual. Got it?” He looks lost. Pidge grinds her teeth. “Basically: cuddle with him, no groping. Tell him you’re there for him, too, so he knows.”

He will not believe me, Kurobasanir murmurs, looking away. But...I will try, if you truly think it will help. His eyes narrow. I will know if you are lying.

“You would I lie,” Pidge sighs.

He continues to squint suspiciously until, seemingly satisfied, he nods and sits back on his heels. Thank you, Katie Holt. Let us hope your advice proves useful.

“Is that all?” Pidge says. Very clearly, she thinks, Can you get the fuck out of my room, please?
He chuckles dryly and shakes his head. *There is, actually, one other thing. I was hoping you might help me figure out what this is.* The demon holds up a fine silver chain, upon which hangs a large purple stone – amethyst, she thinks. She looks at him quizzically and he tosses it to her; she catches it in cautiously cupped palms. *Use your gift,* he urges. *Read it.*

She frowns, not eager to delve into the history of an entirely unknown object. “Where did you get this?”

Kurobasanir shrugs. *I’m unsure as to how I came about it,* he says. *I simply had it.*

She raises an eyebrow. “Okay...since when?”

But he just shrugs again. *I don’t know,* he says. *My memory has been...mm, spotty, as of late.*

That’s mildly concerning. The incubus has amnesia?

He waits impatiently and against her better judgment, she relents, curling her fingers around the chain and focusing hard on its heart, on the pendant. It’s cool against her skin, and, as she thought, it’s amethyst – a high grade variety, deep violet with a glossy shine, though this pendant isn’t for aesthetic purposes.

“It’s a protection amulet,” she murmurs. The demon watches, rapt. “Did you know that in ancient times, people thought amethyst could prevent drunkenness? That’s where its name comes from. The root is methysko – to intoxicate.”

*How interesting.* He’s impatient.

She rolls her eyes. “I suppose you’re gonna be in my head while I read this?”

*Of course.*

“Fine,” she huffs, and begins.

It takes a little while, longer than usual, which is troubling. Amethysts like this one are used for protective pendants, meant specifically to protect, calm, and cleanse the soul, which she thinks is ironic considering whose hands it fell into. So it should be easy for her to delve into its mysterious past. But as soon as she tries, she feels it – the telltale remnants of infernal magic, Void magic, clinging to the pendant’s quintessence, staining and obscuring bits and pieces.

*It has been in Hell,* the incubus observes. *And exposed to dangerous magicks.*

“Yeah, no shit,” Pidge mutters, squeezing her eyes shut and focusing harder. “Quiet.”

*It will not harm you?*

“I said, quiet.”

*Sorry.*

She pushes past the stains and immediately begins to hear voices, shouts and curses and...damn, whoever last had this thing did not have a good time. She lets her mind clear, her breathing even out, and listens until the images begin to settle in her mind; the necklace’s memories, in a way.

The necklace’s owner is being dragged along the ground, struggling futilely against the beings on either side of them. The beings aren’t human – they tower high above the necklace’s owner, with purple skin that more closely resembles a mottling bruise than the amethyst’s hue. Their heads are
horned, scaled, with tufts of fur and protruding teeth like a boar’s. They wear...armor. Their eyes gleam gold.

*Galra*, the incubus whispers.

Pidge focuses harder on the owner. It’s a man, she’s pretty certain though she can’t see his face – muscled arms and legs, a broad but flat chest, a low and rough voice when he shouts, uselessly, for help. Black hair hangs into his face. She feels, like an echo, the waves of dull pain rolling through his body – he’s been beaten, probably more than once. His knuckles are bruised, his ribs creak in his chest, and one of his eyes is nearly swollen shut. He’s afraid – and angry. He doesn’t know what’s going to happen next.

The Galra drag him down a dark corridor; Pidge can’t make out much of their surroundings because the owner isn’t looking at them – he stares straight ahead in dawning horror as a pair of wide doors swings open, revealing a huge arena. The stands are full of people – no, demons, other Galra, all standing and cheering. There are other humans, and some other Void-borns, non-Galra, gathered beside the doors with other guards. They all look terrified.

The owner is shoved forward, and then he sees the person in front of him, and Pidge’s heart nearly stops.

It’s Matt.

*I’m not gonna make it*, he whispers, his voice hollow, distant, as if heard from deep, deep underwater. *I’m never gonna see my family again.*

Pidge can feel her control slipping. She can’t help it. It’s Matt. He’s right there, he’s –

*Focus. You can do it, don’t let go, not yet*, Kurobasanir urges.

There is another Galra in the arena; he points at Matt with his sword. *That one.*

Matt is frozen, shaking, terrified. *He’s going to die.* That is the owner’s single thought before he lunges forward, shoving past Matt and then whirling, knocking him to the ground hard. Matt goes down easily under the larger male, his eyes huge, mouth hanging open.

*Take care of your father*, the necklace’s owner says, and it’s...she knows that voice –

*Shiro*, Matt gasps, and then he’s wrenched away, thrown out into the arena in her brother’s place.

Pidge’s eyes snap open with a cry. She slaps a hand over her mouth, breathing unevenly, her throat tight. Kurobasanir is as stunned as she is. “Where,” Pidge whispers when she trusts her voice not to break, “did you get this?!”

*I told you the truth*, Kurobasanir says. *I don’t know. I just had it.*

“It was Shiro’s,” Pidge says, numb. “Shiro saved my brother’s life. He...” She can’t finish the sentence, crumpling forward, down to the ground. Kurobasanir blinks at her silently. She lifts her gaze to him in accusation. “Were you there?” she asks. “Did you see them?”

*No*, Kurobasanir says quietly. *I...I don’t think so.*

“You don’t think so,” Pidge repeats, bitterly. “Well. Isn’t that just convenient.” She throws the necklace back at him with as much force as she can muster.
He catches it nimbly on a claw, and peers at the sparkling stone. *This belonged to Takashi Shirogane.*

“Have you shown it to Keith?” Pidge asks, hauling herself back up to her feet with effort, hastily wiping at her eyes. Kurobasanir shakes his head. “Good. Don’t. Because it won’t help him feel any better.”

*This stays between us, then?*

“I think that’s for the best,” Pidge agrees. “At least for now.”

*Then it shall be our secret, Katie Holt.*

She stares at him and thinks, *What are you?* and then, *Who are you?*

She knows he hears her questions, but he answers neither of them. Instead, he inclines his head, tucks the pendant away, and melts away into the shadows.

*

Keith doesn’t know how long he’s been laying in bed. Too long, probably.

At what point does it become unhealthy to remain laying in bed? He thinks he’s passed that point awhile ago, and doesn’t really care. He still has a pile of homework, but honestly, what’s the point? Lance is right; there is no point in doing it. It won’t matter that he was top of his class when he’s dead and his soul is in the claws of a particularly clingy incubus.

Said incubus appears in his bed as if on command. Keith suppresses a sigh, but is taken aback when he’s not immediately smothered and or groped. Shiro’s just kind of...hovering.

“What,” Keith says, staring resolutely at the ceiling. He can already feel the itch under his skin, a result of their bond, which he’s been dreading. He’s terrified of the thought of losing control of his own body, not to mention of his own arousal and desire, but he also knows it’s inevitable. It’ll at least be easier to just give in when he’s out of his mind with lust.

“What,” Keith says, staring resolutely at the ceiling. He can already feel the itch under his skin, a result of their bond, which he’s been dreading. He’s terrified of the thought of losing control of his own body, not to mention of his own arousal and desire, but he also knows it’s inevitable. It’ll at least be easier to just give in when he’s out of his mind with lust.


Keith turns his head on the pillow to look at him, the only Shiro he will ever be allowed to have. “That’s me,” he says.

“What are you doing?” Shiro asks, voice weirdly soft, quiet.

“Resting,” Keith says.

“You should be sleeping,” Shiro tells him, still in that strange voice, as if Keith is a small and frightened animal.

“What are you, my mother?” Keith snaps, and rolls away.

“I only wish to help you,” Shiro tries.

Keith scoffs. “Help me? Yeah, help me to come, anyway.”

“No,” Shiro says. “Not that. I mean, eventually, yes, ideally, but –”
“Why don’t you feed off anyone else?” Keith blurts.

Shiro makes a low sound in his throat. “I don’t want to,” he says, sounding as puzzled by this statement as Keith feels.

“Lucky me,” Keith deadpans.

“I brought you some food,” Shiro says. “You haven’t been eating. You need to eat.”

“Trying to fatten me up, huh?”

“Keith, please.” And that gives Keith pause. The incubus must be desperate if he’s pleading. And Keith isn’t heartless. He rolls over, eyebrows raised.

“What did you bring for lunch?” he sighs.

Shiro gawks at him. “Keith,” he says slowly, “it’s nearly midnight.”

“Oh.” Keith blinks back dully. “Dinner, then.”

“Yes. What would you like to eat? The options are infinite,” Shiro says.

“Dunno,” Keith mutters. “I don’t mind much either way.”

Shiro’s eyes narrow. “Just name something. Anything!”

Keith huffs. “Chocolate.”

“You cannot live off of chocolate,” Shiro reproaches, but hands him a square of dark chocolate which Keith nibbles on, the bittersweetness blooming on his tongue. It’s good. “You’re welcome,” Shiro grumbles. “Now...real food?”

Keith hesitates. “Can you make soup?”

“Of course. What kind?”

Keith doesn’t really know, and gestures vaguely — he just wants something warm and savory and soothing, like the kind of soup his father used to make out of scraps from the garden with bits of egg and broth from the scrawny flock of chickens.

“Here,” Shiro says, procuring a bowl of soup from thin air and easing Keith to sit up like he’s an invalid. But Keith isn’t complaining, because as the steam rising from the bowl curls towards his face, he smells the very same soup he had imagined from home, and his gut twists in an unexpected surge of emotion. His fingers shake badly when he reaches for the bowl and a sob catches in his throat.

Shiro’s hands steady his own, warm and firm and comforting. Startled, Keith looks up at the incubus, and feels, not for the first time, utterly lost. How can someone be so much like the person he loved most, and yet so undeniably not them?

“Thanks,” Keith whispers, and lifts the bowl to his lips once the tremors leave his hands. Shiro watches silently, and when Keith is done with the soup and asks tentatively for some bread, Shiro gives him a roll with the fluffiest dough Keith has ever eaten. Eating makes him realize how hungry he was to begin with, and he thinks maybe Shiro has a point – he’s not taking care of himself.
“No,” Shiro says. “You really aren’t.”

Mouth full of bread, Keith mumbles, “Mm, thanks uh lof, Fhiro.”

“Close your mouth,” Shiro says, and scoops Keith up from the bed, striding across the room with him. Keith almost chokes on his roll and Shiro pats his head. “Don’t panic, I’m only taking you to the bath.”

Keith almost kicks him in the head, sending crumbs spraying everywhere as he splutters, “You can’t just seduce me with soup, that’s not – I don’t want –” His hands are sparking madly, and Shiro pauses mid-step, peering down at him and his fiery fingertips with his brows scrunched together. “Don’t,” Keith says again. “I know I need to give you what is owed, and that sooner rather than later I’ll be unable to resist, but –”

Shiro shakes his head and sets Keith down on the cool tile, crouching in front of him and tilting his head, one hand cupping Keith’s cheek lightly. “I would rather it not reach that point,” he says. “The thought of you unable to resist is not appealing to me.”

“Oh,” Keith whispers, vaguely aware that his world is tipping dangerously on its already wobbly axis. “You...really?”

Shiro nods; a short, jerky motion. “I will do nothing to you in the bath if you do not want it. I simply noticed you had been...neglecting your bathing habits, and as I understand it, sometimes a nice bath lifts humans’ spirits a great deal.”

Keith bites his lip. “Do you promise?” he asks, and maybe he does sound pitifully like a child, desperately seeking affirmation that he can be safe here, that he can perhaps even trust, here, with his almost-Shiro.

“I promise, and I always keep my promises,” Shiro says, brushing Keith’s hair out of his face. “I also promise I am here for you, Keith.”

Keith’s breath catches, and he thinks of whitewater rapids and sheer cliff faces and a shouting mob and a shouting man on a black horse just out of reach who once said those very same words to him years ago, and he crumples forward into the incubus’s surprised embrace. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Shiro rubs his back and tips his head to rest over the top of Keith’s. “No need to thank me,” he murmurs. “It is, after all, covered under the terms of our contract.”

Keith shakes his head, nudging the incubus away and standing, fiddling with his tunic for a moment before lifting it up and off. “I think we must have an unconventional contract, then.”

“No,” Shiro says. “I think I am just unconventionally fond of you.”

Keith flushes, yanking his pants and undergarments off before he can think about that for too long. But the incubus just keeps looking at him, and it is in an absurdly fond way. “What?” Keith snaps, folding his arms. “Bet you’ve seen lots of naked humans; stop staring like you’ve just struck gold.”

“Mm, I think I have; you’re radiant,” Shiro purrs, eyes half-lidded and lips quirks. Keith turns redder. “I may have seen many naked humans, but none half as beautiful as you.”

“Stop – cease your seduction immediately,” Keith warns, pointing a trembling finger at him and stomping over to the bathtub. “It’s not working!”
“Seduction?” Shiro clicks his tongue. “Oh, no. Flattery, perhaps, but the most honest flattery there is. Has anyone ever told you that you have the loveliest eyes?”

“You,” Keith mumbles while turning on the water, “are the worst.”

“Aww,” Shiro coos. “But I made you soup.”

Keith makes a rude gesture at him and hops into the tub before the incubus can say anymore embarrassing things. However, he’s undeterred, and leans over the edge on his elbows, smirking. “Embarrassing?” Shiro repeats. “Why are you embarrassed by praise, baby?”

Keith scowls and fumbles with the soap. “It’s hyperbole, is what it is,” he mutters. “I know what you want, and –”

“To wash your hair? Oh, however did you know?” Shiro snatches the soap from him and begins lathering it into Keith’s damp hair, pouring palmfuls of water over it as he does. Keith considers trying to stop him, but then...it’s nice, actually, having Shiro’s fingers in his hair, working through every tangle and snarl carefully, the sweet scent of citrus filling Keith’s senses all the while.

“You’re good at this,” Keith says, quiet and mostly without meaning to. He’s sleepy; he had no idea this activity could be so calming.

Shiro hums. “Thank you. I like touching your hair.”

Keith snorts. “Strange.”

“Is it?” Shiro’s fingers rub briefly at the back of his neck, lifting the tiny fine hairs there as Keith shivers. “There are certainly stranger things. Many of which I think you would enjoy.”

“Hmm,” Keith says. “We shall see about that...later. For now, I think I’m just going to stay in here.”

The incubus chuckles. “Are you, now? Well, I won’t stop you, though I will stand by to make sure you don’t fall asleep and drown.”

“What would happen to our contract if I did drown?” Keith ventures. The fingers in his hair still.

“I will not let you drown,” Shiro says.

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Shiro sighs. “Not much would change, I suppose,” he replies. “Except that you would be dead, and I would be spending my time with your soul, not...this.” His palm sweeps down Keith’s back, then up again, before it can go anywhere suggestive. Keith’s grateful for the boundaries.

“How does one fuck a soul?” Keith asks.

Shiro grins; Keith can’t see it but he knows it’s there on his face. “The concept is the same,” he says. “It just doesn’t work so well in this realm, nor in any realm of the living.”

“But in Hell it works just fine?”

“Well, souls are tortured frequently in Hell,” Shiro says, sobering. “So, yes, their forms are physical there; they can feel pain and pleasure alike just like you and me.”

Keith draws swirls in the water, watching the ripples spread outwards, breaking the soapy white
film that has gathered on the surface. “I’ve always wondered...why is it that demons torture souls to gain power from them? Is there no other way?”

“Any way would result in the eventual destruction of the soul,” Shiro points out. “Does it really matter?”

“Would you rather torture me or fuck me into nothingness?” Keith asks, and immediately wishes he hadn’t.

But Shiro says, “Neither,” and then, before Keith can pursue that further, “I see your point. And I have no insightful answer for you, other than that torture, violence, cruelty...is often the quickest way to break a soul. Void-born are not generally patient beings...you know why we have that name, yes?”

“Obviously,” Keith says. “You were all born, created, what have you, from the Void.”

“A simplification,” Shiro says. “We are the Void, Keith. We do not have souls, but our being, our quintessence – that is a piece of the Void, or so our stories go. And the Void, because it is nothing, is always wanting for something. It always hungers for more. More power, wealth, lust; whatever it is, the Void longs for it. And so we long for it, too.”

Keith turns, slowly, to face him. “That,” he murmurs, “is very sad.”

He reaches out to hold Shiro’s face in his palm as Shiro had held his. The incubus tenses, then leans into the touch, and Keith does not know if he is so obliging because he is starving, or because he is truly fond.

“It is neither sad nor happy,” Shiro murmurs back. “It simply is.”

“But you will never be satisfied,” Keith says. “Do I have that right?”

“Satisfaction is a human concept unknown to us,” Shiro replies. “We do not seek satisfaction, just more, for eternity. In some ways, I think humans are the same.”

“Some people do stupid things for more, yes,” Keith concedes. “Or to get back what they have lost.”

Shiro kisses his palm and Keith’s fingers twitch. “What you are doing for Takashi Shirogane is not a stupid thing. It is a brave and selfless and strange thing, but not stupid.”

“Pidge and Lance and Hunk think it is,” Keith sighs. “They think I’ve thrown my life away.” He eyes Shiro and takes his hand away, giving himself a few more rinses before grabbing his towel and stepping out bundled up in clean cotton. “But of course you’ll tell me I made the right choice.”

“I may be a little biased,” Shiro muses. “But you are not a creature of inaction, Keith – you are not one to wallow and stagnate in your grief. You did what you felt had to be done.” His hands settles upon Keith’s shoulder, and Keith does not brush it off. “I don’t think your Shiro will find it a stupid decision, either. Though he may protest to me dragging your soul off afterwards.”

“Protest, yes; probably,” Keith sighs. “But he will survive without me. He has for most of his life.”

“So have you,” Shiro says.

“Yes, I survived,” Keith says. “But he made me feel alive.” He stares down at the tiles, and is glad that Shiro doesn’t try to carry him again, just takes him by the hand and leads him back to bed.
Keith dresses in his nightclothes in silence while Shiro walks around the room, tidying up the mess Keith has allowed it to become. He has a fleeting image of Shiro in a maid’s uniform and giggles.

Shiro shoots him a crooked smile over his shoulder. “Would you like that?” he chuckles. “I bet you would.”

“Maybe,” Keith says, laying back down in bed and tugging the sheets over himself, “but for now I’d settle for snuggling, since you’re in such a docile mood.”

“Docile? I resent that,” Shiro says without the slightest trace of resentment as he returns to bed. “Do you actually like snuggling? You’ve never struck me as very tactile.”

“I’m not,” Keith admits, looking up at him through his lashes while Shiro slides under the sheets and inches closer to him. “Most touching makes me uncomfortable, I’m not a big hugger or anything like that. But…”

He hesitates. Shiro had touched him often, sparingly at first, then more and more the closer they grew as friends. Little touches, hands on shoulders or arms draped around waists, hugs in greeting and farewell, sitting so close their thighs touched, curled together on Shiro’s sofa while reading or drawing or drinking tea. Keith missed those touches, those little gestures of familiarity and comfort, more than he had ever expected to.

“Ah,” Shiro says. “Come here, then.” And Keith does, and Shiro wraps his metal arm around Keith’s waist, hand heavy on the small of his back, Keith’s head nestled up against his collarbones. “Like this?”

Keith nods. They lay there in silence for a few minutes before Keith whispers, “Can I kiss you?”

Shiro pulls back a little, brows raised. “I’m not going to stop you,” he says, amused.

“No,” Keith murmurs. “Tell me.”

Shiro blinks, tilts his head closer, and whispers, “Kiss me, baby,” and Keith does.

The incubus keeps Keith in control of the kiss, opening easily to his tongue as Keith’s hand curls around the back of his neck, guiding him in, the sensation of Shiro’s lips on his own lingering even when he breaks the kiss to breathe now and then. Keith’s body, which has felt so hollow and numb these last few days, flares to life as their breath mingles and gentle hands rub soothing circles into his jutting hip bones and arching back.

Shiro hums when Keith’s hardening cock presses to his thigh, and Keith breathes unevenly in the interim, waiting for Shiro to take his due. But he doesn’t; just contents himself with nuzzling into Keith’s neck, kissing his skin sweetly and dipping his hands under the hem of Keith’s nightshirt to stroke the bare skin of his back.

“Aren’t you hungry?” Keith whispers, breath hitching as he looks up at Shiro, whose pupils are blown wide and dark.

“Mmm,” Shiro says. “I always am.”

But still, he does not touch. So Keith takes the initiative, sliding a hand into his pajama pants and shuddering when he makes contact with his half-hard cock. He slides the pants down enough to take it out, the elastic snug just under his balls, Shiro’s gaze hot on the motions of his hand as he pumps his cock into full hardness. “Planning on helping?” Keith mumbles.
“You’re doing a very good job all by yourself,” Shiro murmurs back, and that sends a bolt of heat through Keith, his cock twitching, needy and leaking just from the incubus’s voice. Keith’s still sleepy from the bath, the citrus smell wreathing their bodies and mixing with the growing musk of sex and sweat. His thumb catches just under the crown and he hiccups on a moan.

“Don’t – don’t you have to bring me to climax?” Keith says, lashes fluttering and balls tightening, not realizing he was already so close.

Shiro’s clothed thigh brushes lightly over his cock and Keith swears, hips jumping forward, seeking friction against Shiro’s sweats. “There are many ways for me to do that, indirectly or otherwise,” he chuckles, shifting until his muscled thigh is between Keith’s legs, letting him rut onto it, biting back moans and whines as he smears wetness over the gray fabric. “You sound so hot, baby,” Shiro tells him, petting Keith’s damp hair, tangling his fingers in it just enough to tug, light and teasing. “So hot, just for me.”

Keith clings to him, nails scratching at his back, mouth finding a faded scar and kissing it, sloppy and wet, hips rolling more and more arrhythmically until Shiro’s teeth graze his neck and the incubus whispers, “Come just for me, baby,” and Keith comes in a messy rush, eyes squeezing shut.

Shiro sighs, and Keith feels the wave of magic over him as the incubus magicks the mess away. The sleepiness sets in ten times stronger than before, heavy in his limbs and head. In every text he had read, incubi drained their victims of energy, left them languid and exhausted and barely able to move, but Keith feels none of those things with Shiro. He feels warm, sated, peaceful. Shiro kisses his brow. “Sleep,” he says.

But Keith can feel the insistent bulge against his hip and cracks his eyes open, eying it and then Shiro. “You haven’t finished,” he murmurs, and reaches out.

Shiro catches his hands, a line appearing between his brows. “There is no need,” he says. “Do not feel obligated to touch me, too.”

“There is no obligation,” Keith retorts. “Touching your cock is not exactly a hardship.”

Shiro laughs, a quiet and pleased sound, and inclines his head. “Heh. Then have at it.”

Keith does not take his cock out, though; he’s unsure he has the coordination for that. He just shapes it through the fabric, squeezing and stroking blindly, and Shiro grunts, belly sucking in sharply, sharper when Keith mouths at his nipples. “I didn’t forget,” he mumbles, “you like this. Don’t you?”

“Don’t tempt me to gag you,” Shiro huffs, fingers carding through Keith’s hair, keeping his head right where it is.

“You wouldn’t,” Keith says, nibbling at the peaking flesh until Shiro groans, hips shifting up against Keith’s palm. “You like hearing my voice, feeling it on your skin.”

Shiro’s cock throbs under the fabric, under Keith’s palm, and Keith rubs the slick head between thumb and forefinger, lazy and slow, coaxing little by little. Shiro growls softly, muscles tensing and releasing as his human form slips, tail curling tight around Keith’s calf, ears tapering into downwards-curving points which flick back as his face crumples in pleasure. Keith bites lightly at his chest, into strong muscle overlaid by tantalizing fat which stays pink after Keith’s teeth press into it. He likes leaving marks on Shiro.
Shiro’s chest rumbles with approval under his tongue. Keith licks at his nipples and rubs the heel of his palm hard over Shiro’s cock, huge under his hand, cups his balls and kneads firmly. He feels the moment Shiro jolts and comes, claws raking down Keith’s ribs in a flash of pain that yanks Keith out of his sleepy haze with a hiss.

Shiro’s sweats are ruined, gray fabric darkening with cum, and Keith stares at the angry red marks the incubus left on his skin, five lines of fire across his side, scarlet drops of blood beading up like rubies. Shiro, panting, lays his palm over them, and Keith flinches – his touch is cool on the hot skin. “Sorry, baby,” he murmurs, searching Keith’s wide eyes. “Forgot myself a little, there.”

Keith swallows. “S’okay,” he says.

Shiro sits up, then shuffles down the bed, until his head is level with the scratches, and Keith watches dumbly as the incubus kisses each one, the torn skin knitting back together under his lips. He pauses where he drew blood, then laps it away, purring contentedly. Keith can see the spark of vitality returned to the incubus, glowing bright in his eyes, brighter when he moves back up to take Keith into his arms.

“Feel any better?” Shiro asks.

Keith says, “Yes. Think so.”

Shiro exhales in what could be relief. “Good. I thought we might go on an adventure tomorrow, you and I. What do you say?”

“And adventure?” Keith is doubtful. “In bed?”

Shiro chortles. “Ah, no, not that kind. You and your Shiro used to go riding in the Oscuran Woods, did you not?”

“Oh,” Keith says. “Yes. We did.”

“So?” Shiro prompts, and sounds a bit uncertain.

“I would like that,” Keith says, nods, presses closer. “We can have a picnic,” he adds, quieter, in case Shiro thinks it’s a silly idea.

“Not silly at all,” Shiro says, and hides a kiss in his hair. “Rest, now. I’ll wake you in the morning, and we can leave before noon.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers, and closes his eyes, breathing him in as he drifts off to sleep.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

hoooo this chap took some time but it's finally done! and it's also filthy. like. real filthy. but there's also some plot simmering throughout.

plus, get ready for some bottom! shiro soon..........keith has a lot of pent-up stress, ok, and honestly so does his incubus

The early August morning is sunny with a pleasant breeze, warm enough that Keith is reminded of the Wastes as they ride down into the lowlands, where the Oscuran Woods sprawl in a green oasis amidst the bleak gray mountain peaks.

Keith had expected Kurobasanir might steal a horse, or else continue on foot behind Keith, but instead he’d asked to see Shiro’s horse. The Citadel’s stables were vast, a meandering tangle of stalls and corrals which Keith knew well, and the animals it housed were countless. Horses, yes, but also cattle, sheep and goats, deer, pigs, and some more exotic choices of mounts – Keith tended to stay away from the griffins, with their sharp beaks and sharper attitudes, and the panthers were kept well away from the other animals. He’d heard rumors of even stranger creatures, but had never gone looking. He was content with his Strawberry, a feisty chestnut mare who lifted her head and nickered in greeting as Keith approached.

Shiro had stood at a distance, watching them with a tilted head. “She’s your familiar?” he’d asked.

“Yes,” Keith had said. He’s had Strawberry since he was a kid; his father’s mare foaled her. She was all he had left of that life.

Shiro’s horse had remained at the Citadel stables despite his owner’s absence. Ink was a fine stallion, and Shiro’s grandparents could not afford to keep him at their own home, so the Citadel had offered to continue to house the horse as compensation for their loss (but also for quite selfish reasons; Keith knew the horse was ridden by high-ranking magi more often than not). Ink and Strawberry had become friends over the years, so their stalls were close, and when the demon inquired about Shiro’s horse Keith had only to point across the aisle to where the black stallion was eying them inquisitively.

“But don’t be surprised if he shies away,” Keith said as the demon approached the wary stallion, “he’s nervous around everyone but Shiro.”

“I think I’ll be alright,” the demon had murmured, and held out his hand for the horse to sniff. Ink’s eyes seemed to brighten at the sight of his owner, but his ears went back as soon as he pushed his muzzle into the metal hand, and he balked, snorting and lifting his head in alarm.

Strawberry had watched the proceedings with interest – she was a clever horse, and Keith thought she knew something was off with this new Shiro, too. “Told you so,” Keith had called, arms folded.

But the demon was not dissuaded. “C’mere,” he’d cooed, wiggling his fingers at the horse, who eyed them like they were venomous snakes. Frowning, he’d tried with his left hand, and to Keith’s
surprise Ink had taken a few steps forward, nostrils flared and lower lip quivering curiously. “That’s it,” Shiro said, “hi. Hi, pretty pony. So pretty. Hello!”

Keith had looked at Strawberry in bewilderment. “Pretty pony?” he mouthed. Strawberry snorted, unimpressed.

Then Ink had, slowly but surely, snuffled at Shiro’s fingertips, let out a high, excited whinny, and did not balk once the entire time Shiro smugly saddled him up.

Now they ride side by side on the mountain path at a jaunty trot, and Keith wonders how it is that he looks so much like Shiro even in the way he sits in the saddle, hands relaxed where they hold the reins, eyes surveying the landscape like a proud king.

“A king?” Shiro grins, wolfish. “I’m flattered, baby.”

“Can you stop that?” Keith snaps. “Looking into my head all the time, I mean.”

Shiro blinks. “Difficult request,” he murmurs. “Your thoughts are both loud and intriguing.”

Keith grunts, unmoved, and nudges Strawberry into a gallop. Shiro exclaims in surprise and Ink hurries to catch up, but the race is on, and Keith doesn’t plan on losing. Strawberry’s hooves thunder down the mountain path as she runs ever faster, as determined to finish first as her rider.

“Slow down!” Shiro cries, but Keith does not listen, and just rides harder. Pebbles go flying as Strawberry careens down the mountain, hurrying towards the tree line, which at last finally closes over their heads in a cool curtain of shadow and the sweet scent of summer grass below. Strawberry slows infinitesimally, thinking the race is over, but Keith nudges her sides with his boots. He can hear Ink riding close behind, he aims to reach the river…

…but Strawberry skids to a stop, ears flicking and eyes rolled back in her head as if badly startled. Keith digs his heels in but, stubbornly, she does not move. Shiro rides up and around, directly in front of them, effectively cutting them off. His gaze is cool, and piercing as a blade.

“Do not run off like that,” Shiro says. “Dangers lurk in these woods.”

Keith folds his arms. “You cheated,” he says. “And anyway, the most dangerous thing here is a bear, and bears are scared of fire.”

“Wrong,” Shiro says. “My presence here draws attention from…others. Stay by my side, please.”

He’s serious; there’s no trace of playfulness in his tone. Keith frowns. “What sort of ‘others?’” he asks.

“Let us pray you do not find out,” Shiro mutters, and starts Ink off at a slow trot. “Follow me.”

Keith’s frown remains, but he follows, and eventually relaxes as the sounds of birdsong fill the air and the tension leaves Strawberry’s body, her steps becoming slower and wider as she lifts her head to look at the strange green world around her. She is as awed as Keith; they know only arid earth and brown sagebrush. It seems that they’ve stepped into another realm.

“You like this place,” Shiro says. It is not a question.

“Yes,” Keith says. “It doesn’t seem real.”

“It is,” Shiro promises. They stop in a meadow fringed with yellow daisies which sway in the
breeze like so many bowing heads, each crowned in gold. “Would you like to picnic here?”

Keith shrugs and dismounts, giving Strawberry a little shoulder pat as he does. “It’s as good a place as any,” he says. “But I don’t see a picnic basket, nor blanket.”

“Ta-da,” Shiro says, producing a large red and white checkered blanket from thin air and spreading it across the grass.

“Show-off,” Keith says.

“Only for you.” Shiro’s smile is so seemingly genuine, it hurts. Keith sits down on the blanket wordlessly after tying Strawberry within sight, where she can graze among the tall grass. She does, with the utmost contentment. Keith wishes his own satisfaction could be so easy to come by. Shiro sits next to him with a small wicker basket, from which the smell of warm food wafts tantalizingly. “Stop thinking so much,” Shiro murmurs, and reaches into the basket to lift a small piece of scone to Keith’s lips.

Keith snatches the scone from his fingertips and eats it; he does not need to be fed. He swears Shiro’s expression is faintly hurt, but the demon does not try again, just picks up a scone of his own and nibbles at it unenthusiastically while conjuring up a bottle of wine. Keith raises an eyebrow at it, and the cork pops of its own accord, drawing a startled curse from his lips. Shiro chuckles at him and Keith grabs the bottle, taking a retaliatory swig from it.

It’s the best wine he’s ever had. Keith doesn’t even really like wine, but finds himself wanting to finish the bottle.

“I had no idea there were vineyards in Hell,” Keith mutters after he’s swallowed, the rich taste fizzling in the back of his throat, almost burning but not quite.

“Ah, of course,” Shiro says. “The finest vineyards in any realm are in Hell. I have a vineyard of my very own, in fact. Perhaps I’ll let you see it, someday, and drink to your heart’s content.”

Keith shakes his head. “So you may then ravish me atop the grapevines? Tempting, but no.”

“Ravish implies you would not be begging for it,” Shiro says mildly, and pops a grape into his mouth. Keith does not look at the way the juice stains his tongue and lips, red as blood. Shiro licks his lips, well-aware of the effect he’s having. “And believe me, you would be.”

Keith looks away from him to watch where Strawberry grazes with Ink. The two horses pause from time to time to nuzzle at each other, tails switching across their flanks in unison, beating flies off of each other in the warm sun. They share a particularly lush patch of grass quietly. It’s so much simpler to come by, their happiness. Keith envies it a little.

“Are you not happy?” Shiro asks, shifting closer. There is a small line appearing between his brows. “I thought this outing might bring you happiness, Keith.”

Keith looks up at him and feels he is standing on the edge of a deep precipice from which there is no escape; no way out but forward, down, down, down, an endless fall he is not prepared for.

“It’s not that easy,” Keith says, stumbling over his own words. “It’s not – I’m just...I don’t know how.”

“To be happy?” Shiro prompts.

He made me happy, Keith thinks, miserable and hating himself for it.
“Can you not pretend?” Shiro asks. “Pretend that I am him, and nothing has changed, nothing, except that you have confessed how you feel and he has returned the feelings tenfold and now every day you spend together is not as simply friends but as lovers –”

Keith is kissing him before his mind even registers it, because he wants that, oh, he wants it so badly; he does not want to pretend but it doesn’t feel like pretending when Shiro kisses him back, palm rough but warm and comforting where it cups his jaw, lips firm and gentle and shadow cloaking Keith in coolness as he shifts to move over him, wrap an arm tight around his waist and draw him close. Keith tastes the juice on his tongue and presses deeper, lashes fluttering as he chases the sweetness. Shiro’s hand tangles in his hair, fingers firm on his scalp, anchoring Keith in place. Keith whimpers into his mouth; he’s so gone and he knows it.

“Shhh,” Shiro whispers, and kisses him sweeter, softer, and Keith doesn’t even know when it happened, only that he’s now in Shiro’s lap, entrapped by muscular arms and a voice like honey. This time, when Shiro pulls away to lift another piece of food to Keith’s lips, Keith opens his mouth without protest. He doesn’t think what he’s feeling is happiness, but it’s something.

“So this is what you’ve been up to.”

Keith jolts away as Shiro does, and Keith sucks in a breath when the hands on his waist shift sharply into claws, Shiro’s beautiful face twisting as it shifts, too, eyes golden and glowering at something behind Keith. Shiro holds him closer while wings burst from his shoulders, hunched protectively. “Amdusias,” Shiro growls. “You’re far from home.”

“As are you, Kurobasanir.” Keith gives in to his curiosity and peers over his shoulder, eyes widening in bewilderment – there is a man standing there, though to call him a man would be omitting some important details, which are these: his hands and feet are clawed, his legs are bent grotesquely like a goat’s, his skin is the same ghostly gray as the long ragged tunic he wears, and most noticeably, his head is that of a unicorn’s. His horn gleams in the sunlight and Keith swallows; it looks very sharp. He swallows again when the demon eyes him. “A new contract?”

“Yes,” Shiro says. “A witch from the Citadel.”

Amdusias’s eyes narrow. His eyes are white, like unpolished pearls, milky and clouded and unnerving. “A young one,” he says. “Must be gifted.”

“I think you’re well aware of my high standards,” Shiro retorts. Scales flicker across his cheekbones in an ever changing kaleidoscope of glittering gold and black.

Amdusias inclines his head. “I am.” He tilts his unicorn head. “You look familiar. That face you’re wearing...I’ve seen it before.” Keith stiffens and Amdusias notices, his cloudy eyes brightening for a moment. “The arena in Daibazaal, yes, that was it. There’s a gladiator there. One of the best.”

“Yes,” Shiro says through gritted teeth. “He’s an inspiration, you might say.”

“I can see why,” Amdusias says. “He’s a bloodthirsty killer, always makes a mess. Really makes one think – are we the savage ones, or are humans the true –”

Keith blasts a fireball at the demon before he can stop himself, the words bloodthirsty killer ringing painfully in his head. Amdusias dodges the blast nimbly, though he looks as impressed as a unicorn can. Shiro’s claws cut into Keith’s cloak in warning, but it’s too late.

“He is gifted,” Amdusias murmurs, raising a claw to his chin. “I see why you’ve been so absent as of late. Hmm...I may have to take him off your hands, old friend.”
Shiro’s lips pull back from his teeth. “You are no friend of mine,” he says. “Last we met, you tried to kill me.”

Amdusias folds his arms. “Last we met you tried to kill me first, Kurobasanir — you were acting quite unlike yourself. I believe you owe me a great debt after that stunt you pulled.”

“I could rip you in two,” Shiro says, but he doesn’t sound so certain.

“Or you could just share, and avoid the bloodshed altogether,” Amdusias drawls. Keith’s skin crawls, and suddenly grasping the gravity of the situation, he freezes, breath catching in sheer revulsion and terror at the thought of being shared between the two demons like a damn piece of meat. His heart pounds and he cannot even be ashamed of the way he clings desperately to Shiro, pleading him with his eyes as the demon appears to consider Amdusias’s disgusting offer. Keith knows no amount of fireballs will save him if the incubus agrees; because they are bound, Shiro could block Keith’s magic if he wished to. Keith would be helpless.

He thinks he might rather be dead.

“Very well,” Shiro says, and Keith bites his tongue so hard it bleeds. He opens his mouth to protest but Shiro gives him a look, not a reprimand but a look that says, Shut up and trust me.

“Truly?” Amdusias’s horse eyebrow arches. “You’re not known for sharing, Kurobasanir.”

“Mm,” Shiro says. “There is a small catch. You may look, but not touch. Stay off the picnic blanket or I will make good on my offer to rip you in two. And not in a good way.”

Amdusias tilts his head. “I’m intrigued. But only if you put on a worthwhile show. I have high expectations.”

Keith stares at Shiro. You can’t be serious.

Ah, but I am. Don’t look at him. Just at me. I’ve got you, baby.

Keith’s face burns.

Sorry about this, baby, Shiro adds, and the next moment there is a round gag in Keith’s mouth. Keith’s eyes widen, jaw working and tongue pushing against the metallic ball his lips are forced around, but it’s no use. Amdusias chuckles and Keith shudders, harder when Shiro’s hands circle his wrists. Keith knows the incubus plans on binding them and panics, because he needs to be touching Shiro right now; he needs to be able to hold on tightly to him or he feels he will fall, or else be torn away from him.

Shiro pauses, his fingers light on Keith’s wrists. Quiet, baby, he says, words falling into Keith’s mind like raindrops, cool and clear. I know what you need.

And Keith can say nothing to that, especially when Shiro does not bind his wrists and instead magicks his clothes away, leaving him all at once bare to both demons’ eyes. Keith is all too conscious of how wide his legs are spread where he straddles Shiro’s lap, Shiro’s lap which is now bare, his hardening cock pushing up against Keith’s balls, rubbing at his own cock which hardens despite the anxious patter of his heart. Then Shiro looms over him, pinning him to the blanket, and pinning his wrists to the ground with one hand, reaching between Keith’s legs with the other.

Keith’s breathing comes hard and fast as he feels a claw trace around and under his balls, quickly finding his hole and circling around it, slow and sharp. Relax, Shiro whispers, but Keith cannot, has to squeeze his eyes shut to find even some semblance of calmness. Shiro tilts his head and,
without warning, pushes a finger inside. Keith’s back bows, but...something’s different.

At the incubus’s touch inside him, his body thrums with want, warm tingling spreading outwards up his spine and curling low in his gut while the finger crooks deliberately over his prostate. Keith’s mouth falls open, and he thinks he might have been drugged – he’s already loose and ready and more than that needing to be filled, and there are slick noises as Shiro’s finger moves in and out, wetness between his legs that makes no sense. Keith makes garbled noises around the gag and Amdusias laughs.

“Pretty little thing, isn’t he,” the demon muses, and Keith can feel his presence, a constant crackle of infernal magic that is quite unlike his incubus’s; it’s unpleasant and acrid in the air, like hovering smoke, and Keith turns his head away from it instinctively. “Pretty and pathetic,” Amdusias adds. Keith’s toes curl as Shiro adds a finger; he doesn’t want more fingers, he wants Shiro –

Open your eyes, Shiro urges, so Keith does, and a tremor goes through his entire body at the sight he’s greeted with. Shiro is in full demonic form, wings braced on either side of him, tail lashing lazily behind him, but most noticeably, clawed hand wrapped around his cock. Keith had felt that cock inside of him during their first coupling, and on and off a few times after, but seeing it is something different entirely.

It’s not human, that’s for certain – too large, thick and long and curving up proudly, with a tapered head which drips precum in a steady ooze that makes the whole length glisten, iridescent and terribly enticing. Every vein is pronounced, forming ridges of sorts on the blood-darkened flesh, winding up to the lighter tip. Keith gets the sense that it’s more prehensile than a human cock, because it twitches now and then, eager and responsive, and Shiro’s balls are heavy with seed and visibly throb as he shifts forward and presses the tip of his cock to Keith’s waiting hole, and keeps pressing until Keith’s body gives, eagerly and all at once.

Keith moans around the gag, toes curling and fingers curling reflexively under Shiro’s grip, his cock stirring into the last inch of arousal as Shiro rocks his hips teasingly, breaching Keith’s body just enough for him to feel the stretch and ache of it, a stretch and ache that Keith revels in, demands more of; he doesn’t know what the incubus has done to him but he can’t ever recall wanting to be fucked so badly. Not even the plug incident compares to this. His vision blurs with it, and he has no idea what he’s trying to articulate but it doesn’t matter because the gag renders every word nonsensical. Keith is never this loud. Shiro is clearly loving it, his eyes glowing bright and intent, lips quirked in a smug smirk.

He’s so far gone that he’s barely even aware of Amdusias, which was perhaps the point, but Keith is reminded abruptly of his presence when the other demon growls, “Hurry up. Get to the main event already, would you?”

Shiro laughs, the sound rumbling through him and through Keith, and Keith arches when the incubus’s thick tail winds around and under him, encircling his neck like a collar and squeezing gently. “Oh, very well,” Shiro says, appearing almost entirely unaffected as he drives his cock in and out of Keith’s body at an increasingly vicious pace, hips slapping against Keith’s spread ass, Keith’s legs kicking weakly and eyes rolling back in his head.

But Amdusias snaps, “No, you imbecile – hurt him! Or have you forgotten your signature mark of ownership?”

Through the haze, Keith tenses, tightening around Shiro’s cock as Shiro bares his teeth and halts mid-thrust. The next moment, vivid images are flashing through Keith’s mind – a pregnant woman sprawled out on an altar on her back, naked, pale skin splattered with blood, Kurobasanir’s symbol
carved into her chest, bloodied claws looming over her; a bearded man screaming and writhing as sharp teeth rip into his shoulder, the smell of burnt flesh inescapable; a mere girl with long blonde hair crying and moaning as bruises and scrapes appear over her skin, so numerous its original color is impossible to discern –

Keith cries out around the gag; the images weren’t just images, they were memories, Kurobasanir’s memories, and Keith knows he just saw what became of the incubus’s past victims. His induced arousal does not ebb but he bucks frantically under the glowering incubus, fear sparking through him, and he’s barely coherent enough to beg silently, Please don’t wear his face while you hurt me, please, please, please.

But Shiro does not move, and he is not glowering at Keith, but at Amdusias. “Do not presume to command me,” Shiro snarls, rolling his hips slower, deeper, until Keith is squirming and whimpering, nails cutting into Shiro’s knuckles, heart pounding, skin soaked in a cold sweat. Why isn’t the incubus hurting him? Why isn’t he drawing blood; shouldn’t he want to do that to Keith, to humans in general? But then Shiro hefts Keith up in his arms, releasing his wrists so he can cradle Keith closer to his chest, and says, “My signature has changed. Go elsewhere if you seek bloodshed and base violence; you will find none here.”

Keith blinks at him blearily, only to gasp and bury his face in Shiro’s shoulder as the incubus fucks up into him, again and again, the ridged veins of his cock rubbing so perfectly inside Keith, the tip sliding over his prostate just enough for Keith to jolt and whine and try to get him deeper. Shiro’s hands frame his hips securely, tail now stroking at his neck rather than squeezing, and Keith’s fear trickles away like sand from an hourglass.

Keith is a creature of intuition, of gut instinct and feeling, and in that moment he cannot explain how or why he knows it, but he knows that he is not in danger in the incubus’s arms. Shiro’s wings curve around him, and he whispers, I would never hurt you, baby.

Keith closes his eyes and lets the sensation overwhelm him.

Amdusias exclaims, “What’s happened to you?! I’ve heard the rumors, that you were slain in Daibazaal, and now I think they may be –”

“Do I look slain to you,” Shiro growls, and this time he is affected, utterly affected by Keith clinging to him and rocking down sweetly onto his cock with strangled mewls and moans, using Shiro’s taut abdominals to give himself friction on his leaking erection, arms draped around Shiro’s neck, clawing at his back on every downwards slide. Shiro’s balls are hot and full under Keith’s ass, pulsing with the cum inside them, and Keith grinds down atop them as if to coax it out quicker. Shiro’s tail tightens around Keith’s neck, wrenching his head back, and Keith obliges, eyes fluttering shut and drool pooling on his tongue where it’s trapped behind the gag.

“Kurobasanir was a sadist unafraid to make his toys bleed,” Amdusias hisses. “You – you are not Kurobasanir.”

“Then who am I,” Shiro pants, wings beating at the air, buffeting himself and Keith and the other demon with gusts of wind. “Who am I if not one of the most ancient and powerful of my kind?!”

From where Keith’s neck is craned back, he can make out Amdusias’s blurry figure, and sees when the other demon takes a step back, shaken. “I don’t know,” he says, and then vanishes, and Keith slumps in relief, and Shiro coos into his ear, saying, I’m here, I’m here, I’ll never let anyone else touch you, and Keith comes, cock spasming and spilling in a messy rush between them. His climax draws a low, pleased groan from the incubus as his cock swells in response, energy crackling across his skin.
Keith is stunned in the afterglow, and this state is not helped by Shiro’s continuous fucking, his balls pulsing and wings beating faster, harder, the fire in his eyes more intense than before. *You are not Kurobasanir.*

Then who – or rather what – the fuck did Keith summon?!

Keith doesn’t know, and in all honesty he doesn’t really care when Shiro growls into his neck and bites down as he comes – but unlike in the memories, it is not a bite meant to maim, only to mark, and to do so carefully. The demon’s teeth just barely break the skin, and his tongue rasps across the cuts at once, healing them, following the licks with kisses. Keith can barely focus on this when Shiro’s cock is flooding him with cum, though – and it’s ridiculous how good it feels, how much more he wants. The incubus pulls out in a sticky rush of white heat and Keith keens weakly, wanting more but unable to move with the exhausting bliss of orgasm still numbing his limbs and making every movement lazy.

Keith thinks he’s been transfigured into a ragdoll...albeit a very horny ragdoll. He still wants to be fucked; his spent cock is stirring anew and he can feel his hole winking around nothing, desperately empty. Shiro’s eyes are heavy on him, and Keith can do little more than lay there as the incubus traces a claw through the mess of cum on his belly, bringing it up to Keith’s chest. He pinches a pink nipple in between two claws and Keith sobs around the gag, eyes watering and cock already aching again.

Shiro bends down to lick at his chest, teasing his nipples between claws and long forked tongue, and Keith can only writhe under him, cock standing up in an insistent arc over his belly. Finally Shiro relents, pulling back and regarding Keith’s debauched state with no small amount of pride. “I really am sorry, baby,” he murmurs, head tilted. He tugs lightly at the gag, and Keith gasps when it vanishes into smoke and warm fingers caress his jaw.

When Keith feels able to speak, which takes a good minute or two, he croaks, “What did you do to me?”

Shiro’s brow creases. “Ah,” he says, giving Keith a once-over. “It’s just a little trick. I suppose you might call it an aphrodisiac, albeit a very primitive one.” When Keith continues to glare up at him, dissatisfied with the answer, Shiro sighs and adds, “I instilled in your body the intense urge of what I believe you humans call a heat. In other words, you’re experiencing the desire to be bred.”

Keith gapes at him. “Bred,” he repeats faintly. “But I’m not —” His eyes widen in horror, at once aware of the mess cooling between his legs and inside of him. “Am I?!”

“Hush, hush, no, your anatomy is quite unchanged,” Shiro chuckles, covering Keith’s body with his own, and *ohhh*, Keith likes that, likes Shiro’s strong, large body so close and shielding his own like a good mate —

Mate? What. No. *Fuck.*

“I hate you,” Keith groans, covering his eyes, “you — how long am I stuck like this?”

“A few hours at least,” Shiro says apologetically.

Keith groans louder, in despair. “I thought we were just going to have a picnic,” he mumbles.

“We can still have a picnic,” Shiro says, and plucks a grape from the bunch, tapping it against Keith’s lips while fondling his cock teasingly with his other hand. “Here.”

Keith bites the grape and plans to chew it grumpily and ignore Shiro, but his mouth has other ideas
and instead he ends up sucking Shiro’s clawed fingers into his mouth, nibbling and licking at them as the incubus watches with wide eyes. Keith rocks his hips up into Shiro’s palm and moans around his fingers.

Just then, there’s another flicker of movement out of the corner of Keith’s eye. Shiro tenses, wings stiffening and eyes narrowing. “We have more company,” he murmurs, “a lesser demon, an imp. Shall we take this elsewhere, baby?”

But Keith shakes his head and bites Shiro’s fingers, and when the incubus yanks the digits out he mumbles, “Want you right here, want them all to see,” and Shiro’s tongue darts out hungrily, swiping across his parted lips.

“Allright, baby,” Shiro says, “but for the sake of fairness, let’s get on the same page, you and I.” He closes his eyes. Keith sees the imp dart forward, sensing a weakness, only for the unfortunate creature to scramble backwards when magic shimmers in the air and Shiro’s eyes snap open, fiery and almost animal. He whirls on the imp with a furious snarl, wings snapping out on either side and tail flicking out like a whip; the imp barely escapes, squealing off into the bushes.

Meanwhile Keith whines; his vision is fading in and out again, the treetops and sky becoming a disorienting blur of blue and green far above him. He feels off-balance and exposed. It’s only when Shiro turns back to him and rolls them over so that Keith’s straddling his hips and Shiro’s on his back, holding Keith close, that Keith feels secure again.

Shiro’s chest is heaving and his pupils are blown wide in golden irises. Keith finds himself briefly fascinated by the rougher patches of the demon’s skin – he hadn’t paid much mind to them before, but now in the warm sunlight he sees they’re scales of a sort, small and sort of leathery, gleaming gold and black and oddly beautiful. The demon is oddly beautiful all over, Keith thinks. Or maybe it isn’t so odd after all.

“Aw,” Shiro says, tilting his head and cupping Keith’s sweaty face in his palm, “thanks, baby.”

It’s probably odder that he still thinks of the demon as Shiro in this form, a form closer to its true form...but he still looks like Shiro. Keith realizes, suddenly, that the demon has never not looked at least a little like Shiro, to him.

“What can I say,” Shiro murmurs, nuzzling at Keith’s face, “I’ve gotten...attached.” He drags Keith down into a kiss and Keith responds with a moan and sloppy tongue, shifting around atop the incubus until he feels the huge cock under him hardening, pushing up through its own mess and then into the cleft of Keith’s ass. Keith grinds back into it, trying to get it back inside of him, and Shiro lets him struggle for a few moments more before taking pity and helping.

It’s interesting, because Keith may be desperate for Shiro’s cock, but Shiro seems equally desperate for Keith’s ass. When his cock sinks home the demon’s head falls back and he moans, a genuine and overwhelmed sound that makes Keith moan back, a little smug and a little breathless. When Keith rocks atop him in greedy rolls of his hips, Shiro’s claws dig into his waist and he growls, “You can do better than that, baby.” Keith huffs, never one to turn down a challenge, and flexes his thighs, coming down harder, until he’s bouncing on Shiro’s cock with such enthusiasm he’d be embarrassed if he had any capacity for shame left.

He doesn’t. He’s more proud than ashamed, because Shiro is staring at him like he’s a phoenix risen from the ashes, lips parted and eyes burning with awe and incredulity. Keith braces his hands on Shiro’s horns and then goes to reach for his swollen cock, but Shiro snarls, tail beating Keith to it, and squeezing so tight around his erection that he has to stifle a scream of shocked pleasure into his palm.
“You like that, baby?” Shiro pants, tail working around Keith’s cock faster, smearing precum from the tip down the length and back up again, making the slide easy, too easy, so easy that Keith crumples forward, losing his rhythm entirely. Shiro only laughs, still stroking mercilessly, until Keith is clawing at his chest and swearing, hair hanging into his face, and coming with a hiss. Shiro’s tail pumps him through it and he writhes, oversensitized; Shiro doesn’t even let his cock soften and it’s hard again when the tail finally unwinds, and lifts up to Keith’s open mouth.

Keith doesn’t even consider protesting, lips closing around the tip of Shiro’s cum-splattered tail which transforms in his mouth into a thick cock, because of course it does; he’s fucking a sex demon. He’s starting to expect weirdness, and more than that, starting to really, really enjoy it. He licks messily at the other cock, pseudo cock, cocktail; whatever it is, Shiro does seem to feel it as if Keith’s actually sucking him off, because he groans and thrusts up into Keith powerfully, cocktail thrusting in unison into Keith’s throat. Keith takes it, closing his eyes and relaxing his throat, moaning when the cocktail rubs across his tongue, leaking that sweet syrupy liquid that makes Keith dizzy with want.

Maybe it’s the spell Shiro placed him under, or maybe it’s just Keith, but either way he’s struck by the sudden thought of Shiro fucking him with both cock and cocktail, and Shiro stills under him with a hiss like a tea kettle. A very large tea kettle with wings that’s currently fucking him...Keith admits the simile needs some work – oh, fuck, fucking Hell –

Shiro pulls out and slams him onto the ground, on his hands and knees so that Keith has to scramble to stay upright, but when he does his body aches ten times worse than before and he widens his legs instinctively, pushing up towards Shiro, presenting his ass like he really is a bitch in heat. Keith’s drooling, so he barely noticed that the cocktail came down his throat, but he does notice when it slithers out from his mouth, dripping strings of cum from his chin and lips.

Then Shiro’s ridiculous bulk is covering his back, cock flush against his gaping hole but not inside it, just rubbing through the slickness, over Keith’s rim until he’s wriggling back into it, trying and trying to get the incubus to fuck him again. Claws clamp on tight to his hips, and Keith arches his back, whining, cock already hanging heavy and hard between his spread thighs. The cocktail flicks down his chest and abdomen to rub at Keith’s erection, twisting against and around it with startling strength, and Keith can only moan and shift desperately with it in small, abortive movements, staying open and empty all the while.

“Shiro,” Keith whines, face pressed to the blanket and knees quivering in uncontrollable anticipation. “Fuck me. C’mon, c’mon, need you to –”

Shiro’s warning growl shakes his smaller body, literally shakes it, and when Keith blinks his eyes open he sees the reason for the incubus’s pause – they have an audience. Void-born, demons and specters and monsters alike, have gathered at the edge of the clearing, their glowing eyes fixed on the incubus and the witch as if spellbound.

Keith goes rigid with bewilderment and a fear that has been instilled in him from the very cradle. Keep away from Void-born. They are the things that go bump in the night, the monsters under your bed, the old gods who demand sacrifice after sacrifice, the specters who terrorize innocents, the demons who defile and destroy. They are the reason for every calamity and tragedy and misfortune. They will eat you up, they will tear you to shreds, they will delight in prolonging your suffering ‘til the merciful end. You see one, you run. You run and you don’t look back and if they’re faster, you fight, you fight with all you have and you hope and pray to whoever’s listening that they don’t catch you.

Keith’s ability to count is currently severely compromised, but he thinks there must be at least
twenty fucking Void-born staring at him right now. He’s never made the sound he makes right then before in his life. It’s not unlike a tea kettle, either.

Shiro noses at his shoulders, breath warm and smoky. Keith’s trembling. “Shhh, baby,” Shiro whispers, forked tongue flickering over Keith’s neck, down the top of his spine. “They can’t catch you; I won’t let them. Do you trust me? Do you trust me to keep you all for myself?”

Keith shudders, nods shakily. “Yes,” he gasps, heart pumping like he’s running for his life, “yes, I trust you, please –”

Shiro’s growl turns purr halfway through, and his claws scratch light over Keith’s skin. “What was that? Are you asking nicely now, baby?”

“Yes,” Keith moans, clawing at the blanket, crushing grapes under his palms, “please fuck me, Shiro, I want you so bad, I’ve always wanted you, never wanted anyone else, only you, I want your cock, I want your hands on me, all over me, I want you to kiss me, I love you, I –

Shiro fucks into him so hard Keith sees stars, knees buckling under him as Shiro’s cock pounds into him, stretches him wide, fills him like no one else can. Keith feels every thrust just behind his cock, comes once, twice, three times more, his cock staying hard through it all, bobbing, twitching and spurting in nearly-dry orgasms that Shiro drags from him in quick succession.

Keith is a moaning mess unable to hold himself up but the incubus is radiant in his power from climax after climax, roaring as he fucks Keith raw, nailing Keith’s prostate repeatedly until he’s blinded by surges of ecstasy and overstimulation, cock dribbling weakly, the cocktail sweeping up every drop and squeezing him back into arousal. Shiro doesn’t slow then, but he angles himself differently, so that he fills Keith in a dull and delicious ache rather than a sparking burst of sensation. Keith slumps forward, eyes slits and lashes wet, and can only moan, open-mouthed and delirious, as Shiro leans forward and begins to talk while he ruts, deep and relentless.

“You know what they’re thinking, baby?” he croons, stroking Keith’s hair out of his face. “They’re jealous. They want you, want to have you like I have you, but they never will. Never, because you chose me. And you know what else?” Shiro laughs, digging his claws in until Keith feels the sting. “They think you’re the hottest thing they’ve ever seen. And baby, believe me, we’ve seen some things where we’re from.”

Keith whines, the sound faint and pitiful, but to both their surprise, his limp fingertips spark atop the blanket. Shiro’s precise thrusts stutter briefly, and the Void-borns’ eyes widen from the trees. Keith’s cock is hardening again, and he distantly knows he can’t manage another time after this – might as well make this the grand finale. But to do that, Shiro’s got to come inside of him, too.

Keith’s hands burst into flame. Some of the Void-born skitter back, some shift forward, hungry for the magic, and Shiro? Shiro groans in approval, sinks his teeth into Keith’s shoulder, and fucks him until he screams and sets the blanket on fire.

It doesn’t sound very romantic, being on fire and fucked within an inch of his life, but it is. Keith’s fire doesn’t burn them, just climbs higher around them, cloaking them in gold and orange and red and heat that adds another layer of urgency to their movements. Claws dig into the meat of Keith’s thigh and rake across it and Keith doesn’t care, shoves back into it, onto Shiro’s cock, knowing he’s a wreck and wanting to wreck Shiro, too. Keith finds his whimpering and moans shaping into words, into, You feel so good, come, fill me up, touch me, can feel how close you are, break me, please, I’d let you.

“Take it, take my cock,” Shiro snarls, and that’s definitely blood dripping down Keith’s back, but
he doesn’t care, because Shiro licks it and kisses his shoulder and bites down again and he has
Keith pinned completely, pinned so that when Shiro’s cock swells, forcing Keith open wider and
wider and deeper and fuller, Keith can’t even hope to move away.

“Nngh, Shiro, *Shiro*, what –”

“You can take it, baby,” Shiro urges, breathless and rough.

Keith surrenders just as the incubus’s cock floods him with cum, pulse after pulse of it, hot as the
flames dancing around them, and he’s knotted but he’s also just *bigger*, impossibly big; Keith is
impaled on his cock and every twitch of it inside him sends Keith into a shuddering echo of
orgasm.

The cocktail milks him gently through it, though there is no real way to be gentle when the
incubus’s cock is vibrating while continuing to spill, tingling through his body, turning every nerve
raw and exposed so that everywhere is an erogenous zone. Keith cries out and somehow *more* cum
jets from his purpling cock when Shiro sucks his neck softly, smirking against the skin; he knows
exactly what he’s doing to the helpless human. Keith blacks out from a climax that nearly hurts
when Shiro massages his belly, which is full and getting fuller. But Keith *wants* to be full, wants it
so badly that he cries loudly in dismay when Shiro starts to pull out little by little.

The incubus pets his swollen belly sweetly, though, and before any cum can spill out the cocktail
wriggles inside of him. Keith’s needy body clamps down on it happily and Keith feels nothing
short of unimaginable euphoria when it strokes at his insides, keeping him full and frothing up
Shiro’s cum, which sloshes hot and thick within him.

Keith is so focused on reveling in the gentler inner stimulation that he’s taken off guard when
Shiro rolls him onto his back, so that his rounded belly is on display for their audience, whom
Keith no longer fears very much at all. How frightening can they be, really, if they’re cowering and
gawking at the sight of him now? It’s pathetic.

“That’s right,” Shiro murmurs, looming over him, and Keith stares, uncomprehending, at his
rehardening cock. “They’re not frightening, they’re pathetic. They want your power, but they are
lesser beings, weak and undeserving.”

“Not like you,” Keith slurs, and moans as the cocktail traces circles around his prostate, slow and
teasing.

“No,” Shiro sighs, eyes soft and lips quirked, “not at all like me, Keith.”

He strokes his cock slower this time, and Keith blinks up at him, reaches up blindly for it, and
instead grasps at Shiro’s balls. He’s only able to hold one at a time, and when he kneads and
squeezes at the full sac Shiro hisses, cock jolting as if electrocuted, so Keith keeps doing it.

He’s rewarded some time later – seconds, minutes, perhaps even hours; Keith doesn’t know –
when Shiro groans and runs over Keith’s belly, the friction driving him over the edge. Keith keeps
squeezing, milking his balls while Shiro pumps his cock with a clawed hand, painting Keith’s body
in endless ribbons of white.

It’s filthy and completely obscene and Keith loves it, opening his mouth so that some splashes hot
and sweet over his tongue, dripping down Shiro’s throbbing length and still-pulsing sac and onto
Keith’s limp cock and emptied balls. Bred, huh? Yeah, Keith supposes he can see the appeal, if this
is the end result.
At the thought, Shiro grunts and releases another load. Keith isn’t really sure what the point is, if he can’t bear children in the first place, seems like a bit of a waste –

The thought fizzes away when the cocktail gives his prostate a final stroke. Keith’s flames flare higher than the treetops, and the Void-born flee as sparks rush towards them. Shiro comes a final time, and kisses him until he passes out.

* 

Keith wakes up to someone brushing his hair. He doesn’t open his eyes immediately, preferring to silently assess the situation – he’s in a warm, large bed, with a warm, large body curled at his back, claws carding through his hair as each strand is untangled. His hair is damp; he must have been bathed...his skin smells clean, soapy and floral. He’s tucked under soft sheets and a heavy blanket...no, it isn’t a blanket, it’s a wing, folded over him. Shiro is purring.

“You’re awake,” he murmurs, and Keith reluctantly opens his eyes, all at once aware of his sore, aching body. Shiro’s breath huffs softly against his bare neck – Keith’s dressed, so at least there’s that, in dark, loose, surprisingly modest clothing. “How do you feel?” the incubus asks.

The red checkered pattern of the blanket swims through Keith’s mind. “Ugh,” he says, and closes his eyes again.

Shiro makes a quiet sound, finishing his brushing and sighing, “Apologies. I did not intend to push you so far; I forgot myself.”

“Forget yourself,” Keith repeats, brow creasing. “Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” Then his eyes widen and he scrambles upright, much to the alarm of the incubus, who sits up with him hastily. “The horses!” he exclaims, remembering all the eyes in the trees and his fire running amok after them...what if he’d hurt Strawberry?!

Shiro’s claws crook under his chin, turning Keith’s face towards him. “Hey,” the incubus says, low and soothing, “it’s alright, you did nothing wrong. The horses are safe in their stable; do not worry about them.” But Keith remains tense, horrified at the thought of Strawberry and Ink fleeing from the horde of Void-born in a blind panic, and himself too out of his mind with lust to even notice...

“Keith.” Shiro shakes his head, and with a snap of his fingers, an image appears in the air before him – as if through a looking glass, Keith sees Strawberry sleeping contentedly in her stall, head relaxed and water trough full. Then the perspective moves to Ink across the aisle, who is awake but drowsy, head turned towards the starry sky visible through the rows of stalls. Both horses are unhurt and whole. Keith remembers how to breathe again, and collapses back down to the bed with a wince. Shiro nuzzles into his hair and stays close.

“Where are we?” Keith asks, though he thinks he knows. The bedroom is smallish and strange, the bed huge and canopied in black silk that gleams with faint iridescence the longer Keith stares at it. The bed takes up most of the room, the other major feature being a large window on the opposite wall. Outside is some sort of estate, the starry sky overlaying rolling hills and dark woods, and a distant glimmer than could be a lake or river. Farther off, Keith sees orange-gold lights – a village, or a city? He doesn’t know. Beyond that, mountains, black and jagged like broken teeth.

“Home,” Shiro says.

“Hell,” Keith corrects.

“Mm.” Shiro seems to like smelling his hair.
“How many times did I come?” Keith mutters.

“Too many,” Shiro admits. “The trick I used on you was a bit too potent. It’s never worked that well before, actually.” He kisses Keith’s neck and Keith leans into it. “It increases human stamina quite a lot, among other things, but there are still limits. I feared I’d broken past yours.”

Keith scrunches up his nose. “Why do you care?”

Shiro hums, and lays a heavy palm over his chest. “You’re a long-term investment,” he says. “It’s in my best interests to keep you whole and healthy if you’re to last.”

Keith frowns, suspicious, a memory niggling at the back of his mind. “But you could just heal me.”

“Some things cannot be healed with my magic,” Shiro says. “I would rather not test those limits, either.”

“What did the other demon, Amdusias...what did he mean?” Keith blurts, finally remembering. “He said you weren’t Kurobasanir. He said Kurobasanir was a sadist, and then I saw all those —”

“Silent.”

Keith closes his mouth, startled by the command, and by the demon drawing away from him. Shiro rises from the bed, his eyes narrowed and mouth set in a thin line. “Amdusias is a fool,” he says at length. “His words are hardly credible.” He eyes Keith and folds his arms. “You summoned Kurobasanir, did you not?”

“Why are you asking me that?” Keith says. “Shouldn’t you know?”

The demon glowers at him. “You’re lucky you have a pretty face, powerful magic, and provided me with weeks’ worth of sustenance, baby. Don’t talk back; answer the question.”

Keith glowers back. “Yes, I summoned Kurobasanir, the only greater incubus I thought could help me, as well as apparently a sadist who enjoys carving infernal glyphs into his victims’ flesh,” he snaps.

Shiro flinches hard, ears pinning back. “I have never done such a thing to you,” he retorts, baring his teeth.

Keith tips his head up, defiant and deeply unsettled. “You just fucked me into unconsciousness in front of your brethren for a power trip.”

“You weren’t complaining —”

Keith cuts him off. “You almost killed me when we first met. Or have you forgotten that, too?”

Shiro takes a step away from the bed, wings flicking outwards as if to shield himself. His expression is almost...guilty? “Stay in bed and rest,” he growls, “or I will bind you there.” And with that, the agitated incubus storms out of the room, tail lashing behind him and head bowed.
thank you for all your comments!!! i read and adore them all, especially the long and rambling ones - they make me smile.

owo what's this?? a lil less smut and a lil more plot???

Shiro sees light.

He blinks; once more he does not know where he is nor what he was doing before now. Sleeping doesn’t seem to be the right word for it. He’s just drifting, trapped, smothered in quiet formless shadow. It doesn’t try to bind him as before, though it curls closer, almost beseeching.

Shiro thinks he awoke for a reason. But what –

You almost killed me when we first met. Or have you forgotten that, too?

Keith.

Shiro jolts into alertness – Keith’s voice is low and tense and unhappy. Hurt, too, though when Keith is hurt he veils it with anger, as he does now. It’s close, or seems to be, though he hears it as if from underwater. “Keith!” he shouts. “Keith, where are you? I’m here, please, listen to me!”

HE CANNOT HEAR YOU. It’s that voice again, though this time there is no venom in it.

“Do you know where he is?” Shiro demands, trying to keep calm even as he sees his still translucent, glowing skin. “Is he talking to you? Did you try to kill him?!”

The shadows flinch away as if ashamed. I DON’T KNOW WHAT I DID.

“How can you not know?” Shiro presses. His voice trembles. “Who are you? What are you?”

HE IS SPEAKING TO ME, the voice adds, ignoring the other questions.


At this, the voice laughs, and it is a mad and terrible sound, verging on hysterical. Shiro feels it in his very bones – if he even has bones, still.

I WISH YOU LUCK, the voice finally says after the laughter subsides. PERHAPS DEATH WOULD BE BETTER THAN THIS WRETCHED HALF-LIFE.

Shiro falters. “What do you mean by that?”

REMEMBER, the voice sighs. YOU MUST REMEMBER.

But Shiro can already feel himself slipping, eyes falling shut and consciousness fading away. “I
can’t,” he gasps, watching in horror as his own hands disappear, the nothingness spreading upwards faster and faster. “I can’t!”

YOU MUST, the voice says, the shadows rushing towards him all at once, I DO NOT WISH TO HURT HIM!

“Don’t,” Shiro murmurs, hardly knowing what he’s saying, “don’t hurt him, keep him safe... don’t let her get him.”

And then everything is nothing again.

*

Keith leaves the bed after a fitful sleep which is mostly tossing, turning, and feverish dreams that he can’t pin as good nor bad. At least he tried to get some rest. He’s still sore, though not as sore as he probably should be – Shiro must have healed him at least a little while he slept. Small mercies.

The incubus does not descend upon him in a fury as he limps across the room. In fact, Shiro is nowhere in sight, not even when Keith hesitantly opens the door. He’s surprised it isn’t locked, but it isn’t, so he steps outside and tries to take stock of his surroundings. They’re disorienting; the building reminds Keith of some sort of palace.

Unlike the narrow, high-ceilinged walls of the Citadel, though, this palace is open, with wide spaces and wider windows interspersed with intricate wall carvings. The high domed ceiling sparkles with stars and the floor is smooth black marble, reflective and cool. In the alcoves Keith passes, small crystals and statues are placed, or plants with climbing vines and huge flowers which look vaguely carnivorous. At one point Keith almost trips over a large python sprawled over some steps. Its tongue flickers lazily at him and he quickly moves on.

The palace goes on and on. It’s beautiful, in a dark and eerie sort of way, but Keith thinks it’s also very lonely. He’d expected Kurobasanir to have servants, perhaps guests. But there is no one.

Keith’s body finally complains so much that he admits defeat and sits gingerly on a cushioned window seat, peering out over the demon’s lands. It doesn’t feel real to think that this will be his prison for eternity. Keith slumps forward, pressing his cheek to the cool glass.

He can only hope that eventually Kurobasanir will take him somewhere else, let him see the realm of the living at least once more. If not...well, Keith’s heard enough tales about the souls who lose their minds in captivity, whether tortured or not. He shivers hard, curling his legs close under him.

“I thought I told you to stay in bed.”

Keith stares resolutely out the window. “I did. For a while.”

“Then you walked all the way here.” The window seat dips as Shiro sits down next to him. “Your thoughts are louder than usual. They drew me to you.” The demon pauses. “Are you...alright?”

“You live alone here,” Keith says instead of answering the question.

“More or less.” Shiro tilts his head. “Were you hoping to find other souls?”

“No.” Keith turns to look at him. “I don’t think I’d want to see the state they’re in.”

Shiro’s face falls and Keith feels unexpectedly bad about it. “They...they aren’t here,” he murmurs. “I think they were destroyed. Stolen, perhaps.” He hesitates, and when he looks back up at Keith,
the demon’s golden eyes are wide, almost vulnerably so. “I think something terrible happened here, baby,” he whispers. “I think something terrible happened to me, too.”

“Is...is that why you can’t remember things?” Keith ventures, shifting a little closer. It’s hard not to, when the demon looks so lost and so like Shiro.

“Maybe.” He shakes his head. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I’m fine,” Keith says, looking back out the window. “As fine as can be expected.”

“I should not have done it,” Shiro says. Keith fingers tighten where they grip the edge of the cushion. “I should not have displayed you like that in front of those creatures. It was...I knew you were frightened. Terrified, even. I should have taken you to safety, not...well, taken you.”

“What’s done is done,” Keith mutters.

“No,” Shiro says. “I was hungry and therefore foolish and greedy. I did not intend for it to go so far, and for you to provide me with so much of your own energy. The flip side of this is that you need not worry about forcing yourself to get off every day; I am more well fed than I have been in...quite some time.”

“Forcing myself?” Keith says, frowning at him. “You don’t force me. Coerce, maybe, but I knew what I was signing up for. We have a contract. You are an incubus, and I am not an idiot.”

“I never said you were,” Shiro murmurs, face falling again.

Keith eyes him. “What do you want? All you ever come to me for is sex, but you just said you’re satiated, for once, so what?”

“That’s not true,” Shiro says. “I came to you to feed and bathe you three days ago.”

Keith’s brow furrows. “Three days ago? But...how long was I out?”

“Two,” Shiro says, not meeting Keith’s eye.

“Two days?!” Keith yelps. “The – the Citadel, I must get back –”

“No one has noticed your absence,” Shiro says. “I made certain of it. You have come down with the flu, nothing more. You’re excused from class, too. You’re welcome.”

Keith folds his arms. “You didn’t answer my question. What do you want?”

Shiro takes a deep breath. “I want to...apologize.”

“You? Apologize?” Keith says.

“Do not mock me,” Shiro mutters. “I am trying, here.”


“I’m sorry,” Shiro says. “I told you that the thought of you unable to resist held no appeal for me, but I was lying. I enjoyed having you helpless under me, begging for more because you could think of nothing else.”

“This is a shit apology,” Keith informs him, rolling his eyes and flushing.
“I’m not done,” Shiro says. “I will not do such a thing to you again, unless you request it. I cannot guarantee that I will never ‘fuck you for a power trip’ again, but I can guarantee that I will not do so without your permission first. You were expecting a pleasant picnic to distract you from your darker thoughts, but instead...well, I doubt I helped matters by incapacitating you. And if I made your sadness worse, I apologize for that, too.”

“Is that all?”

Shiro shakes his head and glances away. “No. I would like to make it up to you, in some way, whichever way you would like. Can you think of anything in particular you want from me, baby?”

Shiro, Keith thinks instinctively, and winces.

“Anything but that,” the demon says, mouth downturned. “For that...we must wait a while longer.” When Keith doesn’t answer, Shiro reaches out and pats him awkwardly, saying, “Think on it, and let me know when you decide.”

Keith nods tightly. “Can I go back to the Citadel now?”

Shiro frowns, but says, “Yes. I suppose you may.”

And then Keith is back in the Citadel.

*

So Keith gets out of bed and goes to class and studies with the first years and lets the incubus get him off most nights, but he does not feel much at all. He doesn’t know what he’s meant to feel, anymore.

Shiro doesn’t fuck him for many days afterwards; he uses his hand or his mouth or his tail or his fingers, but never his cock. In fact, Keith hardly even sees his cock – the incubus is weirdly subdued, inexpressive of his own arousal, if he even feels any from the sight of Keith quietly moaning and writhing his way to completion. It feels more like a routine than anything else. Keith barely even looks at him. He thinks maybe this is why the incubus is so much more pensive than usual.

Then, for a long and miserable week, it storms, powerful wind and rain battering the Citadel’s stone walls mercilessly, trapping the many witches within them inside. Lance complains often about the bad weather, Hunk flinches every time thunder booms, and Pidge stuffs cotton in her ears to focus on her schoolwork. Keith just watches the rain hit the windows and wonders how much force it would take to shatter them.

Once, Keith wakes up in the night to the crack of thunder and the bright white flash of lightning...and to a warm body curled behind him, claws spread delicately over his stomach. Keith tenses, and the incubus exhales, ruffling his hair.

“What are you doing here?” Keith hisses, sleepy and disgruntled.

“It’s storming,” Shiro whispers back.

“Yes, and?” Keith elbows him weakly. “If you need me to come again, hurry up, ‘m tired.”

Shiro makes a soft, sad sound. “It’s not that.”

“Then what?” Keith’s in no mood for puzzles.
“It seems like this little castle could be torn from the rocks so easily,” Shiro murmurs, “and bury everyone within it under the rubble.”

“What?” Keith says, alarmed and more awake than before.

“I do not want you to be buried under rubble,” Shiro says, and tucks his face between Keith’s shoulder blades.

“You...were you worried about me?” Keith says, and tries to roll over to face him, but the incubus’s grip doesn’t budge.

“Go back to sleep,” Shiro says.

He is gone in the morning, and Keith goes about the day in a startled daze. Worried about him. Shiro, the demon, was worried about him.

Keith feels something, but he doesn’t know what it is, and when he thinks about it too much, he feels guilty. Traitorous, even. He loves Shiro. Not this false incarnation of him that Keith has entangled himself with. But...it’s getting harder to see the difference between them.

The difference should be that of night and day, sun and moon, fire and water – Void-born are entirely unlike humans.

But this one is a damn good actor. So good it doesn’t even seem like an act, sometimes.

The day the storm clears, the novices flood outdoors eagerly, taking picnic blankets and schoolwork with them. No one wants to stay inside any longer. Except for Keith, who is content to study alone in the library, until a certain incubus drags him to the stables with promises of a picnic of their own. When Keith asks if it’s going to be a picnic or an extended act of public indecency, Shiro gets quiet and mumbles that it will be whatever Keith wants it to be, and nothing more.

They ride to the Oscuran Woods in silence and with haste, avoiding the many other groups of students out enjoying the sunshine. They ride farther than Keith was expecting, down the wooded slopes of the Asphodel Peaks and closer to the shores of Mirror Lake. The trees get sparser and Keith, wary of being out in the open meadows with the incubus, stops among the trees. The incubus relents, tying the horses and spreading the blanket before laying out a spread of food.

Keith’s grudgingly impressed. “You made all this?”

Shiro nods, and offers him some noodles. Keith takes the small bowl and they eat quietly, both taking swigs of wine from the bottle Shiro procures. Keith’s careful not to drink too much, which the incubus notices.

“Afraid to lose your inhibitions around me, suddenly?” Shiro murmurs, nibbling on a glossy red apple.

Keith glances at him and swallows the wine. “Can you really blame me, all things considered?”

“I suppose not.” Shiro frowns. “But you needn’t be afraid, Keith. I would not take advantage.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you,” Keith says.

Shiro’s frown deepens. He doesn’t say anything for a while, then, “Have you thought about what you want from me, as my apology?”
Keith blinks. “Not really,” he replies. It’s an honest answer; he’s been trying to think about the incubus as little as possible lately.

“It’s nearly September,” Shiro says.

“Two months left, then.” Keith chews his noodles thoughtfully. “Have you heard anything more about Shiro or the Holts?”

“I have not,” Shiro says. “I have little contact with my old...friends.”

“Like Amdusias?” Keith shakes his head. “Didn’t seem awful friendly.”

“No. I’m afraid I’m not on good terms with any of them; Amdusias likes to gossip and I expect he’s told them all about my supposedly changed nature.” Shiro grimaces.

Keith considers him. “So why don’t you just slice me up a little, get back in their good graces?”

Shiro blinks at him rapidly, alarmed. “Do you want me to slice you up?”

Keith sighs. “None of this is about what I want,” he says.

Shiro is about to say something, something argumentative judging by his expression, but then his eyes widen and he leaps to his feet, tugging Keith up with him. “Look,” he says, and Keith looks to the distance.

There are two riders approaching, one with pale skin and fiery orange hair bright in the sunshine, the other with dark skin and long silver-white hair which falls to her waist. They’re a ways away, but they’re clearly heading towards Keith and Shiro’s picnic spot. For now, it’s hidden from view among the trees, but at this rate they’ll be spotted sooner rather than later.

“Who are they?” Keith murmurs, head tilted. “They look Altean.” They wear the looser, lighter clothing typical of the valley kingdom, blue and gold flowing in the warm breeze. They appear to be nobility, or at least wealthy merchants.

“They have magic,” Shiro says, wary. “The woman with silver hair, especially.”

Keith gives him a sidelong glance. “And? They still cannot see you...can they?”

They get their answer when the horses stop perhaps a hundred paces away, and Keith sees the silver-haired woman lean forward. She says something, and her palms alight blue-white. Shiro edges towards the horses with Keith, picnic forgotten.

“You, there!” the orange-haired man calls. “State your business!”

“State your business!” Keith retorts. Shiro’s lips tighten; the incubus is standing in front of him, blocking him from view.

But the silver-haired woman rides her horse closer and calls, “I am Princess Allura of Altea, and there is foul magic afoot here, traveler! You would be wise to leave the...area...” She stops abruptly, gaze fixed on Shiro. “Coran,” the princess says, panic lacing her tone, “it's...”

“Princess, stay back!” Coran declares, and Shiro grabs Keith’s wrist.

Then fabric is covering Keith’s face, a sort of black mask, and Shiro hisses, “You mustn’t let them see your face. Go, and take the horses with you.”
Keith falters. “But –” If this woman truly is the Altean princess, she will be a formidable foe for the demon. Her prowess in the manipulation of the very air itself is legendary. The light in her palms grows brighter and she rides closer, glaring at Keith with accusatory blue eyes.

“You’re a witch,” she says, dismounting from her horse despite Coran’s protests; he hurries to accompany her. Keith hurries towards the horses, but her words still ring in his ears. “Wait! Explain yourself! How could you commit this unspeakable crime – I see your soul, and it is bound to this infernal being!”

“Go,” Shiro hisses, shifting as he speaks, wings shielding Keith from view and tail slicing clean through the blades of grass as it tapers to a deadly point. Princess Allura cries out in alarm, raising her glowing hands. “Now!”

“Don’t get killed,” Keith mutters under his breath, though he wants to say so much more, he wants to beg him not to leave as the other Shiro did, but there is no time. He swings himself up into Strawberry’s saddle, awkwardly tying Ink’s lead rope to the horn, and digs his heels in.

“Stop!” Princess Allura cries. “Coran, don’t let him get away!”

Sharp icicles whizz past Keith’s ear and Shiro roars, the earth shaking as he charges at the Alteans. Keith urges the horses into a gallop, the pound of their hoofbeats matching the pound of his heart, and prays Shiro will survive. He’s so focused on this that he doesn’t notice the swirling black portal open in front of him until the horses scream and they all crash through it, and fall for a very long time.

*

Keith wakes up in his bed. He feels terrible, nauseous and feverish, and as soon as he sits up, he reels over and vomits over the side of his bed. There’s a bucket there that he doesn’t remember placing. Keith stares at it in dismay, and then at his clammy, sweating hands, and then hears voices outside his door.

“Keith Kogane, this is Master Iverson! Open your door at once.”

Keith blinks, rubbing his head and groaning. He can’t even muster the coordination or energy to get out of bed.

“Kogane! Did you not hear me?!” There’s a rustling, and then Iverson grumbles, “Just unlock the damn door.”

The lock clicks and the door swings open. Iverson storms in. Keith eyes him, and Iverson blanches. “Novice!” he exclaims. “You’re...ill. Again?”

“Iveron, leave the poor boy be!” Master Montgomery exclaims, stomping into the room after him with a sharp flourish of her robes. There are quite a lot of professors in his room – Iverson, Montgomery, Dos Santos, Ryu, and several others he doesn’t recognize. Keith thinks he may be in trouble.

He peers up at them from bleary eyes. “Sir?” he croaks. “What’s...what’s happening?”

Then the Altean princess steps into the room, and Keith’s heart nearly stops.

She is beautiful up close, her pale blue riding cloak darkened with sweat and dust from the road. There are leaves and flower petals tangled here and there in her silver hair. She walks to Keith’s bedside like a fever dream, footsteps so light she might as well be floating, and leans down over
“Princess, careful, you’ll catch the flu!” the orange-haired man, Coran, exclaims. He has an impressively curly mustache and his gloved fingertips crackle with frost.

“I’m quite alright, Coran,” Princess Allura murmurs. She places a soft brown hand on Keith’s sweaty brow and looks intently into his eyes. Keith gets the sense that she can see into his very soul...and perhaps she can.

Keith hopes they at least make his execution quick.

But then she pulls away, her lips curving into a small frown. “He is clear,” she murmurs, “untouched by the Void or its offspring.”

Keith tries very hard to keep a straight face. He has no idea how she came to that highly inaccurate conclusion, but he’s not about to tell her otherwise. Instead he just clears his throat and rasps, “I’m sorry...but what’s going on? Who are you?”

“My name is Princess Allura, of Altea,” the princess says gently. “I was riding through the foothills this morning with my father’s advisor when we came upon a most horrifying discovery. We found a witch who had made a contract with a powerful Void-born, a greater demon.” She bites her lip, and looks to Master Iverson for support.

He nods, arms folded and expression stormy. “Kogane, it is common knowledge that you were one of Master Shirogane’s closest friends and he was the one who brought you to our Citadel.”

Keith’s not good at lying, but considering he has no other option, he’s going to try. “Shiro?” he whispers, struggling to sit up in bed. “What does this have to do with Shiro?! Have...have you...”

“No, Keith, no one has found him,” Master Montgomery sighs. “This...this thing, it isn’t Shiro. If nothing else, please know this much.”

Keith looks back at Iverson, wide-eyed. For once in his life, Iverson looks sympathetic. “Kogane, first and foremost, this is all top secret and repeating this information to anyone would be a grave mistake,” he says gruffly. “But...based upon Princess Allura’s description, the demon has taken the form of Master Shirogane. Advisor Coran here believes it to be a greater incubus, a master at temptation and disguise.” All of the professors exchange uncomfortable and uneasy looks.

Keith gulps. “Who...why...?”

“No, Keith, no one has found him,” Master Montgomery sighs. “This...this thing, it isn’t Shiro. If nothing else, please know this much.”

Keith looks back at Iverson, wide-eyed. For once in his life, Iverson looks sympathetic. “Kogane, first and foremost, this is all top secret and repeating this information to anyone would be a grave mistake,” he says gruffly. “But...based upon Princess Allura’s description, the demon has taken the form of Master Shirogane. Advisor Coran here believes it to be a greater incubus, a master at temptation and disguise.” All of the professors exchange uncomfortable and uneasy looks.

Keith gulps. “Who...why...?”

“This, we do not know,” Iverson mutters. “But rest assured, we will get to the bottom of it. The witch is likely to attend the Citadel –”

“All due respect, I don’t think we can assume that,” Master Dos Santos interjects. “I can think of very few students here capable of summoning and binding such a being and surviving the ordeal! It could be a hedge witch from the Oscuran Woods or even the Dalterion Swamplands.”

Iverson’s eyes narrow. He’s staring at Keith. “Princess,” he mutters, “you’re certain Kogane is innocent?”

Keith stares back at him. Cold sweat trickles down the back of his neck.

The professors erupt into a chorus of outrage. “Master Iverson, how dare you insinuate such a thing!” Master Ryu cries. “Novice Kogane is and always has been an outstanding pupil, quiet and polite and very bright – too bright to risk his soul and throw away his life for a demon pact!”
“Ouch, Keith thinks. He’s always liked Master Ryu, and is sorry to disappoint him.

“The student is quite innocent!” Princess Allura declares, hands on her hips. Now she’s glaring at Iverson, and Keith feels even guiltier. “Besides, he’s in no state to be picnicking in the woods; clearly he is quite ill and I doubt our disturbance is helping him to heal.” She looks back down at Keith. “Since you were a confidante of this Master Shirogane, we simply wished to warn you of this disturbing turn of events, and to assure you that my father will be looking into it at once.”

“Your father?” Keith repeats dumbly.

“King Alfor,” Princess Allura says kindly. “He is a fair and clever man who will get to the bottom of this mystery, and find the foolish witch who made such a foul pact.” She offers Keith a small, bright smile. “If we are fortunate, the demon will flee or, let us hope, perish after today’s encounter. After the witch fled, it was badly wounded in the ensuing battle. My father trains me in the art of defeating Void-borns, you see – they are not as invincible as they would like to think.”

Keith slumps down into his pillows numbly. *Badly wounded. What does that mean? What happened? Where is his incubus?* He focuses on breathing, but it is difficult. The professors mumble worriedly and Princess Allura takes several steps back. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, “I did not intend to upset him…”

“It’s alright, Princess, he’s likely in shock,” Master Montgomery whispers back. “Let us leave him be; he needs rest.”

Iverson casts a last look at Keith before leaving with the others. Princess Allura and Advisor Coran leave last, also glancing back at him with worried, pinched faces as if he is like to vanish in a puff of smoke at any moment.

But Keith does not vanish in a puff of smoke when the door clicks shut behind them. Instead he curls onto his side with a hollow sob.

If the Altean princess killed his incubus, then Shiro is doomed. Keith knows he cannot hope to attempt another summoning, especially not with so much increased security. Another summoning would mean months more of research, of careful preparation, both ritual and mental, and most of all it would mean missing his opportunity to save Shiro on Samhain. Keith will have failed him...and Shiro might truly be gone.

“Please,” he gasps into the cool, still air, “please, Kurobasanir, Shiro, whoever you are, come back, I need you, I command you, *come back to me.*”

He doesn’t expect anything to happen. He certainly doesn’t expect a dull roar of wind to fill the room, and the next moment for the sick feeling in his lungs and head to clear completely just as a heavy, punishing weight falls over him in a hulking mass of shadows. Golden eyes gleam desperately in the dim room. Keith smells blood, metallic and yet inhuman, the copper scent too sharp, too strong, verging on sweet. The arching wings are torn. Black blood drips from the incubus’s lips and onto Keith’s chest, staining his white nightshirt.

“You’re alive,” Keith breathes, faint with relief, “you’re alive, you’re alive –”

The incubus groans, shifting and baring his teeth, a sound of ragged pain, and Keith realizes that he’s really, seriously hurt, and the puzzle pieces fall into place.

Keith gazes up at him. “Do it,” Keith says, “take what you need from me, take what you need to heal.”
Golden eyes flare. *Keith.* ..

“Do it!” Keith snaps, voice tinged with fear, not fear of him but fear that Shiro will not listen and will instead fade away, slip out of his grasp like he is nothing more than shadow.

The incubus only hesitates for half a second – his eyes flicker, a wavering flame, and then he flips Keith, rips the nightshirt away with sharp claws, and opens Keith up with his long, sloppy tongue. Keith can barely form a word, it happens so fast, and his cock jerks in surprised arousal at the sudden sensation, unable to keep up with the incubus’s frantic pace.

Trying to help, Keith arches his back and claws dig into his thighs and waist in reply, drawing blood which Shiro licks away with low growls. His tail is slick with blood as it coils around Keith’s ribs, anchoring him in place while blunt fingertips fumble at Keith’s hole. They push in too hard, too fast, but the stretch is manageable and Keith moans in faint encouragement. Shiro curls his fingers deeper, making them slick to breach Keith more easily, rubbing slickness inside of him until Keith gasps that he’s ready. He isn’t, but he knows Shiro’s in no state to wait.

Shiro makes a broken sound as he forces the fat head of his cock past Keith’s rim, and groans louder as he begins to thrust without giving Keith any time to adjust. Keith was expecting this, and breathes unevenly against the pillows, legs splayed and ass up, cock hanging and hardening in confused sparks of half pleasure, half pain. Keith closes his eyes as Shiro snarls and moves faster, stroking Keith’s cock messily in his huge palm, tail constricting around his ribs.

It’s a brutal fuck, and Keith knows what Shiro needs from him, so he closes his eyes and loses himself to it, crying out when the incubus finds his prostate, whining and writhing on his cock as it splits him wide, focusing on the pressure building in his gut and letting it surge hotter, higher, until he’s coming and moaning helplessly into the pillows as Shiro fucks him through it and demands more.

Keith doesn’t expect him to stop, and he doesn’t. Keith’s first climax only spurs the demon on, makes him greedier for it. Shiro doesn’t let his cock soften, milks it dry and then some, mouthing and biting at Keith’s neck and back and shoulders throughout. Keith can’t tell if the blood dripping down his spine is his own or Shiro’s, and doesn’t much care. Claws tear at his skin and he yelps at the burn, pressing back into it and squirming away all at once. Shiro keeps him pinned, and does not stop.

Keith comes twice more before Shiro does, and to Keith’s surprise the incubus pulls out before his cock spills, splattering cum over Keith’s ass and the backs of his thighs. Keith flinches, startled and oversensitized, his belly a mess of his own cum, cock soft and spent. Shiro makes a piteous sound, somewhere between a whine and a sigh, and pulls away.

Keith reaches out weakly, fingers curling. “Come back,” he mumbles, lifting his head as much as he can. “Don’t go…”

He sees Shiro hunched over him, head bowed, ears drooping. His eyes rake over Keith’s body slowly and he whispers, “Now you’re hurt.”

“Just a few scratches,” Keith says, but hisses and tenses when Shiro touches one of them. His ass is already sore, too, and will likely be worse tomorrow.

“Sorry,” Shiro mumbles, ducking his head further, until he can kiss and lap at the thin slices with small, kittenish licks, healing them one by one and licking up all other fluids as he goes. Keith shivers under him and Shiro falters, and when the incubus lifts his head he looks so nervous and uncertain that Keith’s heart aches.
“It’s okay,” Keith whispers, “Shiro, it’s okay,” and then the incubus is collapsing onto the bed next to him, chest heaving and wings trembling as they cocoon around Keith. “Hey,” Keith says, cupping his cheek softly, taken aback, “hey, shh, it’s okay, you’re here, I’m here…”

Shiro lets out a deep, shuddering sigh and tucks his face against the curve of Keith’s throat. “Thought maybe they’d found you,” he murmurs, “thought you’d be imprisoned, taken away from me where I could not reach…”

“I thought you were dead,” Keith whispers, back, fingers tangling in Shiro’s hair.

A tremor goes through the incubus. “No,” he says. “Not yet. But she tried.”

“You were badly wounded,” Keith says. “That’s what she told me.”

“Yes,” Shiro says, wings tightening around Keith. “Not anymore, thanks to you.” But he does not sound grateful; he sounds bitter.

“What is it?” Keith whispers.

“My power is stolen power,” Shiro says, dull and distant. “Maybe you humans are right. Maybe creatures like me, who survive only as parasites leeching life away from others...maybe we’re better off gone.”

“It’s not stolen,” Keith says fiercely, digging his nails into Shiro’s shoulders until the incubus looks up at him. “Not from me. I give my power to you. And I give it freely.”

“You shouldn’t,” Shiro says, his eyes wide and soft and kinder than Keith has ever seen them. “Oh, baby, you really shouldn’t.”

“But I do,” Keith says. “And I will keep doing so, as long as you don’t get yourself killed by an Altean princess. Do we have a deal?”

Shiro regards him with helpless disbelief for a few more moments before nodding and tucking his head into the crook of Keith’s neck again. “Yes,” he whispers. “Yes, we have a deal.”

After a while, during which Keith wonders if the incubus has drifted off, he’s startled when the demon speaks again in a low, confused tone. “Wait a moment...the Altean princess was here? And she examined your soul...and did not find you guilty?”

Keith blinks at him. “Is that her gift? Seeing souls? Yes, she was here, and she looked into mine.”

“Seeing auras, yes,” Shiro says. His brow furrows. “How can that be?”

“I thought you must have shielded it from her,” Keith murmurs. “She said I was untouched by the Void or its offspring...” He looks up at Shiro. “You once said you could see my soul, and that it was untainted. Is that true?”

Shiro wrinkles his nose. “Figure of speech...unlike the princess I cannot ‘see’ the physical manifestation of souls in this realm, auras. I can only sense souls, and, well...I do believe my definition of ‘untainted’ is significantly different from Princess Allura’s, baby. Though bright, powerful, and overall terribly appealing, your soul is marked subtly by our contract. The average aura-reader could never detect it, but the princess is a prodigy. She would have seen it at once, especially if she were searching for it.”

“She said she saw nothing,” Keith mumbles. “I don’t think she was lying. Why would she?”
“This is curious,” Shiro muses, nosing into Keith’s hair. “The only explanation I can think of is that someone else is shielding you, or rather shielding your soul, from prying eyes.”

Keith shakes his head. “Who? There’s nobody else.” It’s a depressing statement, but it’s true.

Shiro pauses and frowns at him. “Your father, perhaps?”

“My father up and left when I was sixteen, without even a note,” Keith retorts, resisting the infantile urge to shove the incubus away and roll into a small and angry ball. It’s a near thing, though.

“And your mother?”

Keith sighs. “Never knew her,” he says. “Some hedge witch warrior lady. Pa never talked about her, but the villagers gossiped. Said it was her fault I turned out the way I did.”

“A powerful and gifted witch, you mean?” Shiro says lightly.

Keith scowls at him. “Not the way they saw it. My father’s magic was tamer, earth-based, made fertile fields for farming in the Wastes. They were jealous of that, but not scared. Fire, though…that’s a different story. You ever seen a fire in the desert?”

Shiro purses his lips. “I can’t imagine it’s a good idea, what with everything being dry as bone.”

“It’s not a good idea,” Keith says. “When I was hardly three summers old…” He trails off.

“What happened?” Shiro asks, brushing his hair out of his face with a claw. Keith gives him a sidelong glance. “Come now, you’ve already begun the story.”

Keith squeezes his eyes shut. “It’s a shit story, though.”

“No,” Shiro wheedles.

Keith grinds his teeth. “Fine.” Shiro’s chest rumbles in a sort of reassuring purr, and Keith, still grumbling, snuggles up to him and continues. “I didn’t even know what I was doing. Most kids don’t know their gift until, you know, ten or twelve years old, but…” He bites his lip hard. “I was runnin’ through our neighbor’s field, playing hide and seek with Pa or something like that. They grew maize, big dry brown stalks…and my fingertips started sparking right in the middle of the damn field. I laughed; I remember that. Thought it was a game, what else would I think? I wasn’t scared, but I should’ve been, because the next moment the cornstalks went up in a great big fiery blaze.”

Shiro kisses his brow. “I suppose the neighbors weren’t pleased?”

“No,” Keith sighs. “At the time, I didn’t understand how bad it was, but…” He shudders. “My Pa had to barricade the door. He was so scared, and the neighbors were yelling outside, shouting awful things about…about me, and my fire. I think, if my Pa hadn’t been there, they would’ve killed me. Three years old or not.”

Shiro regards him quietly, then cups Keith’s hands in his own. Keith feels the slight tug at his mind, and obeys it, a small dancing flame alighting in his palms. “Look at it,” Shiro whispers, the firelight illuminating their faces in warm, shifting contrasts, light and dark, dark and light. “It’s beautiful. Beautiful, and powerful, just like you. Don’t let anyone try to take that away from you.”

Keith’s flame flares brighter, then sputters with his thoughts as they snag abruptly. “But won’t you
“Take away my magic?” he whispers. “When you take my soul?”

Shiro stares at him, solemn and unblinking. “Keith,” he murmurs, “I could never take your fire from you.”

And then they say nothing more, and Keith falls asleep against his chest as the incubus gently blows out the light.

*

“I think I’ve decided,” Keith announces the next day, after he endures worried looks from all his professors and avoids the steadily multiplying Alteans like the plague.

“Decided what?” Shiro asks, head tilted owlishly. He’s sitting on Keith’s bed, which has been freshly cleaned, leaving not a single trace of human blood, demon blood, or cum. His laundering skills are quite helpful.

Keith takes a deep breath, tossing his book bag to the floor and approaching the bed. “What I want as my apology from you.”

Shiro perks up. “Oh? Do tell.”

“Promise you won’t laugh,” Keith mutters, seized by momentary uncertainty.

“I won’t,” Shiro promises. “Unless it’s something entirely outlandish, though I’d like to think I know you better than that, by now.”

“It’s not…it’s just…I know you can’t give me Shiro, yet. I know that.” Keith sighs. “But I want you to pretend to be Shiro. And by pretend, I mean, don’t ever slip up. Don’t break character, don’t sprout wings and horns and a tail and claws and…”

“A huge demon dick?” Shiro says helpfully. He’s grinning with sharp demon teeth.

“Yes, that,” Keith grumbles. “None of that. Just…just Shiro. Can you do that?”

“Sure,” the incubus says. “Anything else? Anything more, ah...specific?”

Keith folds his arms and focuses on not blushing. “Yes. I want to fuck you. Shiro. Whatever. But we’re doing it my way, not yours.”

Shiro’s eyebrows arch. “Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be? Hm.”

Keith falters. “Is...is that alright, I mean, I don’t want to do anything you don’t want –”

“It’s fine, baby,” the incubus assures, amused. “So, what is ‘your way,’ then? I’m intrigued.”


“Very okay,” Shiro growls. “Is the huge demon dick allowed this time?”

“Please,” Keith says, and Shiro needs no more convincing.

*

But tomorrow comes and Keith is both too sore and too anxious to accept his apology, so instead
he studies with the first years and pretends everything is fine and normal.

“I can’t believe Princess Allura visited you personally!” Lance exclaims for the fiftieth time. “It’s so not fair. She’s got to be the prettiest lady on the continent.”

“She visited me to make sure I hadn’t summoned and bound myself to a demon,” Keith says under his breath. “It wasn’t exactly romantic.”

Lance sticks out his tongue. “Well, that’s your fault. Missed opportunity.”

“Missed opportunity for what?” Keith asks, brow furrowed.

Lance wiggles his eyebrows and leans across the table. “Romance. Y’know, wooing, flirtation, in the very least some compliments…”

Pidge rolls her eyes. “I think Keith’s had enough of romance lately.”


Lance huffs at him. “Yes, that, you didn’t have to say it! But that’s not romance, Keith. Especially since it’s all based upon contract…and he’s a demon…they’re not really capable of the whole emotions and tenderness thing.”

Keith frowns back at him. “I didn’t make this contract for the sake of romance.”

“Didn’t you, though?” Hunk asks from over his book. Keith gives him a look and Hunk hastily studies his notes while adding, “Obviously you were head over heels for Master Shirogane. You don’t have to pretend otherwise.”

Lance nods enthusiastically. “Right, but even if the demon can replicate his body perfectly, it’s still not Shiro wooing you —”

“Guys,” Pidge interjects, “pretty sure Keith knows this already. If you have a point, get to it.”

“I mean, the point is that you have a limited amount of time left in the realm of the living,” Lance declares. “And you might as well enjoy it. With someone other than a sex demon.”

Keith’s stomach flips. “Someone other than Shiro, you mean.”

“He’s not Shiro,” Hunk says.

“It’s really noble and all that you’re trying to stay as loyal to Shiro as possible,” Lance adds. “I applaud you on that and I think Shiro would too. But I also think he would understand if you had some fun and feelings time with someone else before...well.”

“Before you get dragged off to Hell by the aforementioned sex demon,” Hunk finishes.

Keith stares at the table.

“Especially considering you never even confessed to Shiro before everything went down,” Lance points out. “You were never together to begin with, so it wouldn’t be disloyal.”

Pidge eyes them both, nibbling the end of her quill. “Don’t think that’s how Keith sees it,” she
mutters.

“No,” Keith says, “it isn’t.”

Lance’s eyebrows go up. “You’re really determined to just stay with the incubus until your time’s up?”

Keith shakes his head. “It’s...you don’t understand.”

“We can definitely try to,” Lance says.

Keith sighs. “It was only ever Shiro,” he admits. “That I had feelings for...only him.”

“Ever?” Lance repeats, dumbfounded. “As in...you’ve never been attracted to anyone else?”

“I’m not blind, but no, not really,” Keith retorts defensively. “So it doesn’t work like that for me, I can’t just find someone to have a fling with. I don’t have anyone, except a shadow of him, and I’ll take it.”

“A shadow,” Hunk repeats. “Wow. That’s...kind of tragic, really.”

“You guys suck at comforting,” Pidge informs them.

“It’s fine,” Keith says. “They’re right, anyway.”

Lance bites his lip. “Damn.”

Keith shrugs. “It is what it is.”

“What it is, is a witch hunt,” Pidge mutters. “There are Alteans everywhere. You and your incubus better cover your tracks completely...I heard they were randomly checking novices’ rooms yesterday.”

“Why do they think we can summon a greater incubus?” Hunk complains.

“Because one of us did,” Lance says.

“Can we please just focus on the anatomy and physiology of draconids?” Keith pleads.

They focus, at least for a little while.

But when the novices have all gone and Keith is packing up his books, darkness falls over the table and he freezes as it whispers, *Just a shadow, huh?*

Keith doesn’t answer, and warm hands seize him, drag him away into the seclusion of the bookshelves. Keith lets the incubus press him up against them, his spine pressing into the spines of so many books. *Answer me*, the demon demands. *Do you truly think I devoid of emotion or tenderness?*

Keith turns his head to the side. “I don’t know,” he says.

The sharp claws release him. *I wish to be more than a shadow, Keith*, he whispers.

“Why?” Keith asks, simple and sharp. “You’re a Void-born, what more do you want?”

*This*, Shiro sighs, pressing his palm slowly over Keith’s chest.
“You’ll get my soul,” Keith mutters. “That’s sort of the point.”

*Not yours,* he says. *My own.*

And that...that is bewildering. Keith blinks. “What?” he says. “You don’t...there’s no...Void-born don’t have souls.”

*Then why do I feel so hollow?* Shiro pleads, hand lifting to trace over Keith’s face. *If there was never anything there, then it shouldn’t feel as if something is missing.*

Keith chews his lip, at a loss. “Uh,” he finally says after a long and expectant silence, “you sure you’re not just...hungry?”

Shiro sighs and steps away, hands sliding off of Keith like mist. *It is not hunger,* he murmurs. *It is longing.*

And with that, he’s gone, and Keith is left to wonder if he’s dreaming.
The next day, Keith is approached by Master Montgomery after class.

“Novice Kogane,” she says, inclining her head. “Do you have a minute?”

Keith nods, clutching his bag close. “Of course, professor. What is it?”

“I’m afraid it’s regarding the incident a few days ago,” she says. “The Altean experts have been scouring the Citadel and keep finding traces of infernal quintessence, and according to Princess Allura, it is recent quintessence from the very creature she stumbled across in the woods.”

Keith swallows. “Oh,” he says. “That’s...very worrying.”

“Yes,” Master Montgomery agrees, “therefore, we believe the demon wearing Master Shirogane’s face is still out there, and we fear who it might try to influence next.”

“I will not be influenced by it,” Keith says hastily, and she gives him a warm, sympathetic look that makes his gut twist with guilt.

“And I believe you,” Master Montgomery says. “Which is why I think you’re our best choice for this task – informing Master Shirogane’s family about the situation.”

Keith falters. What? No. Why?! “Master Montgomery, I...I really don’t think his grandparents need to know...”

“On the contrary, we believe they must be informed,” Master Montgomery retorts. “The Shiroganes may be elderly, but their family is one full of powerful gifts, and we cannot rule out the possibility that the demon might try to appear to them and impersonate their grandson for some personal gain.”

“And...and you want me to tell them this?” Keith manages.

She nods. “Yes, if you are willing. We do not want to involve more people than necessary in this situation – rumors are already circulating among the students. So, we would prefer someone already aware of the situation to deliver the news to the Shirogane family. It is even more advantageous considering you’ve already met them several times before.”

“Under decidedly different circumstances,” Keith protests, but she’s not having it.

“I realize this is altogether unfortunate,” she says, “but do you think it would be better that they hear it from someone they know and trust, or from a complete stranger?”

“I see your point,” Keith sighs, also seeing no escape. “Fine, then. When do you need me?”

“At your earliest convenience,” she says, arms folded. “If you’re able to leave now, that would be
ideal. We don’t know when the infernal being might strike.”

“Alright,” Keith says. “Got nothing better to do, I suppose.”


“R-right,” Keith replies hastily, “yes, of course, professor.”

* 

This is a silly errand, Shiro complains.

Keith urges Strawberry faster, but there is no escaping the incubus’s prattling. He hasn’t taken Shiro’s horse, so as not to arouse suspicion, but is instead traveling alongside Keith in a kind of formless mist. Supposedly he’s undetectable to any passing Alteans, but Keith’s skin prickles with anxiety nonetheless.

Stop worrying, Shiro says. There’s no one up here. Say, is there a reason Shirogane’s folks live in the middle of nowhere? They’re not shady characters, are they?

“No, they’re not shady characters, they’re elderly and reclusive,” Keith grumbles under his breath. The high mountain air cuts through his cloak and he draws it closer. “The Shiroganes have lived in the Asphodel Peaks for generations, or at least that’s what Shiro told me,” he adds. “His family made a living as fishermen in Lake Lucanus before magic became more widely accepted and the Citadel was built.”

Before the Citadel, the incubus muses, that must have been many centuries ago. Before the Void first touched your world, even.

“Well,” Keith says, “seeing as how the Citadel was created to combat Void-borns, I’d say so.”

They’re not doing a very good job of that, are they? The swirling mist chuckles.

“You’re the only Void-born around, far as I know,” Keith replies, wary. “Or do you know of others?”

You think I’d tell you if I did?

“Yes,” Keith says, surprised at his own answer, “yes, I do think you’d tell me.”

The demon is quiet for a while. Then he mutters, You’re right. I probably would. And there aren’t any others, more’s the pity.

“What would you do if there were others?” Keith asks, riding down a steep slope which is still speckled with snow, wildflowers pushing up through the patchy white embankments. “I can’t imagine you would get along well with them.”

Why not?

“I don’t think you have much in common with them,” Keith says. The slope evens out, and he can see the glittering waters of Lake Lucanus far, far below, and there, on top of a rocky hill, the small Shirogane cottage. There’s smoke curling from the chimney.

Oh? And what’s that supposed to mean?

“Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you haven’t been acting like a very typical demon lately,”
Keith says, slowing Strawberry to a canter. “Talking about wishing you had a soul and treating me tenderly and all that.”

I don’t see you complaining, Shiro snaps. And besides, how many other demons have you met? How can you judge what a typical demon is? I don’t think you have the credentials, baby.

“I’ve met Amdusias, and he said you were atypical,” Keith says.

The mist swirls in irritation and does not reply. Keith shakes his head, and rides up to the cottage, tying Strawberry out front and stopping to say hello to the various animals in the little barn beside the main cottage. Chickens squawk around his feet before hurrying back into their coop once they determine he has no seeds to share. A few spotted goats eye him, unimpressed, and go back to gnawing at a fence pole. The family donkey, Riku, brays in greeting and trots over to the fence to sniff Keith’s palm. The incubus thankfully stays at a distance so as not to startle him.

“Hey, old boy,” Keith murmurs, scratching the donkey’s long ears as he stomps his hoof in satisfaction. “You’ve gotten fat since I saw you last.”

As if on cue, Riku nibbles at his glove hopefully. Strawberry eyes them, clearly jealous of the attention. Keith snorts, gives him a last pat, gives Strawberry a scratch behind her ears to assure her he still loves her most, and heads over to the front door. It looks exactly as he remembers — red paint chipped, door knob tarnished with age, a small series of marks carved into the frame with numbers beside them.

They’re heights. Shiro’s heights, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Keith presses his thumb into the highest line, a full head higher than his own, then knocks on the door.

It opens at once, and Mai Shirogane peers up at him from kind gray eyes set deep into her tan face, which is as wrinkled as an old dried apple. That face brightens when she sees him, and Keith can scarcely open his mouth before she scoops him up into a tight hug. She smells like fish and metal, and is very strong for an old woman. Keith tucks his face into her gray hair and hugs her back.

“Jun!” she calls as she pulls away from Keith and ushers him in. “We have a visitor! Keith! Takashi’s old friend!”

Keith smiles and it is only a little pained. “Thank you for the warm welcome, ma’am,” he says, “but I’m afraid I’m here on rather serious —”

“Shh, shh, don’t ruin the joy of having a visitor just yet,” Grandma Mai scolds. She sits him down at the small kitchen table. There’s fish cooking on the stove. It smells delicious. Keith tells her so and she beams before offering him some, which he declines hastily.

“I don’t want to be a bother —”

“A bother!” Grandpa Jun ambles into the kitchen, leaning on his twisted walking stick and smiling at Keith with his yellowed teeth. He has so many smile lines, they have begun to overtake his face altogether. “You are never a bother here. Not you. Never. Have some fish, fresh catch, very tasty. Trout. I remember you like trout.”

“Catfish is his favorite,” Mai corrects, already piling fish onto a plate for him. “We will catch catfish for breakfast tomorrow, yes?”

Keith blinks dumbly. “Tomorrow – oh, no, I could never intrude – listen, I’m here on important Citadel business. And...and it might be best if both of you sit down.”
Catching the seriousness of his tone, Mai and Jun exchange looks and sit down at the table with him, expressions expectant, leaning forward with an eagerness that hurts Keith’s heart. “What is it?” Jun asks. “Is it...is there any news of Takashi?”

Keith swallows. “Not exactly. The Citadel sent me to warn you. There’s...there’s been a demon sighting. A greater incubus, likelier than not, made a contract with a witch. Possibly one from the Citadel.” Keith is sweating through his tunic, and the flickering figure materializing on the stove isn’t helping. Shiro eyes him, arms folded, perched atop the counter with a tilted head and steady glowing gaze. Keith looks away, and back at Mai Shirogane, who has clasped her tiny wrinkled hands in front of her as if in prayer. “The demon...it’s taken the form of your grandson. Of Takashi.”

Mai closes her eyes. Jun says, in a tone of hopeless confusion, “What? Why? Our Takashi was not involved with infernal forces, not until that damned Kerberos mission!”

“I know, I know, and the Citadel knows that too,” Keith hastily assures, “but they sent me to warn you –”

Mai stands up abruptly, the chair scraping harshly across the floor, and Keith flinches hard. Her hands are curled into fists and she’s shaking. “They think we would be tempted by a beast from the Void?!?” she exclaims, shaking her head so that the neat gray bun atop it quivers violently. “The Shirogane family is a strong one, strong of will and spirit – we would never give in to a demon’s tricks!”

“I’m just the messenger, I’m sorry,” Keith whispers, bowing his head. “I didn’t want to come, I knew it would upset you and I swear, I have no desire to cause either of you more pain than you’ve already been dealt –”

“Oh, Keith, hush,” Jun says, reaching out and covering Keith’s curled hands with his own gnarled fingers, rough from the daily work of casting nets and tending to the garden. “We know, we know. We are not angry with you, only with that damned Citadel. Over a year, and still, they cannot even bring us our grandson’s body though they claim he is gone.” Jun’s fingers tremble and Keith looks into his gray eyes helplessly, wishing he could tell him everything, tell him that his grandson might yet be saved.

Mai slumps against the counters, not two feet from where the demon is perched. Shiro peers at her, head cocked and eyes wide, a hulking shadow looming over the frail old woman, bent double in her grief. When he reaches out with a clawed hand, Keith’s heart leaps into his throat, but Shiro’s palm just falls gently upon her slight shoulder, claws framing it in a way that could almost be protective. Keith looks away again.

“I’m sorry,” Keith repeats. “They won’t tell me anything, either. You deserve to know more.”

“So do you,” Jun says. “You were our Takashi’s closest friend. He loved you very much.”

Shiro pauses, head turning slowly towards the table, hand still upon Mai’s shoulder. Keith looks resolutely at Jun. His nails dig so hard into his palms that they draw blood. “Thank you,” he mumbles. “That is very kind of you to say.”

“It is the truth,” Mai says, glancing up. She brushes hair out of her face briskly and snaps her fingers; the flames on the stove go out with a crackle that makes everyone jump. Shiro lets go of her as if burnt, and seems cowed, somehow. Mai brings Keith his plate of trout, and then a plate for Jun, and then some for herself.
She pours tea from the family’s old ceramic teapot – Keith remembers these cups, made of the clay from the lakebed, cool to the touch when empty and scalding when filled with freshly boiled tea. The tea leaves drift to the bottom in a dark green swirl and Keith wonders what they say. He cannot read them, so he drinks them instead, letting the familiar warmth of the tea settle into his cold body in the cold silence of the house.

“Thank you for coming to us,” Mai says when the tea is nearly gone. “You are a good friend, Keith. To us and to our grandson. You have a home here, should you want it.”

Keith stiffens, already opening his mouth in protest, but Jun nods. “Our home is open to you,” he says. “Please, stay the night, Keith. That Citadel can wait.”

Keith doesn’t want to leave, and yet his guilt is so immense as to be painful. *It’s me. It’s me who stole your grandson’s face for a demon pact. I’m sorry. I know you can’t forgive me. You shouldn’t. I just want to bring him back.*

But instead he says, “I...I would love to stay. Thank you. You’re kind, good people. Just...just like Shiro.”

Mai and Jun smile at him and their sadness is palpable.

Then Mai sits down to eat and says, “Is there anything more they know about this demon, hm?”

Keith shakes his head reluctantly. “No, ma’am, sorry. They saw it and its witch out in the woods the other day, and the Altean princess subdued it. So maybe it’s gone.” Shiro folds his arms and rolls his eyes. Keith continues to ignore him. Shiro’s eye twitches.

“Doubt that,” Jun says dryly. “Used to be a Void-born in Lake Lucanus, you know. An old god. Might still be there; swear I see a dark shape underwater on nights with a full moon.”

“An old god?” Keith exclaims, mouth full of trout. “Did it demand human sacrifices?”

“Oh, no,” Jun says. “Not so far as we know. Just fish. We would toss it one from every catch. It was not a bad being, not at all. Kept to itself.”

“Looked like a great white whale with human eyes,” Mai adds. “Quiet fellow, yes. So not every Void-born brings blood.”

“You say this one is an incubus, though?” Jun frowns when Keith nods. “I hope they are wrong. Those sorts, they are cruel. Not like our Takashi...it is wrong for one to wear his face.”

Shiro is still as a statue where he sits, face unreadable, watching unblinkingly.

“The Alteans are investigating it,” Keith says. “Hopefully they’ll take care of everything.”

“Mm.” Mai sips her tea, and then begins cleaning up, brisk and cheery as before. “Ah, Keith, you may sleep in Takashi’s room; there are fresh sheets and pajamas —”

“I couldn’t possibly,” Keith says, unable to even think of sleeping in Shiro’s bed, in Shiro’s house, after lying to Shiro’s grandparents and bringing a demon into their midst.

But they will not be swayed, and Keith knows it.

Sure enough, Mai gives him a look, a look that says she is going to be the best host she can and he is going to have to let her.
He eats his trout and does not argue further.

*

Keith could never have prepared himself for walking into Shiro’s old bedroom, so he does not try to.

Mai opens the door for him and they step into the small space together; the dark wooden walls are suffocating. Everything is clean and tidy; pristine, even. As if Shiro never left. But he did, and Keith is a hundred times more aware of his absence, standing there beside Shiro’s grandmother before Shiro’s neatly made bed, unable to tear his gaze away from the small altar below the room’s single window.

There’s a framed photograph of Shiro surrounded by candles, flickering with pale blue flame that Keith knows will never go out. The flowers there are fresh, and they fill the room with soft fragrance. There are a few small items among them – two paper cranes, a silver bell, an unlit incense burner, and several more photographs. One of them is Shiro as a young child, laughing in his mother’s arms.

Her altar is somewhere in this house, too.

“Ah,” Mai says, following his gaze. “It is not much, but we do our best to honor Takashi. Wherever he may be.”

“He’s very lucky to have family like you,” Keith says.

“Luck has nothing to do with it,” Mai sighs. “It is misfortune which plagues this family, if anything.”

“I’m sorry,” Keith says, and bows his head.

She pats his arm. “It is alright. You have known more than your fair share of misfortune, too. I do not know why these things happen, not even after eighty-two years. When I figure it out, I will tell you.” Her smile warms him, and she hesitates before reaching out and pressing something cool into his palm. “For you,” she says.

Keith looks into his palm. There is a small iron rose there, with intricate enfolding petals and a thin curling stem with thorns and leaves which form a twisted letter K. “For me?” Keith repeats, confused.

He knows Mai must have made it; her gift is that of metal manipulation, a rare magick which is highly valued but which takes too much out of Mai Shirogane nowadays to create anything too large. The rose is slightly bigger than a gold piece; she must have made it years ago, or else toiled over it for hours on end.

But why?

She nods. “Takashi asked me to make it for you,” she says quietly. “For your birthday. The...the one he missed. Your nineteenth.”

Keith’s chest seizes. A shadow in the corner shifts, grows, blinks with golden eyes.

“He...Shiro...Takashi was going to give this to me?” His voice is barely a whisper.

Mai nods again, her expression nostalgic. “He did so many chores. Rebuilt three canoes. Cleaned
every last inch of the house. Cooked every meal for two weeks. Trying to wheedle his way into my heart so I’d give in and make it for him, of course.” She sniffs, and wipes her eyes in a quick swipe. “But he was already in my heart, and so were you, so of course I made it.”

“It’s beautiful,” Keith says. It’s more than beautiful; but he doesn’t have the words to describe how exactly it makes him feel. Ruined, maybe.

“He did love you,” Mai says, and Keith’s fingers tremble where they clutch the rose. “As a brother or as something more, I don’t know, but he loved you, Keith.”

Keith is going to cry and he hates himself for it. He hates himself for turning Shiro’s love, something as pure and lovely as this little rose, into something so perverse and wicked.

“I loved him, too,” he finds himself saying, his vision blurring.

“You still love him,” Mai says, “I can see it in your eyes.”

Keith swallows. “Yes.”

“No.” Keith takes a deep, steadying breath. “Something more.”

“Oh, dear,” Mai says, in a voice that says she understands everything although there is no way she possibly could, and draws him into a tight and wholly unexpected hug. Mai Shirogane comes up to Keith’s shoulder but she hugs like a seven foot tall bear; it is bruising and brutal and Keith never wants her to let go.

In her arms, Keith misses the mother he never had, and misses too the mother Shiro had and lost as a child at her bedside. Her magic could do nothing to bring the color back into her skin, nor the life back into her lungs once it was gone. No magic can do that; not really.

“I don’t want him to be dead,” Keith breathes.

“None of us do,” Mai says, smoothing his hair away from his face. “It is a cruel thing when the world takes people like Takashi away from us.”

The shadow shivers. Its eyes are flickering lanterns, eternal flames.

“How do you go on?” Keith asks her then, honest and quiet.

“Oh, dear,” Mai says, in a voice that says she understands everything although there is no way she possibly could, and draws him into a tight and wholly unexpected hug. Mai Shirogane comes up to Keith’s shoulder but she hugs like a seven foot tall bear; it is bruising and brutal and Keith never wants her to let go.

In her arms, Keith misses the mother he never had, and misses too the mother Shiro had and lost as a child at her bedside. Her magic could do nothing to bring the color back into her skin, nor the life back into her lungs once it was gone. No magic can do that; not really.

“I don’t want him to be dead,” Keith breathes.

“None of us do,” Mai says, smoothing his hair away from his face. “It is a cruel thing when the world takes people like Takashi away from us.”

The shadow shivers. Its eyes are flickering lanterns, eternal flames.

“How do you go on?” Keith asks her then, honest and quiet.

“Ah, Jun and I, we have lost again and again,” Mai says. “Our son-in-law, then our daughter, and now our grandson...at times we think we are being punished.” She cracks a rueful smile. “But it is not punishment, Keith. It simply is. And so you learn to continue, for there is nothing else to do.”

“You could stop,” Keith says. “Some people do.”

“That would be defeat,” Mai tells him firmly. “And it would do no good, no good to anyone. Jun and I can still do good, so long as we are here. And you, you will be here longer than us — you can do good, too. When we lost Takashi so much good was lost along with him. We can only hope to make up what was lost.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” Keith admits. I think I may have already failed.

“I know you can,” Mai says, and hugs him again. When she lets go, she kisses his cheek, pats his head with her wrinkled brown hand, and wishes him goodnight. Then she leaves, and Keith is left
alone with his shadow.

Keith does not address the demon as he gets ready for bed. His head is full of a dull roar, white noise like waves or wind or fire or all three. The demon does not address him, either, and does not move an inch until Keith, still holding the iron rose in his fist, silently crawls into bed, Shiro’s bed, and turns his face into the pillow.

He swears it still smells like him. Just a little, maybe.

Who is he kidding? Keith can’t remember what Shiro smelled like.

The bed dips behind him and Keith tenses so hard it hurts. “Get out,” he whispers, “get out; you shouldn’t be here.”

“Should you?”

Keith closes his eyes and chokes on a dry sob. “Why?” he asks. “Why are you still intent on tormenting me now? You have eternity to do that, just give me a night of peace.”

“But you are not at peace,” he says. “You are going to cry, here in the dark, by the candlelight of your dead love’s altar, and if I leave, you are going to be alone. Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” Keith snaps, cheeks wet, “go, leave, why won’t you just leave me —”

“Is that why you summoned me? To be alone?” Claws stroke his hip softly. “You have been alone far enough already, Keith. Do not be alone now.”

Keith lets out a shuddering breath. “You’re not him,” he says. “You’re not —”

“He loved you,” he says, and covers Keith’s hand with his own, warming the iron rose with gentle heat. “He loves you.”

Keith does not answer, but he relaxes, and lets the incubus hold him close.

“I will not let you be alone in this,” Shiro tells him.

Keith dreams of blooming rose bushes and gleaming golden eyes within them, always just out of reach.

*

They have catfish for breakfast and Keith leaves with the taste of home on his tongue and the iron rose tucked into his pocket. He keeps checking to make sure it’s still there.

Keith thanks Grandma Mai and Grandpa Jun and they send him off with quick hugs after forcing him to swear that he’ll visit again soon. By the time Keith saddles up Strawberry and returns to the road, it’s nearly noon, and Shiro is restless.

*Something’s not right*, Shiro says when they reach the treeline. *We’re not alone, here.*

“Why, is it Amdusias again?” Keith mutters, hands tightening on the reins.

*No. Keith, stop. Stop!* Shiro rushes out in a dark swirl of mist in front of him, and Strawberry rears in fright; Keith barely manages to hang on.

It’s too late – three figures step out from the trees, all in Citadel guard armor, all with long spears
tipped with sharp silver points, which they turn towards Shiro and Keith at once. “Master Iverson was right,” the lead guard snaps, “Novice Kogane is a traitor to witches.”

Strawberry snorts and stomps nervously as more guards step out of the trees; they’re surrounded. There must be twelve, at least. Shiro’s form coalesces into something more solid but he stays beside Keith and whispers, They’re warded with powerful Altean magic. I cannot touch them.

Flames alight in Keith’s palm and the guards’ eyes narrow. “Stay back,” Keith warns, fighting to keep his voice level although he knows this is the end. He cannot return to the Citadel after this even if he does manage to escape – he will have to find a life elsewhere, perhaps take his chances in the Wastes until Samhain…

“Come quietly or we will use force,” the lead guard says. “Men, bind the demon, quickly.”

“One of the guards steps forward and lifts her hand, a bright light igniting, meant to dispel infernal magic and leave Shiro as powerless as possible. Keith’s flame grows, burning hotter and redder, until it is nearly molten, a fireball at the ready. “I said,” Keith growls, “stay back.”

The guards shift warily. “Boy, you don’t want to do this –”

Keith raises his hand…and freezes as the lead guard crumples to the ground, a hooded figure standing behind him. The other guards falter. The hooded figure stands over the fallen guard, gloved hands flexing, and Keith can feel the sheer power pouring off of it in crackling waves. Strawberry startles back and the guards move forward, only to be knocked off their feet as the hooded figure leaps towards them, landing with a dull thud that shakes the very earth. The figure waves a hand and the guards crumple just like the first, puppets with cut strings.

Keith can hardly breathe. What is this thing?

I don’t know, Shiro whispers.

He and Shiro watch with growing bewilderment as the hooded figure takes out all the guards, bloodless and instantaneous, leaving them lifeless where they stood. Keith can’t see its face, but its frame is lean and tall, taller than any of the human guards, and it moves with impossible speed and grace. The fight, if it could even be called that, is over in mere seconds. The guards are still breathing, but they appear to be in a deep sleep, faces peaceful and still.

Strawberry stands stiff and alert, and Keith sits up tall in the saddle, his fire still aglow. Shiro lingers beside them, uncertain. The hooded figure folds its arms. Its face is still shrouded in shadow.

Douse your flames, there is no need for them, the figure says, and Keith starts – it is a woman. An old woman or a young one, he cannot tell. Both, maybe, somehow. Their memory of this event is gone. In their minds, they found you innocent, and will bring this news to the Citadel when they wake. Stay out of trouble. I cannot always be there.

The figure vanishes. Not into smoke, not into flame, but into nothingness. One second there, the next, gone.

“What,” Keith says, his fireball dissolving into harmless sparks. “Who…?”

“She isn’t human,” Shiro says, venturing cautiously over to the guards as he solidifies fully. “But
not a demon, either...must be a Void-born of some kind. A powerful one.”

Keith shakes his head. “But she didn’t kill them,” he says.

“We are not all evil, as we’ve already discussed,” Shiro mutters, but he looks confused, too. “Her magic...I swear it’s familiar. Where have I felt this before?” Keith waits, but the incubus just frowns in frustration and says, “We should leave now. I don’t want to stick around to find out how long this strange magic lasts, and you’re clearly expected at the Citadel.”

Keith nods and digs his heels into Strawberry’s sides, but he, too, is unable to shake the feeling that he’s felt her magic before. It lingers in the air, a faint impression of prickling warmth, and Keith’s fingertips spark in instinctive reply.

*

When they return to the Citadel stables, Keith says, “I want my apology tonight.”

Shiro inclines his head with a smirk.

“Until then, leave.”

The smirk falls, but he obeys.

Keith touches the iron rose and stays in Strawberry’s stall for a long while, tracing his fingers over the metal ridges and curves.

Master Montgomery greets him warmly when he returns to her office, errand complete. He does not mention the guards, does not tell her he knows the errand was meant as a trap, does not say anything more than he needs to.

“Master Iverson will be pleased,” Montgomery says, with an apologetic smile. “Thank you, Keith.”

“Of course,” Keith says.

*

After dinner, Keith opens the door to his room and finds Shiro sitting on the bed.

He looks freshly showered, black hair damp and glossy, pushed back from his forehead, gray gaze tilted downwards to the book in his lap. It’s a book about the stars. He’s wearing plain clothes, a black tunic and loose brown pants, and his arms are whole, unscarred, muscled and glowing with a healthy tan. His broad chest rises and falls gently as he breathes, turning the page and pretending that he doesn’t notice Keith approaching the bed.

“Hi,” Keith says, once he is within reach.

Shiro looks up, and the smile that crosses his face is blinding in its simple joy and beauty. “Hi,” he says, and tilts his head, patting the bed beside him playfully. “I missed you.”

Keith swallows. “I missed you, too,” he whispers. His heart hurts, but he sits down on the bed, and tells himself that he asked for this. He wanted to play pretend. He just didn’t know the demon would play so well. Or maybe he did know, and that’s why he’s been putting it off.

Shiro’s smile falls, and his smooth brow creases. “Hey,” he murmurs, and lifts a hand to cup Keith’s face. “You okay?”
Keith’s vision swims for a moment, swims with the image of Shiro’s unscarred, familiar face so close to his own, burnt into the backs of his eyelids when he squeezes his eyes shut to ground himself. Shiro’s other hand finds its way to his jaw, and warm lips press against his brow. Shiro says nothing.


Shiro bites his lip and does. He looks inquisitive, but also a little worried, which is very Shiro of him. Keith tugs his shirt off and nods for Shiro to do the same, then pants and underwear. Keith keeps his underwear on; it gives him more of a sense that he is in control. Shiro stays obediently on the bed, bare and beautiful, his eyes watching Keith’s every movement. His cock is stirring against his thigh already.

“What do you want?” Shiro asks after a few moments, during which both of them are silent.

Keith’s thinking, and waves a hand at him. Shiro closes his mouth.


“Okay,” Shiro says, and closes his eyes. He’s perfectly relaxed when Keith leans down to kiss him again, deep and sweet, pushing his fingers into Shiro’s hair and mussing it slightly, scratching his nails light and pleasant against Shiro’s scalp. “Mm,” Shiro mumbles as Keith pulls away, his lips still parted and head tilted upwards, chasing Keith’s kiss. Keith chuckles and trails kisses down his jaw and neck instead, delighting in the simple pleasure of stubble scraping over soft skin, then employing his hands to slide down from Shiro’s broad shoulders and cup the swell of his chest.

Shiro’s breath catches when Keith kneads at the firm muscle and tweaks at his nipples, soft and quick, a hint of what’s to come. Keith takes his time; takes his time sucking and licking and biting into the pale of Shiro’s throat, tracing the lines of strong muscle overlaid by unblemished skin, covering it with his mouth, his marks, bruises that he wishes would never fade.

“Keith,” Shiro sighs, voice breathy already, reaching up to cup the nape of Keith’s neck and run his fingers through the fine hair there. “Baby, please…”

His hips cant up, cock brushing against Keith’s thigh, and Keith pauses, smoothing the pad of his thumb over a reddening bruise. Considering. He shifts above Shiro, just a little, slides his lean thigh in between Shiro’s and right over his hardening dick. Shiro whines, lower lip caught between his teeth. Keith’s eyes narrow. Shiro’s are still closed.

Keith grabs Shiro’s wrists then, wrenches them away from him and into the pillow above his head. He reaches under the pillow to retrieve the rope he stashed there earlier, rope that the demon surely noticed but did not comment on. Keith pushes that thought away and focuses on tying neat knots, tight but not too tight; he wants to leave marks but not pain. Shiro holds still, lips quirking, eyes still shut.

“You’re playing dirty, baby,” Shiro murmurs, testing the bonds once Keith’s done. They hold fast.

“No dirtier than you,” Keith retorts, and is satisfied by the way that makes Shiro shudder. Keith hums, fingertips skating down his chest, digging into the grooves of muscle and arches of bone; collar, ribs, hips, kissing each of them until Shiro’s breath shortens and he squirms, subtle but insistent, below him. “Patience,” Keith reminds him, and continues leaving kisses everywhere he touches, spending time bringing Shiro’s nipples to hard pink points with his tongue, dusky circles pebbling under his warm breath. Shiro bites his lip harder, body held tense and back arching off
the sheets, cock leaking a sticky puddle in the V of his hips.

Keith licks his lips when he pulls away. Shiro grits his teeth, only to gasp loud and shocked when Keith moves down his body and sucks Shiro’s cock into his mouth, poking the pointed tip of his tongue into Shiro’s sensitive slit, waiting until Shiro is panting and moaning to fondle his heavy balls. Shiro’s hands flex uselessly, tendons standing out in his bruised neck, and Keith laves his tongue up and over the veins on the underside, lapping under the head and then pulling off with a wet pop.

Shiro groans, chest heaving and cock standing up red and wet, thighs spread with an eagerness that makes Keith’s mouth water. Keith licks the salt from his lips and leans over him, retracing his steps, stroking and petting at every place that makes Shiro desperate for more.

“You look beautiful like this,” Keith tells him, low and secretive. Shiro swallows, a hard bob of his throat. Keith kisses his rough cheek, the unscarred bridge of his nose, the smooth curve of his brow. “You know that, right? How beautiful you are, so beautiful that anyone would want you.”

Shiro’s lips part. “But only you can have me,” he whispers. “It’s only you, Keith. I only want you – ah!”

Keith flips him quick and easy, unable to stop his wolfish grin at the sight of Shiro laid out before him, powerful back muscles flexing as he tries to push himself up on his elbows, bound hands scrabbling at the sheets. “Shhh,” Keith coos, sliding his palms down the curve of Shiro’s spine, pausing at the small of his back before continuing downwards, squeezing his ass until Shiro stops squirming. Keith says nothing, just reaches for a pillow and slides it under Shiro’s front, chuckling when he starts grinding his cock into it immediately, groaning softly, faltering when Keith spreads his ass and swipes a dry fingertip over the tight furl of his hole.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Keith murmurs, making sure Shiro can feel his breath as it whispers over his skin. “I’m going to open you up with my tongue and fingers until you come, and then, when you’re begging for it, I’m going to fuck you until you’re hard again and you’re gonna come on my cock.” Shiro groans, long and wanting, lifting his ass in obvious invitation.

If they weren’t playing pretend, the demon would have snarked back at him. But they are playing pretend, so Shiro just says, hoarse and frantic, “Do it, baby, wreck me; I want you too.”

“Not gonna wreck you,” Keith says, lifting his fingers to Shiro’s lips and sliding them into the wet heat of his mouth slowly. “Gonna make you mine.”

“I’m already yours,” Shiro mumbles around his fingers, sucking them without even the slightest brush or sting of teeth. His pliance makes Keith weak, weak because he has imagined this; has imagined Shiro’s soft gaze translating into his soft body under Keith’s, strong muscle relaxed and yielding under Keith’s hands and around his cock, letting Keith in like he has done for no one else. Keith pushes three fingers deep into Shiro’s mouth, deep enough to make him choke, and Shiro takes it, throat working and lashes fluttering.

Keith tugs his fingers free and shoves away the memories threatening to spill over in his mind, a flood of colors and sounds and smells and tastes and touches, so many touches; Keith never knew just how starved for touch he was before he met Shiro.

Shiro shifts, opens his eyes to look at Keith over his shoulder, brows furrowed in concern. “Hey,” he says, “stop thinking so hard; I can practically hear you worrying from here.”

“Not worrying,” Keith mutters, ducking his head, “just remembering.”
“Yeah?” Shiro’s face softens. “There’s a lot to remember, huh.”

Keith nods. “I just missed you,” he whispers, hating the lump in his throat. “I don’t ever wanna forget you, you know? I don’t wanna forget what we had.”

“You won’t,” Shiro says, and there’s something in his eyes, something like a glimmer of determination, of empathy, of real, genuine understanding; and Keith’s heart leaps at the possibility that maybe, just maybe, he really does know how Keith feels, why Keith feels, why Keith sacrificed everything in an instant for this man. “Keith, you won’t forget,” he says again, with such conviction that Keith can only tear his gaze away, move down Shiro’s body, and kiss the bumps of his spine, terrified by their fragility.

Shiro groans in loud encouragement when Keith’s kisses venture lower, louder when Keith hooks his wet fingers into the cleft of Shiro’s ass and spread him wide, exhaling hot over his hole and smirking when it winks in anticipation. Keith has had enough of his own teasing and wastes no time in sinking his tongue inside, licking firmly past the tight ring that gives under his mouth with shocking ease. Shiro writhes, voice breaking as he gasps, “Shit, baby, yeah, yeah,” when Keith pushes his fingers inside, one after the other, alternating with the slick plunges of his tongue and the playful flutters of his lips.

“You like that?” Keith asks as he pulls back, voice rough, edged with his own arousal. He wipes spit from his chin and admires his handiwork as Shiro moans an affirmative, rubbing his cock against the pillow and spreading his legs wider, needy, whining when Keith grabs his thighs and urges them even wider. “You have a pretty ass, Shiro,” Keith tells him, giving it an approving pat. Shiro laughs, breaking on a shuddering moan when Keith shoves two fingers in without warning. He’s not afraid of hurting him at this point; Shiro’s hole is stretched and shiny, and Keith only hesitates for a moment before leaning forward and spitting into it.

Shiro yelps, back arching and hole clenching, body working around the warm glob of spit. It starts to slide out and Keith pushes it back in, working it around with two fingers, searching and curling and nudging until Shiro tenses and groans oh, and Keith knows he has him where he wants him. Keith rubs his fingers into Shiro’s prostate again and his hips jerk hard; Keith can see the hanging swell of his balls under his fingers as they slide in and out, and wonders how hard he is, how close he must be, and imagines Shiro making a mess all over himself, fat cock pulsing with white ropes of cum as he writhes to completion on Keith’s fingers.

Shiro whimpers, and Keith knows he saw it, too. “B-baby...baby, please, please, I gotta...touch me, touch me –”

“No,” Keith hisses, twisting his fingers hard and merciless. He reaches for the lube in the pocket of his discarded pants, and keeps working Shiro open while he takes off the cap. “Tell me how it feels, Shiro. Tell me how it feels to be so hot for it.”

Shiro gasps, “Good, good, feels so good, wanna come, want you to fuck me, baby, you’re good at this, you’re so good at thi – ssshit!”

Keith shoves his tongue in alongside his fingers, working them in tandem, and lubes up his other hand to reach under Shiro and squeeze at his balls, coaxing him to spill, only getting a single touch to the thick base of his cock in before Shiro shouts and comes, clenching so tight that Keith has to back off, wiping his mouth and crooking his fingers deep with every convulsion of Shiro’s body. Keith doesn’t give him time for his cock to ever soften fully; he rolls Shiro onto his back and nearly swallows his tongue at the sight that greets him.

Shiro looks ruined; face blotchy and flushed, mouth hanging open, lips bitten and reddened, hair a
tousled mess, eyes glazed and pupils huge and dark. But Keith’s more focused on the cum splattering his belly and, in places, his chest, covering Shiro’s cock as it stirs valiantly for a second round. Shiro makes a broken noise when Keith flicks his thumb over the head, smearing cum into it, using it to slick the way and drive Shiro into a whining puddle of oversensitized lust.

“Keith,” he gasps, “please, you promised, fuck me, c’mon –”

Keith covers his fingers with lube and opens Shiro up with three, once more taking his time, waiting until Shiro is fucking his ass back onto Keith’s hand, skin gleaming with sweat and eyes rolling back in his head. Keith avoids his prostate, not wanting him to come yet, because his cock is already full and eager again. Keith’s own dick is pressed to the seam of his underwear, and every movement of it against the fabric has become a kind of delicious torture which he weathers for the reward ahead.

Still, he can’t help but press the heel of his free hand between his thighs, rocking his hips gently against it and groaning quietly at the much-needed friction. Shiro notices, a tremor going through him and hunger bright in his eyes. “Can’t wait to get your cock in me, baby,” he moans, stretching and curling his toes as Keith’s fingers curl too, “I need it, need you, want to feel it for days afterwards, nng…”

“Okay, okay,” Keith gasps, unable to wait any longer, withdrawing his fingers fast enough for Shiro to hiss at the loss, arching his back as Keith yanks his underwear off and finally gets his dick out. Shiro does his best to look as enticing as possible, which is unbelievably easy. Keith never needs much persuading when it comes to him, and in the end this wasn’t about driving Shiro mad with denial; Keith never wanted to deny him in the first place.

Keith is not here to deny but to give; give because Shiro has given him so much and to say Keith feels indebted to him would be too cheap, and too simple. It’s not a debt to be paid, it’s more like an expression of gratitude, of wonder, of never knowing quite why Shiro rode for three days to a place he’d never been to save a boy he’d never met, and why he didn’t stop there, why he gave Keith so much when Keith felt he deserved so little.

He thinks of this as he slots his hips to Shiro’s and guides his cock inside, awed by the way Shiro allows him in, head falling back and moans spilling from his lips in a litany of filth and endearments woven into one. Shiro is perfect velvet heat surrounding his aching cock, squeezing its length in all the best ways, better when Keith fucks deeper, until he’s fully seated inside him and Shiro is trembling, hands curled into fists and bound arms bulging as his muscles flex hard. Keith rolls his hips experimentally and Shiro moans, soft but not pained, the tension in his face melting away into bliss, legs hastily curling around Keith’s waist, drawing him in, until Keith overbalances and falls heavy atop him.

“Wish I could – ah – touch you,” Shiro breathes, looking at Keith through his lashes, breath feathering hot over his cheek. Keith braces himself on Shiro’s chest with one hand, reaching behind to heft Shiro’s leg up higher with the other hand, anchoring them together.

“You are touching me,” Keith whispers, hair hanging down into his face and lips curving into a small, fond smile. He thrusts in and out, in and out, and watches Shiro’s face crumple in pleasure. “You deserve to feel this good always,” Keith tells him, and Shiro’s eyes flicker open, startled. “Always,” Keith repeats, and kisses him.

Shiro groans when he tastes himself on Keith’s tongue, their tongues turning everything sloppy, salt and musk and spit and Shiro’s desperate sounds buzzing against Keith’s lips, but Keith fucks him slow; slow and hard and with purpose. Shiro takes it, takes it and moans Keith’s name with every thrust in, takes it as Keith fucks him open and raw and kisses him breathless. It’s more tender
than Keith meant, but the more he thinks about it, he can’t not be tender with Shiro.

Even when it’s not his Shiro.

Bitterness coils in his throat and it makes him fuck Shiro faster, harder, losing rhythm in favor of pounding Shiro’s prostate again and again until Shiro keens and his eyes water and his legs kick, heels digging in hard, cock twitching between their bodies, drowning in precum and coming in a hot wet rush and a cry of “Keith, Keith,” that echoes in Keith’s ears and brings him to climax in the tight clench of Shiro’s body, dragging his cock through it, not wanting to stop even as he’s overcome with the hazy sleepy ecstasy of orgasm and slumps over Shiro’s shuddering frame.

Keith unties Shiro’s wrists with clumsy fingers. There are faint red indentations on the delicate skin and Keith longs to soothe them with his lips with a magic he does not have; he leaves them be. Keith braces himself for the demon to drop the act as soon as Keith’s cock slips free of Shiro’s loosened hole, but instead a warm hand falls upon Keith’s back, keeping him close. Now it’s Keith’s turn to close his eyes, overwhelmed.

Too much, he thinks, but knows it was also exactly what he needed.

Shiro noses into his hair and whispers, “Thank you.”

Keith stiffens, tries to pull away but finds himself held fast. Resigned, he settles back down. “Think I should be thanking you,” he mutters.

But Shiro says, “No. I mean it.”

And Keith doesn’t know what to say to that, so he says nothing, and they lay like that until Keith drifts off, and awakes hours later clean, warm, and in the demon’s arms, shadows trailing from them like smoke.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Just a lil clarification: when Kurobasanir speaks in italics, know that he's speaking from a form that is more demon than human; when he speaks normally he's in a more human/corporeal form.

Ahhh it took awhile to finish this chapter but I hope you enjoy!! I'm having a lot of fun with this story and I hope you are, too ;)

Shiro is in a dark place.

It is a kind of suffocating darkness, cold and damp and heavy over and around him, and he can hardly move but he struggles to his feet, knowing that he must press onward — there’s something waiting for him in the darkness, or rather someone.

It feels like an eternity before he sees them – a small pale figure crumpled on the ground, wrists and ankles bound in chains, body bare and bruised, black hair grown long and ragged.

Shiro stops. Two black horns curl from Keith’s head. They gleam red at the tips, as if dipped in blood, freshly gored. A thin red tail curls from the small of his back, limp and unmoving but circling the front of his body as if in some feeble attempt to shield its owner. His fingers are clawed, sharp and wicked curves that make Shiro shiver just to look at. It’s Keith, but it isn’t. Shiro can feel the magic emanating off of him, and it’s powerful. Tainted, too, by another magic, something even stronger, and endlessly crueler.

Keith, Shiro whispers, reaching out to him. Keith does not reply, but one of his chained wrists twitches, sending a rattling tremor down the entire chain. Keith, who did this to you?

Keith groans, shivering and curling in on himself, and his eyes flicker open, glowing gold and hazy. His mouth, when it opens, is lined with sharp white teeth like needles, and those make Shiro shiver, too. You let her get me, Keith rasps, his golden gaze accusing. You did this to me, Shiro.

And all at once Shiro realizes this is not just a dream, nor a hallucination, but rather this is the future, a future, and Shiro must somehow divert it or it will happen.

The darkness swallows him up.

*

For two weeks, they do not speak about the night that the incubus gave himself to Keith.

Keith has no desire to; it is like a raw, open wound in his chest, ripped open just a little further every time he looks at the demon’s face and sees Shiro in it – Shiro not just in appearance but in essence, in the fleeting softness of his eyes, the gentle curve of his lips, the low and comforting timbre of his voice. Keith is glad September is nearly over, because he doesn’t think he can stand this much longer.

The demon’s less chatty and snarky than usual. He follows Keith like a shadow, but a quieter one,
one who takes his daily due in a way that Keith cannot call routine nor aloof nor harsh – he is gentle with Keith, gentle but mercifully quick, and Keith does not know what to think of it.

Alteans flood the Citadel in cycles of blue-robed hunters who prowl the halls and always bow their heads to Keith as they pass. They’ve been told about him, presumably by the princess. The princess is kind to Keith whenever she sees him, but it is not until the end of September that she requests his presence privately.

The invitation troubles Shiro but there is nothing he can do about it, and the demon fizzles away with frustration as Keith steps into the private dining room in the north tower, where Princess Allura is waiting. It is a smaller room than Keith expected, and the setting, a round table warmed by flickering candlelight, is quite intimate. Princess Allura looks up as the guards give him entry, and ushers him over with a wave of her hand. The doors close behind Keith and the guards wait on either side, their armor gleaming in the low light and their helmeted heads hidden under silvery visors.


Keith sits, stiff and awkward, in the chair closest to her. “Of course, princess,” he murmurs, ducking his head.

“How are you faring, novice?” Allura asks, tilting her head and tapping her glass with a fork. Servants flow into the room in a silent stream, carrying trays of rich foods and bottles of wine.

“I’m fine,” Keith says, eying his filling wine goblet. “Princess, is something wrong?”

“Wrong?” Allura frowns, a delicate downturn of the lips, and shakes her head. “Not quite.”

Keith’s eyebrows go up.

She sighs. “There’s been a development,” Allura says. “What do you know about old gods, Novice Kogane?”

“Old gods?” Keith repeats, confused. “They’re...I mean, they’re Void-born, supposedly the most powerful, but more reasonable than demons. Which isn’t saying much. They often demand sacrifices from humans...sometimes they give favors in return.” He tilts his head. “Why?”

“Does the name Hecate mean anything to you?”

Keith blinks. “Of course,” he murmurs. “Hecate was the first witch...are you saying she’s an old god?”

“Some sources believe she is,” Allura replies, “my father included. We have ample reason to believe so. Hecate has many cults, witches who serve her directly –”

“She’s dead,” Keith says, eyes narrowed. “She lived thousands of years ago, that’s not –”

“Ah,” Allura says, holding up a finger, “she should be dead, yes. But many believe she still lives, or exists – who knows if her continued existence can truly be called living? You see, Keith, from what we Alteans have uncovered over the years, we believe that Hecate was searching for the secret of eternal life. And we believe she found it, through alchemy...and contact with the Void. This was the birth of witchcraft. It was not some gift bestowed upon us from the heavens. It was a mistake. Hecate unleashed terrible power that day, upon herself and the rest of the world, and ceased to be human.”
“Are you saying witches aren’t human?” Keith shakes his head. “All due respect, but you sound like the folks in my hometown, princess.”

“You and I are quite human, Novice Kogane,” Allura corrects. “For we have accepted the finite nature of our lives, and seek to use our magic for good, helpful, practical purposes. But Hecate’s search for immortality corrupted her soul, perhaps even consumed it altogether.”

“But she found it?” Keith asks. “She gained immortality?”

“I do not know that you would call it a gain,” Allura mutters, gaze dark. “But yes, she did. In Altean legend, the place where the secret is found has a name – Oriande. Though I would guess it is less of a place and more of a plane, like ours or the Void. A plane between planes, if you will. A dangerous place. None have ever returned, except, we assume, Hecate.”

“Alright,” Keith says. He’s uneasy, and wishes for once that his shadow was still beside him. The shadows in this room are too long, too dark, and he knows they are not on his side. “Why are you telling me this, princess?”

“My reasons are twofold,” Allura says, placing one spoonful after another of berry compote onto her plate and spreading it pensively over her thick slab of toast. “One, we have been saying a sharp spike of increased activity in Hecate’s cults, especially those near the Citadel. They were not considered threats, and still have not harmed any outsiders, but we have received reports of bloody moonlit animal sacrifices and even self-inflicted harm among cult members. It seems they are trying to either make contact with her...or supply her with more power. As of yet, we do not know why.”

Keith swallows. “And two?”

“Two...” Allura bites her lip. “I’ve been told you are familiar with Archmagus Honerva, yes?”

“Yes...” Keith frowns. “She hasn’t taught at the Citadel for a long while. Does she have business in Altea?”

Allura folds her hands, expression grim. “No,” she says. “Archmagus Honerva left us months ago for her true master – a demon by the name of Zarkon.” Keith stiffens. “Zarkon rules the realm of Daibazaal, the very realm your friend Shiro was last seen in, and the realm the incubus who stole his face originates from.”

“What are you saying?” Keith whispers. “Archmagus Honerva has bound herself to a demon?”

“Worse,” Allura says. “They are wed, if Honerva’s very recent correspondence with us is to be believed. And...and she believes she is with child.”

“A cambion,” Keith says with mounting horror, any hunger he might have felt before dissipating despite the full spread of food before him. Cambions are the rare, powerful result of the union between a demon and a human. They are the stuff of nightmares; twisted, ugly creatures devoid of emotion or reason who delight in senseless cruelty and violence. “Won’t the birth kill her?”

“There is no telling,” Allura says. “But she has changed much since she left her kingdom and abandoned her kind. Her name is Haggar now, a name which far more resembles a demon than a human.”

Keith digs his nails into his palms under the table. Zarkon’s witch is Archmagus Honerva. She’s the one who captured Shiro and the Holts. They’re in her lab. Keith thinks of every class of hers he sat through, every lecture which had so captivated his interest...and then he thinks of Shiro, lying
on a cold stone table in her laboratory, bound and trapped and in pain –

“Keith!”

Keith’s head jerks up, eyes wide. Allura is staring at him with concern. “Your fingertips,” she says, “they were sparking. I was worried you were about to set the tablecloth aflame. Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” Keith says after a long moment, during which he looks down to see the tablecloth is slightly singed, and his fingertips still warm. “I think I see where you’re going with this, princess. Is Haggar following in Hecate’s footsteps?”

Allura nods tightly, continuing to eye him. “Haggar’s search for Oriande began when she was still an alchemist in my father’s court. She claimed it was out of an interest in Hecate rather than in following her wicked path, but my father soon saw through it when Haggar’s experiments became...more unorthodox.” Allura swallows, setting down her spoon. “She seeks not only immortality, but has an unstoppable lust for power which drove her to Hell.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” Keith asks.

She takes a deep breath. “Please promise me you will not set the tablecloth aflame.”

“I promise.” Keith’s hands curl into fists. “Tell me.”

“Honerva – Haggar, whatever she is now – contacted my father last night via megascope.” Allura closes her eyes. “She informed us that your...Master Takashi Shirogane is alive, Keith. And the Holts, too.”

Keith hardly even has to feign surprise and relief. It’s one thing to hear the words coming from a demon who has a vested interest in lying to him; it’s quite another thing to hear them from a princess who stands for justice and goodwill. “He’s alive,” Keith whispers. “I knew it. I knew it, I –”

“Oh, Keith,” Allura whispers, “I’m afraid it’s not as simple as that. Your friend is in terrible danger. Haggar has been using him as a test subject for her experiments, and it’s been so long at this point...there may not be much of your friend left. I’m so sorry. But I thought you should know.”

“What has she done to him?” Keith asks, voice barely audible. “Please, if you know, I want to hear it.”

Allura hesitates, then bows her head, face filled with pain. “She...she did reveal some details. The Holts...I think they may be better off. They were gifted alchemists in their own right, so she has been employing their gifts to her own ends. As for Master Shirogane...” Allura looks sick. “My father challenged her, saying she was just trying to bait us into a trap by claiming she held these witches captive. In response...Haggar showed him to us.”

Keith stares at her. “You saw him?” His heart hurts, aches. It isn’t fair – why should this princess, who already has all she could ever want and knows nothing of loss like this, get to see Shiro? It’s a foolish, petty thought, but it snags in Keith’s mind anyway.

“Yes,” Allura says. “He. He’s much changed, Keith. She...made a few modifications.”

“Princess, please.”
“She amputated his right arm,” Allura says quietly. Keith jolts as if electrocuted. “She’s given him a prosthetic –”

“You’re sure?” Keith demands, the images of the demon’s prosthetic flickering through his mind. “What did it look like?”

She blinks. “It...appeared to be made of metal, quite state-of-the-art, and though he is unable to cast magic with that hand it has some sort of magic of its own, plasma-based...are you upset by this?”

“Very.” Keith says through gritted teeth, “please, what else, I, I want to know –”

“Allright,” Allura says, bewildered, “he, ah, his face was scarred, across his nose there was a sort of stripe as if from a claw. His hair was turned white in the front, which was startling, I don’t know what the cause of that could be...he looked aged. Many scars, and an increase in muscle mass, likely from his heavy physical activity in the gladiator fights. It’s all barbaric business, Keith, I...my father didn’t want me to tell you, but –”

“But how is he?” Keith presses, desperate, drawing blood where his nails puncture through his palms. “Did he say anything, did he –”

“He said only two words,” Allura replies. “He said, ‘Vrepit sa.’”

Keith falters, filled with dread. “What does that mean?”

She looks, suddenly, very, very sad. “It is an oath of fealty among demons,” she says. “Master Shirogane has sworn loyalty to them, now.”

“No,” Keith whispers, “no, you’re wrong, he would never –”

“It has been over a year, Keith, and the horrors he must have faced there are unimaginable,” Allura tells him gently. “I would not be surprised if it was an act of self-preservation. Otherwise, they may be holding his friends’ lives over him as leverage to manipulate him.”

“Or she’s tortured him beyond repair,” Keith says, numb and half to himself.

“What was that?” Allura asks worriedly.

“Nothing,” Keith says. His hands are not sparking anymore. In fact, they’re very cold. “If you’ll excuse me, princess, I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Oh,” Allura says, standing awkwardly and gesturing towards the door, “of course, Novice Kogane, my apologies, I...did not intend to put you off your meal.”

“It’s fine,” Keith says, although it is anything but fine. He gives her an awkward sort of half-bow, because she is after all a princess, and hurries out. The guards part to let him pass, and Keith shivers as the low light glints off their metal, thinking of metal fingers and scarred skin.

As soon as he’s in the hallway, Keith runs. He runs through the Citadel because he thinks moving too slowly would give his mind too much time to catch up and to realize fully the truth Princess Allura told him. Of course the thought has occurred to him – maybe Shiro’s not all there, anymore. Maybe he’s been damaged in more ways than physical. But Keith never took much stock in it. He knows Shiro, and Shiro is strong; he is stubborn and smart and he stands up for what he believes in. The Shiro Keith knew would not give in to the witch Haggar.
But maybe this isn’t the Shiro he knew.

Keith’s eyes brim with tears and he swipes them away, furious, racing up the stairs, endless stairs, until he can feel blisters forming on his heels and his chest is heaving from exertion and he’s reached Shiro’s room.

He doesn’t know where else to go. No, that’s not right – he knows where he should be. He should be in Shiro’s place. He should have been the one captured, taken, tortured, broken...

*Don’t be stupid, baby.*

Keith freezes, hand trembling on the doorknob, as cool claws wrap around his shoulder one by one. “It’s not stupid,” Keith whispers, “it’s true. It should be me, not him. He doesn’t deserve this.”

*And you think you do?*

Keith doesn’t answer that, but they both know what he thinks. He opens the door and steps inside, startling forwards when the door slams shut behind him with a rush of cold wind. The demon is angry.

Good, Keith’s angry too. He’s furious. Furious that the world could take someone as special as Takashi Shirogane and do its damnedest to destroy him, just for the hell of it. Furious that he’s stuck here, among the living, where he can’t reach Shiro, can’t speak to him, can’t hear him, can’t see him, can’t touch him, can’t help him, even though he has never wanted anything more in his life. Furious that for all his supposed gifts and power, Keith can do nothing for Shiro. He was too late. He could have done more – he *should* have done more.

And Keith is furious that Kurobasanir did not tell him everything he knew; that the being he’d been foolish enough to start to trust had been hiding secrets about Shiro all along.

The wind subsides and the demon stands before him, wings half-spread, horned head bowed down towards him. *What did that princess tell you?* he murmurs, and cups the sides of Keith’s head, eyes flickering as he reads Keith’s swirling thoughts, troubled and focused.

“Let go,” Keith snaps, jerking away, but the demon does not let him go. “I said –”

“You think I’m hiding something from you,” the demon says, eyes burning steady and hot. I promise you –

“No! Shut up, shut up, I know you did!” Keith exclaims, turning on him with a hiss of smoke and flames trailing from every fingertip. “What about Archmagus Honerva, huh? I’m sure you had not the slightest inkling that she’s Zarkon’s witch, Haggar.” The demon flinches visibly, wings drawing inwards. “But then riddle me this, demon – why would Archmagus Honerva mention your name, Kurobasanir’s name, in conversation with Iverson, and then do nothing to chastise me when she realized afterwards that I had overheard?!?”

*I don’t know, Keith,* the demon says, eyes burning steady and hot. *I promise you –*

“Your promises mean nothing!” Keith shouts, hurling a fireball at him. It catches Kurobasanir
square across the chest and the demon stumbles back, eyes widening and wings flaring outwards. Sparks fall and smolder among the carpet; half of Keith wishes this place would just go up in flames already. “You knew,” Keith says, low and vicious, “you knew all along what she did to him, you knew she broke him and you were never going to tell me until it was too late, until you had the satisfaction of watching me see him like...like that, and then you could finally take your due.”

Broke him? the demon asks. His voice is quiet, too quiet, almost eerie. He’s calm. Keith just blasted him with a fireball and he’s just standing there. Keith’s fury burns hotter.

“Yes, broke him,” Keith snarls, “she tortured him until there was no going back. Until Shiro couldn’t hold on anymore. The princess told me – she told me he said ‘Vrepit sa.’ He’s pledged allegiance to them. Shiro would never do that. Never.”

She likely threatened him, the demon murmurs, with his own death or the deaths of his friends...he may simply be trying to survive.

“She cut off his arm!” Keith cries, hands curling into fists. “He can’t use his magic with that hand anymore, did you know that too?”

You would so quickly jump to the conclusion that he is gone?

Keith swallows, his anger fading, replaced by endless, raw fear. Fear, and grief, pooling in him like a bottomless lake of despair. “They’ve hurt him,” he whispers. “They took his arm, his freedom, his magic, his agency, and who knows what else. She tortured him for her experiments, forced him to fight for creatures he despises with every fiber of his being. And no one has tried to save him or even send him a message, to tell him we still remember him. The Alteans learned of this last night; I know Iverson must have been told. But he will do nothing, I can guarantee it. And she will keep hurting Shiro.” Keith’s knees give out from under him and he sinks to the floor in slow motion, legs folded and body crumpled forward, kneeling on the carpet. “And maybe he isn’t gone yet, maybe he’s still hanging on, but how long will it take before he lets go? They’ve hurt him so much already. Maybe it’s too much hurt to bear.”

The demon kneels before him and lays his hands on Keith’s shoulders. Keith does not look at him. Baby, he whispers, I want you to find your Shiro.

Keith looks up. “I don’t believe you,” he whispers.

We are both taking risks to fulfill this contract, the demon continues. Granted, I have not given my soul to a Void-born. But I have no love for that witch Haggar. I have not seen your Shiro in my ventures down to Daibazaal, but I have seen what she’s done to others, whether human or Void-born. I have no doubt that if she caught me, she would have no qualms about serving the same fate to me. This is no easy game for me, you realize.

“Forgive me if I don’t think your only motive for entering into a contract with me is saving Shiro from the depths of Hell,” Keith mutters.

Obviously not, the incubus says, rolling his eyes. You’re a powerful witch with an enticing soul and a pretty face. And...I like you, Keith Kogane. You have a certain prickly charm about you, like a cute little cactus. And because I like you, and more pertinently because I’d like to receive your soul in as prime condition as possible, I want what you want. It would do no good to keep secrets from you.

“A cactus,” Keith repeats. “Did you just call me a cactus?”
Yes, the demon says, swiping a claw over his cheek to wipe away the tears streaking his skin. *Listen to me, little human cactus boy. Others may be doing nothing to help your Shiro, and they are cowardly, selfish, and wrong in their ways. But you are doing all you can, Keith. All you can, and more. You gave everything you had to help him. Even I can respect that. And he will, too.*

Keith sniffs, averting his gaze again. “If he’s even lucid enough to recognize me…”

*Hey.* A warm palm strokes his cheek and Keith leans into it unconsciously. *You told me that you love Shiro. That he is your best friend. Yes?*

“Are you trying to make this all the more painful?” Keith snaps, but when the demon says nothing, he mutters, “Yes. Yes, he was...he is. He is.”

*And when you look into your soul, and think of him, do you believe he is still there? That he is still alive, still waiting, still the Shiro you fell for?*

After a long moment, Keith nods, brow furrowed. “Yes,” he whispers. “If I didn’t believe that with all my being, I wouldn’t have sold my damn soul. But...but the princess said –”

*Forget what she said; she does not know him as you do, the demon soothes. If you still feel him there, waiting for someone, waiting for you, wanting to live and be free again, then I think you should trust that feeling. I cannot force you to trust me; that is not how trust works. But trust yourself, Keith.*

“I don’t know if I can,” Keith admits, burying his head in his hands. “Not when all I can think of is Shiro afraid and in agony, hating the world for leaving him to a fate worse than death.”

*Then think of other things,* the demon suggests. Keith eyes him, doubtful. *Don’t say it isn’t that simple. It is. You are in his room now, his home. You must have had good moments with him, here. Good memories. Think of those.*

“I think that may just make this worse,” Keith sighs.

*Try,* the demon urges. *Just try.*

So Keith tries.

He thinks of a night where they were laying on Shiro’s bed together, flopped over with their legs dangling off the side of the bed and their eyes on the ceiling, taking turns firing spells at it, mostly random illusions, projections on the pale stone. Shiro kept making butterflies, each one different and intricate and beautiful, and Keith kept making crows, each one black and loud and hungry, and all of Keith’s crows kept gobbling up the butterflies.

Suddenly, the memory isn’t just a memory. Keith’s reliving it. It’s almost like a dream, but he can see the magic crackling at the edges if he focuses hard enough – it’s another illusion, a detailed and powerful one. The incubus’s illusion.

Keith turns to face Shiro on the bed. Shiro’s face is scrunched up in concentration as he flicks his fingers, sending three more butterflies fluttering upwards. One pink, one purple, one blue. Each one glows faintly, in sharp contrast to Keith’s two circling crows, who cock their heads and clack their sharp beaks greedily.

“Ooh, those are pretty,” Keith says, his vocal cords automatically following the script in his memory, like second nature. “Would be a shame if something... ate them!”
The crows swoop and the butterflies scatter, Shiro squawks in outrage when one of the crows snatches up the pink butterfly in its claws, devouring it in one gulp. “Keith! C’mon, again?”

“Gotta make something harder than a butterfly,” Keith says as the second crow takes the other two butterflies out of the sky.

Shiro mock-scowls at him, and flicks his fingers again. This time, it’s a swarm of glowing wasps which burst from his fingertips, and Keith flinches as they surround one of his crows, their angry buzzing filling the room. Keith’s crow caws and flaps its wings frantically while striking out with its sharp beak, but it’s no match against the swarm. The crow explodes into black smoke and Shiro fistpumps in victory. The wasps move on to Keith’s remaining crow, which flies away in a panic, already starting to fall apart at the seams as Keith’s anxiety manifests in his magic.

“I’m gonna get you,” Shiro cackles, directing his wasps faster, angrier, and Keith suddenly can’t bear the thought of watching his crow be destroyed like the other, and, knowing he can’t stop Shiro’s stronger magic, rolls onto his side and hides his face in the nearest pillow, wincing and sucking in a sharp, pained breath when he hears the wasps buzzing crescendo and the loud caws of the crow fade out.

There’s silence. Then, “Keith? Hey…” Shiro touches his shoulder carefully and Keith grits his jaw, hating that he feels like he’s about to burst into tears over a fake magic crow. “Are you alright? I’m sorry, I just thought…”

“It was a game,” Keith finishes dully, “and I’m a sore loser. I’m sorry.”

“Keith, no, hey,” Shiro says, firmer, “you’re not a sore loser. You’re upset, what’s wrong?”

“It wasn’t even real,” Keith mumbles, hunching his shoulders. “It was a fake crow, and it’s dumb, that’s all.”

“If it made you upset,” Shiro says quietly, “then it’s not dumb, Keith.”

Keith shakes his head, lifting it up from the pillow and peering at Shiro through his hair. “I don’t know why it made me upset,” he says. “It just...it was mine, and then you destroyed it.” He bites his lip. “I know I destroyed your butterflies too, I. I shouldn’t have –”

“Keith, it’s okay,” Shiro says. “I’m not mad at you for that, not at all. I was having fun. But I shouldn’t have destroyed your crows like that. Can I offer you a new one?” Shiro holds out his hand and a third crow flickers into existence in it, ruffling its glossy black feathers and blinking at Keith from beady black eyes.

“Hi!” it croaks, and Keith smiles helplessly, gaze darting up to Shiro, then to the bird, then back again.

“Here,” Shiro murmurs, reaching out so that the crow can hop onto Keith’s arm, “it’s yours.”

Keith conjures up a fake handful of seeds and the fake crow caws gleefully before hurrying over to peck at them, its fake claws leaving faint fake indentations on Keith’s skin. Shiro’s magic is very powerful. Keith wonders if he will ever be that good.

“You will,” Shiro says, and this isn’t part of the memory, but Keith doesn’t care. Not when Shiro is leaning so close, close enough for Keith to feel his warmth, not when Shiro’s arm is curling around his waist, drawing him gently in. “Keith, I believe in you. You know that, right?”

Keith looks up and Shiro is so close, close enough to kiss, and Keith’s heart hammers in his chest.
“I don’t know why you do, honestly,” he whispers back. “Nobody else has.”

“Then I suppose I’ll just have to make up for their poor choices, hm?” Shiro murmurs, and leans in, and Keith closes his eyes, the raven’s feathers soft on the delicate skin of his wrist as Shiro kisses him –

Keith’s eyes flash open. The demon is on top of him on Shiro’s bed. “That was a cheap move,” Keith says, breathless.

“Was it really cheap if it worked?” Shiro asks. He doesn’t look like the Shiro in the memory anymore; he’s half incubus and half white-haired one-armed scarred Shiro. Keith’s painful thoughts come rushing back and leathery wings close in around him, blocking the rest of the world out.

“Why do you look like that?” Keith whispers, turning his face away.

“Because that’s what he looks like,” Shiro says. “Don’t you wish he was here with you now, like this, instead of...well, a less pleasant place?”

“But he’s not here,” Keith says, voice sounding weak even to his own ears.

“No, but I am,” Shiro murmurs. “And I can be him for you, until we save him.”

He starts to shift into a fully human form, but Keith reaches out, stilling him, and shakes his head. “Don’t,” he says. “I don’t want to pretend again. I know what you are and I want you as you. Like this.” He runs his fingertips over a curved horn and the incubus blinks. “No secrets, you said.”

“No secrets,” Shiro agrees, and leans down to kiss him. This time, Keith accepts it, knowing exactly who and what he’s kissing, expecting the slight sting of fangs as the demon presses deeper and covers Keith with his muscle-bound body, tail lashing with expectation and tickling at Keith’s bare ankles.

“I did want him to kiss me then, you know,” Keith gasps when Shiro breaks away, dragging the kisses down his jaw and neck and chest, tongue lengthening and eyes darkening at Keith’s words. “Then, and so many other times. But I knew he never would. He was too good for that; he would have seen it as taking advantage, or something.”

“I would have done it,” Shiro growls, lips stretching into a razor-sharp smile. “I would have done far more than kiss you, baby.”

“But you weren’t there, were you?” Keith clicks his tongue. “Your loss.”

“I’m here now,” Shiro snaps, rising to the challenge and hurrying to rid Keith of his clothes without shredding them. “And he’s not.”

“Ah —” Keith’s breath hitches as the demon’s tongue finds his cock, wrapping around it and stroking, squeezing, fleshy and dripping with saliva that tingles on Keith’s sensitive skin.

“But what if he was?” Shiro muses as he pulls away, claws dragging thick lines of saliva up Keith’s belly. “What if he could see you now? What would he think?”

Keith’s face flames in embarrassment. He can’t imagine it. He doesn’t want to imagine it — Shiro, coming back from class tired and stressed, stepping into his room only to find his bed occupied by Keith, naked and achingly hard, begging with wordless breathy sounds as a greater incubus has its way with him, smirking smugly all the while.
“You sure you don’t want to imagine that?” Shiro chuckles. “I sure think you do. How about I help paint the picture for you?” He flips Keith onto his hands and knees, tracing a claw around Keith’s hole after spreading his cheeks wide. He eases the first metal finger in slowly, slickly. “He walks in, and sees you like this, just like this. You’re saying his name. Say it.”

“Shiro,” Keith whispers, “Shiro — ah!”

The demon slaps his ass hard; the sound echoes. “Louder, baby, he can’t hear you.”

“How long?” he purrs into Keith’s ear, tongue flickering over the shell of it. “How long have you ached for him, baby?”

“Years,” Keith moans, pushing his hips back into the single finger moving slowly inside him. “Since – since that first night, in the Wastes –”

“Years,” Keith moans, pushing his hips back into the single finger moving slowly inside him. “Since – since that first night, in the Wastes –”

“That long?” Shiro laughs. “Naughty little Keith. Did you hope he might have his way with you, there in the middle of your desert camp in the middle of nowhere?”

“I was too young,” Keith gasps. “He wouldn’t have –”

“But you thought about it,” Shiro coos, adding a second finger and twisting, avoiding Keith’s prostate while Keith squirms to force him towards it, to no avail. Keith shakes his head frantically but Shiro’s claws dig into the meat of his thighs, demanding. “Remember it, Keith. Remember that night. Remember your hunger, that hunger you had never felt before you saw him.”

Keith closes his eyes, helpless, and remembers.

He’d been perched on the edge of a boulder, still warm from the desert sun, keeping close to the small crackling fire he’d made minutes ago, and keeping a constant eye on the strange witch who’d saved him from the canyon. They’d made camp near a small creek, one of the only water sources for miles, and Keith was eager to move on. But the witch claimed he needed to bathe, first. He’d been riding for three days straight, if his story was to be believed. Keith wasn’t sure what to believe, yet.

“You’re awfully quiet over there,” the witch, Shiro, had said over his shoulder while unclasping his long black cloak and draping it over a stunted, dry tree. “Everything alright?” He winced. “All things considered, I mean…”

“Yeah,” Keith had muttered, picking at his frayed tunic, “I’m fine. Good. You’re really gonna bathe in there?”

“Yes, why not?” Shiro had said. “There aren’t leeches or something in here, right?”

Keith had snorted. “Ain’t no leeches for miles. Maybe a toad or two. It’s just brackish water. Salty.”

“A little salt never killed anyone,” Shiro said, and then paused, and made a face. “Er, well...maybe not the best...you know what I mean.” Red in the face, he’d turned away, and started taking off his shirt.

Already chuckling from the comment, Keith stopped mid-chuckle at the sight of the witch’s bare back. He was...broad. Muscles flexing in his wide shoulders, with a deep and strangely pleasing line between them, curving down to the divot at the small of his back and lower –
Coughing, Keith looked away. What...what was he thinking? Ogling a damn stranger...a stranger who swooped in to save him on horseback after riding three days through the Wastes just because he saw Keith in his dreams. Gods, Keith was sweating and the sun wasn’t even out.

Oblivious, Shiro just kept disrobing, and Keith almost inhaled his tongue, averting his gaze for the most part but unable to stop himself from peeking as Shiro lowered himself into the cool water with a contented sigh. He’d leaned forward and the arch of his back was tantalizing, shining with water droplets when Shiro’s arms stretched upwards to pour water from his cupped hands, cascading down his skin...

The campfire had flared and sparked brighter, and Keith had flushed, heart pounding. He’d been a little afraid of the witch, afraid of being alone out here with him, but now his fear shifted, morphed into something different, as terrifying as it was arousing.

It’s a vile thought, an evil thought, but it had entered Keith’s mind as he’d tried and failed not to watch Shiro bathe in the desert creek that night. He would turn on his heel, bring himself up to his full height, and advance towards Keith in the flickering firelight, brow lowered and jaw set, flames reflecting in his eyes. Keith would try to run, but he wouldn’t get far – strong hands would pull him down, shove him into the dust – or would they be gentle, kind and firm and holding Keith close like he had never wanted anyone else to do before –

“My, my,” the demon says in his ear, jerking Keith out of the memory and back to the equally sweaty and frustrated present, “I see you’ve always been this filthy, baby. And to think, the potential was within you,” at this he adds a third finger and pauses, “all along.”

“Ngh,” Keith groans, pressing his face into the pillows. “Thought you wanted orgasms out of me, not fantasies.” He tries shoving his ass back to work Shiro’s metal fingers deeper, but the incubus grips his hips tight, not letting him give an inch.

“I do want orgasms,” Shiro murmurs, licking teasingly over Keith’s inner thigh, “but the fantasies intrigue me. I wonder just how many you have locked up tight in that pretty little head of yours.”

“You have eternity to find out, don’t you?” Keith points out, struggling to keep his voice even. Shiro’s still not moving his fingers, and it’s torture, and also not fair. Keith’s had a rough day. A rough year, really.

“Aw, poor baby,” Shiro drawls. “Such a hard life you’ve had.” His other hand inches down over Keith’s cock, stroking and tugging leisurely while Keith hisses and glares at him over his shoulder. “Mm. Very hard.”

“You,” Keith wheezes, “are the worst – ah! Shiro!”

A low mechanical hum fills the air as Shiro’s metal fingers fill Keith with shocking vibrations, thrumming through him and encouraging him to arch into it, legs falling open and ass lifting up with no thought of shame, no thought of anything at all when the vibrations connect firmly with his prostate and Keith cries out, cock weeping into Shiro’s fingers as the demon milks the tip teasingly, rubbing at Keith’s taut balls with his thumb.

“You were saying?” Shiro laughs, and curls his vibrating fingers deep, leaning forward to land a playful bite on Keith’s ass. Keith’s sure it leaves a mark, and isn’t mad about it.

“Please,” Keith whines, hair a mess as Shiro’s fingers fuck him open, lube squelching between them and dripping down Keith’s ass, cold and startling where it runs over his balls. Shiro notices, and cups Keith’s sac carefully, ducking his head and laving his fleshy tongue over it, painting them
with spit. Keith groans, face red and cock twitching, grateful when Shiro’s hold on his hips relaxes so Keith can roll his hips back and fuck himself on Shiro’s fingers, driving the vibrations harder, deeper. Keith supposes that having an incubus lover does have the marked advantage of having an utterly shameless lover – nothing is taboo, here.

Shiro growls, more vibrations which thrum through Keith’s balls and make his gut clench, close, close, close. “Lover,” Shiro repeats, and Keith falters, unsure if he’s made some misstep, but then the incubus’s growl turns to a purr and he licks soft and slow and murmurs, “my lover,” and Keith shudders all over and comes, and Shiro licks him clean, eager and almost too rough on Keith’s oversensitized skin.

When he comes down from his dizzying climax he’s sprawled over Shiro’s bed, cock limp and hole still tender, faintly sore, with the incubus kneeling between his legs, head tilted in a way that’s almost curious.

Keith peers up at him, surprised he hasn’t been seized and fucked already. The intensity has faded from Shiro’s softly glowing eyes, though Keith can see how hard his cock is, jutting out between his thighs, covered by his lazily stroking hand. It takes Keith a moment to understand — Shiro’s touching himself to the sight of Keith before him, legs spread and belly splattered with his own cum.

“Were you hoping I’d fuck you?” Shiro smirks, though it’s strained. “Not today, baby. Today, this is enough.”

Keith whimpers. “Come on me,” he says, and Shiro grunts, cock visibly swelling in his clawed hand. He grips it tighter.

“I will, baby,” Shiro promises, breath shallowing and chest heaving as pearly droplets slide from the tip and over his knuckles. “Mm...so pretty, just for me, all spread out and soft and easy…”

“Just for you,” Keith mumbles, and as his eyes fall shut he hears Shiro groan loud and then there’s a hot splatter across his front. Keith shivers, opening his eyes and reveling in the mess as Shiro drags a claw through it.

“Good boy,” Shiro praises. He crawls over Keith, tail curling with him and winding possessively around Keith’s neck, squeezing just enough for Keith to stiffen, releasing the next moment. Keith inhales, and eyes him as he stares down at Keith for a while, before waving his hand and magicking the mess away.

Keith makes a vaguely discontented sound and Shiro snorts, rolling him onto his side and snuggling up behind him after pulling the sheets over them both. “There will be time for lasting messiness later,” he murmurs, carding his claws through Keith’s hair. “But for now, rest, and know that I will be here beside you.”

Keith closes his eyes, and holds the demon’s words close in his heart.

*

Shiro is in a darker place.

Too dark. He can’t see a thing. He stops, and can hear his own labored breath, magnified, underlain by the hollow thud of his heart. No, wait. That thudding is not a heartbeat; it’s bodies, dozens of bodies, falling to the earth lifelessly around him.

Shiro is blinded by light. Spotlights, he thinks. The space around him is illuminated, and bile rises
in his throat. It’s an arena. And every square inch of the packed dirt around him is covered in corpses. The stench is inescapable, and when he tries to close his eyes he finds he cannot. Someone else is controlling his body. Shaking, he looks down at his hands and finds them covered in blood; fresh, wet, dripping. The voice in his head laughs. It is a terrible sound.

Then one of the bodies nearest to him stirs — no, it’s something underneath the bodies, pushing them apart with trembling pale fingers which spark weakly. Shiro wants to warn him. He wants, more than he has ever wanted anything else, to scream for Keith to run away as fast as he can because this thing inside him is as evil as it is uncontrollable.

Keith shoves his way out of the corpses and stands before Shiro, wild and teetering on the edge of hysteria, firelight shining in his wide violet eyes.

_Don’t do this, Takashi_, he says. _This isn’t you. I came all this way to save you, and I’m gonna. So...so just put that down, okay?_

Shiro’s metal hand — wait, he has a metal hand?! — is raised, pointed directly at Keith, glowing and whirring with power and violent intent. Shiro knows that it could rip Keith to shreds in an instant. He also knows he can’t let this happen, or Shiro will be ripped to shreds with him. But he can’t move. He’s frozen.

And suddenly he’s not in his body at all — he’s just an observer, a bystander, helpless as he watches the colder, emptier version of himself advance on Keith, eyes narrowed and weapon raised.

_Shiro?_ Keith whispers, taking a step back and lifting his hands, now bathed in flickering fire that Shiro knows, with a heavy heart, that Keith will never use. _Shiro, please. Please, stop. Don’t do this. I can’t...I can’t hurt you. Don’t make me._

But Shiro watches as the arm draws back, and the plasma ignites, and with a brilliant beam of white-violet, it obliterates Keith into ash where he stands.

Shiro wakes up screaming.

He’s not awake, not really. He’s floating again. The shadows are closer, and anxious. They feel like old friends, not enemies, and Shiro welcomes their cool touch on his transparent skin.

_Keith_, Shiro says, and the shadows tighten in a way that is not threatening, but rather in agreement. _He’s in danger. I’m going to hurt him. I don’t want to, but I’m going to._

_Not you_, the shadows whisper, their voice no longer booming, weaker than before. _Not anymore._

_What do you mean? Why won’t you tell me what’s happening?_ Shiro pleads.

_Because you must remember_, the shadows say, and one by one they sink into his skin, writhing just beneath the surface, visible inside his spectral frame. _Because you are me, and I am you._

_Please_, Shiro gasps, _he’s going to die._

_He’s awake_, the shadows say, and Shiro plummets into nothing, too exhausted even to scream.

* 

Keith awakens to the demon staring at him.
“Augh!” Keith yelps, and scrambles away.

“Why are you scrambling away?” Shiro asks, nonplussed, and draws him back in. They’re both still naked in Shiro’s bed, and Keith has no idea what time it is. “Stay. I enjoy snuggling with you.”

Keith coughs, and shoves lightly at his bare chest (his palms definitely do not linger there). “I gotta go to class,” he says.

“Do you?” Shiro pouts at him. “Come, now, it’s October in only a few days’ time. Do you want to waste your last month on boring hours of classwork?”

“I’d rather waste it on that than on you fucking me,” Keith retorts, mood soured by the reminder of his dwindling days here.

“Ouch,” Shiro says, and lets go, still pouting. “Certain I can’t persuade you somehow?”

“To let you fuck me? No, not in the mood,” Keith sighs, sitting up and stretching feeling the demon’s gaze on him. “Unless you had some other grand idea of how to spend the time.”

“You could fuck me?” Shiro suggests, eyes glinting eagerly.

“One that doesn’t involve getting off,” Keith says, and rolls his eyes as he stands and gathers up his clothes. He glances at the clock and freezes. It’s half past noon. Fuck. Half-dressed, he whirls, facing Shiro with an accusatory glare. “You let me sleep in! I’ve already missed most of Alchemy 1600...damn.”

“Alchemy’s awful anyway,” Shiro says, stretching leisurely and making a real show out of it, fanning out his wings in a graceful arc on either side of himself. “Waste of your talents. You can set things on fire, why bother with turning lead into gold?”

“Or seeking immortality in Oriande,” Keith mutters darkly, yanking his tunic on with too much force.

Shiro is still on the bed, but his eyes flare brighter as he says in a strange, hollow voice, “Oriande?”

Keith blinks at him, unsettled by his solemn expression and tone. “Yes...it’s a place from Altean legend. A place Haggar is searching for to find immortality. Do...do you know it?”

Shiro shakes himself, frowning and glancing away. “It feels like I do,” he says after a long beat. “It’s as if...I visited that place in a dream, a long time ago. It was...bright. Strange, glittering...almost like so many imagine the heavens to look like, if they truly existed.” His frown deepens. “Ethereal. But terrible, too. It is full of danger...” He shudders, and a twist of pain crosses his features. “If I did visit Oriande, I do not think it ended well.”

Concerned, Keith goes to the bed, laying his hand on Shiro’s arm gently. “What do you mean?” he murmurs. “Were you hurt?”

“Hurt...yes,” Shiro says, his eyes distant, clouded over by the haze of memory. “Yes, I think so.”

“What hurt you?”


Keith’s fingers tighten on his arm. “Who, then?”

“Haggar?” Shiro does not answer, and Keith nudges him, but he’s miles away, brow furrowed in thought.

Finally he turns to Keith, gaze now clear and hard, and says, “Do not speak of Oriande. It is not a place meant for mortals, not even those with magic.”

Keith frowns up at him, unswayed. “Is it a place for immortals, then? Did Haggar find what she seeks?”

Shiro’s growl starts low in his throat and is closer to a snarl when it breaks free of his lips. Keith startles back but Shiro catches his wrist, claws digging in, drawing up points of crimson. *She will never find what she seeks,* Shiro rumbles, his more human features melting away as he shifts, towering over Keith. *She will never be satisfied in her quest for more knowledge she is not meant to have, and she will never stop trying to find it no matter what it costs. Now, silence, and do not speak of it again.*

“I will speak of what I like,” Keith snaps, hand twitching in Shiro’s grasp, blood running freely down his arm. Keith’s fingertips spark in warning and Shiro’s eyes flicker to them at once. He looks vaguely bewildered, then surprised as he sees the blood, then...frightened? He drops Keith’s hand as if it’s, well, aflame, which it is. Keith lifts his hand to assess the damage, and takes a preemptive step back. “You done?” he mutters.

Shiro’s form recedes, and he ducks his head. “Yes,” he says. “It seems I remembered more than I thought. I’m sorry.”

He vanishes before Keith’s eyes, and when Keith looks down at his wrist again, it’s healed.

* 

Keith ends up not going to class. Instead, he goes to the stables and takes Strawberry out for a ride. She’s happy to see him, and he feeds her warm oats after brushing her coat, which is thickening as summer fades to fall. Keith thinks about birthdays and how strange they are.

He rides Strawberry down the usual path, watching stones skid from her pounding hooves, clattering and rolling towards an unseeable end at the bottom of the steep, steep slope. A cold wind bites at Keith’s face and he wishes he had a scarf. He wishes he was in the Wastes, sometimes. He misses them. He misses home, even if so often it never felt like a home.

He misses his father. James Kogane may have been a man of few words, a man of brusque manner and little expression of his affections, which Keith had often doubted he even had, but Keith misses him. He wonders what it was that was so important it warranted leaving Keith that night three years ago, without so much as a goodbye.

Keith had awoken to the warm sun and no father. He’d taken his horse; Keith could put two and two together. It hurts, thinking that maybe his father was just biding his time all those years, waiting impatiently until his useless, fiery son could fend for himself. Keith supposes animals do the same thing, though they don’t wait sixteen years, and the fathers are usually first to leave, not the mothers. So maybe Keith should count himself lucky, among animals, anyway.

He grows to hate the mountains after a while, so he rides Strawberry down to the woods, hoping they’re more hospitable this time of year. The trees are brilliant with colored leaves – warm oranges, reds, browns, yellows, and burnt umber. Keith is more at ease among them, and so is Strawberry – she matches them, too. Her chestnut coat is well-camouflaged here, and Keith relaxes in the saddle, letting his mind wander away from fears of demons and Alteans.
He slows Strawberry to an easy walk, and lets his hand wander into his coat pocket, where the iron rose rests. He takes it out, turning it over in his palms, wondering. It is warm from his skin, warmer when he exhales over it, watching condensation form on every intricate fold of the petals, a single bead of moisture clinging to one of the thorns. Keith tilts his head. He wants badly to believe that Shiro was going to give him this gift when he returned to tell Keith he loved him. Brothers, Keith thinks, do not give each other gifts like this. Friends, maybe. But a rose is not a subtle symbol. Even Keith can realize that.

But if Shiro loves him, Keith does not think he can bear it. If Shiro loves him, how can Keith free him, save him, only to be torn away from him forever by a demon he has grown to...to care for? To see as something more than just a selfish, cruel Void-born, certainly. Keith does not think Kurobasanir is cruel, nor selfish. And he does not think Kurobasanir is lying to him.

Why, then, does Keith still feel that Kurobasanir has not told him everything? Why does he feel that a piece of a very important puzzle is not only missing, but buried, hidden, deliberately? And the worst part is this – Keith does not think Kurobasanir has hidden it.

Then who has?

Strawberry’s ears flick back and she stops mid-pace, stomping her hooves firmly among the dry, rustling leaves. Keith tucks the rose back in his pocket, one hand tight on the reins and the other lifting with a palm full of fire. Strawberry snorts, and Keith sees the whites of her eyes, and the froth around her bit, and knows something is wrong. The leaves rustle louder, rasping, and Keith’s blood runs cold.

“Who’s there?” he calls. The birds have stopped singing.

There is no answer, only more rasping, rustling, coming closer and closer, encircling him from all sides. These are no Citadel guards. Keith has felt the prickling magic of demons and he feels it again now, not Kurobasanir’s familiar heat but something cold, insidious and vicious as a poisoned blade. Keith’s flames grow, consuming his entire hand, spreading up his arm. Strawberry shifts under him and Keith mentally begs her not to buck him off. But when the first demon emerges from the leaves, he knows it’s no use.

Strawberry goes up on her hind legs with a scream of pure terror and Keith goes tumbling into the leaves, flames sputtering and catching on the dry earth, surrounding him a circle of fire as Strawberry gallops away, back towards the Citadel. Good, at least she’s out of harm’s way. Keith, however, is staring straight into the face of it – the face of a naga.

Naga are among the oldest known demons, half man, half serpent, with a venom capable of paralyzing humans within seconds.

The naga smiles at him, pleasant and close-lipped, and slowly raises itself to its full height, green scales gleaming among the leaves as its long body coils under it. Keith watches it warily, and then sees a dozen others slithering from the shadows, all smiling, all deadly.

“Stay back,” Keith warns, lifting his fiery circle higher, sweat beading on his brow. “Who sent you? Amdusias?”

The naga hiss in cool amusement, forked tongues flickering out, tasting the air. Ssspeak of the devil, the green serpent says, head cocked. We did away with poor foolisssh Amdusiasss weeksss ago.

He was spreading rumors. Rumors about your dear friend Kurobassanir. Said he wasn’t quite himself...we couldn’t have that.

“Who,” Keith whispers, heart pounding. “Who couldn’t have that?”

I think you know, the naga says. You are a smart boy. Just like your mother.

And then the naga lunges through the circle of flame, uncaring of its seared scales, and bites.
Keith staggers, his flames flickering as the venom fills his veins. He counts to ten in his head, and is surprised he’s still standing by the end of it, though his knees wobble under him and he’s dizzy to the point of nausea. His vision flickers with his flames and he hears the naga hiss, So it’s as she said. He’s strong.

He is little more than a child, another naga protests.

A child who can take one of our bites and remain on his feet? A second bite should do the trick. Keith lashes out blindly, striking the naga closest to him with a blast of fire. It shrinks away with a hiss, the acrid smell of burnt flesh sour in the air.

“Get back,” Keith slurs, blinking rapidly and blasting two more fireballs where he can see two more naga advancing. He doesn’t, however, see the naga behind him, which sinks its fangs into his shoulder and sends him folding to his knees, heartbeat racing and skin prickling with pain. “What,” Keith grits out, “do you want...from me...”

How is he still speaking?! the burnt naga demands.

You know how, another says. He is her child, born of her flesh. A third, then.

It will kill him —

No. It won’t.

Keith tries to set the earth around him aflame again, but finds with terror that he cannot reach his magic; his focus is gone and his mind spins as a third pair of fangs pierce his shoulder and he crumples forward, hitting the ground hard. Still, Keith reaches for his fire, and the grass sparks and sputters furiously, and he feels the remaining inner flames coalesce into white-hot electricity crackling through him. The naga’ hissing is too loud, too close, and they howl in pain when Keith’s skin shocks them, sending them reeling backwards.

Freeze him out, one of them says, and the air around him chills, the earth freezing solid under him, the naga’ magic seeping into his skin and quelling any remaining warmth. Keith’s teeth chatter, but he cannot move away from the increasing cold; he cannot move at all. He’s barely able to twitch his fingers, and within seconds even that is taken away from him. Keith hears the naga laughing,
He feels their clawed hands on him, lifting him up, though they keep the cold wrapped tight and vicious around him.

_He’s turning blue_, one says as they carry him through the forest, the sound of rustling leaves and hissing loud in his ears.

_She wants him alive. Said nothing about hypothermia. He doesn’t need his fingers and toes for what she wants from him._

Keith’s eyes are half-open, the world is a blur of green scales and brown leaves and he doesn’t know where they’re taking him but he knows it’s away, away from the Citadel, away from this world, even, and away from Shiro. Kurobasanir. _Whatever._

He feels the weight of the iron rose in his pocket and with the last of his strength, mind and body numb from cold, Keith calls to his demon, struggling to reach out to their contract, a formless mass of strange magic deep inside him. He doesn’t know if it works. He can only try, and hope, and shiver violently.

_Don’t see why we had to go through all this trouble. Couldn’t she wait until Samhain?_ The hissing increases in volume. _No, she couldn’t, because now the boy has protection – best to snatch him up before someone else does._

There is a loud thud and the hissing stops.

_Someone like that?_ “Keith,” Shiro says, and Keith can’t turn his head to look, can’t move his mouth to call out to him, just reaches out with his magic, pleading. He’s dizzy and cold, so cold, and he can feel his fire sputtering out and as it leaves him he feels so _empty_, a hollowed out husk of a boy who will never amount to much of anything. His vision darkens and a face looms in the back of his mind, his father’s face, yes, but there is another beside it, a blur of a face that he knows must be his mother’s, but it cannot be, _it cannot be…_

Keith is dropped by the naga as they scatter with a collective panicked hiss, some still grabbing at them with their claws as Shiro’s snarls fill the air, quickly crossing the line between human and bestial. The air gets colder and so does Keith as Shiro’s shadow falls over him, hulking and far larger than it should be. Keith’s face is pressed to the leaves, so he still can’t see, but he hears Shiro’s howl of pain as the naga lunge at him, one after the other. They may be cowardly little fiends, but they’re still vicious, and a hot splatter of the demon’s blood hits Keith’s cheek, running down his skin and dripping off his chin, onto the dead leaves.

_Don’t, Keith begs, don’t bleed for me, Shiro._ Because he knows it’s not Shiro, but it hurts like it is.

The demon pauses, rumbling growl echoing eerily through the trees, and then the naga shriek in equal parts rage and fright as Shiro’s shadow grows _bigger, _wider, two huge shapes spreading outwards from his broad shoulders, his body lowering, horns lengthening – _oh, fuck_, Keith thinks as leathery, clawed hands close around his middle and lift him up into the air, _he’s a dragon._

The naga leap and lunge desperately but Keith’s out of reach as the demon’s strong wings beat at the air, quickly gaining altitude. Keith doesn’t feel at all secure in his grasp, a fear not helped by his inability to look away from the shrinking earth below. Keith hangs limp, helpless, and cannot yell to warn Shiro when two harpies swoop up from the treetops towards them. He can, however, think very panicked thoughts, and he does that, as loudly as possible.

Shiro banks hard to the left, away from the harpies’ gnashing teeth and reaching claws. Keith is
almost flattered that Haggar is going to this much trouble to capture him...but why him? He can’t
think too hard about it, or his mind spins and his stomach lurches dangerously. Or maybe that’s
just due to the fact that he’s being carried away by a damn dragon, and the air is getting awful thin,
and the mountain peaks look close enough to touch. If Keith could move his arms. Which, he
can’t.

*Hush,* Shiro urges, which is easy for him to say as he dives steeply, tucking his wings close to his
body and holding Keith closer to his chest. It’s scaled and smooth, like a snake. What the fuck,
Honestly. Keith thinks that all the books he read on demons left much to be desired.

The harpies scream and manage to take swipes at Shiro’s tail; he swipes back and catches one of
them square across the chest, knocking her clean out of the sky with the heavy spiked spade-tip as
it collides with her shoulder, resulting in a sickening crack. She screams as she falls to her doom,
one wing crooked and broken, and her sister howls in rage and rakes claws over Shiro’s flank.

*You’re right,* Shiro says, coming out of the dive fast and hurtling upwards effortlessly, wind
whistling past Keith’s ears at near-deafening volume, you humans know precious little about my
kind. Aren’t you lucky to be getting all this hands-on experience? Field work, you might say. Brace
yourself, baby.

Keith can’t brace himself in any way except mentally, and perhaps emotionally, so he tries. A
strangled sort of wheeze still drags its way from his throat as Shiro stops midair and plummets like
a stone, folding his wings tight around Keith and cocooning him in shadow, the harpy’s shrieks
muffled, distant, spiraling away with Keith’s oxygen.

He loses consciousness halfway down.

* *

Keith awakes in a cave, of all cliches.

Shiro’s staring down at him. He still looks very much like a dragon. It’s not a bad look. Keith
wonders if he hit his head.

“No,” Shiro rumbles, so deep that Keith feels it in the stone beneath him, “you did not hit your
head, I made sure of that. You did, however, get bitten by three naga, and by all rights you should
be dead.”

“I think maybe I am,” Keith slurs, eyeing him and his draconic form, which is...well, as big as a
dragon. A dragon that’s currently spooning Keith, tail tucked around him protectively and wings
half-folded like a canopy. “How long have you had this power, huh?”

“Don’t joke about your death,” Shiro warns, yellow eyes narrowing and nostrils flaring. Smoke
curls out of them. Keith stares. “I’ve always had it, of course. Why?”

“It’s just...interesting,” Keith says, and is pleased when he’s able to move his fingers slightly, and
feel the warm scales under his palm.

They’re not scales, exactly, just like Shiro’s not exactly the kind of dragon Keith’s seen in so many
fairytale books and murals of ancient battles alike – there’s more leathery skin than scale, and his
muscles are still defined in a strangely humanoid way, and even his face, despite its definite
change, is still recognizable as Shiro. The scar’s still there, which Keith thinks is odd. He likes it,
though. The white forelock is gone, replaced by a sort of crest between the dragon’s curling horns,
white in the first segment and black the rest of the way down.
“Interesting,” Shiro repeats dryly, and then his eyes gleam, understanding. “Do you also find it interesting that you were nearly stolen from me by a filthy pack of lesser demons?”

Keith’s throat constricts at the reminder. “Wasn’t my fault,” he mumbles, “they just – came out of nowhere, Haggar sent them –”

Shiro’s face twists in fury. “Haggar did this?!” Keith flinches back at the manifestation of his fury; he can, after all, feel just how powerful the muscles flexing against him are, and the memory of the harpy’s wing shattered by a single blow flashes through his mind.

Keith nods, trembling, very aware that he’s still mostly paralyzed and at the mercy of an angry dragon incubus.

**Dragon incubus. Wait. Huh.**

Shiro stops gritting his teeth and peers down at him, head tilted. “Apologies,” he mutters, “my anger is directed at that meddling witch, not at you. Cease your shaking like a leaf.”

“I’m cold,” Keith says. “And I can’t move closer to you.”

One scaled eyebrow lifts slowly. “Are you asking me for snuggles, baby?”

Keith hums as the dragon’s tail shifts him closer, right up against Shiro’s pale underbelly, smooth white plates speckled here and there with black and gray. “Maybe more than snuggles,” Keith admits quietly, laying his palm over the plates as best he can.

Shiro makes a strangled, throaty sound and stares down at Keith, tiny where he is curled up against the massive dragon, in utter disbelief. “I had to coax and cajole you for days in human form,” he bites out, “but in this form, you’re easy? Really?”

Keith flushes and wishes he could duck his head. He doesn’t justify that with an answer.

**Grumbling.** Shiro noses at his hair, hot breath washing over him, and grumbles in louder discontent. “You are freezing. And very lucky you weren’t killed.”

“What if I had been?” Keith wonders, savoring the feeling of Shiro nuzzling at him, tucking Keith ever closer.

Shiro stills. “Our contract would remain,” he says. “I would save your Shiro, and keep your soul.”

“But if Haggar took my soul first –”

“Silence.” Shiro’s voice is booming, layered with ancient magic and power, and Keith’s jaw clicks shut. He sighs, and a rough forepaw wraps gently around Keith’s back, clawed thumb rubbing sensation back into his numb shoulders. “I would not let her. Know that, and do not think of things which will never come to pass.”

“But you said I should be dead,” Keith whispers. “The naga said so, too. I was still standing after the first bite…”

“You are strong,” Shiro mutters, but there’s a vein of uncertainty in his tone. “Do not let the fact that you still live trouble you; it’s a good thing.”

“But you didn’t come for me,” Keith whispers, “until I called for you...you didn’t come…”

The claws dig into him through his cloak, huge curved points like keratinized scimitars. “I was not
in this realm,” Shiro says. “I should have come sooner.” His claws loosen, sliding over Keith’s body and ripping fabric little by little as they go, baring slices of skin to the air. “Before they hurt you.”

Keith shivers harder as the claws expose a strip of thigh. “You’re making me c-colder,” he chastises, teeth chattering. “Thought you were gonna w-warm m-me up-p.”

“Keith,” Shiro sighs, shaking his horned head, “you cannot even move. You must rest.”

Keith scrunches up his nose. “Put your wing over me,” he says, and Shiro does, and then lays his head down beside Keith with a huff of smoky vapor. It’s nice. Keith feels safe and warm and cramped in the best way, and for the first time since waking he’s able to relax and close his eyes with a small, content sigh.

“You really do like this,” Shiro muses, shifting his wing until it covers Keith and his own head completely. “You’re a strange little human. But strange in the best of ways, I think.”

“Shut up,” Keith mumbles, face hot, and lets the rhythm of the dragon’s steady heartbeat lull him to sleep.

* 

Upon waking, Keith stretches…and then grins in delight when he realizes that stretching is moving, he can move, yes!

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

Keith squawks in surprise when his bleary vision clears to see the dragon towering over him, lips (do dragons have lips? A question for another day) quirked and head tilted like a curious cat. Or a judgmental cat. “You’re still…” Keith gestures at him. “Big.”

Shiro rolls his glowing golden eyes. “A dragon,” he says.

“A big dragon.”

“We need to talk about your absurd size kink, baby,” Shiro says, crouching down until their eyes are level with each other. “But perhaps not this very second…”

“No,” Keith agrees, “I wanna see your dick.”

Shiro blinks at him rapidly for several seconds, and then flops onto his back with what Keith can only describe as a cackle, arms and legs flailing about madly while he continues to laugh, shaking his entire body…and the entire cave. Keith keeps a nervous eye on several quivering stalactites above and says defensively, “I don’t see why it’s so funny. You are an incubus. Am I not supposed to think every form you take has the potential to be a sexual one?”

Shiro lifts his head with a smirk. “You’re not wrong,” he drawls, rolling back onto all fours and then sitting back on his heels in a more human posture. “Just not something most humans find appealing. More of a demon thing.”

Keith folds his arms and sits up. “You fuck other demons?”

Shiro snorts; smoke curls lazily. “Obviously, baby. I’m not always in a contract, and I do have certain appetites which must be satiated. Humans can’t usually keep up.”
Keith’s eyes narrow, sensing a challenge. “Is that so?”

Shiro blinks in surprise. Then his smirk returns. “Are you jealous, baby? Don’t feel bad; it’s not your fault you’re so soft and delicate and easy to break –”

Keith lunges at him with fists full of fire and manages to knock Shiro backwards, sending the unsuspecting demon tumbling onto his back with a grunt, wings flaring out with a startled little flap as Keith lands heavily on his chest. His heartbeat is like thunder, and Keith can feel rather than hear it speed up as he straightens up, shifting back along the creamy belly plates and craning his neck to search between the demon’s splayed back legs.

Shiro chuckles. “You are jealous, huh? Cute.”

Keith grits his teeth and palms hopefully over where he’s discovered a strange break in the plates, a slight bump between two of them that gives under his questing hands, drawing a shocked rumble from the dragon under him. “Maybe I am,” Keith says, rubbing insistently, “or maybe I just want to give you a reason to keep me around.”

Shiro’s jaws part, exposing rows of jagged white teeth and a long black tongue, flickering out like a snake’s. It’s shiny with saliva and Keith shudders at the thought of the possibilities of what that tongue can do. Shiro’s eyes narrow as he hears the thought, and something shifts under the plates Keith has been determinedly fondling. Something big.

“So you think you can fuck your way into my favor?” Shiro growls.

“Is that not how this works?” Keith counters.

“Well,” Shiro drawls, “I’m certainly not about to stop you. Unless you’re starting to have second thoughts.” Shiro grins, a vicious display that makes Keith’s dick ache. He thinks maybe fucking a demon has ruined him for any sense of normalcy in the bedroom. “Probably,” Shiro says, entirely unapologetic. “But normalcy is boring.”

“Oh,” Keith says, as the plates part and something presses up against his palm, something smooth and strange and almost slimy as it emerges from its sheath. And keeps emerging. Keith warily looks over his shoulder again, and freezes, mouth dry and thighs locking around the dragon’s scaled sides in shock.

If Keith had to guess, he’d say Shiro’s dragon form was at least fifteen feet long, and well over ten feet tall. His cock is horrifyingly proportional to that. Keith swallows as the length continues to curl free of its hidden slit, curving gracefully upwards to reveal its pointed, tapered tip; the head is long and fat and vaguely triangular, leading into a series of petal-like ridges, then smaller scale-esque bumps which mirror the gradual bulge forming towards the base of the dragon’s cock, which is framed by visible veins and what almost looks like muscle. The whole length is slick, oily, almost, purplish-red flesh gleaming in the low light of the cave.

So, this is what Keith’s life has led up to. Death by demon-dragon cock.

He’s already scrambling towards it and unlacing his pants.

Shiro’s smug grin falls and clawed hands stop Keith in his tracks. Keith wriggles and glares at him with more desperation than vitriol. “Oh, baby,” Shiro groans, “you’re gonna be the death of me.”

“Let go,” Keith snaps, unable to deny the thrill of excitement that goes through him when sharp claws cut and dig into his skin. “I have a contract to fulfill, here.”
“You’ll hurt yourself, you silly boy,” Shiro retorts, and before Keith can argue, the dragon rolls, pinning Keith under him, and they are no longer in the cave, but on a familiar soft surface, the ceiling overlain by a million sparkling stars. Keith wonders at how Hell can seem so inviting. He supposes that is the point – to lure humans in, to corrupt them through their selfish, carnal desires, and all for the small price of their souls. He does take pause for a moment at the thought, and has half a mind to be ashamed – he shouldn’t be enjoying this. He made this contract out of duty, not for pleasure. Pleasure did not even factor into it.

A warm, curved muzzle nudges at his face.

And yet, here we are, Shiro says, with you begging for my dragon cock.

“I have not begged yet,” Keith retorts, though any and all bravado leaves him when he looks down between them and sees the dragon looming over him, huge cock bobbing in the air as Shiro shuffles closer to the join of Keith’s legs. He’s naked, and eyes Shiro accusingly, rather than eying his shamefully hard cock. It’s tiny compared to the dragon’s, but rather than making Keith feel somehow less, it makes him squirm in eager anticipation he cannot explain.

His eyes roll back in his head when Shiro shifts forward, heavy cock dragging over Keith’s, and it’s wet, leaving a thick layer of shining slime over Keith’s entire torso. The slime is iridescent, and when Keith reaches down curiously to feel it, it’s warm and sticky, webbing between his fingers and tingling wonderfully over his cock. Keith can see exactly where the slime leaks from the tip of the dragon’s cock, and there seems to be no end of it.

It makes Keith wonder how much cum it’s capable of spilling, and his gaze shifts back, to the heavy sac held tight against the dragon’s belly, bobbing with his cock. It looks full, to say the least, and feels fuller when the dragon’s body lowers, careful not to crush Keith, but rubbing the swollen sac over Keith’s thighs and then over his own cock and balls, rolling them under it as Keith gasps and squirms, because he can feel the heat of the cum inside them, and he can feel them pulsing with the need to release it.

There’s absolutely no way Shiro can fuck him with his cock like this; it’s easily half as long as Keith is tall, and though the tip is slender and tapered it’s still as wide as Shiro’s human thighs – the bulging middle and base are even wider. But Keith wants it, badly. A soft whine leaves his lips when cool claws trace over his ribs, warm golden eyes watching him, and then, fuck, hot drool dripping from toothy jaws and over Keith’s heaving chest. He’s making Shiro drool. That should not be as satisfying as it is.

Keith spreads his legs wide and says, “If I beg now, will you fuck me?”

Shiro makes a sound that is both a laugh and a moan, neck arching down until they are nose to nose. “You’re serious? You want to be split open by a monster that badly, baby?”

“I’m not delicate,” Keith says, “and I’m not breakable. Besides, I thought dragons liked fire.” Flames flicker to life on his lips as he exhales, breathing fire as best he can, and Shiro’s grin widens in genuine delight at his wit. Keith blows a playful smoke ring into his face.

“You would break if I just fucked you like this,” Shiro says, and Keith opens his mouth to argue, but then the dragon adds, “but that’s why I took you here. My magic is stronger in my own realm...strong enough to allow your body to take me without damage. I am, after all, an incubus. Do you think I would back down from such a tempting challenge? Of course not. But I will ask one last time – are you sure?”

Keith’s cock twitches and he nods, fast. “Yes, fuck, please, if there’s a way – I want –”
“Heh. Very well, shush,” Shiro says, and shuffles backwards, off of Keith until his head is peering down at Keith’s cock with obvious excitement. He pauses, however, and adds, “This will be overwhelming, baby.”

“I know,” Keith huffs, “that’s what I want, now get on with it –”

“No, I’m serious,” Shiro says, clawed hand settling over Keith’s belly and shutting him up at once, “it will be more than you have ever felt. And if it is ever too much, you tell me, yes? And I will stop, and I will take care of you. Do not feel that you must prove yourself to me in this.” His eyes flicker like firelight. “You are already well within my favor, Keith.”

Keith doesn’t know what to say except, “Okay. I understand. Will...will it hurt?”

“Perhaps,” Shiro says, “but it will be a good hurt. Don’t worry, I remember – you don’t want me to hurt you, but you like knowing that I could.”

“You can,” Keith says, licking his lips nervously, “hurt me. A little. If you want.”

Shiro’s gaze darkens, and he lowers his head. “I’ll keep that in mind, baby,” he says, and then his dragon tongue is slithering between Keith’s thighs, and inside him.

The effect is near-immediate – Keith’s body opens easily to the dragon’s thorough licking, warm saliva running down his inner thighs and then in rivulets down his balls and cock as Shiro gets messier with it, eyes closing in silent pleasure, and then in not so silent pleasure as he begins to hum, vibrations rocking through Keith’s body and right over his prostate. Keith grunts, grabbing at the pillowy surface around him and arching up into it, lashes fluttering and cock ready to burst, and then he makes a garbled sound as the dragon’s tongue presses deeper, deeper, deeper than Shiro had ever touched inside of him and deeper than should have been possible, the dragon’s jaws fully open and his fat tongue painting Keith’s insides with dragon spit that is doing something bewildering to him.

It’s almost as if it’s creating new space while stretching him, molding his body into something meant only to be fucked, just a warm tight sheath for the dragon’s waiting cock – Keith chokes on air at the thought, legs spreading as wide as they can, cock dribbling pathetically over his belly. Then the dragon’s tongue withdraws and Keith almost cries – he’s gaping open, and it’s different from being sore and fucked open because he’s not sore and he hasn’t yet been fucked, he just needs, and he can feel his rim twitch and convulse but it’s puffy, swollen and sensitive as if it’s been changed, too, and he yells when cold claws tease at it as if to test their handiwork.

It’s as if he’s been given an entirely new set of nerve endings, and hollowed out at the same time. “Shiro,” Keith gasps, and finds he can spread his legs even wider, with more flexibility than he ever remembers having. “Please, please...”

The dragon chuckles and once again looms over him, and the surface under Keith shifts, reshaping to lift his lower body up so that his hole is on display for the dragon, and Keith gasps again when clawed hands shove his wantonly spread legs nearly up to his ears, leaving him completely open and vulnerable.

“Mmm,” Shiro rumbles, gazing down at him with half-lidded eyes, “what a pretty little witch you are. But I don’t think I heard you – what is it that you want from me so dearly?” His huge cock bobs closer, a long line of slime dripping from the tip and directly into Keith’s hole. Upon contact his entire body seizes, and Keith feels it slide down, down, down inside of him in high definition, a cruel tease of what he really wants.
The sound that leaves his lips is not human and there are tears in his eyes when he moans, “Fuck me, please, fill me up, Kurobasanir, need you –”

The dragon growls in obvious dissent and Keith trembles in a dizzying mix of fear and arousal as he leans close, sharp teeth inches from Keith’s neck, and hisses, “My name is Shiro, baby.”

Keith shudders, and nods, helpless, whispering, “Shiro, Shiro, Shiro,” in a frantic mantra, and the dragon, seemingly content with that, closes his clawed hands tight around Keith’s weakly flexing legs and lines his cock up with Keith’s waiting hole. Keith expects him to just shove inside but he does not; he continues to tease, letting the tapered and slippery tip brush over the contracting ring of Keith’s hole, coaxing it to loosen somehow further, and then dipping the fleshy head over his rim and just barely inside, enough to make Keith keen and whimper and plead wordlessly for more. But Shiro wants words, and asks for them, and Keith stares up at him and to his surprise, words spill from his lips in a filthy litany that shocks them both.

“Split me open on your thick cock, I want it, I need it,” Keith groans, “fuck me until I forget my name, until I can only say your name, until you come inside me again and again until there’s nothing left and I’m full of all your seed and mark me up so everyone knows I’m yours, so everyone knows what we did, knows that I took your cock like this –”

“Fuck, baby, you make a convincing case,” Shiro groans with feeling, and finally, finally, thrusts inside Keith.

Keith cries out as Shiro’s cock slides home, the tapered head going in easily, then widening, forcing Keith’s body to accommodate its veiny, bulging middle, and then the petal-like ridges open inside him, fluttering and massaging directly over his prostate, and he comes just like that, hips bucking and curses spiraling from his lips, barely recognizable as words. The bucking of his hips only serves to drive the dragon’s cock deeper, and as the middle enters him fully he begins to feel the overwhelming, impossible pressure of the tip against his gut, and then that tip twitches, wriggles powerfully, and Keith yells, white sparking behind his eyelids.

His cock is softening but confused, and forgets about recovery time when Shiro, lips curled and mouth dripping with drool, ducks his head down and curls his tongue around the limp length. Keith’s toes curl and he kicks uselessly; the dragon’s claws are still holding him tight in place, forcing him to writhe between the wet stimulation of the dragon’s tongue on his cock and the flexing, pulsing, ever-thickening push of the dragon’s cock entering him.

It’s still not fully inside and Keith is utterly unprepared for a sudden image to flash through his head – it’s what Shiro sees, and it’s Keith stretched impossibly wide as the dragon feeds his cock into his asshole, and the flesh is changed there, muscles contracting and puffy and pink, covered in viscous slime that makes everything tingling and warm.

Keith tries to consciously tighten around the dragon’s cock and it works, prompting a warning growl from Shiro and a ragged moan from Keith at the resulting hard thrust inwards, leaving him stunned as nearly all of the dragon’s cock forces its way inside, the curves of Keith’s insides hugging every inch of the slippery, throbbing cock. But there’s still more to go – the rounded knot at the base, which really looks like two knots sitting on top of each other, both bumping against Keith’s ass as the dragon begins to fuck him slowly. He doesn’t know how they’re ever going to fit, but Shiro makes no attempt to force them inside, yet.

Keith feels the sting and burn of it, but he loves it, and so does his cock, fully hard once again, sliding through the loose curl of Shiro’s tongue and then twitching unhappily when the dragon backs off, leaving his cock to the mercy of the strange friction of Shiro’s smooth belly scales, which brush over Keith’s cock as the dragon moves, rutting his hips against Keith’s ass. Keith’s
As he gets used to the sheer size of Shiro’s cock in him, he becomes greedy, moving up into every thrust with bitten-off grunts and whimpers, cock slapping against his stomach and Shiro’s belly, craving more, more pleasure racing up his spine, coiling tight in his belly, fizzling through his veins like magic. It’s intoxicating. It’s also intoxicating how powerful the creature fucking him is – Keith can feel the strength behind every thrust, see the muscles expand and contract as Shiro’s rhythm grows more punishing, cock pounding Keith open with single-minded purpose.

Keith comes again after the dragon’s cock connects with his prostate for a minute straight, and Shiro snarls above him as his body clamps down and spasms with orgasm, Keith’s blissful shout smothered by Shiro’s tongue pushing past his lips and invading his mouth in a messy, magnificent kiss. He does not stop even for a second, hips pumping his cock in and out of Keith’s once-more stirring body while he licks into Keith’s mouth, then over his neck and throat, teeth grazing over Keith’s collarbones. Keith whines and lifts his chest, vision blurring with pleasure as Shiro takes the hint and laps sloppily over Keith’s nipples, bringing them to hard pink points with the flexible tip of his tongue.

“You love this, don’t you, baby?” Shiro rumbles as he pulls away to admire his handiwork. Keith pants and arches up into the next devastating thrust, red in the face. “You love it when I wreck you like this. Only I get to do this to you – how does that make you feel?” When Keith doesn’t answer, the dragon’s thrusts stop abruptly and he squeals in dismay, fixing wide, pleading eyes on the dragon. “Well?” Shiro prompts. “How does it make you feel to know that only I get to wreck you, baby?”

“Good,” Keith sobs, “makes me feel good, so good…”

“Good,” Shiro coos, “because you deserve to feel good, Keith. Do you want that? Do you want me to make you feel better than you’ve ever felt, better than any human could ever make you feel?”

“Yes,” Keith breathes, spine bowing and cock rousing as the dragon’s cock stiffens inside him, “yes, yes, Shiro – !”

The dragon roars, a deafening sound that makes Keith tense instinctively just as claws split his skin in fierce lines of red heat and Shiro’s knot splits him open in a bloom of unbelievable ecstasy, locking the dragon’s cock fully inside while Keith yowls and claws blindly at scaly limbs and curved horns, unable to express the sensation in words.

And then, then, Keith feels the heavy hotness of the dragon’s full sac bearing down against his ass, and he feels the moment it pulses and begins to empty, Shiro’s huge cock spurting rope after rope of thick, burning cum into him. Keith jerks and writhes on Shiro’s knot as he’s filled to what feels like near-bursting, but the dragon just keeps coming, flooding Keith with seed that has nowhere to go but deeper inside, increasing the heat and pressure until Keith is screaming with it, cock spilling twice and remaining still-hard; the dragon’s cock shows no signs of stopping.

Shiro purrs at the sight and Keith screams again, hoarse and shocked, when the dragon’s cock begins to move in him again, still coming, still pulsing and still plugging him up tight. His belly is visibly round and distended, taut and growing larger as the dragon’s cock swells and releases, swells and releases, the constant movement sloshing the cum inside him, never quite allowing it to settle.

Keith’s mouth has fallen open and he cannot close it, and realizes he’s completely helpless; the dragon’s using his body like a ragdoll, grinding his knot against Keith’s tender rim until Keith comes with a mewing cry, his own cock emptied of cum and unable to do anything but twitch and
spurt in dry pulses that leave him shuddering and dazed.

And all the while, Shiro covers him with his massive body, wings curved around him protectively, and murmurs sweet nothings completely at odds with his merciless fucking. Sweet boy, sweet Keith, mine, mine, mine. Taking my cock so well, keeping everything inside like you were meant to, if you’re good I’ll eat you out after, or maybe keep it all inside while you sleep, would you like that? I want what you want, baby. I love making you feel like this, making you feel special, because you are, Keith, you are.

Keith throws back his head and keens, beyond language, his fingertips sparking and body crackling with uncontrollable electricity. Shiro rumbles in surprise when he notices, and then grunts as Keith’s overstimulated, contorting body manages to send a flurry of electric pulses through the dragon’s spurting cock.

Keith has no idea how he’s doing this, and Shiro stares down at him, open-mouthed, and Keith does it again, and again, and then Shiro roars above him and Keith’s breath is wrenched from his lungs as the dragon flips him, keeping Keith on his cock all the while, but forcing him onto his hands and knees so he can claim Keith from behind. This time there is no mistaking the strength behind each thrust, and Keith buries his face in the soft pillows and cries and moans and begs and curses and burns as Shiro comes again, sac deflating as Keith’s belly swells to the point of pain.

Wind buffets him from either side as huge wings flap and then a thick tail winds around Keith’s middle and Keith remember it knocking the harpy from the sky and involuntarily shocks Shiro again. But rather than being dissuaded by the electrocution, it seems to spur the dragon on, and the next moment sharp teeth close around Keith’s left shoulder, and he jolts with a cry as Shiro bites down and stills within him with a rumbling groan of relief, sated at last.

Blood runs lazily down Keith’s chest and back where Shiro bit him, and he knows it was a gentle bite, or his shoulder would not still be attached to his body. The wound still stings when Shiro’s tongue laves tentatively over it, and Shiro hums at Keith’s hiss of pain, making low sounds of comfort deep in his throat and shifting back, sitting back on his heels and bringing Keith with him.

Keith can do nothing but slump helplessly against him as he’s forced to sit upright, impaled fully on the dragon’s slowly softening dick and staring in numb disbelief at his full belly and still-hard cock. He doesn’t know how he’s numb yet also trembling with delicious, flickering echoes of sensation and pleasure, echoes which make him mewl and gasp as Shiro takes his cock in one huge clawed hand, rubbing the pads of his fingers over the reddened length and purring.

“You did so well, baby,” he murmurs, nuzzling at Keith’s cheek and licking his ear and neck fondly. “Better than most demons, in fact.”

“’S not over yet,” Keith slurs, though he glows with pride at the praise.

“No,” Shiro agrees, amused, and takes one of Keith’s hands in his free hand, guiding it to rest over his swollen stomach. “I suppose I can’t keep this inside you forever, much as I’d like to. Press down, baby.”

Keith does and gasps in discomfort, shaking his head. “Hurts –”

“Now,” Shiro says, and lifts up Keith with a hand around his waist, lifting him up and off his softening but still large length. The straining knot pops free and Keith’s entire body bows, the pressure released, and Keith has never felt so filthy as he does then when silvery-white dragon cum floods from his used hole, soaking his thighs and the dragon’s already messy cock, and there’s so much that not even gravity can get it all out.
Keith presses down harder on his still-plump belly, experimental, and moans at the second rush of thick heat sloshing out between his legs, toes curling and his dick managing a final climax, one that ends in Keith collapsing forwards, still leaking cum and embarrassingly open. Shiro catches him as he falls, easing Keith down face-first onto the soft pillows, and moves behind him, eliciting a pitiful whimper for mercy from the exhausted human when he exhales hotly over Keith’s ass.

“Shhh, I’ve got you,” Shiro promises, and licks tenderly inside him, cleaning him and weathering Keith’s weak convulsions and the aborted half-thrusts of his hips; the dragon’s tongue feels incredible in him, but he’s too tired to respond in any way but breathy moans and whines and soft pleas. As the dragon licks, though, Keith feels his body shifting again, this time back to normal, the hollow feeling fading away and each lick coaxing his muscles to relax, to rest, to heal. Keith’s eyelids are heavy and he can’t move his limbs, nor does he want to. He’s not afraid to close his eyes and let Shiro take care of him. He trusts Shiro to take care of him the way he needs. It is a quiet realization, but an important one.

At the thought, the dragon’s tongue curls away and a warm hand strokes down the languid curve of his back, touch lingering. “I’ve got you,” Shiro says again, voice unsteady with an emotion Keith cannot name. “I won’t ever let them take you from me. Never.”

Keith drifts off into a safe and perfect sleep.

*

He dreams of home.

He’s sitting on the front porch, bathed in late-afternoon sunshine that colors the world in golden sepia tones and renders the sky hazy and faded at the edges. He’s shucking corn, peeling the pale green husk from the ripe yellow kernels with careful, practiced hands that are too small to belong to a man’s – they are a child’s hands, tanned by the sun and rough from work in the fields but a child’s hands nonetheless, and so Keith expects it when his father’s horse comes into view on the dusty road, his father riding at a hard gallop towards the house.

Heart leaping, Keith all but throws the corn into the basket in his excitement, hurrying down the porch steps and waiting with baited breath as his father rides up to the hitching post and dismounts, tying his horse loosely before turning to his son.

“Keith,” he says, and smiles, a rare expression that makes Keith smile, too. He’s always in a good mood after his overnight trips. He leaves at least once a season, and no one knows where James Kogane goes; but he always has at least one smile for Keith afterwards, so Keith doesn’t ask questions. “C’mere, my boy.”

Keith goes to him, and when his father hugs him Keith hugs back twice as tight, until his father coughs, pats his shoulder, and says, “Ow, Keith. Yer gettin’ too strong for yer old man.”

Keith stops at once, arms hanging limply by his sides. “I’m sorry, Da.”

His father looks down at him, expression inscrutable, and keeps his hand on Keith’s shoulder. “That’s alright, son. Hey, look at me, will ya?”

Keith looks up, hesitant. “What is it, Da?”

“I’m glad yer alright,” his father says, brows drawing together. “Sometimes yer old man worries ‘bout ya when he leaves.”

“I’m eleven, Da, I can take care of myself,” Keith protests, and his father’s eyes darken.
“Not yet,” he says, and draws Keith back into an unexpected hug, squeezing him so hard that this time Keith can hardly breathe, but he doesn’t say a thing about it. “Yer still my son, ya hear me? We got a while longer, you and I.”

“Sure, Da,” Keith says, frowning and confused, “‘course we do.”

Then his father steps away, back to being gruff and succinct, and heads for the porch with Keith trailing him like a hopeful puppy. “So, how’re things, then?” he asks Keith over his shoulder as he climbs the steps, eying the basket full of shucked corn. “See yer keepin’ on top of your chores, good man.”

“Yessir,” Keith says with a smart nod, “corn is almost all ripe, gonna be a good harvest this year, I can feel it.”

His father snorts and raises an eyebrow. “That so? Sensed the plentiful crops with yer fireballs, eh?”

Keith wilts, hating to be reminded of how useless his magic is for the farm, especially when compared to his father’s. “No, sir,” he mumbles, “guess not.”

There’s a brief silence, and then to Keith’s utter bewilderment his father reaches out and cups his face, tipping his chin up and looking at him, all thoughtful and serious. Keith holds his breath. Then his father says, “Y’know, ya really do remind me of her, sometimes.”

Keith stares up at him, hardly daring to believe. “Like...like who, Da?”

His father sighs, releasing him, and goes to sit on the bench, motioning for Keith to sit beside him. He does, uncertain and nervous though he may be. “I used to tell ya all about yer Ma when you was only a babe,” his father says, “though I ‘spose ya don’t remember much of that.”

“No,” Keith says, biting his lip. “I don’t, Da.”

His father sighs again, heavier this time. “Remarkable woman, yer Ma,” he says. “No matter what anyone says, know that much, Keith. You are yer Ma’s son, and she’s a force to be reckoned with.”

Keith feels like he’s treading on eggshells. “Did...did I get my fireballs from her, Da?”

His father nods slowly. “Think so. Sure didn’t get ‘em from me.”

They sit in companionable silence for another minute or two, and then Keith ventures to ask, “Da, what happened to her?”

His father stiffens, and although his father has never struck him and Keith would like to think he never would, he still fears it as he sees his father’s hands curl into fists. “She’s gone,” he says simply. “Prob’ly fer the best, that.”

“For the best?” Keith shakes his head. “Why?” When his father does not answer, he pauses, and whispers, “I’ve...I’ve heard what some folks in town say. Is it true she had evil magic –”

“Quiet with that nonsense,” his father says, and Keith’s mouth snaps shut like a mouse trap. “Naw, it ain’t true, an’ they don’t know nothin’ ‘bout magic anyhow, Keith. She’s got a gift, is all. Like you.”

“Then why’s it for the best that she’s gone?”
His father turns to him then, and puts both hands on Keith’s shoulders, gentle but firm. “Keith,” he says, “folks’re afraid of what they don’t know. That’s why they’re afraid of us, us an’ our magic. But son, you are…” He exhales and sets his jaw. “You have a gift, son. An’ no matter what happens, no matter what those fools out there say, you use that gift you been given. An’ sometimes, folk might call you evil, Keith. But listen to me, son, listen – no matter what, you ain’t evil. Yer my son. Know that, if nothin’ else.” His father’s eyes are misty, and Keith does not know what is happening. “’Cause no matter what yer magic might be, son, it’s in here that matters.” He presses his hand to Keith’s chest, over where his heart beats fast. “That’s who you are, Keith. Who you are in here. Understand?”

Keith nods. “Yes, Da,” he says.

His father’s face crumples, and the memory blurs, and once more Keith is enveloped in his bruising embrace. “I love you very much, Keith,” he whispers into Keith’s hair, and Keith wakes up.

“Hi,” Shiro says. He’s lying next to Keith, in human form, in Keith’s bed at the Citadel. He’s wearing clothes, even. Miracles abound.

“Hi,” Keith croaks. “You’re not a dragon anymore.”

“And you’re not begging for cock again, thankfully,” Shiro says. “You actually managed to tire me out, for once.”

Keith huffs and shoves at him, rolling his eyes. “Oh, quiet, you.”

Shiro sticks his tongue out, mischief bright in his eyes. “Make me, then.”

Keith leans in and kisses him, and it works. Shiro shuts up instantly and kisses him back, slowly bringing Keith closer in a warm embrace. It’s refreshingly chaste, and when Keith pulls away Shiro smooths his thumb over the edge of Keith’s lips, as if to memorize the shape of them.

“Your dragon form certainly isn’t as good at kissing,” Keith murmurs with a soft smirk.

“You weren’t complaining,” Shiro snorts, shaking his head and flicking Keith’s ear lightly. “Although, I concur.”

“Hm.” Keith smiles, sleepy and content, and rolls onto his back. He’s achy, but as if from strenuous exercise, a good kind of fucked-out that intensifies when he stretches. Shiro watches him, lips quirked. “How much class have I missed?”

“It’s October,” Shiro says.

“Oh,” Keith says. “So it is. Three days, then?”

“Three days in absentia,” Shiro confirmed. “Your teachers just think you’re very sickly.”

Keith sighs. “And what will they think when I am gone?”


“I don’t know,” Keith admits. “My father never left a note; nobody knows where he went. Maybe I ought to do the same.”
“Do you want to be like your father?” Shiro asks.

“He was a good man,” Keith retorts, the dream strangely clear in his mind.

“He left you,” Shiro says, and Keith shakes him off, sitting up.

“I’m sure he had his reasons,” Keith mutters.

“Doesn’t make it right,” Shiro says, sitting up with him.

“And who are you to be talkin’ about right and wrong?” Keith retorts fiercely. “Demons ain’t even supposed to make a distinction, and here you are, debating the morality of my father and tellin’ me to call you Shiro instead of Kurobasanir. Which, by the way – hell’s that about?”

“What?” Shiro looks away, shifty. “I don’t remember that.”

“You don’t remember a lot, and it’s kinda worrying,” Keith says, and flops back down into bed, because he’s still too tired to sit up.

“I’m not lying,” Shiro says with a frown. “I truly don’t recall, Keith. But...did I say such a thing?”

“Yes,” Keith says, facing him. “I called you Kurobasanir and you said ‘My name is Shiro, baby.’”

Shiro tilts his head. “Perhaps I was just getting into the act.”

Keith sighs, not wanting to be reminded that this Shiro is not his. “Perhaps.”

“Hey, don’t be like that,” Shiro wheedles, snuggling up to him and laying an arm over his waist, “I apologize if it upset you, baby. Won’t do it again.”

Keith pokes his nose. “Already touchy feely again? I think I gave you well over three days’ worth of orgasms.”

“You did,” Shiro says with a satisfied grin. “But I like holding you, baby.”

“Ugh,” Keith says, but he likes holding Shiro, too.

*

Something is up, and Lance is going to find out what.

He prides himself as a perceptive person, and he’s all the more perceptive as a result of his Sight. It’s a strong gift, even if it may have gotten him into trouble a few times – for example, the time when he discovered Keith Kogane had made a contract with a greater incubus that looked like Takashi Shirogane.

He’s thinking it might get him into trouble again, because whatever is happening around the Citadel, Lance aims to find out, even though he has a sneaking suspicion there’s absolutely nothing good about it.

It started with the shift of energy in the air. Lance picks up on things like that faster than most witches, and it makes him antsy, on edge to the point of physically bouncing his leg or tapping his fingers or fiddling with the closest small object. Hunk may not notice energy, but he notices Lance, and calls him out on it after a couple days of uncontrollable fidgeting.

“Buddy,” he hisses, pulling him off down a hall after class, “what’s up? I haven’t seen you this
“Distracted since you had Ethics of Magic with Florona Finnigan last quarter!”

“I’m not sure,” Lance hisses back, “but something’s not right, here.”


“It feels ominous,” Lance says. “It feels like there’s a new magic signature in town, Hunk. Like...a new being.”

“What, like Keith’s incubus?” Hunk asks.

Lance grimaces. “I recognize his magic. No, no, it’s different from that. But...maybe he knows something about it.”

“You wanna ask him that?” Hunk exclaims.

“Well, if I’m gonna ask him, you’re gonna go with me for moral support, Mr. Therianthrope,” Lance says. “You’re the one who can turn into a freakin’ bear. All I can do is see shit.”

Hunk heaves a sigh. “Still working on the bear thing, but fine,” he says. “Don’t blame me if he rips your face off, though.”

Lance attempts to corner the incubus the following afternoon when Keith leaves during their regular study sessions to get some water. Keith’s attendance is spotty at best, and he’s not applying himself half as hard as he usually does, but it’s October and Pidge told Lance and Hunk weeks ago that Keith’s contract was meant to be completed on Samhain. Lance knew he’d be doing less homework, if any, if he knew he had less than four weeks left to live, so he’s grudgingly impressed that Keith’s trying at all.

When Keith is gone, the incubus is usually quiet – his snark seems to have softened somewhat, as has his behavior around Keith, and the whole phenomenon is real, real weird. Lance has pressed Pidge about it, because he knows she knows more about Kurobasanir and Keith than she lets on, but he hasn’t managed to get a peep out of her.

The demon is sitting next to Pidge now, idly peering over her shoulder at the notes she’s scribbling in the margins of her Lovecraft’s Guide to Deep Sea Beasts textbook. “Needs more tentacles,” he remarks, tapping a claw over one of the diagrams, and she elbows him. The incubus grins; he seems to be in a good mood.

Lance clears his throat. “Hey,” he says. “I’ve been feeling some weird new energy around the Citadel lately. Know anything about that?”

The incubus looks up slowly, eyebrows arched. “Are you speaking to me?”

“Yes,” Lance says. “So? D’you know what I’m talking about?”

“It is difficult,” the incubus says slowly, “to focus on much of any energy here, what with the Alteans snooping about and casting their wards every which way. But what do you mean, precisely?”

Lance shrugs. “Not much, which is why I’m asking. It just feels...off. I don’t like it, whatever it is.”
The incubus looks intrigued, if nothing else. “Off,” he repeats, and purses his lips. “I will admit, I’ve felt something around the Citadel, too. But I find it best not to meddle in other Void-borns’ affairs. As a human, I think you would be better off ignoring it, too. Unless you seek a contract…”

Lance scowls at him. “I’m not seeking a contract, thanks but no thanks,” he snaps. “Doubt Keith would be too happy to know you’re ready to snatch up his friends as soon as you’ve devoured his soul.”

The incubus’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Buddy, why,” Hunk grumbles, “why do you have to try to rile up the demon…”

“I was not offering a contract with myself,” the incubus retorts with a sniff, standing up from his chair as Keith wanders obliviously back into the study area, “considering that Keith and I will likely be too busy enjoying the many delights of Hell together to make room for another demanding contract.”

Keith almost trips over the chair leg. “I’m sorry,” he says, strangled, “what?”

Pidge looks up from her textbook with a small, private sort of frown. Yeah, she definitely knows something they don’t.

“You’re trying to tell me you don’t plan on ripping Keith’s soul to shreds the first chance you get?” Lance demands.

The demon bares his teeth at Lance. “I don’t, but yours is still on the table,” he warns.

“Okay, okay, cool it, everybody!” Hunk yelps.

“I’m cool,” Pidge says, coolly.

“Me too,” Keith says, “I think.” He sits down and pats the glowering incubus hesitantly on the shoulder. “Are you cool, Shiro?”

“So cool,” he grits out. “As ice.”

“Lance?”

Lance is not listening. Lance is staring, horrified, at the shadowy figure crouched atop the bookshelves just behind Shiro and Keith. “Guys,” Lance whispers, lifting a shaking finger, “guys, what the actual fuck is that?!”

Everyone looks. The shadow stays put, cocking its head at Lance and then, as everyone else looks directly where he’s pointing and says, “Lance, there’s nothing there…” the shadow shakes slightly, as if laughing, and lifts a dark finger to its unseen lips in the universal gesture for, shhh.

Then the shadow leaps off the bookshelf and vanishes into thin air.

Lance is on the verge of hyperventilating, so maybe that’s why the demon takes him seriously when he gasps, “C’mon, you must’ve seen that thing!”

But the incubus shakes his head, troubled, and moves unsubtly closer to Keith, wrapping an arm around him. “I saw nothing,” he mutters. “But evidently you have.”

“There was a shadow person that only I can see,” Lance bemoans, putting his head in his hands as
Hunk awkwardly pats his back. “Why was there a shadow person that only I can see?!”

Lance sleeps in Hunk’s room that night, though it does not make a difference, for long after he’s drifted off, a tall, shadowy figure slips into the room, watching him for a moment with slitted yellow eyes before shifting into a slim black cat and leaping out the window.

* 

“Pidge,” Lance says, leaning against her doorway. “Spill the beans.”

“What beans?” Pidge grumbles, kicking her feet up onto her desk and eying him, unimpressed, over the rims of her glasses. “I have no beans here.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Pidge huffs. “You don’t think he just likes me for my pretty face?”

“Ew,” Lance says, “why. No. Gross. You can’t make jokes like that about that incubus, Katie, not when he basically offered you a contract not so long ago!”

“He wouldn’t,” Pidge says, and looks away, biting her lip.

“You don’t know that; we can’t ever assume the best of him, not like humans. He’s not human, and you know as well as I do that Void-born don’t have the capacity for caring, much less empathy or genuine attachment –”

“I thought I knew that,” Pidge says, “but I’m not so sure anymore, Lance.”


Pidge sighs, rubbing her temple. “He came to me in this very room, over two months ago, when Keith was...in a depression spiral, basically.”

Lance gawks at her. “He came here?!! He was with you, alone, trying to figure out how to get Keith to roll over for him?”

“Not exactly,” Pidge says. “He...he told me some interesting things.” She runs a hand through her messy hair and gives him a sidelong glance. “I think it’s safe to say Keith’s incubus is not your standard Void-born, Lance. Know what he said to me? He said he didn’t want to take anything from Keith by force, that he didn’t want Keith’s suffering. He asked me to explain depression so he could help Keith, and however selfish his motives might have been, he was clearly worried. He said Keith was endearing.”

“He was lying, duh,” Lance mutters, but from the resolve in Pidge’s eyes, he’s not so sure.

“There’s more,” Pidge says. “He can’t turn into any other human form, only Shiro’s.”

Lance opens his mouth, then closes it. “Now, that,” he says, “that’s...strange. I thought –”

“Incubi could shift into limitless human forms? Yeah. They should be able to, but he can’t. Why would he lie to me about not being able to do that when he was trying to seduce Keith? He wanted to take a form other than Shiro’s, but he said he was stuck.”
“Why do I have a bad feeling about this?” Lance mumbled, wringing his hands. “Do you think maybe...maybe Keith botched the summoning ritual? Maybe he didn’t summon and bind himself to Kurobasanir?”

“I’ve considered the possibility,” Pidge says, “but I don’t know. It just doesn’t add up. There’s some really fishy shit about the whole thing – oh, and I didn’t even tell you about the damn amulet.”

“Well, now you better.” Lance leans forward expectantly.

“You can’t tell anyone this, not the demon, not Keith, not even Hunk,” Pidge warns. “Because the implications are...not good, to put it lightly.” Lance nods, dreading what she’s about to say, and she exhales. “Right. So, he gave me a protection amulet, an amethyst one, and asked me to read it with my magic. I asked him where he got it and he told me he had amnesia, didn’t remember where or how he got the thing.”

“Now, that sounds like a lie,” Lance mutters.

“Maybe,” Pidge says, “but then, when I read it...Lance, the necklace was Shiro’s. The real Shiro’s. I saw him being dragged into the gladiatorial arena in Hell, and Matt was there. He...he saved Matt’s life, Lance. And I saw it all, in that stupid little necklace.”

“So the incubus had contact with Shiro, he had to have,” Lance whispers, eyes widening. “What if...what if he found out about Keith from Shiro, and somehow persuaded Keith to summon him and...”

“But to what end?” Pidge exclaims. She’s clearly been thinking about this a lot. Agonizing over it, even. “It just doesn’t add up. If Kurobasanir’s using Keith for some ulterior motive, then why does he treat him so well?”

“To trick him?”

“If so, then he’s going above and beyond for the sake of trickery,” Pidge mutters. “And that still doesn’t explain the amnesia or limited shapeshifting.”

“He really does seem to care for Keith, albeit in his own fucked up way,” Lance says after a beat of silence. “And for Keith’s sake...I hope he’s telling the truth, and that he won’t destroy Keith’s soul when Keith’s time is up.”

“Me too,” Pidge sighs.

Then Lance sees it again – a separate shadow, leaning against the far wall, watching and listening intently. Its golden eyes flare when Lance’s gaze falls upon it. Pidge is still talking, but Lance says, “Katie. Katie, turn around slowly.”

She does. “Uh...what am I looking at, here? Curtains?”

“It’s...it’s standing right there,” Lance breathes, and jumps off the bed with a squeak as the figure steps forward, towards him, head tilted as before. “What do you want?! Get back, or I swear –”

The figure surges forward in a blur of black and violet smoke before slamming Lance into the nearest wall, all the breath leaving his body at once. Lance is paralyzed, staring up into the being’s face, which is shrouded by the shadow of its hood. He can see a sharp chin, dark hair, and lips curled into a disapproving scowl, and then of course the glowing eyes.
“Lance!” Pidge exclaims, but the figure flicks its wrist and Pidge is unable to take a single step closer, stilling as if frozen in time.

Lance swallows hard. Slender fingers tip up his jaw, forcing him to maintain eye contact. “What do you want?” Lance asks again, voice shaking as badly as he is.

He was unprepared for both the being’s voice, which is commanding and female, and the being’s words, which are, I want to keep Keith Kogane safe.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

we're getting close to the end!

unfortunately, I've gotta let y'all know that this fic will be on hiatus for at least a month - I'm traveling/studying abroad in Ireland until July 20, and I'm gonna take a break from the fandom until then, so I doubt the last couple chapters will be up until late, late July or early August. BUT, don't despair, I think you're going to enjoy those last few chapters and I'm definitely excited to write them :-) this has been such a fun story and I know you're all eager to have the various mysteries solved~

and oh yeah, season 6. whew. can't believe it's canon that keith loves shiro wow anyway ENJOY

Keith isn’t afraid for the end.

He still isn’t quite sure what it will be like when the incubus takes his soul, once all is said and done, and he doesn’t ask. He’s not sure he wants to know. And the incubus knows this, and so he does not tell Keith. Instead, the incubus treats him kindly. Yes, as strange as it, the incubus is kind to him as the October chill sweeps over the mountains, filling the Citadel’s stone halls with drafts and dry leaves, carried up on the wind from the woods.

He does not ask more of Keith than he needs, and he is respectful of Keith’s boundaries to a degree that is startling, and quite new. When Keith wants to be alone, the incubus leaves him be. When Keith wants only someone to keep him warm under his thin cotton sheets, the incubus never tries to instigate more than snuggling. And when Keith initiates sex, the incubus lets him take the lead more often than not. But it is not as before, when their trade-off felt mechanical, like a chore. It never feels like that, now.

Keith does not know what it feels like. Intimate, maybe. But there is something almost sad about it, too, something Keith sees in the incubus’s gray eyes which are really Shiro’s, and Keith wishes often that he could see what goes on in the demon’s head.

“No,” the incubus tells him as they lay together in Keith’s bed, sprawled lazily over tangled sheets, Keith’s head tucked close to the demon’s chest. “You don’t, baby.”

“Why not?” Keith asks, looking up at him. “You see my thoughts all the time.”

“Yes,” Shiro says, “your thoughts are pleasant.”

“Pleasant? Really?” Keith frowns. “And yours aren’t?”

“My thoughts are...tumultuous, to put it lightly.” Shiro sighs. He looks away, and there it is again — that sad, sad look, a quiet and distant somberness.

Keith touches his cheek, brow furrowing. “Hey,” he murmurs, “what is it? Is it your memory again?”
“My memory is fine,” Shiro says, and smiles, but Keith knows Shiro’s smiles and this isn’t a happy one. He smiles back, though, not wanting to push the demon too much. He doesn’t want to risk ruining the peace between them.

Shiro must not be listening to his thoughts all the time, because he doesn’t press Keith, and instead closes his eyes, pulls the blankets over them, and tells Keith a story.

The stories are new. Keith doesn’t know where they came from, but he likes them.

This one is about a dragon, not one who spent his time in mountain caves with daring witches, but one who lived in the depths of the earth, alone, in a cold cavern of ice and snow. And this dragon was a she, and she had a clutch of three beautiful eggs with diamond shells, and she watched over them day and night, all the while hoping they would hatch.

But one thousand years had passed, and still there was nothing, and still she waited.

“Why does she wait?” Keith interrupts. “Why doesn’t she just try to find another dragon?”

“Because she is the last,” Shiro says. “So she can do nothing but wait, and hope.”

So the last dragon waited and hoped over her three precious eggs, and whenever the frost crackled over them she brushed it away and shielded them from the cold with the warmth of her body, and she swore now and then that she could feel the faintest echo of a heartbeat in her eggs. She knew she was growing old, for even dragons must someday die, but she would not leave her eggs. Her hope kept her captive over them.

And then, one day, the old mother dragon’s time came, and she died where she was curled around her three diamond eggs.

“No!” Keith exclaims. “She can’t die!”

“But she did,” Shiro says, “and as her body rots, it produces heat in that cold, cold cave. And the heat pierces through the thick diamond shells, and her three eggs hatch beside their mother’s corpse, and they, not knowing any better, and starving from their long incubation, tear into her body and grow fat and warm. And then the three children leave the cave, and when they reach the world above, they see it is full of other baby dragons like them, emerging from their dead mothers’ caves, teeth red with their mothers’ blood.”

Keith is silent. Then he asks, “What does it mean?”

Shiro tilts his head and squeezes Keith’s hand. “Void-born do not have mothers,” he says. “The Void itself is from whence we come, but there is nothing maternal about it. So there are many stories we make to feel better about our origins. Stories of mothers who would sacrifice everything for their children, mostly.”

“What about fathers?” Keith asks.

Shiro glances at him, perplexed. “What about them?”

“I had no mother,” Keith says. “My father raised me — that’s all I know.”

“Hm,” Shiro says. “Would your father have died for you?”

Keith swallows and stares at the ceiling. “I...I want to believe he would. He...he wasn’t good at loving, my father. Or at least not at showing it. But he tried. He really did try.”
Shiro does not look convinced.

“Look,” Keith mutters, “I know you think he’s a bad father for leaving me. And maybe he is. But I think he must’ve had a damn good reason to leave. He must’ve.”

Shiro studies him for a long moment. “You really believe that.”

“I believe he loved...loves me,” Keith says, looking away because he cannot say loves me to the demon’s face. “So, yes. I do believe that.”

“I never met your father,” Shiro says, “so I suppose you would know better than I.”

Keith relaxes. “Yes,” he says, “I would.”

Shiro chuckles, and squeezes Keith’s hand again, this time rubbing his thumb over Keith’s knuckles, gentle and slow. “I’ll try to think of a story about fathers for tomorrow night,” he says, and when Keith leans in to kiss his cheek, he sees a warm rosy flush rise in the demon’s skin, and wonders if all demons blush, or if that’s just his.

*  

The next night Shiro takes Keith up onto the Citadel rooftop to see the stars. Keith is a little afraid of falling off the edge, but Shiro keeps him close, tucked into the curve of his side, arm draped securely around Keith’s shoulders.

He’s telling Keith a story about fathers, a story about a man who drove his chariot across the sky every dawn to collect his children, the stars, and gather up all of them in the warmth of the day. Then he stops, wincing and shuddering, a tremor that Keith feels go through the incubus’s entire body. He shakes himself, eyes wide, and glances at Keith with a mixture of vague panic and confusion.

“Shiro?” Keith whispers, alarmed.

Shiro does not answer. He is staring off into space, lips parted, gray eyes reflecting the stars. Then, just as Keith’s pounding heart is about to drive him to shake the demon, Shiro shakes himself, makes a strange, low sound, and says, “Apologies.”

“What was that?” Keith demands. “You looked as if you’d seen a ghost!”

“Not a ghost,” Shiro says. His eyes are focused on Keith, but they’re sad again. “At least, I hope not.”

“What does that mean?” Keith pleads.

Shiro shakes his head. “Do not worry about it, Keith.”

“How can I not worry when you seem so strange and sad?” Keith asks, soft and honest enough to make the demon look at him, troubled. “Why are you sad?”

“I’m not,” Shiro says, and shakes his head. “Sad isn’t quite the right word for it. I suppose I just...” He exhales, looking back at Keith. “There are less than three weeks until Samhain.”

“Yes,” Keith says. “Are you not happy about that?”

“It’s bittersweet,” Shiro admits. “On the one hand, I will finally have your soul all to myself, and our contract will be thankfully completed. On the other hand...” He grimaces. “I do feel a bit sorry
for taking you away from your Shiro, baby. It’s tragic, really.”

Keith swallows, and says, “You... you don’t have to take me away from him.”

Shiro’s eyes darken, and Keith is at once reminded that this being is a demon capable of great cruelty as sharp claws dig into his skin and sharper teeth form in the incubus’s wide mouth. “But I do,” he retorts. “I can’t be sharing you, Keith, not even with the love of your life. You’re mine — that was our agreement. Besides, you know I can be so good to you…I’m hardly an unappealing prospect.”

*Step away from the witch.*

Keith and Shiro start to their feet, only for Keith to trip on the roof shingles and nearly tumble over the edge; Shiro yanks him back and keeps a tight grip on his arm as they turn towards the stranger.

Well, maybe Lance isn’t mad after all. That’s a shadow person if Keith’s ever seen one. But this shadow person is not crouched atop a bookshelf; it’s standing less than two meters away, holding a knife in one hand which gleams in the moonlight, and glaring at them with golden eyes.

Keith is also obliged to call it a she, because its voice is definitively female, though there is not a single note of softness in it. She is a very angry shadow lady.

“Show yourself!” Shiro growls, baring his teeth and flaring his wings out, further shielding Keith. “Are you one of Haggar’s minions?”

The shadow lady barks out a laugh, sharp and cold.

*If anything, Lady Honerva is one of my minions,* she says. *You are the only minion here, incubus. Now, I say it once more — step away from the witch.*

“I will not,” Shiro says, eyes narrow. “You shall not have him.”

*Oh, because he is yours? Your pet to do with as you please? I think not, and I will take him from you if I must.*

The shadow leaps upwards, and transforms in midair into a murder of cawing, clawing crows; they drag Shiro away from Keith and Keith yells through the cacophony of sound, fire igniting in his palms.

“Let him go!” Keith shouts, shooting a fireball blindly into the flock, hoping it’s close enough to the edge to miss Shiro. It must be, because the crows scatter with raucous shrieks, and reform several feet away into the shadow lady. Keith blasts her with another fire spell, which she deflects easily, before he runs to Shiro’s side. The incubus was pushed down by the vicious birds, but staggers to his feet when Keith helps him up.

The shadow lady does not attack then, but watches them with narrow, glowing eyes and hisses, *Keith, this demon feels nothing for you. Do not let it trick you into doing its will.*

Keith does not extinguish his fire, and stays close to Shiro, glaring at the shadow lady. “How do you know my name?” he snaps.

*I know everything about you,* she says.

“Clearly not,” Shiro says, clawed hand tight on Keith’s shoulder, “considering you believe he would let me come to harm. Keith is loyal to me, not you.”
The shadow lady makes a sound not unlike a growl, and steps forward, flames trailing her feet and wreathing her like smoke. *He knew not what he was doing when he summoned you* she says. *He was desperate, and you took advantage of him. I will not stand for that.*

“I knew exactly what I was doing!” Keith retorts. “I am not a fool. And you didn’t answer my question! How do you know me?!”

She takes another step closer and Shiro bares his teeth, leathery wings arching up protectively around himself and Keith. Again, she stops. Flames lick at her long black cloak, and as Keith and Shiro wait, tense and bewildered, she appears to hesitate. When she does speak, it is with a slowness that suggests she is selecting her words carefully.

*Witches who seek favors from the most powerful of their own kind summon me. Your father was one of those witches, Keith.*

He doesn’t understand. “That’s still not an answer,” he whispers. “Who *are* you?”

Her eyes dart to Shiro, and she shakes her head. *So long as he is bound to you, I cannot tell you. It would only endanger you more, Keith. But you deserve to know. So I will sever your contract, and you will be freed.*

Keith’s eyes widen and Shiro bristles indignantly. “You will do no such thing!” the incubus snarls. *I will do as I wish,* she says, and lifts her hands.

“Don’t!” Keith exclaims, his heart pounding – he’s never heard of the ability to break contracts, but somehow he doesn’t doubt she can. “I need him, I made that contract to save Shiro –”

*No man is worth selling your soul for,* she says, dismissive, though there’s something else in her tone – sympathy, perhaps. *And even if he was, I won’t allow it. I’m sorry, Keith.*

The next moment, the overpowering aroma of cinnamon and myrrh fills the air, followed by a loud hissing sound as two black snakes coil out from under the woman’s fiery black robes. The serpents lift their heads and fix their beady black eyes on Shiro and Keith along with the shadow lady, and then Keith is falling to his knees with a cry – it’s as if someone is yanking on his heart itself, trying their damnedest to rip it clean from his chest.

“Stop!” Keith gasps, and feels the incubus crumpling down beside him, groaning as he shifts to his true form in some attempt to regain power.

*What are you doing?* Shiro roars, his voice weakening, carried away on the wind. *Release me – I will not,* the shadow lady grits out, her flames flickering from effort and her snakes rising up as if to strike. *Not until you release him!* *Never,* Shiro says. Then Keith doubles over in agony, clawing at his own chest and gasping for air and the incubus cries, *Let go! You’re hurting him!*

*I’m freeing him,* the shadow lady growls, *why is this taking so long...?*

“Shiro,” Keith begs, “don’t do it, don’t release me –”

*I won’t,* I *won’t,* Shiro promises.

*It does not matter, I will end it regardless,* the shadow lady warns, and Keith’s spine buckles as the
sensation increases tenfold – but it is a stalemate, his heart will not leave his chest and he can feel the heat from the shadow lady’s fire as it climbs higher in frustration.

Keith has never felt such powerful magic before, not even when he summoned Kurobasanir – this does not feel quite as ancient, but it is more dangerous, chaotic and crafted like a finely honed weapon. And yet, the more the magic pulls, the more the magic inside Keith resists.

Then the shadow lady’s flames snuff out and she takes a step back, her snakes slithering away into nothingness. Keith collapses in relief as the pain ebbs away, panting and soaked in sweat. Shiro is not much better off, though he is able to drape a wing over Keith as he heaves himself to his feet, taking Keith by the hand and letting the exhausted witch slump into his side for support as they face the stunned shadow lady together.

_How?_ she whispers. _Your contract cannot be broken._ Her eyes widen and flare brighter with barely-contained fury. _What have you done to him, demon?!_

Shiro’s lips curl into a thin, vicious smirk. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She lunges forward, and Keith sees a glimpse of gleaming white fangs before he whispers, “He did nothing I did not want,” and she stops.

_Keith, he has manipulated you –_

“No,” Keith says, louder and with more conviction, “he has not. He...he has been good to me.”

_Good,_ she repeats in utter disbelief. _Kurobasanir the Greater Incubus, infamous for his cruelty and sadism, has been good to you. Forgive me if I don’t follow._

“That is not my name,” Shiro says, and Keith chances a look up at him – his jaw is set, and he’s resolute when he says, “I am not that monster.”

_Then what the Hell are you?!_

Shiro swallows. “Something better.”

Keith lifts his chin, summoning up his energy and igniting his fingertips again. “I made this contract and I intend to go through with it until the end,” he says.

The shadow lady lowers her head, seemingly subdued. _And when will that end be, Keith?_

“Soon,” he says, reluctant to disclose the actual date to her.

But somehow she knows anyway, and the sound she makes is quiet and terrible. _Samhain,_ she whispers. _Ah, the fates are cruel, aren’t they? Very well. Until then, Keith. Oh, and happy early birthday._ And then she’s gone.

Shiro says, “When is your birthday?”

“October 23rd,” Keith says, staring at the spot where she’d been standing. The rooftop is singed. “What was that?”

“That’s only a week and a half from now,” Shiro muses. He shakes his head. “She’s more powerful than any Void-born I’ve encountered. But her magic feels familiar. Like Haggar’s.”

Keith stiffens. “She did say Haggar was one of her minions –”
“No,” Shiro murmurs, “she said Lady Honerva was. I think...there is a difference.”

Keith tilts his head. “Do you mean to say her magic was not so cruel as Haggar’s?”

“You felt it, too,” Shiro points out. “Cruel is not the word I would use. A force to be reckoned with, though...and not pure nor good by any means.”

“Chaotic,” Keith says, half to himself, “that’s what it was. Primordial.” He looks at the incubus. “She knew me.”

“She knew your father,” Shiro counters. “She performed a favor for him, evidently.”

Keith is suddenly cold. “No,” he says, “no, my father never meddled in forces like that, forces beyond his control. He was down-to-earth, lived a simple life, a quiet life…” He shakes his head. “He would have told me,” he says. “I know my father.”

Shiro puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes. “I believe you, Keith. I don’t know what she was, who she was, or what she was after.”

“She wanted to break our contract.” Keith swallows. “But even she couldn’t. Is...is that...does that happen often?”

The incubus cups his face and looks steadily down at him. “No,” he says. “It does not.”

Keith whispers, “Did you mean what you said when you told Lance you would be too busy to take on another contract, because you would be too busy enjoying the delights of Hell with me?”

“It’s no secret that I’m a hedonist, baby,” Shiro chuckles, but he knows that’s not the answer Keith is looking for.

“What’s going on?” Keith pleads, brushing his hand off and stepping away from him. “First you say you aren’t Kurobasanir, then you say you won’t take on any other contracts, then you drift away from me as if lost in your head, and then a woman made of shadows is unable to break our contract?”

Shiro frowns at him. “Would you rather I abandoned you in Hell and moved on to another hapless human?”

Keith flinches, but stands his ground. “I would rather you tell me the damn truth,” he says. “What did I summon? Do you even know?”

They face each other in silence broken only by the low crackle of Keith’s smoldering flames.

“It is late,” Shiro says, finally. He reaches out, but Keith evades him.

“Answer me,” he says. “What are you?”

The incubus’s eyes are like black glass marbles in the night, reflecting Keith’s fire in their depths.

“I am yours,” he says, and touches Keith’s forehead with a cool fingertip.

Keith finds himself in his bed, in his dark room, alone.

*

Shiro is standing alone in the desert, on the edge of a sheer canyon cliff, looking down into the
whitewater rapids below.

The foamy surface glows in the darkness. He looks up; the night sky above him is drenched in starlight. Up in the mountains, the stars are so often obscured by clouds and fog. But here; here they are free, open, endless.

*Did you watch the stars, before?*

Shiro starts, and gazes across the abyss. There is a silhouette standing on the other side. Its only visible features are its glowing golden eyes, but it has the same build as Shiro, the same height, and almost the same voice. Almost, because its voice is not human.

“Before?” Shiro asks, curious rather than afraid.

*Before Kerberos, it says. Before you fell.*

Shiro takes a step away from the edge of the cliff, palms sweating. “I don’t want to fall,” he said.

*You had no choice, it tells him. You were a prisoner. A test subject. Don’t you remember, after all this time?*

“No,” Shiro says, “no, I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

*You do, it says. You must. We are running out of time. We must warn him, before it is too late.*

“Warn who?”

“Shiro,” Keith says. His voice floats up, up, up from the rapids, and Shiro looks down in horror at him. He’s clawing at the sharp, slick rocks, his fingertips bloodied and raw from struggling to hold on, to fight the current threatening to drag him under. He stares up at Shiro with huge, pleading eyes. “I trusted you,” he gasps, “I loved you.”

*And you threw him to the wolves, the silhouette says, and as Shiro lifts his gaze to it, leathery black wings unfold from its shoulders, and its body lengthens, broadens, changes into the shape of a roaring black dragon. Rocks break under its weight, and Keith screams as the chunks of stone hit the water inches from him, each one capable of shattering his skull. Remember, or I’ll tear him limb from limb,* the dragon promises him, sharp white teeth dripping with venom and drool.

“I can’t!” Shiro screams, stumbling forward, desperate. “Please, believe me, I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

*Very well,* then, the dragon says, and dives over the edge of the cliff, towards Keith, his agonized shout cutting off halfway as its claws rip into soft white flesh in a spray of scarlet –

Shiro’s eyes snap open. He’s lying on a cold metal table, his vision blurred with violet lights.

There’s a woman staring down at him, a woman whose face is all jagged angles and ashen skin stretched thin – she is gaunt, her eyes cold and clinical as they examine him. Her eyes were hazel, once. Now, they seem to glow with an unearthly violet light from within. The violet light is everywhere, rendering the memory hazy, blurry – there’s a needle in his arm. The liquid it feeds into his veins is freezing, and makes everything slow. A sedative.

*My lady,* a voice says, distant and tinny as if heard from the end of a long metal tunnel, *Subject 117-9875 has been neutralized and is ready for Trial 1.*
Before the gaunt woman can reply, an agonized, furious roar echoes through the violet-lit chamber, shaking the table Shiro lays upon. It is not human and it is not beast – it is a monster. His heart pounds and he goes cold as the woman smiles slowly down at him. *Good,* she says. *Begin Trial 1.*

Shiro sees a shadow out of the corner of his eye, small and dark and hunched over, curled in on itself, bound to the floor by chains. It looks at him, flickering in and out of existence like a dying flame, and whispers in a dry rasp, *She took more than just your arm that day.*

He bolts upright with a gasp. The harsh lights and cold table and strange woman are gone. Everything is dark, except for the pale, crumpled body lying several meters away, his dusty tunic splattered with blood. Shiro crawls to Keith and cradles the unmoving boy in his arms, lower lip trembling as he sees the deep claw marks gouged into his chest.

Then a heavy hand falls upon his shoulder, and Shiro goes still as curved claws dig into his skin. *He is alright.* It is the same voice, the same dry rasp of sound, and Shiro knows that is important but cannot figure out why.

It doesn’t matter, because then Keith stirs in his arms, the wounds closing up and healing, his eyes fluttering open and fingers curling around Shiro’s arm. Shiro relaxes, relieved.

But something is terribly wrong – Keith’s eyes are glowing just like the woman’s, cold violet, and when he smiles it is too long, too sharp. His tongue flickers out between long jagged fangs, black and forked like a snake’s, and his hand clamps down onto Shiro’s arm, nails lengthening into claws of his own, blood beading up where they dig into Shiro’s wrist. His pale skin shines with patches of reddening scales, and strange black lines twist and sharpen like ink over his chest and arms and throat, eldritch symbols Shiro cannot decipher but which fill him with unspeakable dread.

*Hi, baby,* Keith murmurs with a crooked smirk, and then everything goes black.

*'

Keith would never in a million years expect the incubus to coordinate a birthday celebration with his novice friends, but that’s exactly what he does.

It’s a quiet affair held in an empty classroom – Shiro leads him there after class on October 16th, a week before his birthday proper. Keith is fully anticipating getting fucked over a desk, so it throws him for a loop when he opens the door and Pidge, Lance, and Hunk are standing there, erupting into a chorus of “*HAPPY BIRTHDAY, KEITH!*” as he walks in.

“Huh?” Keith says. Hunk all but shoves a cake into his face. Keith blinks dumbly at it. In all honesty, he prefers pie, but Hunk has clearly spent a lot of time on the confection.

Keith doesn’t notice the incubus’s thoughtful expression.

“Fake Shiro told us it was your birthday next week,” Lance explains, ushering Keith over to sit down at the table, which has been festooned with various magical sparklers and garish floral illusions. “And since he’s taking you on some secret getaway trip, we figured we’d better throw your party now.”

Shiro glares at Lance as he leans against the blackboard. “Not so secret anymore, seer,” he mutters, but he’s not truly mad, just miffed.

Keith sits down next to Pidge, who shoots him a grin and passes him a box wrapped in brown parchment paper. “For you,” she says. “Go on, open it.”
Hunk swats her away. “No, no, no, not before cake!” he scolds, brandishing a large knife before cutting the cake with the utmost precision.

His concentration makes Keith chuckle, and Lance says, “Hunk’s very serious about his baked goods, y’know. This is an honor, Kogane, I hope you know.”

“Yes, I’m very honored, truly,” Keith laughs, shaking his head as Hunk loads a heavy piece of cake onto the plate he slides in front of the baffled witch. “What kind is it?”

“Red velvet,” Hunk says, cutting another slice proudly. Keith moves to lift his fork and dig in, but Hunk snaps, “no cake yet, song first!” and Keith sits back with an amused huff, folding his arms and waiting while Hunk cuts the cake.

“Hmph,” Shiro says, examining his nails, “should have gone with Devil’s food cake.”

“That was so bad,” Pidge says, rolling her eyes.

“Really? I thought it was quite good, myself,” Keith says slyly, and the incubus blinks at him, flushes, and looks down.

“Do you want a piece?” Hunk asks Shiro when he’s served everyone else, including himself.

“Nah, he only eats one thing, and it’s not cake,” Lance says under his breath.

Shiro’s jaw works. “Cake would be lovely, thank you, Hunk.” He sits down beside the therianthrope, who blanches and subtly scoots away after handing him a plate.

Lance plops down on the other side, so that Keith is in between him and Pidge, and declares, “Alright, one, two, three – happy birthday to Keith, happy birthday to Keith –!”

“Happy birthday de-ear Kee-eith…”

“Oh,” Keith says, ears red as the others join in. He closes his mouth. What is he supposed to do while they sing to him? He doesn’t know. All he knows is that Shiro has a beautiful singing voice. Just like his Shiro’s.

When they’ve finished, the three novices cheer and look at Keith expectantly. “Er,” he says, “thank you?”

Everyone wastes no time in digging into their cake. Pidge nudges the box over to Keith again. “Present,” she hisses.

“Okay,” Keith says, chancing a look at Hunk, who is too busy eating cake to admonish him. Satisfied the coast is clear, he carefully tears the parchment paper away. It’s a book. A very rare and expensive book, from the looks of it – leatherbound, with a spine and cover stamped with gold letters and black runes. “Pidge,” he whispers, “this is…”

“A journeyman level pyromancy spellbook, yes,” Pidge says. “And not your standard Citadel print, either.” She gives him a small smile. “Even if you won’t get to take your journeyman exam, I think you should be one. We all know you’d pass, first try.”

“Thanks,” Keith mumbles, biting his lip and running his thumb over the soft leather. “How...how much was –”

“It’s a gift, Keith,” Pidge interrupts. “Don’t worry about it. I hope it serves you well.”
He nods, swallowing back the lump in his throat. Giving him no time to recover, Hunk says, “I guess this cake could count as a gift, too, but I actually did make you another little something.” He digs in his pockets for a few seconds, and emerges victorious with a small, shiny sort of cube, which he hands over to Keith.

It’s cool and reflective in Keith’s hands. He tilts his head at it, and so does the incubus. “What is it?” Keith asks, curious.

“It’s a communicator,” Hunk tells him, and the lump in Keith’s throat grows. “For when you’re, um, away. And want to talk. To...not demons.” He gives the incubus a nervous sidelong glance. Shiro’s expression is inscrutable.

“That’s...thoughtful, Hunk,” Keith says. “How do you use it?”

“You just tap on a side three times and cast a projection charm, which activates it,” Hunk explains. “See, I’ve got one too.” He pulls out another, identical cube. “Try it.”

Keith taps his nail against the side and, feeling foolish, murmurs, “Proiectura.”

Instantly, the cube lights up a pale, bright blue, as does Hunk’s, and a slightly blurry image of Hunk’s excited face is projected into the air atop the cube. “Hi!” Hunk says, and Keith smiles helplessly.

“Hi,” he says back. He sees his own face projected from Hunk’s cube; Shiro is peering at it, a slight frown gracing his lips. Keith clears his throat and says, “This is incredible, Hunk, thank you...how do I deactivate it?”

“Oh,” Hunk says, “just dispel the charm.”

Keith dispels it, and the cubes shut off. “Amazing,” he murmurs, and Hunk grins at him again.

“Hm,” is all Shiro says.

“I have a present for you too,” Lance informs him, slinging an arm around Keith’s shoulders. Keith raises an eyebrow at him and Lance withdraws his arm. “Right. Uh. So, it’s not much, but I noticed you have a thing for knives, so…” He presses a narrow, wrapped object into Keith’s palm. It’s heavy.

Keith unwraps the cloth from it, revealing a sleek silver dagger. Its hilt has a series of charms wrapped around it on thin leather strips, and Keith recognizes many of them: protection from evil, protection from possession, healing, and one in particular that makes him chance a glance at the incubus. It’s a finely-carved bone amulet in the shape of a tree, a symbol of life and balance, an a universal symbol against the forces of death and chaos — the Void-born.

Shiro’s eyes narrow, but still, he says nothing.

“Lance,” Keith says, “this is a beautiful weapon, but I…”

“Keith,” Lance says, “take it. It was made in my home on the isle of Cobao, by skilled witches who have dealt with all manner of evils. You need it more than me.”

Keith hesitates. “Thank you, really, but —”

“Just take it, Keith,” Shiro says. He sounds tired.
Keith nods, silent, and ties the knife in its sheathe to his belt. “Thanks, Lance.”

Lance inclines his head. “Don’t mention it.”

The party continues – Lance brings out a fiddle that Keith never knew he had, and plays a jaunty folksy tune while Pidge and Hunk drag Keith from his seat and dance around the room with him. Shiro watches all the while, picking at his cake, until three songs in when Lance says to him, “Don’t suppose you can spare a dance for the birthday boy, huh?”

Keith, panting and red-faced after being spun around the room by Hunk, with Pidge on his shoulders, pauses mid-step and faces him with wide eyes. Shiro shrugs and rises from the bench. “I suppose I could,” he says.

Keith lets Pidge hop off, and Hunk lets go of his hands as the incubus approaches. “Not going to waltz with me, are you?” Keith quips.

Shiro takes his hands, settling one on his waist and enfolding the other in his own. “Not quite,” he says.

Lance begins to play again, and this song is slower, mournful, beautiful. Shiro guides him through the steps, and they dance a dance Keith has never seen before, smooth and slow and so intimate he’s certain Shiro can feel his heart pound where their chests press together. Shiro looks down at him with dark, soft eyes, and Keith does not know what to make of it. Something has changed within the incubus; that much seems clear. Something has changed between them; that is even clearer.

*You’re mine.*

Keith shivers, and lets Shiro take the lead.

Pidge, Lance, and Hunk take Keith to town that night, and Shiro does not accompany them.

Arusia is a small and bustling village filled to the brim with passing travelers, performers, and drunkards, their laughter and jovial shouts warming the chill night air. Keith tugs his cloak closer around himself as a group of Altean hunters pass by, and Lance pats his shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he says, “your shadow isn’t around, you’re safe from them.”

Keith frowns. “I think I would feel safer if he was here,” he admits.

Lance shakes his head at him. “Have you forgotten what he is, Keith? Have you forgotten what I saw when I found you two in the library?”


They get warm whiskey in the tavern, and Keith holds his mug close in gloved hands, watching over the rim as Lance makes friends with a gaggle of Lakefolk girls. One with long blonde hair is watching him with especial interest, and when Lance notices, he turns towards her, and sits close to her on the bench, their bodies angled towards each other. She shows him her illusory magic, creating tiny galaxies with a snap of her fingers, drawing golden chariots and horses which race around the tavern, weaving a cloak of silver which settles around Lance’s shoulders before exploding into a cloud of glitter.

Lance laughs loud, and she smiles, and their hands touch on the tabletop.
Keith looks away. His heart hurts.

“Hey,” Pidge says. She’s the only one sitting at the bar with Keith – Hunk is playing an intense round of cards with some stone-faced mountain men and shows no signs of giving up.

Keith glances at her. “Yeah?”

“I know this must be difficult,” Pidge says. “Leaving.”

Keith stares back down at his whiskey, his face reflected in its dark surface like a small moon. “I thought it would be easier,” he said. “I didn’t have anyone, before. When I summoned him, I mean.”

“And now you do.” Pidge bites her lip. “I would say sorry, but I’m not. I like being your friend, Keith. We like having you around. And we’re going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you, too,” Keith whispers.

Pidge tilts her head. “You think he’d ever let you come back, visit sometime?”

Keith is struck with the sudden and awful urge to cry. “I don’t know,” he says. “I thought so, maybe. Hoped so. But...maybe Lance is right. There’s no changing what he is, and there’s no changing our contract. I gave him my soul, and he...” He exhales and closes his eyes. “It’s up to him what he wants to do with it.”

“Nobody should ever have to make the choice you did,” Pidge tells him. She’s very close, and Keith looks at her, studies the soft brush of brown eyelashes over freckled cheeks, the slight part of pink lips, the lazy curl of hazel hair, and tries to memorize it all, though he knows it is impossible. He will forget. Perhaps he will even lose his mind. Eternity is a long time.

“It wasn’t a choice,” Keith says. “I had to, Katie.”

She nods. “I know,” she says. “I would have done the same. But because of you, I didn’t have to. And I thank you for that, Keith Kogane.”

“You’ll have your family back soon,” he promises her.

“And Shiro,” she says.

Keith takes a shuddering breath. “And Shiro.”

Pidge watches him closely. “Do you want me to tell him?” she asks.

“Tell him what?”


Keith’s hand goes automatically to the iron rose in his pocket. He imagines Shiro’s face in his mind’s eye – shocked, confused, angry, disappointed.

“No,” he says. “I don’t...” Keith sighs. “I don’t know.”

“Hey,” Pidge says again, “it’s okay, Keith. It’s going to be okay.”

This is, of course, a lie, but Keith wants so badly to believe her.
“Thanks, Katie,” he says, and gives her a weak smile.

Lance and the Lakefolk girl are entwined on their bench, kissing.

*

Keith is rudely interrupted after a brooding bath the following night by a frantic banging on his door.

He half-tumbles out of the bathroom, dropping his towel, pulling on robes and his cloak, smoothing down his damp hair, and saying, “Alright, alright, what is it?” as he opens the door.

Half of the Altean royal guard is standing there. They do not look happy. Keith gulps.

“Novice Kogane?” the head guard demands, her steely eyes fixed on him. “You have been summoned by Princess Allura. She requires your presence at once.”

“Okay,” Keith says, lifting his head high and trying to remain calm. “May I ask why?”

“She will explain. Follow us, now.”

He follows them.

As they walk through the Citadel halls, Keith is very aware of the stares and whispers their procession attracts – at one point, they pass Pidge, Lance, and Hunk, who are shuffling out of the dining hall and looking as hungover as Keith feels. They all snap out of their daze when they see Keith.

Are you okay? Lance mouths.

Keith shakes his head and shrugs, only to be shoved rudely by one of the guards behind him. “Keep walking,” the guard hisses, and Keith’s struggle to stay calm becomes much, much harder.

He keeps scanning the halls for a familiar shadow, a pair of golden eyes, but Shiro is not there. Keith does not like the implications.

By the time they reach the royal guest apartments, Keith has broken out into a cold sweat. The guards usher him inside, not into Allura’s dining room this time, but into a circular antechamber. The door thuds shut behind him. There are two guards flanking him; the rest are outside. Princess Allura is standing in the middle of the room, pacing with evident agitation, and her red-haired advisor stands off to the side, along with a few other grim-faced Alteans.

Allura stops when Keith enters.

“Novice Kogane,” she says. Her tone is frosty. “Please, come in.”

“Your Highness?” Keith ventures. “What is this about?”

“Oh, I think you know,” she retorts. “Bring in the prisoner.”

Another door opens, and two more guards drag a woman in long, black, tattered robes into the room, forcing her to stand before Princess Allura. “Is this him?” Allura demands, pointing to Keith. “Is this who your mistress spoke of?”

The woman turns towards Keith, and her face is dark, her eyes even darker, though they brighten when she sees Keith. “Yes,” the woman says, nodding rapidly, “Keith Kogane, the boy my
mistress commanded us to protect.” She attempts to bow before him and Princess Allura glares; the guards stop her. Keith stares in bewilderment.

“And who is your mistress?” Allura continues, still eying Keith.

“The Lady Hecate,” the woman says reverently, “the first witch, the most powerful of our kind, the lady of the night, the goddess of ghosts and lost things.”

“Enough. What does this novice need protection from? Tell me what you told me before.” Allura’s tone spares no room for refusal.

The woman hesitates, and then says, “He has bound his soul to a devil.”

A ripple goes through the room. Allura says to Keith, “Is this true?”

Keith swallows hard. He’s never been a very good liar. “Yes,” he says. “It is.”

He braces himself for the princess to strike him down where he stands. But she does not. Instead, her beautiful face crumples, and she looks at him with wide, horrified blue eyes and whispers, “How could you do such a thing?”

Keith does not break her gaze, though he can feel it slice through to his very core. “How could I not?” he says.

He sees a kind of understanding in her eyes there, and something that is not judgment, but rather grief. “You did not do it for your own gain, then,” she says, and sighs, looking away for a long moment. “I thought as much. Unfortunately, that makes no difference to our legal system. A contract is a contract, and the sentence for such a crime is death.”

Hecate’s worshipper turns on her heel with a gasp, shaking her head. “Milady, no! You mustn’t touch a hair on his head, or Lady Hecate will strike you down!”

Allura folds her arms, and nods to the guards. “Take the prisoner away –”

“You don’t understand!” the woman cries. “He was hidden from her gaze by the demon witch Haggar before, but now –”

Allura stills, lifting her hand. The guards stop. “Haggar?” Allura whispers. “Haggar was hiding Novice Kogane from Hecate?”

This is news to Keith, as well. “What? Me? Why?”

Then again, Haggar did send a troupe of naga after him, so apparently he has something she wants.

Hecate’s worshipper says earnestly, “Haggar wishes to rip his quintessence from his body, no matter if she must rend him limb from limb, flay him alive, or torture him into insanity to do so!”

Allura takes a step back. Keith says faintly, “Oh.”

“What,” Allura breathes, “is so special about this witch’s quintessence that Hecate would shelter him and Haggar would pursue him so adamantly?”

The woman shakes her head. “I do not know, milady, only that Haggar can shelter him no longer. He has a powerful protector, now, one whose bond with the boy interferes with Haggar’s magic.”

She smiles at Keith, small and secretive, and Keith shivers. “The incubus he has sealed his fate with.”
Allura’s lips thin, and she closes her eyes briefly, steeling herself. She looks back at Keith. “Summon it,” she says. “Now, so we can purge it from your soul and give you at least some chance for redemption.”

“No,” Keith says, without hesitation. “I won’t.”

Already, he can see the shadows on the edges of the room growing longer. No, he says in the privacy of his mind, don’t. Don’t reveal yourself to her; she’ll hurt you.

“Novice Kogane,” Allura warns, lifting her hand as it fills with silver light, and then, in a softer and more desperate tone, “Keith. Please, do not make this harder than it has to be.”

Keith stares back at her, defiant. “Look at my soul,” he says. “What do you see, Princess?”

She frowns at him, but focuses, her brow furrowing as she does. “That’s not...that’s not possible, you’re…” Her eyes narrow. “Someone has been meddling with your soul to give it the illusion of purity, and it isn’t your demon.”

The shadows leap to life, coalescing in the shape of the incubus, and the guards and advisor shout and reach for their weapons. But Shiro does not attack them; as Keith feared, he just huddles over Keith, wings curved and teeth bared. Princess Allura holds up her glowing hands, trying to disguise their minute shaking, and he growls, Do not touch Keith.

“Someone already has,” Allura retorts. “Do you like the thought that someone else has free access to his soul, demon?” Her lip curls. “If they could disguise it so thoroughly, don’t you think they could take it from him before you even had the chance to stop them?”

Shiro growls louder. I would like to see them try.

Hecate’s worshipper cries out and falls to her knees, prone on the ground, chanting and gasping softly. The guards rush towards her, but not before another shadow crawls from the floor in front of the woman, black cloak swirling out behind her and casually thrown knives catching both guards square in the chest. They crumple to the floor, killed instantly.

I have tried already, the shadow lady says.

Princess Allura stumbles back, and lifts her hand to blast the shadow lady with her radiant magic, but her fingers twitch uselessly and the light dies in her palm. Allura’s eyes fill with panic. “No!” she screams. “Guards, help! Help!”

The shadow lady tilts her head. Cease your shrieking, she sighs, I mean you no harm. You are a powerful and good witch, Princess. Do not lose my blessing over you by harming this boy.

Allura’s lips part. “Hecate?” she whispers, falling back against the wall and trembling. “Can it be?”

That’s what they call me, yes. The shadow lady huffs and walks towards Shiro and Keith. She clicks her tongue. You two just couldn’t stay out of trouble until your contract was fulfilled, I see.

“Sorry?” Keith manages.

Hmph, she says, and inclines her head towards Shiro. Keep him safe. Or I will personally destroy you. Goodbye, for now.

And the world falls apart.
Keith grabs for Shiro, who grabs for him, and they clutch each other in silent shock and confusion as colors and spaces and sounds whirl past them in a nauseating blur. Keith sees flashes of mountains, of forest, of lake, of ocean, of a shining city in a fertile valley...and then he sees dust, red dust, warm sun beating down on tanned skin; he sees home.

They’re standing on the porch of the house Keith grew up in. It’s sunset in the Wastes, and Keith leans forward with a shaky inhale, bracing himself on the rusted railing. “Is this real?” he asks.

Shiro’s arm is wrapped around his waist, and the incubus tucks his face into Keith’s hair and says, “I think so.”

“They know,” Keith says, staring out at the barren desert landscape with a deepening numbness. “I cannot return to the Citadel again.”

“No,” Shiro agrees. “You cannot.”

Keith reaches into his cloak, and with relief, feels that the book, the communicator, and the knife are still there. And, of course, the iron rose. “So,” he says. “Haggar was hiding me from Hecate, because she wants to take my quintessence by whatever means necessary, and Hecate was hiding my soul from Princess Allura, because she wants to protect my quintessence by whatever means necessary. Does any of this ring a bell for you?”

Shiro shakes his head. “No, but I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. And Hecate sent us to my old home,” Keith finishes. “Because why not just make this more fucked up, hm?”

He turns on his heel and goes inside. The threshold creaks underfoot, and the house looks just as he left it. Keith’s eyes scan the space, taking in the dusty kitchen table, the old black stove, the windows with curtains shut tight, the sagging green couch and the worn beige rug. It feels like walking into a dream, and not a good one.

Shiro follows him in, leans against the doorframe, and says, “It’s nice.”

“Ha,” Keith murmurs, and sits down heavily on one of the ancient wooden chairs. “Nice isn’t the right word.”

“Then what is?”

Keith puts his head down on the table. He listens as footsteps approach, slow, measured.

“Hey,” Shiro says, sitting down next to him. “Talk to me.”

Keith lifts his head just enough to peek at Shiro over his forearm. “What if I don’t wanna talk?” he hedges, fingers tiptoeing across the table, towards Shiro’s metal hand.

Shiro catches his questing fingers and says, “A good fuck doesn’t solve everything, Keith.”

Keith puts his head back down, and, surprising even himself, he begins to cry.

Shiro rises from his chair so fast he almost upends it, and picks Keith up. “Alright,” Shiro murmurs, “alright, it’s alright, you’re alright, let it out.”

“Shut up,” Keith sniffles, shoving his face against Shiro’s chest and definitely smearing snot and tears all over his shirt. “You don’t have to pretend to be the good guy, here, I – I know what you
“Enlighten me,” Shiro says, voice level as he carries Keith down the hall.

“You’re going to take my soul,” Keith sobs, “and you’re going to lock it away, lock me away, all for yourself, and I’m never going to see my friends again, and I’m never going to see my father again, and I’m never going to see Strawberry again, or use my magic again, or feel the sun on my face again, and everything is going to go on just fine without me, even Shiro, and I’ll never see him again, either.”

Shiro is quiet, and shifts his grip on Keith to open a door. Keith sees cracked gray walls and exposed floorboards and coughs when Shiro takes the dusty coverlet off the bed, shaking it out and tossing it away before taking Keith’s cloak off and laying Keith down on the bed, his old bed, which just makes him cry harder.

The last time he’d been here, he’d been here with Shiro. The mob had been outside, and Keith imagines their angry yells and the clang of metal on metal now, and curls in on himself, and wonders how things would’ve changed if Shiro hadn’t gotten there in time, and Keith had died that day.

Would Shiro still be trapped in Hell, with no hope of return? Or would he, by some strange twist of fate, not have been picked for Kerberos? If he hadn’t saved Keith, and brought the Citadel such a bright and promising rising star, he might not have been noticed as much. He might have been safe.

The incubus stands beside the bed. “Your death would have been a waste,” he says.

Keith laughs bitterly. “A waste of magic and a tight hole, yes,” he chokes out. “What a shame.”

Shiro, but not his Shiro, sits on the side of his bed and says, “No. A waste of a human life. A very precious and important human life.” Keith swallows back another sob and glares at him through a film of tears. Shiro leans forward, and draws his thumb over Keith’s cheek, wiping the tears away. “Three people will be saved because of you,” he says. “That means something, Keith. You will be missed, and mourned, and remembered, and cared for. Know this.”

“The honorable demon,” Keith snorts, turning his face into his pillow. It smells like the earth; dry earth, dry grass, dry bones. “Waxing poetic to sweeten me up, are you?”

“Do you really think I would do that?” Shiro asks, stroking his hair in a way that is meant to be calming but is just quick and clumsy enough for Keith to wonder if he’s afraid of what’s coming, too.

Keith says, “No. I think you would keep me in a room filled with luxury, imprisonment hidden in velvet and gold, and I think you would visit me only to trap me in my lavish silken bed and feed me grapes and suck my cock and fuck me until I screamed and told you how good it felt, or until you grew tired of me.” Keith swipes a hand over his face, pushing the demon away and staring up at him. “Is that it?”

Shiro bows his head. “You seem to think it is.”

Keith deflates, and curls back down into the thin cotton sheets. “You know what the worst part is?” he muses. “The worst part is that I can’t blame you. You are what you are, and that’s that. I’d be a fool to expect better from you. I made this choice; I’m to blame. I thought I could do it. I thought I could save Shiro, because I didn’t want to give up on the one person who never gave up on me.” He squeezes his eyes shut.
Fabric rustles, and Shiro places a small object, warm from his skin, into Keith’s limp hands. Keith’s fingers tighten around it – it’s the iron rose. He knows without even looking.

Shiro bends down and kisses his forehead. “Do not blame yourself for doing all you could to save the person you love,” he says. “Get some rest, Keith.”

The incubus leaves with a quiet click of the door, and Keith lays there in the dying radiance of the desert sun, holding the rose to his heart.

He thought he wasn’t afraid, but he was wrong.

He is terrified.
Keith wakes up alone.

It’s early, judging by the color of the sky through the dust-veiled window – a deep, dark blue, slowly lightening at the horizon with ochre and orange. He sits up, rubbing his eyes, which are sore and dry from crying. Keith dislikes crying. He cried in front of the incubus, and the memory makes him wince. Then again, for once there had been no mocking retort or attempt to comfort via seduction.

Speaking of seduction, it’s been a minute. As Keith slowly gets out of bed, he becomes uneasily aware of a strange ache quietly making itself known inside him. It’s not painful, not yet, but it’s like a nudge, a warning. Keith ignores it.

He’s not sure what he’s expecting when he opens his shabby wardrobe drawers, but the sight of his old clothes, neatly folded and faded with age, makes his throat tighten. The first few tunics he pulls out are much too small, but he finds a few that still fit, albeit snugly. He’s grateful for his few dark cotton leggings, too, because they stretch and fit well, though it does take some maneuvering for him to get them on.

Keith keeps the iron rose in his pocket, and after a moment’s hesitation, keeps Lance’s knife on his belt, too.

He leaves the room, taking care to step lightly, and feeling odd about sneaking around his own house. Keith supposes it is his, now, rightfully. His father isn’t here, though Keith had often wondered, and hoped, that he’d returned. Clearly, that isn’t the case.

Keith stops short at the end of the hall. The incubus is asleep on the sagging green couch, curled in an awkward ball of limbs, horns, and tail. He appears to have magicked away his wings; Keith doubts they’d fit on the couch with the rest of him.

Keith cannot remember ever seeing the demon sleep. Do demons sleep? He takes a few steps
closer. Shiro doesn’t wake up.

For a moment, just a moment, Keith’s hand falls to the silver knife. It’s an impulse, and one that he is briefly tempted by. But he doesn’t think a little knife would do the trick, amulet or not. And besides, killing the incubus would be selfish; Shiro would die with him.

But Keith wonders what the demon would do if Keith tried. How would he treat Keith differently? Would his true colors be revealed? Keith doubts he would be so nice if he awoke with Keith holding a knife to his throat.

“My opinion and treatment of you would not change.”

Keith jumps.

Shiro sits up, eyebrow raised. He does not look even a little groggy as he rises from the couch. “Would stabbing me be cathartic for you, Keith?” he asks.

Keith scowls, and takes a preemptive step back. “I’m not actually going to,” he mutters. “It wouldn’t work, anyway.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“You wouldn’t even let me get close enough,” Keith says. “So it doesn’t really matter.”

Shiro tilts his head. “It would be, wouldn’t it? Well, go ahead, then.”

Keith blanches. “I’m not – you think I’m stupid enough to believe you’d just let me stab you?!”

His brow lowers. “You’re not stupid, Keith.”

Keith unsheathes the dagger and Shiro blinks, surprised. “Fine!” Keith snaps. “Fine, you know what, if it’ll make you stop acting like you care, then fine, I’ll do it.” He stalks towards the demon, and the demon does not move. He does not move, or stop Keith, even when Keith has the blade pressed to his throat. Keith glares up at him, and Shiro stares back, impassive, waiting.


Keith grits his teeth. “Stop wearing his face,” he whispers. “Just – I can’t –”

A large hand cups his cheek and Keith flinches. “No,” Shiro says. “I want to help you, so I will keep the form of the one who could give you the most help. And that is this one.”

“No!” Keith retorts. “It isn’t! The form that would help me most is the one that is really yours, the one that isn’t human, the one that isn’t kind, the one that doesn’t give a shit about me or what I feel or what happens to me –”

“But was I ever like that?” Shiro asks, quiet. “Even the very first time, Keith, I did not wish to hurt you. I wished for you to feel pleasure –”

“I don’t want your pleasure,” Keith hisses. The knife slides, catches just so, and Shiro’s throat bobs as the blade nicks it, shadowy flesh turning to smoke from the silver.

“I know,” Shiro says, still so fucking soft and sincere. “You wanted Shiro. And I tried to give you that, too.”
Keith shakes his head. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” he whispers, and drops the knife, and himself, to the floor. He sits, half-kneeling at the incubus’s feet, and puts his bowed head in his hands. “I was supposed to hate you,” he says. “You were supposed to be cruel.”

The demon’s hand settles upon his head, not pushing, just resting. “Why?” he asks.

Keith rubs his palms against his face. “I wanted to save Shiro,” he says. “Not betray him.”

The demon makes a low sound of realization and, impossibly, kneels down in front of him. He tips Keith’s chin up with cool metal fingers and says, “It is not wrong for you to enjoy yourself with me, Keith.” He frowns. “Do you think Shiro would want you to suffer? To subject yourself to the will of the cruel being you expected?”

“Of course not,” Keith mumbles, “but that’s not the point, the point is how I feel —”

“You still love him, don’t you?” the incubus asks. Keith nods, shaky. “And if he loves you, Keith, baby, he would want you to be happy. He would want you to be safe. He would not want you to regret your choices, and he would not want you to be afraid.” Shiro traces Keith’s cheek with his fingertip. “Don’t be afraid, Keith.”

Keith swallows hard, gazing into his steady gray eyes which look so human. “I want to believe you won’t hurt me,” he admits. “I want to believe you will be kind to me even when you have complete and utter control over me.”

“But…?”

“But you won’t,” Keith says with certainty. “It’s not in your nature not to take power that’s given to you.”

“I would think you knew my nature better than that by now,” the incubus reproaches.

“I don’t know what your nature is, anymore,” Keith says. “Do you?”

He’s taken off guard when the incubus wraps his arms around Keith, pulling him into a firm embrace, holding Keith’s head to his chest. “I know that I do not want to hurt you or let any harm come to you,” he says. “I know that much.”

Now it is Keith’s turn to ask, in barely a whisper, “Why?”

Shiro releases him, and sighs. “Because you’re you,” he says, and stands, extending a hand to help Keith up. “Don’t forget your knife.”

Keith takes the knife, then the hand, and tells him, “You are a very strange demon.”

“Yes,” Shiro agrees, and smiles, a little sly and a little shy, and Keith thinks maybe, just maybe, this mess will turn out alright.

* 

Keith spends the morning cleaning the house with near-mad intensity. Shiro offers to help more than once, but Keith shooes him away. The demon retreats to the front porch, and maybe he slept poorly, because he’s napping in the warm sun when Keith checks up on him around noon. The sight makes him smile despite himself – sometimes the incubus reminds him of an overgrown house cat.
By the time Keith is done sweeping, scrubbing, washing, airing out, and thoroughly dusting the house, he’s amassed quite a bit of grime on himself. He takes a quick peek out the window – Shiro is awake, but still sitting on the porch, gazing at the horizon. He starts to turn, as if sensing Keith’s eyes on him, and Keith hurries away down the hall to shower.

As he strips off his clothes, he braces himself for a shadowy presence and sharp claws, but he is left alone to shower in peace. The strange ache inside him becomes a nagging presence, prickling down his spine with faint twinges of discomfort, but Keith continues to ignore it, dressing in the few recovered clothes of his father’s closet and drying off his hair. His hair’s getting long, he notes, examining himself in the mirror. It’s a roguish sort of look; he likes it.

He continues unmolested down the hall and stops at the kitchen, where the incubus is waiting, head tilted and eyes bright. Keith stops dead in his tracks.

“Hi,” Shiro says.

“At least refrain from fucking me in the kitchen,” Keith sighs.

Shiro falters, taken aback. “What? I would never. Well, I might. But not right now! Right now I’m making pie. Would you like to make pie with me?”

Keith’s suspicion is not so easily dissuaded. “Is that an innuendo?”

Shiro laughs and shakes his head. “No. I’m serious. What flavor?”

Keith eyes him and folds his arms. “Cherry.”

“Easy enough.” Shiro produces a mixing bowl and several spoons from mid-air, along with flour, water, sugar, butter, and a plethora of other baking supplies. Lastly, he holds up a bowl full of ruby red cherries, each one shiny with drops of dew. He holds one up, and tosses it to Keith, who catches it in his open palm.

“You’re serious,” he says. “Pie.”

“You like pie more than cake,” Shiro says. “I remember.”

“Didn’t think you heard that particular thought.” Keith pops the cherry into his mouth and chews slowly as flavor bursts across his tongue. “Tart,” he remarks.

“Tart cherries are used for baking,” Shiro replies. “And eating.” He winks and pops one into his mouth, too, chewing with deliberate slowness before handing Keith a heavy book that most certainly was not there before.

Keith looks down at the volume, expecting spells, but sees only...baking instructions? “Shiro,” he says, “is this a cookbook?”

“Obviously,” Shiro says. “I don’t often make cherry pies, you know; I haven’t memorized the recipe. Read it aloud for us, c’mon, or I’ll eat all these cherries before we’ve even begun.”

Keith, bewildered, reads.

Shiro listens and follows his directions with startling efficiency, measuring out cups of flour and sugar and slicing through butter with conjured knives, melting it into the salt and vanilla in an instant. He motions for Keith to help him once the batter-making is well underway, and Keith stirs the mixing bowl vigorously, watching the incubus out of the corner of his eye, waiting for him to
make a move.

But he never does. For once, every motion is innocent, and there is a ridiculous element of domesticity to the way they move around the small kitchen together. Shiro gives him space, and yet they keep each other in their orbit, circling and weaving and barely brushing past. Keith wonders if what he feels in the air between them is tension or something else.

Shiro hums a song under his breath and it is a song Keith has heard before, an old ballad about a girl with silver hair who made friends with the stars. The last time he heard it was in Shiro’s room, sung quietly in the hazy hours of a late summer afternoon.

Keith cuts the lattices for the crust carefully and wonders where the incubus heard it.

Moments later, the humming stops, and a heavy heat presses to Keith’s back. He tenses, blade stilling between two slightly uneven strips of crust.

Shiro’s hand cups his hip and his chin tucks into the curve of Keith’s shoulder like it belongs there. “Don’t let me stop you,” he murmurs.

Keith swallows. He’s angry, and not quite sure why. “I’d rather keep my fingers while you get me off, if you don’t mind,” he grits out, dropping the blade onto the countertop.

The hand falls away from his hip and Shiro makes a low sound. “Can I not just hold you?” he asks.

“Nothing is ever just with you,” Keith says.

“This is,” Shiro replies. “I just wanted to hold you. Not seduce you.”

“Hm,” Keith says, picking up the knife again slowly, not relaxing but returning to his slicing, “if you say so.”

Shiro says nothing, and he does nothing, nothing except hold Keith gently and watch him work, and when Keith is done he steps away and returns to his side of the kitchen.

Keith releases the breath he’d been holding and sneaks a glance over at him. Shiro is standing with his back to Keith, bent over the pan as he pinches the pie crust with thumb and forefinger, shaping it into a wavy raised edge. He looks so human it hurts; there’s a smudge of flour high on his cheek and Keith’s fingers itch to brush it off.

He gives in to the urge, bringing his plate of lattices over and stopping beside the incubus, who looks at him with raised brows. Shiro goes still when Keith licks his finger and reaches out to Shiro’s face, wiping the flour away. As his fingertip smooths over soft skin, Shiro looks at him, eyes dark but not demanding; and reaches out to Keith, brushing a loose strand of black hair back behind his ear. His touch lingers, and his lips quirk.

“What?” Keith asks, voice unsteady.

Shiro’s smile stays. “I’m glad I get to be here with you,” he says. “That’s all.”

Keith stares at him. “Glad,” he repeats. “To be with me?”

Shiro nods. “Let’s finish this pie, shall we?”

Keith does not move away, this time.

*
While Shiro figures out how best to bake their pie in the old iron stove, Keith retreats to the couch to lick sticky cherry filling off his fingers and continue to ignore the growing ache inside him in peace.

He isn’t sure what the incubus’s game is, here. Is he trying to drive Keith to him in sheer desperation? Is he testing the boundaries of their contract; figuring out just how long he can stay away from Keith before Keith gives in to a need he cannot control? Or is he suddenly not interested in fucking Keith senseless anymore?

Keith picks at the loose threads in the couch and slumps against the overstuffed pillows, resting his head on his knee. Maybe the incubus isn’t playing any game at all. Maybe he just genuinely wanted to bake pie with Keith.

It’s absurd. Keith sighs, and closes his eyes.

Some time later, the clattering around the kitchen stops, and heavy footsteps approach. Keith remains curled up as a warm hand falls upon his shoulder and squeezes. “Pie is done,” Shiro says. The mere sound of his voice makes Keith shiver, and at his touch the magic in his chest constricts, a reminder of just how tightly Keith is bound to him.

It’s not a pleasant reminder.

Keith lifts his head and looks up at him. Shiro’s expression is as open and soft as before. Keith brushes his hand away and stands up. “Okay,” he says, “Then let’s eat some pie.”

Shiro brings the warm pie out to the porch and they sit there together, side by side but not quite touching. The pie is good, better than good, crust splitting in a satisfying way as his fork digs into it, exposing thick red cherry filling. The sugar is edged with tartness and Keith savors it.

“Consensus?” Shiro asks when Keith’s halfway through his piece. The incubus has barely touched his; he’s punctured the buttery pastry to let the cherry ooze out onto the plate, but taken only a few small bites.

“Looks like I like it better than you do,” Keith mutters, putting another forkful into his mouth.

Shiro shakes his head. “I like it,” he says. “Unfortunately I find myself not as hungry for this particular form of sustenance.”

Keith’s grip on the fork tightens until his knuckles are ivory. The sweetness on his tongue sours. There is something awful, he thinks, about being at the mercy of someone else, and being obligated to perform favors for someone else. Even if that someone else is Shiro, or at least someone who pretends to be Shiro.

And this is what he’s signed himself up for, for eternity. It’s a nauseating thought, losing control of his own body’s desire when he wants nothing less. In the woods with the demons watching and in the cave with a dragon mounting him; that was different, different in that he wanted it, wanted to be temporarily overwhelmed by want and even need.

But this is not temporary and Keith has never wanted this. This is a necessary chain Keith has forged for himself, and the incubus holds the other end, will always hold the other end, and suddenly Keith is not hungry either.

Shiro sets his pie aside and leans towards him, a line between his brows. “Keith,” he says. “I’m trying to do as you asked, and letting you keep your thoughts to yourself, but I can sense the pain you feel now. What is wrong?”
Keith says, “Will it be this way forever? Will I become weak and helpless for your touch every day without fail, without even an ounce of my own volition?”

Shiro leans away. “Ah,” he says. “Once our contract is completed, no, the need will not be so frequent. But…” His teeth dig into his lower lip. “You will always be bound to me, and should I wish it, you would be on your knees before me whenever I liked.”

Keith stands abruptly. The incubus watches him, head tilted up and eyes gray pools of thought. “I suggest you finish your pie,” Keith says, “because that’s all you’ll be getting tonight.”

Then he walks down the stairs, off the porch, and into the desert.

*

Shiro lets him go.

Keith wanders, aimless, down the dusty path that is more an animal trail than a road, dully noting the faint indentations of horseshoes and wagon tracks. It’s not long before he sees the pale green of cornfields and the huddled rows of old farmhouses among the sagebrush and juniper. Keith walks towards them, his pulse speeding up despite himself.

He recognizes someone at once — there’s a young woman with long brown hair playing fetch with a shaggy sheepdog on her porch. Keith stops walking. It’s the same little girl who pushed him away from the mob, into the canyon below. But she’s not so little anymore, and when she looks up, her bright eyes widen and she freezes, dropping the ball, much to the delight of the oblivious sheepdog.

“Hello, Romelle,” Keith says, awkward and keeping his distance.

She stands, and to his surprise, does not run. “So you’re alive,” she says. “Some folk thought that Citadel witch took you as a sacrifice, or else trained you up as his minion.”

“Minion?” Keith repeats, and chuckles, forced. “No, not quite. He took me to the Citadel. I am...was...a student there.”

Wary, Romelle eyes him. “Was?”

Keith is tired of lying, and he never was much good at it. “I made a contract with a greater incubus,” he says. “So I expect they’ve expelled me and written a warrant for my arrest by now.”

Romelle blanches, and takes a step back, but she still does not run. “Why?” she whispers. “What could possibly compel you to do such a thing?”


But she shakes her head. “No,” she says. “You’re not evil. The rest of town may have believed that, but I never did.”

“Then why did you push me into the river?”

She swallows. “I’m sorry,” she says. “But I knew they would do far worse to you. Some would have had your head on a pike and still not been satisfied. I think that is evil, not a bit of fire.”

Keith sees it in her eyes. “Do you have it too?” he asks. “The gift?”

She looks away, but lifts her palms up, and Keith watches as water pools in them, dripping down
her dry knuckles and dampening the dust below. “Yes,” she says. “But in the desert, people like water better than fire.”

“People like water better than fire everywhere,” Keith counters. “It’s a good gift. Does anyone know?”

“My mother and brother,” she says. “That’s all.” She wipes her damp hands off on her gingham skirt and peers at him uncertainly. “So you sold your soul,” she says. “You still didn’t answer me — what would make you do a fool thing like that?”

“The Citadel witch,” Keith says. “His name is Shiro. He’s trapped in Hell, so I made a contract to save him.”


“I suppose.”

“You must really have grown to care for him, this Shiro,” Romelle adds.


She bites her lip. “Will the demon kill you when your contract is up, then?”

Keith shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he says. “I don’t care, in the end.”


“It’s a little late for that,” Keith admits. “And he saved my life, once. It’s the least I can do.”

“But he didn’t sacrifice himself, did he?”

“Sacrifice is the only saving I know how to do,” Keith sighs.

The realization is painful, and Romelle’s lips twist, and she frowns down at her feet.

“Oh,” she says. “In that case, I’m sorry, Keith.”

“He might not kill me,” Keith muses. “He’s not so bad for what he is.”

“But you will be his prisoner,” she whispers. “A kind captor is still a captor.”

“Yes,” Keith says. “But it’s still more grace than I expected. I’ll take it.”

Her frown remains. “You won’t see your Citadel witch freed, then?”

“No,” he says. “But just knowing he’s free will be enough.”

“Will it really?”

Keith turns away. “It was good to see you, Romelle. I wish you well.”

She’s silent for a few moments. Then she says, “The oasis is still here, you know. The one you always hung around. I remember.”

“It’s an hour’s ride, and I haven’t got my horse.”

“I have a perfectly good horse in the barn,” Romelle says. Keith looks up at her in surprise. “River
is a good mare. And you always were a good horseman; I trust you with her.”

“Thank you,” he says, “but I couldn’t —”

“Please,” she says. “Just accept it, Keith. Experience what you can in this world, your world, while you’re still able.”

Keith thinks of Strawberry, and concedes.

*

Once at the oasis, his leggings covered in gray horse hair and sweat sticking his long hair to the nape of his neck, Keith ties Romelle’s horse to a nearby mesquite, strips down to his underwear, and casts the strongest concealment spell he knows before slipping into the cool brown water.

This place is a secret of the Wastes, hidden in a ring of mesquite and palo verde whose roots seek the sparse water in miles of dry earth. The natural spring keeps the oasis full even in the long dry season, and though the water may not be clear and bullfrogs spawn in the shallows and peccaries frequent the banks in the early mornings, Keith has always loved it here.

He digs his toes into the mud and swims out to the middle of the roughly oval pond, letting himself float out on his back, forcing himself to relax.

This place is so much different from the river, churning white water and sharp rocks like jagged teeth at every turn. Still, Keith remembers the threat of drowning, the burn in his lungs and the water in his gasping mouth, and as the calm spring water washes lazily over him, he wonders, as he often has, how different that day would have been if Shiro had not come to his rescue.

He likes to think he would have survived. He likes to think he would have managed to climb the slippery cliffs, and face the mob with fiery fists to frighten them off; or perhaps he would have managed to let the current carry him to soft sandy banks and a still pool like this one. Perhaps he could have started a new life in the land the river led him to, far away from mountain Citadels and mysterious men in black cloaks.

But in his heart Keith knows he would be dead if not for Shiro. And now, irony upon ironies, he thinks he may be dying for Shiro. There is more than one way to define death, and for Keith, eternal imprisonment is synonymous with it.

He floats for a long while as the warm sun fades to a lowering lantern upon the horizon, a quiet glow through the huddled trees. Keith basks in it, and wonders if there is a sun in Hell. If not, he will miss it dearly. Though, he thinks with some derision, if he pleads the incubus for a sun, he might receive some pretty illusion of it, just like the incubus himself.

Then again, Keith muses bitterly, the incubus’s illusion of Shiro has done its job well. Often too well.

Keith misses Shiro. His longing for the lost witch is a constant, growing pit in his stomach, different from the itching need for the incubus which still shifts restlessly in him like a thorny serpent. Keith does not know if the longing will ever leave him, even when he knows Shiro is safe and sound. It is a kind of longing that can only be remedied by holding Shiro in his arms, breathing him in, hearing the sound of his voice, seeing the light in his eyes.

Keith closes his eyes and tries to do something he has tried, and failed, many times before.

He holds the iron rose he’d brought out into the pool with him tight in his fist, memorizing the
sharp edge of petals and the smooth lines of the first letter of his name. He focuses hard on every curve and point of contact, and then tries to see beyond it.

In his mind’s eye, Keith tries to imagine Shiro asking his grandmother to make this for Keith, and in Keith’s conjured memory he is hunching his broad shoulders and ducking his head, face faintly flushed, scratching his jaw self-consciously as he makes the strange request. His voice is quiet, serious, with a pleading note that gives the old woman pause.

She reaches out to him, placing her small, brown, gnarled hand on his larger, paler, younger palm, and saying, *Why do you ask this, Takashi?*

And he bows his head and says, admits, *Because I love him.*

The transition between water and nothingness is sudden and startling.

One second Keith is floating, and the next he is stumbling to his feet in an empty expanse of shifting gray and black and violet like the color of a fresh bruise. When he looks down into his palm, it is white and smoky and translucent, but the iron rose stays firmly upon it.

Keith closes his palm around the metal petals and calls into the nothing for Shiro.

He does not expect an answer, but for the first time, he gets one.

“*Keith?*”

Keith stands still, utterly still, his eyes wide as he gazes frantically into the shadows around him, searching for movement. “Shiro?!” He tries and fails to keep his voice level. “Shiro, where are you?”

He is wholly unprepared for Shiro to step out of the haze of swirling color, and for him to look so solid, tangible, real, alive. Keith’s throat closes up and he reaches out, stricken, hardly daring to believe.

Maybe Shiro can’t believe it, either, because he falters, tilting his head, and whispers, “Keith?” again, softer this time. “Is it really you? How…?”

“Astral projection,” Keith blurts, unable to stop looking at Shiro, or Shiro’s soul, spirit, reflection; whatever this version of him really is. “I used this.” And he holds up the rose.

Shiro’s lips part. “So it really is you,” he says, with no small amount of wonder. His smile is genuine and beautiful. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Keith breathes, and steps forward to embrace him, but Shiro takes a step back, his expression sad.

“We can’t touch,” he sighs, “not here. Nothing is real here, and it won’t last. Look.” He lifts his hand, and Keith realizes he can see right through it. They’re already fading.

Keith swallows back panic at the thought of never seeing Shiro again after this. “Okay,” he whispers. “Okay. Where are you, then? How are you?”


“To you?” Keith ventures to ask.
His gut twists when Shiro nods, slow and troubled. “They hurt me,” he murmurs. “Again and again. I thought I would die from the pain, Keith.”

Keith’s shaking. “But — did you?”

“Die?” Shiro looks away. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. But I remember wishing they had just killed me.” His face crumples. “I’m sorry. I don’t want you to worry, not about me. It’s too late, now.”

Keith says, “Shiro, I’m getting you out of there, here, wherever, okay?”

Shiro’s eyes widen. “Out? Keith, there is no out. I can’t escape. I’m bound, forever.”

“I’m bound too,” Keith insists, and sees the dawning horror in Shiro’s eyes like a storm on the horizon. “I’m getting you out, Shiro. Trust me.”

“Keith, no,” Shiro breathes, and Keith knew he would be shocked and unhappy but this reaction goes beyond anything he had anticipated — Shiro looks terrified, bewildered, furious, agonized, and his voice when he speaks is cracked and wretched. “No, no, no,” he gasps, “oh, no, what have I done!” He falls to his knees and Keith starts forward in concern, stopped by Shiro’s cry for him to stay away. “Don’t!” Shiro pleads. “Don’t touch me, don’t come near, I don’t want to hurt you anymore...oh, Keith. Keith, I’m so sorry.”

Nothing falls away, and Shiro with it, his face ashen and awful, hands clawing at his own skin. The image burns on the backs of Keith’s eyelids as he floats on the surface of the water, and he stares blankly at the stars, his heart struggling to regain its usual tempo.

“Keith!”

The small pool is rocked by the huge ripples of a huge creature breaking the surface, and Keith blinks in a blur of confusion as clawed hands wrench him out of the water, lifting him up to a frightened and familiar face.

Familiar, but not the one he wants most.

Keith shoves the incubus away from him violently, or attempts to; he only succeeds in flailing and splashing water all over the both of them. Shiro carries him to the sandy shore successfully, and only then is Keith able to tear himself out of the demon’s arms. Every fiber of his being rebels against the action — to his dismay, the pit inside him is growing, a need that feels all too much like a heavy chain which not only keeps him tethered to the incubus, but drags him ever closer.

Shiro — no, no, this is not Shiro — stares at Keith with the look of a wild man.

“I couldn’t find you,” he says. “One moment, you were there, the next...you vanished.”

Keith opens his mouth to retort, then remembers — the concealment spell. Was it really that strong?

“I thought something had happened to you.” Shiro’s eyes are huge and golden and the fear in them looks real. “I thought...maybe you had done something terrible.”

Keith realizes how it must have looked to the incubus, stumbling upon the secluded oasis only to see Keith floating in the center, stunned and still with eyes wide open. Did he really think Keith would do such a thing? Take his own life rather than see this through to the end? Apparently so, because he looks like he’s seen a ghost, and he grasps for Keith’s unwilling frame as if Keith will
crumple to the earth at any moment.

“No,” Keith grits out, “I am quite alive.” He lifts his chin. “And so is Shiro. I found him. I spoke to him.”

The demon’s expression flickers. “How?” His clawed hands tremble, but he stops trying to bring Keith back to him although it looks like it pains him.

“In the astral realm,” Keith says. “Where the veil is thin, between worlds, I —” He breaks off and swallows. “I found him. He glares at the demon. “And you honestly thought I would take my own life before saving his?”

“I didn’t know what to think.” The demon’s broad shoulders are hunched and he ducks his head, and Keith hates that he feels sorry for him at all. “All I knew was that you were gone, and I was afraid.”

Keith stares at him. “Afraid,” he repeats. “Why? You would still have my soul, dead or alive; what does it matter?”

The sound he makes is like a wounded animal. “Keith,” he whispers, “please. Don’t say such things. It matters. Your life matters. Of course it does.”

“It shouldn’t!” Keith exclaims, shaking his head and taking an unconscious step forward. “My life shouldn’t matter to you at all!”

“Then what should?” he asks. Pleadingly.

Keith sneers. “Not making cherry pie with me, that’s for damned sure. You’re an incubus, not a chef, so act like one.”

They stand facing each other for several long moments, seemingly at an impasse, Keith bare-chested and angry and so full of grief it hurts; Shiro with shining eyes and a wretched expression which slowly falls away into a cool, composed mask.

He takes a step forward and Keith is dizzy at the proximity, struggling not to sway on his feet. “What would you have me do?” Shiro asks, in a strange and hollow voice.

“What you must,” Keith says, and lets out a ragged groan when the incubus pulls Keith to him, letting Keith’s wet form make an imprint all down the front of him. Keith is limp as a rag doll against him, and looks up only when a cold claw forces him to.

“Do it,” Keith says.

“You don’t want me,” the incubus says, the saddest Keith has ever seen him.

The image of Shiro in agony on his knees, trapped in twisting shadows and translucent skin, is burned into his mind. Keith has betrayed him, and he can do so no longer.

“No,” Keith agrees, “I will never want you. Only him. But this was never about want, was it?”

Shiro’s eyes close, a brief and painful interlude. “You would have me take you against your will, then?”

Keith hates the very idea, but his hands curl into fists, grabbing the front of Shiro’s tunic, and he repeats, “I would have you do what you must.” He shakes his head. “Don’t tell me you don’t want
that."

“I don’t,” Shiro says miserably. “Keith, please don’t make me.”

“Why,” Keith hisses, “why won’t you just get it over with — ah!”

Shiro wrenches him up so that Keith’s legs are hitched up around Shiro’s waist, and wades back into the water with him, heading towards the shelf of stone on the other end of the oasis. It is not soft nor comfortable but Keith supposes the act they perform upon it will be neither of those things, anyway.

He’s resigned to it, already retreating to a quiet numb place in his mind even as his body comes to life pressed up against Shiro’s. The incubus must feel the hardness of Keith’s cock between them, the desperate tight cling of Keith’s thighs around his middle, the sharp dig of his nails, the hot gasp of his breath as he tucks his face into Shiro’s throat. It should be easy for the demon to pretend Keith wants this when his body is so willing.

But when he lays Keith down on the stone slab, his face is still filled with sorrow and, impossibly, shame. Is he truly conflicted about this? And if he is, does that mean he truly cares? Is a demon capable of such a thing?

“We can wait,” Shiro says, a little desperately, “until you’re...more in the mood —”

Keith stares up at him blankly. “In the mood?” he repeats. “There is no mood needed for contractual obligations.”

“But —”

“And we can’t wait,” Keith snaps. “Any longer and I will be out of my mind with false lust, and you will be weak, neither of which are ideal. Is that what you want? For me to be so needy that I am rendered unable to say no?”

Keith expects many responses, but what he does not expect is for the demon to take a step backwards, trembling, and put his head in his hands, slumping against the rocks in defeat. Keith sits up, confused and despite himself, concerned.

“I’m so sorry,” Shiro whispers, and Keith stiffens in disbelief. “If you can believe nothing else, believe that much. I want nothing less than to hurt you. If there was any way we could do this differently —” He peeks at Keith from between his fingers. “You deserve so much better.”

Keith swallows, heat rushing to his face, drowning him, puddling low in his belly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says.

His breath comes out in a rush when the demon leans over him, dragging the pads of his fingertips over Keith’s cheek.

“You deserve your Shiro,” the incubus whispers, soft and reverent as a prayer. “You deserve a human lover, a lover you want, who is able to respect your wants, who is able to love you the way you want them to, not out of contract or urgency or sacrifice.” His hands stroke warm and firm over Keith’s bare chest and Keith arches into it, nipples tight and hard, head swimming with blurry need. “You deserve better than me, better than what I am, what I will always be...”

Shiro drags kisses down Keith’s throat and Keith’s mouth falls open, his gaze fixed on the starry sky, surrendering to the sensations. The incubus has never touched him like this before, careful and almost guilty, as if Keith is something he cannot have, although that could not be further from the
truth.

“Stop,” Keith gasps, “shut up; you didn’t see him, you didn’t see his face when I told him what I’d done —”

Shiro stops, lifting his head and looking down at Keith, inches away. “Oh, Keith,” he whispers, “don’t blame yourself for this.”

“For what?” Keith snaps, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. “For letting you fuck me and liking it? For fucking you? For sucking your cock? For kissing you? For letting you have all the things I wanted him to have; for giving you everything I wanted to give to him first?”

The incubus’s face twists violently. “He would not want you to feel pain over this —”

“No!” Keith cries, sparks struggling to crackle into being on his wet fingers. “You don’t fucking know what he would want, because you’re not him!”

Keith’s blast of blinding white fire sends the incubus staggering an impressive ten feet backwards, his tunic burned clean away, smoldering bits of ash falling into the water below. Silver minnows scatter, some float dead to the surface, and the demon clutches his singed chest, eyes flaring gold as his skin hisses from the flames.

Drained, and as numb as he is aroused, Keith collapses back onto the stone slab and waits for the demon to punish him.

Strong arms lift Keith up again, but this time he finds himself cradled, not manhandled, tucked close to the still-smoking skin as the demon leaves the pool with him. The faint smell of horse drifts near and Keith hears Shiro say, “Go on, go home,” followed by the soft smack of palm on flank and the hurried thunder of retreating hooves.

He stands there with Keith in his arms for a few moments longer, exhaustion palpable in his frame, and then kisses the top of Keith’s head gently and walks through a door that was not there before.

They fall into Keith’s bed in the dusty house full of strained memory. Keith can feel the place where the incubus kissed him like a growing weight, pinning him to the sheets as Shiro moves over him and brushes Keith’s hair out of his eyes.

“I will make it quick,” he whispers, his irises returned to their pale gray, gleaming in the dark.

Keith moans, skin clammy as if struck by fever, and paws blindly at him, feeling the dry burnt texture of his slow-healing chest. “We’re even,” he breathes. “I hurt you; now you can hurt me.”

Shiro shushes him and says, “No. I cannot. What do you want, Keith?”

“Shiro,” Keith sobs, dry and desperate. “Tell him I’m sorry —”

“He knows you are,” the demon promises, lips feather-light on Keith’s cheek, “he just wants you to be happy, baby. To be safe. To be okay.”

Keith’s cock is aching in his leggings and he squirms, frantic to be free of them, nearly crying out when the demon shapes the bulge of his erection through the thin fabric. “Quick,” he pants, “you said quick, please, I need…”

“Quick,” Shiro agrees, and covers Keith’s body with his own, slotting a hard muscled thigh between Keith’s legs, so that Keith can rub off against him. And Keith does, cursing and moaning.
to the ceiling as he thrusts in jerky shallow rolls of his hips over Shiro’s thigh and comes in a hot wet rush that feels less like bliss and more like relief.

It was quick. Keith is glad only one was required of him tonight, because he’s on the verge of unconsciousness.

But the demon is still on top of him. Maybe he has other plans. Keith closes his eyes and lets his sticky legs fall open.

Shiro sighs, eases Keith’s leggings off the rest of the way, and says, “It’s over.”

“Until tomorrow,” Keith mumbles. Shiro is silent, and Keith cracks his eyes open as his senses return to him. “Thank you for making it quick,” he adds, his tongue feeling large and awkward in his mouth. His skin prickles as feeling returns to it, and slowly he processes the cool sheets, the warm air, the lingering phantom touch of hands over him. His body is bare and vulnerable but the demon shines away from it, from him.

“Do not thank me,” Shiro grits out, and in the low light Keith cannot tell for certain, but he swears there’s a shine of dampness as if from tears on the demon’s cheeks.

Keith sits up, and, hesitant, lays his hand on Shiro’s arm. The demon looks at him warily. “You didn’t,” Keith mumbles, “rape me.” He means it.

Shiro looks so tired. “Do not try to justify it,” he says. “Just go to sleep.”

“No, listen to me,” Keith says. “I didn’t mean what I said. I do want you. I hate myself for it, but I want you. So...so much.” Gray eyes stare back at him, wide and unreadable. “And I think that must be wrong. It must be a wrong towards Shiro to want you and let you do all of this to me looking just like him. But...” Keith bites his lip and squeezes the demon’s arm softly. “But I can’t seem to stop. And I’ll never have Shiro like I have you, anyway. This was never about having Shiro. It was about saving him.”

The incubus tilts his head. When he cups Keith’s face in his hand, Keith leans into it. “Shiro was in pain when you saw him?” he asks.

Keith nods, gaze sliding away. “He wouldn’t let me touch him,” he whispers. “He was...confused, and scared. He said he didn’t want to hurt me anymore.”

“Do you know what he meant?”

“I know that he must have put two and two together. He knows I made a contract, and somehow I think he knows what kind of contract it was.” Keith looks up at the incubus and frowns. “But he thinks you’ve hurt me, and I wanted to tell him...I wanted to tell him that’s not true. You could have, but you haven’t. Even when I say cruel things to you and blast fireballs at you...” Keith swallows. “You are kind to me, especially of late. And I do not understand it.”

The incubus exhales, shoulders slumping in what could be relief. “I am glad you feel that way. I like you, Keith,” he says. “And I see how much you care for your Shiro, and I suppose I try my best to give you what he would.”

Keith smiles weakly. “I don’t think Shiro would give me a dragon,” he chuckles.

The tension successfully eased, the incubus snorts and flops onto the bed beside him, handing Keith a pair of shorts as he does. Keith puts them on, grateful for the thin barrier between them.
“You never know,” he muses, warm breath ruffling Keith’s hair, “I’m sure he would be generous to you.”

Keith sighs, quietly longing, and rolls into the curve of the demon’s body, which for once seems innocent. “I actually really liked making pie with you,” he admits. “It felt like the kind of thing Shiro would have done with me.”

“Thought you said he was a terrible cook?”

“Oh, he is,” Keith says, “but he would have still tried. Though I doubt the pie would have been half as good as ours.”

“Mm.” Keith feels the demon’s smile on his brow as they nestle closer. He hums when fingers weave into his hair, claws scratching his scalp light and soothing, a solid arm heavy over his waist. “Keith,” he murmurs, “we will save your Shiro. Alright? We will. Soon. And when all is said and done, there will be no cage, gilded or otherwise, for you.”

“Then what?” Keith whispers. “A very large bed?”

“No,” he sighs. “Keeping you captive would kill your spirit, and I have no desire to do that.”

“Then what is your desire for me?” Keith presses, pressing closer as he asks it.

“To hold you,” Shiro whispers, wrapping his arm tighter around Keith, “but not to keep you.”

Accepting the embrace easily, Keith inhales the smell of him, and thinks that it’s changed, somehow — it’s familiar in a different way, the volcanic smoke and earthy incense fading, replaced by the salt of skin and sweat. It’s almost human.

“Stay with me through the night,” Keith whispers, “and you can hold me all you like tomorrow morning.”

Shiro stays.

*

Keith does not wake up alone the next morning, or the morning after that, or the morning after that.

*

The day of Keith’s birthday dawns crisp and bright, and Keith yawns as he sits up and stretches lazily, glancing around in confusion at the indent in the bed where Shiro should be. He tilts his head, and hears the faint clatter of pots and pans from the kitchen, followed by the dull thud of closing cabinets, and then a loud sizzling. The scent of cooking bacon wafts through the air, and Keith blinks, realizing what day it is as he slips out of bed and pads out of his bedroom, down the hall.

Shiro is ready for him, with a plate full of bacon and eggs held aloft and a playful grin. “Good morning,” he says, and pulls out a chair for Keith, who sits with raised eyebrows and a rumbling stomach. “Sleep well?”

“You would know,” Keith retorts, the memories of last night bringing a tinge of pink to both their faces. “You made breakfast?”

“The first of many gifts,” Shiro says with a flourish. “Coffee?”
“Sure,” Keith says, and doesn’t even bat an eyelash when the demon procures a steaming mug from thin air. “Thanks.” He takes a sip, and resists the urge to moan in sheer appreciation. “Mmm. Who would’ve thought making a contract with an incubus had so many side benefits?”

Shiro’s grin widens and he sits down across from Keith, looking very pleased with himself. “What can I say?” he drawls. “You bring out the best in me.”

The admission has Keith hastily shoving some eggs in his mouth, staring into his coffee with disbelief. “Uh-huh,” he mumbles through the food, snorting when Shiro gives him a look of disapproval. “Sorry,” he says after swallowing, immediately and unapologetically going to town on the bacon.

“Hmph,” Shiro says, rising from the table and striding across the room, clearly antsy about something. “When you’re done eating, get dressed; we have places to be.”

Keith’s eyebrow lifts higher. “Oh, do we, now? And what places would those be?”

“It’s a surprise,” Shiro says, and winks.

* * *

Shiro tells Keith to meet him outside when he’s ready to leave. Keith is so engrossed in puzzling over what the surprise could possibly be that he almost falls on his face when he walks out the back door and sees a large black dragon waiting there expectantly, basking in the desert sun like an oversized .


“Not quite,” Shiro says, and unfolds his wings, lowering his body to present the spike-less space between his shoulders. It is just wide enough to seat a rider. Keith’s eyes widen. “Well?” Shiro says, golden eyes gleaming. “Get on, then.”

Keith tries and fails to contain his eagerness as he scrambles up smooth scales and atop Shiro’s back, powerful muscle flexing under him as Shiro draws his wings back up again. Keith grabs ahold of the dragon’s neck crest and says, “Dragon flight, then. Alright, you got me, I’m intrigued.”

“Still a surprise,” Shiro says, standing up and prompting Keith to yelp and clutch at his neck as the dragon’s entire body sways dangerously. “Hold on, now. I can’t say I’ve ever done this before.”

Keith eyes him. “This?”

“Let a human ride on my back,” Shiro chuckles, spreading his wings and giving a few experimental beats. “I guess you’re just special.”

“Hmm,” Keith says, leaning back a little, allowing himself to relax. “Feels like I should have reins.”

Shiro snorts, a ring of smoke curling into the air. “Don’t push it,” he says, and leaps into the air.

Keith’s breath leaves him in a violent rush as the dragon takes off, wind tearing at his hair and clothes with every wingbeat. Shiro gains altitude fast, surprisingly fast for such a large creature, and Keith forces himself not to look down or focus on his legs dangling with nothing beneath his feet. The sound surrounding them is a dull roar, white noise that, for at least a few moments, wipes Keith’s mind clean of tangled thoughts, nagging fears, and hesitant hopes. It’s nothing but a blur
anchored by his palms spread over Shiro’s warm neck and the brown desert sweeping out from under him, replaced by endless powder blue sky.

Eventually, the dragon’s flight levels out, and Keith exhales, his chest tight but not uncomfortably so. They must be high; the air is even thinner than in the mountains, up here.

It’s still a shock when he looks down and sees an ocean of lazy white clouds drifting below them. He’s unable to contain his gasp, thighs squeezing tight around scaled shoulders.

Shiro’s laugh rumbles through him. “It’s alright,” he says, his voice low and reassuring. He banks to the left, slow and unhurried, so unlike their last frantic escape, and Keith finds no option but to believe him. “Sit tight, it’s going to be a while before we get there,” he adds, and Keith’s curiosity grows.

“We’re heading north,” he says after a while, after he has managed to relax again, and discovered that Shiro is able to soar for over ten minutes straight without even a single wingbeat. Keith remembers his father telling him how the hawks use the warm air thermals to soar, and wonders if Shiro’s doing the same, or if it’s just more magic.


Keith tilts his head. “Are you taking me to the beach?”

“No. Enough guessing, you’ll see soon enough. Look down; we’ll be passing over some excellent views in a second.”

Tentatively, Keith peeks over one outspread wing, and his jaw drops.

The clouds part to reveal the earth below, a quilt of browns, greens, and pale yellow interwoven by the glittering silver ribbons of rivers, creeks, and streams. A huge canyon splits the landscape in two, red cliffs towering above a blue river which runs white as it nears the spill of a waterfall, cascading down into a deep pool ringed with trees, turning desert inevitably into sparse woodland and open plains. He can see villages scattered here and there, more common here than in the Wastes; there are even some dots of people moving about on horseback and on the banks of the sprawling lake. A herd of elk thunders across a meadow speckled with the last of summer’s wildflowers, pursued by a pack of gray wolves, and Keith watches, entranced.

“You can see the whole world up here,” he breathes, eyes wide and seeking every new sight hungrily.

“Yes,” Shiro agrees, “I wanted you to see it.”

Keith swallows, and clutches the dragon’s neck tighter. “Thank you,” he whispers. “It’s beautiful.”

Shiro says nothing, but he angles into a shallow stoop, towards the rolling hills up ahead. Keith’s stomach drops, and he grits his teeth against the oncoming roar of wind...only to cry out in delight as dragon wings snap outwards, propelling the two of them upwards in an endless whoosh, Shiro’s body twisting gracefully mid-air as he follows the movement towards the sun. Keith lets go, because he has to, has to pump his fists skywards with a resounding whoop of joy as he’s blinded by sunlight and iridescent scales and throw his head back, unable to contain the emotion in his chest.

Shiro roars with him in wordless and deafening approval, swooping back down until Keith swears he could touch the treetops if he reached out, let bristling pine needles slice his palms open and rejoice in the impossible feeling of flying, of bleeding, of being alive. Shiro’s wings beat hard as
the dragon weaves over the alpine expanses and Keith’s lungs burn with it, and he doesn’t care, he just shouts to the clouds, to the hawks, to the earth, to the sky, to Hell itself, to Shiro; to whoever will listen to him.

By the time Shiro slows and lands in a secluded forest clearing, Keith’s breathless and drained. He half-falls off the dragon’s back, and Shiro shifts in the blink of an eye, catching him with an arm around the waist. They stand chest to chest in the shadows of the trees and Keith stares up at him, heart still pounding.

“Okay?” Shiro asks, voice soft, eyes softer.

“Yes,” Keith says with feeling, and presses a kiss to his cheek, because he can.

Shiro’s lips part, startled, and Keith gives him a smug smile. Two can play at this game of theirs.

“Now,” he says, “where to?”

* 

Redwall is an old city, and a magnificent one.

Keith remembers visiting this place only once before. He’d been a young child, not older than five or six, and his father had taken Keith here in the back of their wagon to trade the year’s crops. It had been a long, bumpy ride from their home in the Wastes to the coastal city, but it had been worth it. Keith remembered the towering sandstone walls and brick buildings long after, and now, standing before them again, the memory hits him with vivid force.

Shiro studies his awed expression and says, “They say this city was built before the arrival of my kind in your world. It’s survived many ages, many wars.”

“It’s a strong fort,” Keith says, laying his hand upon the warm wall as they pass through the bustling city gates, unnoticed among the many merchants, craftsmen, sailors, soldiers, and townspeople. “Strong walls, strong rulers.”


Keith follows his gaze to the plaza before them, which is made up of polished cobblestones arranged in spiraling concentric circles, and crowned in the center by a huge, ornate fountain. It spouts sparkling plumes of water high up into the air, which fall back into the basin to be drunk by passing livestock and people. The basin is also, bizarrely, filled with coins, which gleam dully below the surface. They almost look like gold when the sun catches them.

“Each one is a wish,” Shiro tells him, peering into the water with him as they approach. “There’s so much hope in this fountain, Keith. Can you feel it?”

Keith frowns. “I can only sense magical energy,” he says.

Shiro shakes his head, firm, and puts his hand on Keith’s shoulder with a soft squeeze. “Focus,” he says. “You can, if you try.”

Keith peers again at the water, doubtful, and looks for something more than rusting metal and wasted money. There’s no magical energy, it’s true, but...there is something. Keith leans closer to the surface, his fingertips tingling, and as a passing little girl tosses a copper into the pool, he sees it, a flash of light, a sound that is almost a word, bright eyes and bitten lips, fingers crossed and faces flushed with anticipation –
Shiro splashes him in the face.

Keith whirls around with a squawk, and takes chase as Shiro dashes through the crowd away from him, laughing loudly, impossible to miss in his fine black tunic, hulking frame never quite hidden by those around him. Keith nearly trips on the cobblestones, unused to walking on such a surface, but he manages to keep up. The city is full of life and people of every sort, and briefly Keith wonders what it would have been like to grow up here, in the midst of it all, rather than in the midst of nothing but dust and corn.

He catches Shiro when Shiro wants him to, at the marketplace, which is even busier than the plaza. The crowd begins to feel as if it’s crushing Keith, and he can’t help but hurry close to Shiro’s side, tamping down his panic. Shiro notices, and takes his hand, his smile small and crooked and familiar. Keith clings to it, and him. “We’ll find someplace quieter soon,” Shiro tells him. “But first, we need to find some lunch.”

Keith’s stomach rumbles in agreement, and Shiro leads him off through the endless stands and vendors, towards the scent of cooking food wafting over their heads. They end up in front of a wizened old woman bent over several pans filled with sizzling dumplings, and Keith’s mouth waters. She squints up at them. She reminds Keith terribly of Shiro’s grandmother, and maybe the demon is reminded of her, too, because he leans down and says, “Excuse me, madam, but how much for twenty of those?”

She blinks. “Twenty?” Her voice is like the rasp of a broom over wood planks. Then her old face splits into a grin. “Growing boys, eh? Mine were just as bad at your age. I’ll give you twenty for five copper.”

Shiro shakes his head. “Five copper? No, no, three silver, and nothing less.”

She blinks harder, squints at him suspiciously, and then, apparently sensing no swindling, shrugs and says, “Deal! I’ll even throw in some steamed buns. Special deal.” She winks, and begins piling the food into a covered bowl. “Plus, a little secret – best teahouse in town just down the street, three blocks. Mister Unagi’s. Good tea and good spot for lovebirds.”

Keith turns as red as the exotic birds cawing loudly two stands over, and Shiro squeezes his hand while giving her the money and taking the food. “Thank you very much for the advice,” he says graciously. “Might I also ask your opinion on the best place to see tonight’s festivities?”


“You may be surprised,” Shiro says, and inclines his head as they go.

“What was that about?” Keith asks. “What festivities?”

“You’ll see,” Shiro says. “Surprises, Keith.”

“Ugh,” Keith says. “Where are we going now?”

“The teahouse, of course,” Shiro says.

* * *

The teahouse is also a bathhouse. Because of course it is. Sly old dumpling woman.

“C’mere,” Shiro says, and Keith comes, but only because the dumplings are fucking delicious and
Shiro is offering him two of them. Keith takes his sweet time in chewing the perfectly cooked dough, pork, and vegetables, and shamelessly licks his fingers afterwards. Shiro watches appreciatively.

Shiro weaseled his way into getting the two of them a private bath and room, and although Keith had his doubts initially, he has to admit this is nice. Beyond nice. The rising steam is warm and wreathes the two of them gently, and the water is warmer, soaking all of the tension from Keith’s body, not to mention the desert dust.

It also means he gets to see Shiro in all his naked glory, which is always a plus. Keith keeps his distance, though, venturing close only for dumplings, preferring to admire from afar (or, well, the other side of the not-very-large bath). There’s something deeply satisfying about teasing the demon.

Shiro reaches for a steamed bun and Keith raises an eyebrow mid-bite. “You don’t need food,” he says.

Shiro huffs, fingers closing around the bun in defiance. “Need, no; want, yes.”

Keith shrugs, munching on another dumpling and sticking his toes out of the roiling water, only to squawk and curl in on himself when an attendant strides unashamedly into their supposedly private room with a tea tray. “Gentlemen,” she says, and places the tray down on the bathside between them. Keith stays tightly curled, like a barnacle at low tide, staring at his knees. Shiro says something to her, and she leaves with a swish of silk skirts.

“Keith,” Shiro says when she’s gone. He nudges Keith’s shoulder and presses a hot cup of black tea into his shaky hands. Keith still avoids his gaze. Amused, Shiro says, “Are you shy?”

Shy is not, Keith thinks sulkily, the right word for it. “I don’t,” he starts, and stops, feeling more than a little stupid talking about this with a sex demon. He sips his tea and immediately burns his tongue. Keith sets the tea on fire as a punitive measure.

Shiro sighs, takes the flaming cup from him, and pours him another cup which he holds as hostage until Keith’s fingers stop sparking and he mutters, “I’m not shy. I just like being, y’know, covered.”

There’s no derisive laugh from the demon. Instead he says, thoughtful, “You like having control over who sees you like this. You like being the one to make that choice.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Keith retorts.

“To some degree,” Shiro muses. “You might be surprised.” He sips his own tea slowly, gaze meditative. “I remember, the first time, when you’d summoned me.” Keith stiffens. “I bared your body to me in an instant, and that was when your fear became palpable.”

“I wasn’t afraid,” Keith snaps, and grabs another dumpling to stop himself from speaking again.

“You were,” Shiro says. He doesn’t sound happy about it. “I could have made you out of your mind with lust for me then; false lust, as you call it. I could have swept your fear and grief and anger away along with every memory of your Shiro. I still could.”

Keith is frozen, swallowing painfully and wondering if he should be running, yet. He doesn’t.

“But I didn’t want to,” Shiro admits. “I wanted you as you were. Just you. Was that wrong of me? Would you have preferred to forget it all, and to feel nothing; for it to be easy?”
“No,” Keith says at once, and he sees Shiro slump as if in relief. “No. I think...I think sometimes it is better to feel pain. Sometimes you should feel pain. Otherwise you become numb, and nothing matters, and when nothing matters, you’ve lost.”


“What were your dreams, Keith?” Shiro asks, shifting closer, eyes intense and lips parting like ripping rose petals.

Keith is hot, dizzy, and he knows he cannot blame it on magic. “I,” he starts, and stops, steam and breath mingling between them. “I wanted to go to the stars,” he says, and something gives inside of him, crumbling away under Shiro’s earnest, hopeful gaze.

“To the stars,” Shiro repeats, and smiles. “How?”

“In a ship,” Keith whispers, words bubbling past his lips, uncorked and unstoppable. “I wanted to fly, to fly my own ship up there and find new worlds, new people, new magic. I wanted to gather a crew, a family, to go with me, to help others like us, to show others our gifts and to show them how to use theirs. I wanted to make a home there, eventually, I think. I wanted that. To belong, somewhere, elsewhere.”

Shiro’s expression could break glass. He pushes a careful, slow hand into Keith’s damp, curling hair, and keeps it there. “It’s a good dream,” he says. “Thank you for telling me, baby.”

Keith nods, and asks, “Do demons have dreams?” He can’t move away; he feels bewitched, hypnotized, paralyzed like an insect in a spider’s web; but he thinks this web is entirely of his own making.

“I don’t know,” Shiro says, “but I have them.”

Keith watches as Shiro’s eyes dart away from him, unfocused. “Aren’t you a demon?” Keith wonders when this genuinely came into question, and realizes that maybe it always was.

Shiro’s hand falls away, and he shifts back, the moment broken. Keith knows, with a sinking stomach, that even if he asks Shiro won’t tell him those dreams of his. What could a demon dream of? Luxury? Wealth? Death? Victory? Power?

But none of those seems to fit the demon before him; the demon who has become more uncertain shadow than terrifying monster. What Keith feels for him then is not pity – that is too shallow an emotion. Pity doesn’t make chests ache and palms sweat and minds wander and breath catch.

And pity certainly doesn’t make Keith wade through the bath to sit beside Shiro with his cup of tea, lean against his side, and sit with him in comforting, companionable silence until the bathwater turns cold and the tea is all gone.

*

Shiro talks no more about dreams or stars, and when they’re finished at the bathhouse, they return to the marketplace to peruse the wares. Keith keeps telling Shiro he doesn’t need a “real” gift, this excursion is more than enough, but Shiro is stubborn in all forms, apparently.

Keith is stubborn, too, but unfortunately he has no coin. He will have to resort to other measures, then.
They split up when Keith claims he needs to find a toilet. As soon as he’s out of sight, Keith begins scanning the market stalls for something that might interest an unconventional incubus.

A stand strung with sparkly tassels and bangles catches his eye, and when he hurries over to scope out what’s on offer, he’s confronted with what is most certainly a table covered in various, er, creative sex toys. Keith takes a step back, but it’s too late – the vendor, a red-haired woman with even redder nails, leans over her table and drawls, “Can I help you? Bet I can.”

“Uh –” Keith clears his throat.

Keith had never really understood it when women were referred to as foxes, but he understands instantly when she tosses her fiery mane over her shoulder, bats her long, pale lashes at him, and slides a large glass penis across the table towards him like a pint of ale. “Did I guess right?” she coos.

Keith’s first instinct is to bristle, not because she’s wrong, but because – is it really so obvious? He’s about to turn away, face red and mildly humiliated, when she adds quickly, “Apologies, dear, it’s not you; it’s me.” He eyes her, wary, and she taps the side of her head with a smirk. “Telepath,” she says. “Of a very specific sort.”

Keith blanches. What a terrible gift. Though, looks like she’s put it to good use. “You can...hear other people’s...sexual preferences?” he ekes out.

“Mhm,” she says. “You have quite a few.” Her head cocks, and her smile widens, and Keith is afraid of what she might be hearing right now. “Heh. A rare bird, aren’t you? Pun intended. I think I have something that might interest you, though it’s not...particularly mainstream. Here.” She reaches under the table and procures a small, corked glass vial filled with violently blue liquid.

Keith is about to tell her that he has no coin, but something stops him, a tiny voice in the back of his mind. You don’t need coin, the voice says. She will give it to you; you need only ask.

“Give that to me,” Keith says, and the words taste different on his tongue, thick and forbidden.

He’s sure he’s not imagining it when her green eyes cloud over as she hands him the vial easily. “Of course, sir,” she says, and winks.

“What does it do?” he asks, turning over the vial in his hands.

“It has...shall we say, transformative properties,” she hedges. “Drink it, when you want to try it out, and you’ll see. The effects won’t last longer than a few hours, and it’s harmless.”

Keith frowns, but nods and tucks the vial into a pocket. “Thank you, I guess,” he says.

She tilts her head. “You have a strange lover,” she says. “And you want a strange gift for him?”

“Yes,” Keith says. “Preferably not a sex toy. No offense. He just has...er, plenty of those already.”

She laughs. “Fair enough. If you’re looking for strange, I don’t know that you’ll find it in the market. There’s a shop just down Ochre Road, a stone’s throw from here; has the strangest collection of gifts I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen some strange things.”

Keith doesn’t want to think about that. He thanks her, and hurries off, knowing it’s only a matter of time before Shiro goes looking for him.

*
He finds the shop easy enough, and finds it quite deserted as he walks inside, a small bell jingling dully to announce his entrance. There’s no response from the shop’s interior, which is crowded and dark, filled with teetering bookstacks and shelves packed with all manner of oddities. Keith sniffs, smelling old paper, old metal, fish, earth, wet dog, and mold.

Keith stops himself from calling out into the silence. His skin prickles, and he wishes he’d kept more of his protective amulets. He still has the knife, at least. He can’t tell if this place is dangerous, not yet, but he can sense powerful magic woven through the air like a net.

But there is no ambush as he wanders deeper into the shop, looking at the contents of the shelves with confusion and curiosity. What would the demon like? Keith worries at his lips with his teeth. He knows what Shiro would like, but the demon is not Shiro. Still...maybe it’s something to go off of. Shiro liked books, a lot. Keith can’t exactly imagine the demon settling down in front of a cozy fire to read the newest complete volume on Botany of the Western Wastes.

Yes, that was an actual book Shiro owned. There were a lot of cacti illustrations in it. Shiro had killed every plant he touched, so Keith supposed he preferred to enjoy them in theory.

There are endless books here, and Keith’s eyes rove over the spines, wondering. They sound interesting, and a few are even about the Void and the Voidborn, but they don’t seem to be the right choices. Keith wishes the demon had told him what his dream was; maybe that would make this easier.

Something glints across the room, and Keith peers into the gloomy corner, and sees the glint of light again. He picks his way through the cluttered space, and after some cautious poking around, he finds it.

It’s a necklace, a golden one, and the pendant is...a rose. Because of course it is.

The rose has a bright stone inlaid in the center, which must have been doing all the glinting. Keith knows little about jewels, but he thinks this one must be precious indeed – it looks like frozen fire, a bright red-orange gleaming with flashes of blue and yellow as Keith examines it closer.

“It’s a fire opal.”

Keith whirls. There’s a shadowy figure leaning against a nearby bookshelf, and Keith recognizes her at once. “You,” he breathes, and then, barely audible, “Hecate.”

She folds her arms. “I see you haven’t stayed put as I told you to.” She sighs. “But I would have been disappointed if you were a rule-follower.”

Keith has no idea what to make of that. “What do you want?”

She points to the necklace. “Are you planning on purchasing that? It’s very lovely. And very you, I think. Fire opals are said to hone trust in one’s instincts and intuition. They’re also stones of passion and luck. While I’m not sure you need more of the former, more of the latter never hurts.”

Keith says, “It’s not for me.”

Golden eyes narrow in the shadows. “You’re buying a gift for your incubus? Interesting, considering it’s your birthday.”

“How did you know that?” Keith demands.

She laughs, dry and soft. “I could never forget. Has he given you a gift, at least?”
“He brought me here, to Redwall,” Keith says. “He’s buying something in the market right now. He’ll come looking for me soon.” It’s a warning.

Hecate says, “Do you think I would harm you?”

“Would you?”

“Never.”

Well, then. Keith says, “Did you harm the Princess?”

“No,” she says. “Do you think so little of me?”

“I know so little of you,” Keith counters. “You’re not something they teach us about at the Citadel.”

“They ought to,” she says, and tosses him something which Keith catches automatically – it’s a book, covered in silvery occult symbols which make Keith’s skin thrum. “Do you like to read?” she asks, almost shy.

“I do,” Keith says, holding the book awkwardly, and then looking back at the necklace.

“Oh, just take it,” Hecate says.

“The shopkeeper –”

“Is one of mine,” Hecate finishes. Keith stares at her. “I have eyes everywhere, Keith,” she says. “In my old age, one learns to cover one’s ass.”

Keith takes the necklace, and no one stops him. “Thanks,” he says. “I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

She takes a step forward, as if she’d like to come closer, and he sees her fingers twitch as if she’d like to touch him, too; but in the end she turns away and murmurs, “Happy birthday, Keith,” before vanishing in a swirl of smoke that smells like the desert wind.

The shop door bangs open just as Keith puts the book and necklace away in his bag.

Shiro stands in the doorway, looking fully prepared to kill a man.


Shiro blinks at him in disbelief. “And why,” he grits out, “did you get lost?”

“It’s a surprise,” Keith says, unable to contain his glee.

Shiro rolls his eyes, but a smile tugs at his lips, and when he kisses Keith at the door, Keith can feel the relief in him.

* 

Shiro got them a suite at the Belvedere Inn. Keith thinks inn is not the right word for it. Palace might be more apt.

“Oh, come now,” Shiro chuckles, lounging on the divan, “I stopped myself from getting the penthouse because I knew you would think it was too much. This is barely a step above a standard
suite, baby.”

“It’s absurd,” Keith says, flopped onto the bed and staring at the intricately patterned ceiling. “No sheets need such a high thread count. How many ducks do you think they murdered to make these pillows?”


Keith throws at least thirty dead ducks at him, and Shiro catches the pillow deftly and wedges it under his head with a content sigh. Keith rolls his eyes. “You’re still not going to tell me what we’re waiting for?” he tries for the fifth time in ten minutes.

“I told you,” Shiro chuckles, “we’re waiting for nightfall. We have a few minutes yet. Just relax, Keith. Think of the pie.”

Shiro had taken him out to dinner at another absurdly fancy place, but Keith couldn’t even be mad about that, because the food had been divine. And they’d had cherry pie. The taste lingers on his tongue, and Keith licks his lips, remembering. Shiro sees it, and sits up, prowling over to the bed with the smooth, slow gait of a predator.

“Relax, he says,” Keith drawls as Shiro moves on top of him. Keith grabs lightly onto Shiro’s collar and tugs him down. “You’re not going to sacrifice me under the blue moon, are you?”

Shiro snorts and shakes his head. “No blue moon,” he murmurs. “It’s a harvest moon...sometimes called a hunter’s moon.”

Keith shivers. “You didn’t say no to the sacrifice.”

“No,” Shiro says, “I didn’t.”

Shiro kisses him like he’s got something to prove, and Keith groans into his mouth and decides, ducks be damned, he’s going to thoroughly enjoy fucking on this bed later. Shiro hears the thought and bites down on his lower lip, drawing a hiss from Keith and a sharp dig of nails into scarred skin. Shiro licks into his mouth slow and hot and dirty, and the cool night air is shocking when he pulls off and away, offering Keith a hand.

“What,” Keith croaks.

“Sun’s setting at last,” Shiro says. “We have somewhere to be.”

“Where?” Keith asks, flustered and quite done with surprises.

Shiro points up.

* 

The dumpling lady was right. The top of the Belvedere has an amazing view.

“I’m almost disappointed,” Keith says as they settle themselves on the red roof tiles, huddled close in the chill air. “No summoning circle or chalk symbols in sight. Not even a drop of chicken’s blood.”

“What would I even do with chicken’s blood?” Shiro chuckles, shaking his head and draping an arm around Keith’s shoulders. “No sacrifices. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Hmph,” Keith says, still smiling, and burrows into the blanket they brought up with them. “Are
we even allowed to be up here, do you think?"

“Absolutely not,” Shiro says, the corners of his eyes crinkling up.

“You villain,” Keith says, and mimes clutching his pearls.

“Criminals, the both of us,” Shiro sighs with mock regret. “Professional roof-trespassers. The ultimate breach of law and propriety. However did we get here, Keith?”

“We climbed,” Keith says with a straight face.

Shiro chortles and buries his face in Keith’s shoulder. Keith grins down at him, only to pause and stare open-mouthed at the horizon as something in the darkness swells with light, a bright flare blooming from the silhouette of a small barge Keith can see in Redwall Bay.

“Shiro,” he gasps, “what is that?”

And then the light rockets upwards, exploding into a shower of golden lights with a dull boom like a million fireflies, each one popping and fizzling away into the night. Dozens of other barges are illuminated in the bay as each one ignites their own exploding lights, and Keith can’t look away. The air smells like sulfur and the sea, thunderous cracks of sound interspersed by cheers from the docks and the distant but loud chorus of hundreds of people singing, dancing, and playing music.

“They’re called fireworks,” Shiro tells him, his face cast in the quick radiance of green and red as two more fireworks go off. “A simple yet fantastic concoction of gunpowder and mortar.”

“Gunpowder?” Keith frowns. “But…that is a product used in war, not…” He gestures to the whole of the city, to the sky crackling with joyful lights and colors and to the streets below, lined with people in costumes and various states of drunkenness, none of whom seem to be in the mood for violence.

Shiro laughs, tilting his head up to watch the ghostly remnants of the detonated fireworks spiral slow and gray across the night sky. “Funny thing about humans,” he muses, “there’s a baffling duality about you. Give a city five hundred tons of gunpowder, and what do they do? Figure out how to turn it into something beautiful. In fact, the people of Redwall set off these fireworks every year for their Harvest Moon Festival, in part for their beauty, but also because of an old superstition that fireworks keep away evil spirits like me.” His lips quirk.

“You’re not evil,” Keith says. Shiro looks at him. “You’re…well, you’re more like a firework.”

Shiro raises an eyebrow.

“You could be deadly,” Keith says. “You could turn people against each other and ruin them. But you could also make people happy, and protect them against those who would do them harm. You could also be something beautiful.”

Shiro’s eyes reflect the next bout of fireworks, and in his face, for a long and glorious and aching moment, Keith sees his Shiro there.

Then the demon blinks and says, “A pretty metaphor. And quite imaginative, too. Me, a firework – I suppose that’s not too far off the mark.”

Keith’s heart thuds in heavy disappointment, and he mumbles, “Thanks, I try.” His hand falls upon his pocket and he remembers the necklace, and adds, halting, “I, er, when I ran off today, I found something for you.”
Shiro lets out a startled cough-laugh. “For me? What, is it chicken blood?”

Keith shakes his head and withdraws the necklace, holding it out and not meeting Shiro’s eyes. “I know material treasures probably don’t mean much to demons, since you can make gold appear out of thin air, but, well, I wanted to get you something.”

Shiro inhales sharply, lifting the necklace from Keith’s open palm with a bewildered expression. “Why...Keith, it is your birthday,” he points out.

Keith grimaces and looks at the roof tiles. “I know that. Just thought it was nice, is all.”

“It is nice,” Shiro says, and Keith’s heart leaps. The demon lifts the necklace up to the brief flashes of light, and purses his lips. “Fire opal,” he says. “Not an easy jewel to find. Did you steal this?”

Keith squirms. “I didn’t exactly...pay for it.”

“I’m so proud.” Shiro beams at him and fastens the gold chain around his neck. The rose and its opal fall squarely in the hollow of his throat, and Keith swears the stone flares brighter at the contact with the demon’s skin. “As it happens, I got you a gift, too, and it’s a good thing I did, otherwise I would be looking like the world’s worst incubus partner right now.” He hands Keith a small black box.

“Is it a sex toy?” Keith blurts.

Shiro shakes his head and says, “Open it; I swear it doesn’t bite.”

Keith cracks the box open. His lips part. There’s a black leather cord inside, tightly braided, and in it is interwoven with what he can feel is powerful infernal magic. He snatches his hand away. “Are you sure?” he demands. “It feels like it could bite.”

Shiro takes the box from him and takes out the leather cord, which Keith sees is a necklace of sorts, so short it is almost a choker, or perhaps collar would be a better word. It is simple, with only a single metal piece on it, which holds a loop as if something could be attached to it. “You still have the iron rose your Shiro gave to you?” the demon asks patiently.

Keith’s frown deepens. “Yes,” he says, reluctantly taking it out of his pocket. “Why do you need it?”

“It is meant to be placed here,” Shiro says, tapping the leather cord. “Trust me?”

Keith bites his lip but shows him the rose, and Shiro lines it up with the cord’s bit of metal. Both pieces glow white-hot for a fraction of a second, fusing together, and the air around them ripples with the magical aftershocks. Keith’s skin tingles with the power and he whispers, “What did you do?”

“Here,” Shiro says, and carefully wraps the cord around Keith’s neck while Keith holds very still. Is this some final part of the contract he was unaware of? Is he being bound in a somehow stronger way?

Shiro fastens the cord closed, and Keith’s spine stiffens, his throat closing for a moment before he gasps in air. The cord is warm and pulsing around his neck, like a living thing, and Keith’s lips part as Shiro leans forward as if to kiss him. Instead, though, the demon brings the iron rose to his lips, kissing it softly, and a spark courses through the leather, sending an answering tremor through Keith.
“What is it?” Keith whispers, aware that the infernal magic is not, as he had first assumed, of the malicious variety. It actually reminds him more of...protection magic.

“You could call it an amulet,” Shiro replies, still very close. “So long as you wear this, no being, of the Void or otherwise, will be able to control your mind or magic by magical means.”

Keith stops breathing. Is such an amulet possible? And, “Not...not even you?”

“Not even me,” Shiro says. “Our contract cannot be broken, but it can be amended, a little. My kiss was the amendment. May this amulet grant you the most freedom of spirit that is possible, Keith.”

“You can’t control me,” Keith whispers. “Shiro...but, my magic –”

“Is yours, not mine,” Shiro finishes.

Keith wants to kiss him, badly; so he does.

*  

“My, my, if I knew it would – ah – give me this kind of reaction, I would have created that amulet for you long ago!” Shiro pants as Keith slams him down onto the dead ducks bed and kisses the absolute Hell out of him.

“What reaction,” Keith mumbles in between kisses, “did you expect?”

“An ‘Oh, thanks,’ ” Shiro manages, “or maybe a hug, if I was lucky –”

“Count yourself lucky, then,” Keith grunts, and bites down on the side of his thick neck. Shiro arches under him, hands turning claw on Keith’s ass, hissing out a curse in a guttural language that makes Keith rut down against him and double his efforts to leave a bruise.

It’s then that he remembers the blue vial in his pocket, and breaks away with an unsteady exhale, taking a moment to admire the sizable hickey on the demon’s skin before scrambling off and adjusting himself. Shiro looks the picture of debauched, and he’s not even naked yet, so Keith is proud. The demon sits up, flustered, flushed with mussed hair and an obvious bulge in his pants. “Where’re you going?” he grumbles. “Not thinking of trying to tease me, are you?”

“No, just give me a second,” Keith says, and all but runs into the bathroom.

He’s excited, okay.

After some deliberation, Keith decides he should remove his clothes first, just in case, but he keeps his underwear on because...well, who knows what’s going to happen down there? He wants to give himself a few seconds to prepare himself for that, no pun intended.

Keith takes a second to glance at himself in the mirror, and touches the amulet around his neck as he does so. The black leather stands out starkly against pale skin, and Keith wonders if it can really be true; if this can really protect him from being bound by anyone. It’s a daunting thought, and even more daunting when he considers that someday, he might want to take it off, and he might want to do that with the incubus.

Really, he must be going mad; trusting an incubus and downing a vial of suspicious liquid from a sex telepath.

The blue liquid is cold and sickly sweet, and within a few seconds of swallowing, Keith starts...
itching all over. A wave of almost-pain sweeps over him, and his knees buckle; he catches himself hard on the edge of the sink and sucks in a lungful of panicky air as his back tears open.

Keith cries out, staring at himself in the mirror in disbelief, his hands splintering the porcelain as they shift with the rest of him, skin raising and hardening, tailbone elongating, teeth sharpening –

“Keith?!” Shiro bursts into the bathroom, and Keith almost falls on his ass. So does Shiro. The incubus gawks at him, yellow eyes huge. “Keith,” he says, “you’re a…”

“Dragon?!” Keith exclaims, touching the red scales curving along his cheekbone gingerly, then the small curling horns on either side of his head. His half-folded burgundy wings shiver over his shoulders. “Or…or half-dragon, at least –” His tail, also red and tipped with a flattened spade, swishes behind him. His tail. What. Transformation, the lady had said. That meant – she knew about the dragon thing...oh, dear.

“Are you saying you bought that from one of the vendors?” Shiro hisses. “It could have hurt you –”

“But it didn’t,” Keith says, a grin spreading slowly across his more angular, slightly scaled face. The smile is lined with jagged teeth, and the tongue that darts out between them is long and forked. “Look, I have wings.” He flexes said wings experimentally, the sensation strange, moving muscles that had never even existed before. “Wonder what else I have…?”

Keith and Shiro look down at Keith’s dick in unison. There’s still a dark happy trail of hair, but his hipbones are flecked with red scaling, and something definitely feels, er...different. Keith edges his underwear off, and they fall at his feet, forgotten as both of their mouths fall open.

“I take back what I said about the vendor,” Shiro murmurs, “she does good work.”

Good and remarkably accurate work, because Keith’s dragon dick looks like a smaller, redder version of Shiro’s. And by smaller, what he really means is bigger, because Keith’s human dick was fine and good, but he’s definitely gained a few inches, girth and lengthwise.

“Wow,” Keith says. He’d bet money (which he doesn’t have) that there’s a knot, too.

“I had a whole plan for the birthday sex,” Shiro adds in a strained voice. “It was strategic. Detailed. Thoughtful. And now you’ve gone and derailed it with this.” He folds his arms. “Could you be persuaded to derail me with it, please?”

Keith’s distracted with flexing his wings again and realizing something very important. “Shiro,” he whispers, “Shiro!”

“Is that a yes?”

Keith’s yanking his underwear back on and pushing past the demon, half-running to the balcony. His tail flops behind him, knocking several things over, and he almost trips over it once or twice, but he doesn’t care. Not when he’s spreading his wings and gasping, “Shiro, I think I can fly!”


Keith turns, arms folded, ready to defend himself, but Shiro is looking at him with such aching fondness that his heart stutters on a beat instead. “To the stars, remember?” Keith says, biting his lip and giving his new wings a little flap. “It only lasts a few hours, so…”

Shiro nods, and shifts himself, until there’s another half-draconic person in the room. His black
wings unfold and he says with a gleam of fangs, “Don’t let me stop you; it is your birthday. What better day to live your dreams? There ought to be someone to catch you if you try to fall, though.”

Keith laughs; he can’t help it, and sprints towards the railing with wings outstretched.

The running start gives him the lift he needs as he grabs the railing and launches himself off of it and into the night air, which is cold on his bare chest and legs, and as soon as he’s aloft a muscle memory he never knew he had takes over.

He hears that voice in his head again, a voice which sounds almost like his own and almost like a shadow’s, and it tells him, *Look, you were born for this*. Keith’s shoulders strain as his wings flap hard and fast, and he’s not falling, he’s not fumbling; he’s soaring upwards in an exhilarating arc of speed, hair raked back by the wind and eyes fixed upon the stars and fading fireworks.

It’s like he’s been a puzzle with a missing piece all his life and suddenly, he sees the full picture. It flashes behind his eyelids, forgotten as soon as he sees it, for his mind is human and unable to catch hold of it, but Keith finds himself crying out to the night with wild abandon, swooping among smoke trails and feeling his magic stir in a way it never has before.

Fire ignites in his palms, consuming his hands in light, and Keith looks at them in delight and laughs, thrusting his hands out in front of him and making swirling trails of fire through the air. Sparks shower around him, leaving glowing embers in his hair and over his skin like fiery freckles, and Keith doesn’t know if they’re from the fireworks or himself.

“People are staring,” Shiro calls, swooping down beside him, Keith’s firelight brightening his already glowing eyes. “Lucky for you, they probably don’t think you’re an evil spirit.” He chuckles and circles Keith with a slow glide. “See, the Harvest Moon Festival not only banishes evil spirits, it welcomes others – spirits you and I might call dragons. They call them their rain gods.”

“Are we gods, then?” Keith calls back with a grin, wings pumping with determination as he tries to gain altitude, spinning himself around and around so that the fire forms long, upwards spirals of incandescence.

Below them, there are people gathering on the shore, staring and pointing, some shouting, others cheering, others praying on their knees. A few, and they are Keith’s favorites, shoot fire from their fingertips, blue fire and red fire and green fire and purple fire, and Keith whirls around in a blur of answering flames, his heart pounding and skin sweat-soaked and eyes wide open.

There is a power within him, and perhaps it has always been within him, and it is waking up.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” Shiro says, and he really does look glad, “but we’re attracting too much attention, and this spell of yours is sadly only temporary.”

“A few more fireballs,” Keith wheedles, and Shiro snorts, inclining his head. As if he could stop Keith if he tried. But Keith thinks that maybe he knows this, because all he does is wait, expectant and smiling, black scales shining in the harvest moonlight.

Keith’s fireballs explode over Redwall Bay like twin suns, blinding in their intensity, dissolving into a million stars. The sea catches each and every one of them, and swallows them whole.

“Okay,” Keith whispers, reaching out to take Shiro’s hand. “Let’s make our exit.”

He doesn’t remember the last time he was this happy. Maybe he never was.
Keith still has his wings when he pins Shiro to the bed for the second time that night.

Hazy gray eyes blink up at him – he’s keeping a human form, maybe because he likes the way Keith’s wicked claws and blood bright scales look on this body, Shiro’s body, as much as Keith does. Keith traces one of the claws just under Shiro’s jaw, forcing his head to tilt up. The incubus obliges and murmurs, “You look like one of us, baby.”

Keith pauses, his folded wings rustling as he shifts and tilts his head. They’re both undressed, hard cocks sliding over each other and skin sweaty and flushed from their flight and frantic foreplay. “Like a demon, you mean?” He’s not as upset about the comparison as he should be, though it nags unpleasantly at the back of his mind.

Shiro nods and groans, low and pleased, when Keith’s sharp, sharp teeth graze over his neck. Keith has the fleeting, blurry thought that he could rip the demon’s throat open with just a little more pressure. Shiro groans louder, clutching at Keith’s hip. “Yeah,” he breathes, “like a demon. But you’re not, you’re just...mmm, just you, Keith, yes...”

Keith’s claws scratch lightly down Shiro’s body. He doesn’t actually want to draw blood, regardless of whether or not it will hurt the incubus, so he pauses when his clawed hands settle over Shiro’s spread thighs. “Uh,” he says, “I don’t...can you...” He holds up a claw with an apologetic look.

Shiro nods and groans, low and pleased, when Keith’s sharp, sharp teeth graze over his neck. Keith has the fleeting, blurry thought that he could rip the demon’s throat open with just a little more pressure. Shiro groans louder, clutching at Keith’s hip. “Yeah,” he breathes, “like a demon. But you’re not, you’re just...mmm, just you, Keith, yes...”

Keith slides his hands under Shiro’s thighs and shuffles forward. “Are you –”

Shiro grabs his jaw and drags him down. “I’m sure, baby,” he whispers. “Fuck me. Please.”

Their lips collide as Keith guides his cock past the tight ring of muscle that is definitely not as tight nor dry as it should be. It’s more like wet velvet, and Keith grunts in surprise into Shiro’s mouth as the incubus’s body sheathes his new cock with shocking ease, keeping just enough friction every inch of the way to make them both moan and press into it. “Shit,” Keith hisses, squeezing his eyes shut and trying his best not to claw Shiro’s thighs open, “shit, shit, shit –”

Shiro’s thighs close around his waist and his grin is feral when he yanks Keith in fully, shuddering when Keith bottoms out. “Feels good,” Shiro tells him, chest rising and falling unevenly, stroking Keith’s face as if he can’t stop, distracted already. “My last gift to you, heh –”

“Or mine to you,” Keith retorts, and Shiro moans in wholehearted agreement as Keith thrusts deep, rolling his hips and holding Shiro down with the threat of split skin, though he thinks Shiro would stay where he wants him regardless.

Keith bares his teeth at the thought, tail lashing behind him and wings spreading unconsciously. His mind snaps on the word mine, and it echoes through his head like a nonsensical mantra, mine, mine, mine, mine, because this demon is not his; Shiro is not his; but Keith wants, and with his cock stretching Shiro wide open and raw and Shiro panting and arching with a low cry when Keith finds his prostate, it’s so easy to believe Keith has him.

Shiro’s body is dripping sweat and tightening muscle and heady moans and hard cock, full and hot when Keith brushes the length of it with the backs of his knuckles, almost a caress if it hadn’t been so teasing. Shiro whines at him and tries to get a hand around himself, but Keith growls and pins
his wrists above his head, pushing them into the pillow until Shiro starts to struggle, weak and with no purpose behind it.

“No,” Keith says, “you don’t get to touch. Only I get to do that.”

Shiro licks his lips. “I’m waiting, baby,” he whispers, and Keith kisses him as punishment, all teeth and with his hand around Shiro’s throat. There’s blood; Keith can feel it under his claws as they slice through; but he’s not doing this to harm the demon. He’s doing this because he knows blood means something to Voidborn. Blood is power. Keith gave this demon his blood, in the beginning. And now, fucking the incubus with all his might on his twentieth time around the sun, Keith knows that he is giving Keith his power, too.

Keith smears bloody fingertips down the muscled heave of Shiro’s chest, and when he turns the smears into symbols, memorized runes of luck and hope and safety and peace, the incubus gasps his name and begs for another kiss, his fingers curling uselessly and pulse throbbing under the thin skin of his wrists.

How can he seem so human? Keith drags Shiro into his lap and drags red, stinging lines over his back and Shiro keeps his hands behind his back, holding them there dutifully without any restraint on Keith’s part. Keith’s wings wrap around the demon, cocooning them as he bounces Shiro on his cock, and Shiro snarls and sobs and Keith bites only enough to bruise, and whispers, “Beautiful, you are beautiful.”

Shiro trembles like he can’t turn a man’s mind to mush or set a cornfield on fire in half a second. He trembles, and leans into Keith, and whimpers like Keith is all he has, like he is nothing more than a mortal man feeling pleasure he cannot escape or articulate.

He comes like that, too.

Keith buries his face in Shiro’s neck and comes inside of him soon after, fingertips sparking and palms burning brands of light into Shiro’s back. Shiro breathes hot and damp against his cheek, and when he says, “Baby,” Keith rolls the two of them back down to the bed, looming over Shiro’s sated body anew with promise in his eyes.

“We’ve still got at least an hour before this wears off,” Keith promises, aware of the swelling at the base of his cock and eager to put it to good use.

Shiro spreads his thighs wide, throws back his head, and begs.

*

Keith wakes up, and he is most definitely not alone.

Shiro is sprawled out on his front on the bed beside him, the sheets thrown over them as an afterthought, snoring softly. Every breath ruffles his white forelock of hair, and with his head tucked just so into the crease of the pillows, Keith can see the hefty collection of bruises all down his neck, scattered around the golden chain and rose with artless asymmetry.

Sitting up, Keith slowly gets acquainted with every odd ache and pain in his body – his shoulders hurt most. He has a hazy recollection of beating his wings for fifteen minutes straight just so he could fuck Shiro harder, which sounds like something he would do. It was worth it, anyway. Keith thinks he owes the sex telepath a cherry pie or something.

Shiro stirs awake in stages, stretching slow and cracking his eyes open with effort. They’re glowing golden slits, and they flare when they see Keith.
“Mm,” Shiro mumbles, “tell me last night was real.”

“It was real,” Keith says, leaning against the headboard. “We flew over the city together.”

“Mhm,” Shiro says, propping himself up on a lazy elbow, “and then you fucked me senseless. That wouldn’t be revenge for the whole, ‘at least three times’ thing, would it?”

Keith is stuck on the fading sensation of wind in his hair and magic all around him. “Maybe,” he sighs, and gets out of bed, feeling much older than twenty. Shiro watches, quiet. Keith stops at the doorway to the bathroom. He wants to ask Shiro to bathe with him, to talk with him, to stay with him, but Keith knows it isn’t like that between them. Yesterday had been a special occasion, that’s all. A gift. And a good gift, too. Too good.

“Thank you,” Keith says to the incubus. “For yesterday. It was...I had a good time. It’s been a while since I had a real birthday celebration, so...thanks. For that.”

“Of course, Keith,” he says, sleepiness sharpening into impassive mask.

The party’s over, but Keith doesn’t mourn it. He never expected it to last.

*

They return to the Wastes that afternoon, and as the dragon lands with him in the dust, Keith thinks, A week. I have a week left.

That final week is a strange one. Keith tries not to be sentimental, but he wants to make his peace with this world, and those who matter to him in it, before he goes for good.


Keith isn’t sure about that; then again, he isn’t sure he knows what constitutes as ‘good,’ anymore.

He reads the book Hecate gave him. He reads it while Shiro is sleeping or otherwise away – the incubus is giving him space; Keith recognizes that much, and appreciates it. They won’t have much space between them, soon enough.

The book is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. With every page Keith turns, he swears his flames stir in his chest, restless trapped sparrows roused by ancient words. More than once, he hears the voice again, but he still cannot understand its meaning.

You know these words, Keith. You’ve read them before, no, she read them to you, before, before, before.

Hecate is a terrifying being by all accounts. But she was not, as Allura had said, the first witch. She was one of the first, but evidently there were others, and it was those few others who had delved too deeply into their search for knowledge of the Void. Hecate had been among them, but she, unlike the other witches, who were consumed by the Void and corrupted utterly by it, sought to bind that ancient power; to control it. And she succeeded. The book is vague about Oriande and her involvement in it, but Keith has a strong suspicion she found the key to harnessing the Void’s power there.

No, it’s more than a suspicion. He knows she did. But he doesn’t know how he knows.

Keith visits the oasis twice more, and he visits his father’s grave once.
It’s not a real grave; there’s no body. But Keith likes anchors, solid things he can touch. He lays his fingertips atop the quartz boulder with his father’s name carved roughly into it. The stone is cool, like ice but harder, so Keith bows his head against it, too, and lets the numbness spread.

“I wish I could have said goodbye,” he whispers. “Do you wish that, too?”

The hiss of dry wind through dry sage brush is his only answer.

“Goodbye, Da,” he says, and leaves.

*

It is Keith’s last night in this world, and he’s laying in bed, staring out the window, memorizing the stars. His mouth tastes like cherry pie. He closes his eyes, and inhales. What will happen to this place when he leaves it? He’s not naive enough anymore to still think his father will come back for it. His heart hurts when he imagines it as a ruin, moldering away into a skeleton of a home, all hollowed out and hopeless.

Or maybe someone else will find this place. Maybe they’ll make it into a real home.

It was his real home, once. But now Keith drifts, wishing he had wings again, because as it is he is directionless, a ship incapable of steering anywhere but down.

The door opens, and the incubus steps inside.

Keith’s eyes open.

“Is it time?” he asks.

“Almost,” the incubus says. He is not smiling. “I need to speak with you, Keith.”

“We are speaking,” Keith says, but sits up.

“I’ve realized something,” the incubus says. Not only is he not smiling, he is not meeting Keith’s eyes. “And that something is that…” He exhales. “Keith, when our contract is terminated, I would not keep you trapped in Hell with me. It would be better, for us both, for you to stay with your Shiro and return here.”

Keith’s mouth opens and closes soundlessly. He touches the iron rose, just to make certain his mind is not being tricked. It is not. “Oh,” he says, and clears his throat, feeling like he has to say more than that. “That’s, that’s…generous of you. Unexpected, of you, uh. Why?”

The incubus tilts his head. “Don’t ask silly questions, Keith,” he says, and turns away with a slumped defeat that Keith’s entire being echoes like a sigh.
“What do I look like?”

The incubus levels him with an exasperated glare. “Different,” he grumbles, “that’s all. Just different.”

“How different?” Keith presses, and goes still as a heavy golden collar is fixed in place around his neck. It’s cold over the thinner leather choker, and when the incubus tugs on the chain attached to it, Keith has no choice but to stumble forwards. “Hey!”

“I know obedience is not in your nature,” the incubus says, “but if we are to succeed, you must do as I say.” Keith swallows, and yellow eyes narrow. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Keith says. Nimble claws affix more golden adornments to him, thinner chains crossing over his chest and wrapping under his arms to the back of the collar, each one strung with gleaming freshwater pearls and black chips of onyx. His torso is bare, and his lower body isn’t exactly what Keith would call properly covered; swathed in a sash of thin white fabric as soft as silk but quite a bit more sheer. It goes down to mid-thigh, and is hitched high where it’s fastened at his right hip, exposing the entire side of his leg. He will have to walk very carefully.

The incubus continues to make adjustments and additions; dusting Keith’s hair with a glittering powder that makes him sneeze, clipping small and annoyingly jingly rings and jewels to Keith’s ears, and slipping his hands into strange fingerless white gloves which stay on through a series of tight, corset-esque lacing up his inner forearms. It’s...a lot.

“This seems like a lot,” Keith says.

The incubus jerks on the leash and Keith wheezes. “Samhain is the largest and most important gathering Voidborn, and thus there are certain expectations,” he retorts. “Any pets who receive the great honor of accompanying their masters to the festivities must be dressed and presented accordingly.”

“Pets,” Keith repeats, and wrinkles his nose. “Euphemistic, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t.”

Keith frowns and looks up at him.

This is not the Shiro who took him to see fireworks on a hotel rooftop and gently kissed the iron rose over his throat, not anymore. His mood and appearance have changed since that morning, when he’d woken Keith with a few brusque words, waited impatiently while Keith ate a hasty breakfast, and whisked him off to Hell without so much as a warning. He looks more dragon than human in his true demon form, yet even then he retains some of Shiro’s features – or maybe that’s just wishful thinking.
His face is all sharp angles and deep shadows, head crowned by spiny protrusions and long, curling horns tipped with fine golden caps encrusted with diamonds. The incubus towers above him, even with the sulky hunch of his broad shoulders, and leathery black wings fold over his back, arching high above his head. The only garment he wears might as well be liquid shadow, shifting and shimmering around his waist and over his hips in a devastating sweep of black.

The incubus still wears the fire opal Keith gave him, but demons are vain creatures, so that’s unsurprising.

“What do I look like?” Keith repeats.

The incubus glares, but it’s half-hearted. Slowly, his anger falls away, and he just looks tired. “Like a pet,” he sighs. “No one will recognize you. See for yourself.”

Keith takes the gilded hand mirror that appears in the demon’s claws, and blinks at himself, thoroughly unsettled. His face looks like someone who saw him once had tried to draw him from memory, and exaggerated most of the features. He looks doe-eyed, lashes long and dark, and his nose is a perfect sharp curve. The slash of his mouth is framed with lips that are much nicer than his own, and the taper of his brows, jaw, and chin is severe, softened only by flushed cheeks on high cheekbones.

Everything is accentuated with softly-glowing gold and silver paint, smeared in clean curves over his cheekbones, nose bridge, forehead, chin, and lips. The swirls continue down his neck and shoulders and bare chest in esoteric symbols painted by careful claws earlier that day.

“It’s only an illusion,” the incubus adds, and when Keith focuses hard enough, the image does ripple, giving a glimpse of his true face below – except for the paint, which is very real, and stays, stubbornly shining. “With any luck, we’ll blend in to the crowd.”

Keith gives him a doubtful once-over. “I think you’re going to stand out a little.”

But the incubus snorts darkly, leaning in close with a smile that is not at all nice. “Believe it or not,” he says, “incubi are small greater demons, relatively speaking.”

Keith swallows, and keeps his chin tilted up stubbornly. “Oh,” he says. “How big are the biggest?”

The incubus’s lips curl. “Bigger than a dragon,” he says. Keith blanches and he heaves another sigh, grabbing the chain – leash – again. “Come on,” he mutters. “We must begin our journey to Daibazaal.”

Keith frowns, though he has no choice but to go where the leash tugs, following the incubus down the silent, dark hall in Kurobasanir’s palatial Hell home. Keith had so dreaded spending eternity here, trapped in a world of silk sheets and black marble and strange distant stars. But now...now, he supposes he’ll never set foot in this lonely, hollow place again.

But what of Kurobasanir? Will he take on other contracts, and fill this place with wayward human souls? Or will he stay here alone? Keith isn’t sure which option makes him feel worse.

“I can hear the utter discordance of your thoughts, and I’m not even trying to listen,” the incubus growls. “If you have questions, ask.”

“Why are we journeying to Daibazaal?” Keith asks, hurriedly to keep up with his longer strides. “Can’t you just transport us there with magic?”

He scoffs. “No. The place is heavily warded, and in any case, we are expected to arrive via
more...conventional travel.” The hallway widens and ends abruptly in a huge outdoor courtyard. Keith stares at the carriage waiting for them, open-mouthed. It’s a beautiful silver color with a black sheen like oil, and two creatures are attached to it that could be horses, but are most certainly not. They turn to Keith with eyes like coals, and snort smoke. Their hooves trail flame, and their coal black coats smolder with every shift of their muscled bodies.

“Nightmares,” the incubus says. The carriage door snaps open, and Keith starts, biting back a curse.

His fingertips spark reflexively as he eyes the dark interior and stomping nightmares. “You call this conventional?”

“Get in the carriage or I will carry you there,” the incubus warns.

Keith gets in.

* 

The air in the carriage is too warm, Keith thinks. Too close. So it’s only natural for him to clamber up into the incubus’s lap after the carriage has left the estate and begun to clatter along the road to Daibazaal.

He receives the cool raise of an eyebrow for his efforts. “What,” the incubus grits out, “are you doing.”

Keith tilts his head and lays a hand over the incubus’s chest. It rises and falls under his palm, and he imagines the rhythm becomes unsteady. “You need power, don’t you?” he asks. “This is it, after all...the main event.”

Golden eyes flicker. “I got you off yesterday,” he says, turning his face away. His jaw is tight and his brow is low.

“You just jerked me off,” Keith retorts. “Come on, Shiro –”

He stutters off into silence as the incubus pins him with a single look. “I am not Shiro anymore,” he says. “I am Kurobasanir; call me what I am.”

Keith furrows his brow, chest twinging at the demon’s resolute words. “I thought you said –”

“It does not matter,” he spits out, “what I may have said. Or done. I am not your Shiro, let that be the end of it. You will have him soon enough.”

Keith blinks. Pauses. And whispers, “Are you...you’re jealous. Aren’t you?”

A rumbling growl fills the carriage and Keith shivers, wondering exactly when he became so bold around ancient and powerful Voidborn. His lips lift, and he leans further into Kurobasanir, who is ignoring him, ears pinned back in blatant irritation. “Heh,” Keith says, exhaling hot under his jaw and spreading his legs wider to straddle a flexing thigh, “you are. Should I be flattered –”

“Shut up!”

Keith’s breath is torn from his chest as the demon whirls and shoves him against the side of the carriage, eyes wide and furious, chest heaving, claws digging hard into Keith’s shoulders where he grips him tight and harsh. Their noses nearly touch, and Keith holds very still, cursing himself for being so foolish. Just because the demon might have shown him a soft side doesn’t mean he
actually has one. He’s a fucking *demon*, and he has Keith at his mercy.

As soon as the snarled words issue from his lips, however, Kurobasanir looks like he wants to cut his own tongue from his mouth with a rusty butter knife, and releases Keith hastily. Keith sits on the edge of the cushioned seat, slumped against the wall, and checks his throat for blood. None, though he can feel the bruises forming.

The incubus has slid to the complete opposite end of the seat, which is only a few feet away. He’s bowing his head, and his wings droop. He doesn’t meet Keith’s eye.

Keith slides cautiously over, but stops just short of touching him. “Are you alright?” he asks, not knowing what else to say.

Kurobasanir huffs, tail wrapping around his own ankles. “You should not be asking *me* that, you ridiculous human.”

“But I am, you ridiculous demon.”

Kurobasanir sighs. “I’m fine,” he says, and shifts to look out the window at the eerie landscape rolling past; tall dark trees with branches like reaching hands. “Better than fine. Glad to be rid of you, after so long.”

Keith flinches, hard. “Was I that much of a nuisance to you?” he mutters. “As if you didn’t get the better end of the deal.”

Smoke fogs up the glass as the demon exhales. “Did I? You were the one orgasming most of the time.”

Keith’s eyes sting, and he blinks desperately. He will *not* cry right now. “That is not – !”

“And I don’t get to devour your soul,” Kurobasanir finishes. “So, all in all, a net loss for me, I think.”

Keith glares at him, though the incubus is still gazing out the window. “Then do it,” he says.

Kurobasanir turns slightly. “Do what?”

“Take my soul,” Keith snaps. “If you want it, then take it. That was our contract, in case you’ve forgotten. It’s right here.”

Kurobasanir stiffens, and with effort replies, “I don’t want it.”

Keith’s eyes burn, more tears threatening to spill, much to his chagrin. “Why not?” he demands. “Why the hell would you make a contract for a soul you don’t even want?”

He sniffs, and examines his claws, each one long and sharp enough to gut a man. “It was a slow realization,” he says, tone bored. “There’s no fun in keeping a soul who resists being broken every step of the way. Too much effort.”

Keith swallows back bile. “You wanted me *broken*?” he whispers.

Kurobasanir does turn to look at him then, and there’s something complicated in his eyes. “No,” he says. “I don’t. That’s why I’m not taking it.”

Keith searches his expression. “You’re just going to let me go.”
“Yes. With your Shiro.”

“Why?” Keith pleads.

“I just told you.” Kurobasanir shakes his head. “Your soul holds no further use for me. I...I will
find others, and…” He trails off, and the something becomes a little less complicated. He glances
away again. “And you will live out the rest of your days in your world, safe, and you will never
contact any Voidborn again.”

“Is that an ultimatum?” Keith whispers.

“It is an amendment,” Kurobasanir says. “I’ve changed the terms of our contract. That is all.”

They sit in silence as the carriage clatters on.

Then the demon adds, “If you would like to provide me with more power in the meantime, that is
etirely up to you. I will not stop you, now that we understand each other.”

Keith stares at him, incredulous. “You just shoved me against the wall –”

“I won’t even touch you,” Kurobasanir says, laying his hands down on the seat, perfectly relaxed.
“If you want, that is.” And he goes back to looking out the window.

Keith wants to punch something, he thinks. Or maybe scream. Or cry. Or...he doesn’t know. He
should be happy, right? He should be glad the demon is letting him go free. Such a thing is
unheard of, as far as Keith knows. He’s suspicious, but the demon has not lied to him before, and
now would be a strange time to start.

And, despite everything, he’s going to miss Kurobasanir. He’s going to miss him a lot. He’s getting
his Shiro back, yes, and that brings him indescribable happiness. But Keith knows things will not
be the same. His Shiro doesn’t even know the half of what Keith feels for him. And his Shiro has
never touched him in half the ways Kurobasanir has, or ever will.

Keith did not want pleasure, and he did not want attachment, but Kurobasanir has given him both,
and in that moment he is struck with the realization of how much Keith both hates and loves him
for that.

Mostly, loves. And that’s even worse.

So after a long while that is really embarrassingly not long at all, Keith scrambles across the seat
and back into Kurobasanir’s lap. Strong thighs tense under him, and the demon’s lip twitches, like
he’s surprised, like he didn’t think Keith would rise to the bait. Keith didn’t think Keith would do
that either, but clearly, he’s changed. Probably not for the better.

True to his word, the demon doesn’t touch him. He continues to look out the window with barely a
hitch in his breathing as Keith feels for his cock, drawing it out from the folds of the shadowy
garment. He’d forgotten about the change in size, and pauses to consider it. Is it pathetic to have
melancholic feelings about a cock? Keith, knowing the answer to that, shifts back on the demon’s
thigh until he can lean down, nearly bending himself in half, and suck the soft head of
Kurobasanir’s cock into his mouth.

Keith rests a hand on the demon’s upper thigh to steady himself as he sucks, dragging his tongue
over veins which gain definition as the flesh fills out and hardens in his mouth. There is no other
response from Kurobasanir; even his hands on the seat remain relaxed, or perhaps limp is a better
word for it. It sends a thread of dark uncertainty through Keith, and he sits up, wiping his mouth,
looking from the demon’s half-hard cock to his turned-away face.

“Is this okay?” Keith whispers, bracing himself for some mocking ridicule, but needing to know anyway.

Kurobasanir does not mock him. His eyelids lower, watching Keith from the corner of his eye. “Mm.” It’s little more than a low hum, but it’s an affirmative sound, and when Keith leans back down to touch him again, his arousal seems to come faster, easier. Comforted by that, Keith lets his eyes fall shut, pulling back to lick slow wet circles around the emerging head, rubbing his gloved hands over the ridged length, leaving small kisses on heated skin for a reason he cannot name.

The demon’s fully hard cock glistens in the low light of the carriage, leaking pearly beads of slickness which Keith gathers on his fingers, trembling from a mixture of nerves and embarrassment as he lifts up on his knees to reach behind himself and tease his hole open. Kurobasanir is still watching him out of the corner of his eye, feigning disinterest – or maybe he truly is disinterested; Keith doesn’t know, anymore. He fumbles to slide a finger inside himself, and can’t stop the sharp hiss he lets out at the intrusion; the slide is still too dry. He bites his lip in frustration, trying to press another inside, to just get it over with, but the angle is all wrong and it stings when he opens himself wider –

Kurobasanir rumbles under him, and magic ripples in the air between them as thick slickness covers Keith’s fingers. Keith blinks, and sneaks a look up at the incubus. Still looking away, but with a line between his brows that wasn’t there before. The slide in is much easier this time, and the magical gel tingles inside of him, warm and electric. Keith moans softly, stretching himself open with three fingers within minutes, and letting his head fall against Kurobasanir’s shoulder as he arches back onto his own hand. The demon is all solid, unmoving muscle beneath him, a tremor going through Kurobasanir’s body only when Keith finds his own prostate and groans, shifting forward and brushing their cocks together.

Keith takes his time working himself open, because he doesn’t want this to hurt. Leaving the incubus is already going to hurt enough as it is. Besides, he hopes it’s torturous for the demon to have Keith writhing and preparing himself for ages on his lap. Keith sneaks a look down at Kurobasanir’s cock and can’t help but smirk – he’s leaking uncontrollably, and the skin is so dark that it’s nearing a previously undiscovered shade of purple.

The carriage turns onto a new road, much bumpier than the previous path, and Keith decides enough is enough. He straddles as much of Kurobasanir’s lap as he can, already feeling the ache in his inner thighs, and positions the head of the demon’s cock at his hole. Kurobasanir exhales quietly and Keith watches his face as he lowers himself onto it, inch by inch.

He might as well be looking at a statue. Kurobasanir stays frozen, even when Keith gasps while he sinks down onto the widest part of the demon’s cock, his body opening to the stretch with an ease that can only be muscle memory.

The sound is too loud in the quiet carriage, and Keith gets louder when the carriage bounces on the road, driving Kurobasanir’s cock up into him before he’s ready for it. Keith groans, nails digging into the demon’s thighs and chest, panting as he adjusts, starting to move before he’s adjusted completely. Sensation tears through him, from the tingling lube to the hard burn of the demon’s cock as it sinks into him fully to the dull throb of his dick as he rubs it helplessly over Kurobasanir’s taut stomach.

And still, Kurobasanir does not react.

Keith wonders breathlessly if the demon can somehow turn off his nerve endings; if he can choose
not to feel. Humans, on the other hand, cannot help but feel whether they want to or not. That’s something else Keith both hates and loves.

Right now, mostly loves, as he rides Kurobasanir’s cock with hiccuping moans, losing himself to it because this is the last time, the last time he will ever see this damned demon, so what does it matter if he lets go a little? Any shame he had falls away; he’s stretched open and filled, and it doesn’t take long at all before he comes, clenching tight around Kurobasanir’s cock and leaving a sticky mess between their bellies.

But the demon doesn’t come; he stays hard and hot inside Keith, and Keith recognizes it for the challenge that it is. His insides twinge with sensitivity, and he grits his teeth as he shifts around, until the carriage bounces again and a swollen cockhead rubs over his prostate, coaxing a startled jerk from his softening cock. Keith whines, continuing to grind in the same spot, his cock smearing over shadowy skin and turning everything into a gray haze of oversensitivity.

It’s an accident when the carriage hits a particularly large bump in the road and sends Keith flying backwards, squeezing his legs tight around Kurobasanir’s thighs to stay on, but sending his upper body into a deep backbend that punches the air from his lungs and sends blood rushingsouthwards. Something catches him from falling onto the floor, but it’s not a hand; it’s the demon’s tail, pushing at the small of Keith’s back with the slightest pressure. Keith arches, staring up at the carriage ceiling, and feels the demon’s cock swell ever-so-thicker where it’s buried deep in him.

“I think it was plenty big enough,” Keith hisses through his teeth, in denial of the fact that he’s seeing stars and his cock is aching again.

Kurobasanir makes a noncommittal sound, but his lips are curved upwards, just a bit.

**Smug bastard.** Keith lunges forward, bottoming out on his cock in one fell sweep, and grabs the demon’s horns. Kurobasanir’s head jerks forward, and there’s a faint flash of annoyed gold before his cock moves inside of Keith, a deliberate wriggle that makes his toes curl and breath shorten. His tail moves, too, twisting up around Keith’s midsection and finding his neck with a firm squeeze. Keith twists, but only succeeds in trapping himself further, gaping soundlessly as the tail digs into his airway, circling like a noose.

Keith kicks weakly, unwittingly bouncing himself harder on Kurobasanir’s cock, his mind sparking with bewildered flashes of sharp sweet pain, oxygen, breathe, need to breathe; and overwhelming pleasure just this side of too much, deeper, more, need more, Shiro, kiss me.

The incubus closes his eyes, and it feels like a victory, even when the tail unwinds and Keith gasps for air and comes in a violent jolt of limbs and cock.

Of course the carriage has to roll to a sudden halt at that very moment.

Keith blinks, disoriented, and freezes as the window beside Kurobasanir slides down. There’s a tall, skeletal figure outside, and as they lean down, he sees their face is leathery, gaunt and edged with broken, jagged teeth along every curve. They stare at them both with cold, blank, white eyes. Keith’s arousal drains away in an instant, heart pounding in visceral terror and humiliation flooding him in its wake as the demon says after a long and purposeful pause, “All pets must be officially licensed and collared before they can be allowed into Daibazaal.”

Keith hates himself for hiding his face in the incubus’s chest as he replies to the other demon, but he can’t, he can’t look at that awful thing, and his horror grows exponentially as he realizes he might have to service the incubus in public, at the festival, in front of who fucking knows how many of these monsters who look at him like he’s nothing more than a scrap of meat to be devoured,
because to them, *that’s exactly what he is* –

The carriage starts moving again, and the window rolls up.

Keith can’t move; panic claws up his throat and chokes him worse than the incubus ever had.

A warm, heavy hand settles on his lower back, thumb rubbing small circles into his skin. Keith clings, because he’s scared. He is *so scared* of what’s about to happen, and of what he might have to do. But he cannot be scared. He has to be strong, for Shiro. He can’t save Shiro if he’s terrified out of his mind.

Soft lips brush over his brow and the incubus murmurs, “Are you okay?”

Keith gives a small shake of his head. He’s afraid of the incubus, too, he realizes. He wasn’t, for a while. He’d been lulled into a false sense of security by seconds of sweetness strung together to form the picture Keith wanted to see. But here, in his own realm, he’s colder, distant, harsher, and Keith thinks he was a fool for thinking he had an ally in the incubus. This is a contract, not a friendship, and certainly not a romantic relationship. And the incubus said it himself; he wants to be rid of Keith. He wants the contract to be over and he will not care about what Keith has to endure to get there –

Kurobasanir kisses him, claws weaving into his hair, tongue pushing insistent yet tender into Keith’s mouth. Keith yields, always weak for a good kiss, but he still keeps his hold on one horn, though he knows it’s an illusion of control.

Strong thighs flex under him, and Keith grunts at the very sudden reminder that he’s sitting on a demon’s cock. The kiss breaks abruptly, their lips connected by a thin line of saliva which breaks on Keith’s chin. Kurobasanir brushes it off roughly, his eyes bright as they fix upon Keith.

“I care,” he says, and it is the single best thing he could have said in that moment.

Keith sunders under his touch, and when the incubus presses him down onto the soft, satin seat, he goes, his legs parting for the incubus to thrust back inside him, slower than Keith expected. Kurobasanir cradles the back of Keith’s head in his hand and fucks him like he means it, kissing Keith as he rips strangled curses and whines from his lips.

Keith doesn’t let go of his horn, and Kurobasanir doesn’t make him. He sucks bruises into Keith’s throat and rakes his claws over Keith’s thigh as he drags him up to meet each thrust, splitting Keith open in more ways than one. The demon covers him, smoothes him, keeps Keith wrapped in sweating smoking warmth, and Keith forgets about breathing, buries his face in the demon’s neck, and sobs, or moans; he doesn’t know which.

“Baby,” Kurobasanir whispers, sharp teeth digging into delicate skin.

Keith comes a third time, and this time the incubus follows him.

Kurobasanir does not move away for a while. He stays over Keith, almost protective, exhaling over his jaw in shallow, measured pants. Keith finally lets his hand fall from the horn, numb from gripping so hard, and the incubus catches it in his own hand. Keith shivers.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Kurobasanir says, drawing back to look down at him. It’s a promise, and not one made lightly; Keith feels the magic reverberate through him.

“It will be,” Kurobasanir says, sitting up and taking Keith with him.

Keith doesn’t know which one of them the incubus is trying to convince.

*

Daibazaal is not a far cry from what Keith had imagined.

Everything seems to be on fire, for one thing. The carriage rattles through a valley of charred trees and sluggish lava flow, and Keith gazes out the window with Kurobasanir, whose expression is grim. Gray ash floats through the air outside like snow, carpeting the dead earth.

Keith wonders if Shiro walked this path, once. An image of Shiro’s pale face covered in ashes flashes through his head, and he shoves it away.

It’s not long before the valley of ashes gives way to the city, and Keith startles back as towering black edifices come into view, each one a mirrored obelisk, illuminated from within by stark violet lights. “What,” Keith breathes, “is that?”

“They’re called skyscrapers,” Kurobasanir murmurs, leaning his arm and head against the glass. “They’re just buildings.”

“Tall fuckin’ buildings,” Keith whispers. There are so many of them, spires rising up like a vast graveyard. More lights flicker past among their bases, flying through the air faster than Keith thought was possible. The road their carriage takes skirts the city proper, but one of the flying lights comes close enough for Keith to see its shape – it’s like a metal bird, falcon wings spread flat and stiff and shiny, dark glass paneling like eyes inlaid into its sides and head.

“Airplane,” Kurobasanir says. “Some use it as transportation.”

“There are people in there?” Keith gasps, pressing his face to the window in awe. The airplane is already flying away, and he swears he can hear a dull roar as it does so. Is it alive?

“Voidborn,” Kurobasanir corrects, “but, yes. At least a dozen. Some airplanes can hold hundreds.”

“That’s amazing,” Keith whispers.

“It’s an excessive and unnecessary use of power, is what it is,” Kurobasanir mutters.

Keith frowns, but sits back in his seat.

The carriage continues for another hour at least before it passes the city, which is another amazing thing – Keith never knew cities as large as this one even existed, in Hell or otherwise. But the city does end, and more charred trees come into view, but these trees are strung with fiery balls of light, bobbing and dancing between the branches. The lights intensify as they continue, and more carriages and various vehicles join them on the widening road. Keith slumps down in the carriage, not wanting to see any more faces filled with teeth if he can help it.

They stop with the other vehicles, and Kurobasanir takes ahold of Keith’s leash before grasping the door handle. He pauses, and turns to Keith. “You remember what I said,” he warns. “Do as I say or we will attract suspicion. You will be close to me the entire time. React as little as possible, and do not stare. Above all else, do not use your magic. You are not a human here, Keith. You are food – and believe me, that means different things to different demons.” Keith gulps. “If anyone, and I mean anyone, discovers you are a witch, then you become more valuable food. And hungry Voidborn have been known to take desperate measures.”
“I understand,” Keith murmurs. “No magic. No staring. No disobeying.”

“Good,” Kurobasanir says, and straightens up, his eyes adopting a dangerous glint. “Come, pet.”

And he opens the door.

* 

Keith is almost glad he’s leashed, or he’d be lost already. He’s never seen so many people in one place before, and calling the swarming crowd around him people might be both generous and inaccurate. He tries not to stare, but some things are impossible not to see, like the gelatinous blue blob that oozes past him, various objects suspended in its viscous frame; or the elephantine creature with a small white top hat, human eyes, and huge feathery wings; or the tall stork with goat legs and a pair of golden antlers who attempts to hand Kurobasanir a bright red apple full of worms. (He does not take it.)

Keith knows, both from his previous research and the book Hecate gave him, that most of the passerby are lesser demons. But some, including the one who approaches Kurobasanir as the crowd finally thins out, are higher in rank than the incubus.

The new demon looks like a normal middle-aged human man in all respects, except for his impressive black handlebar mustache, and his frog legs. They are large, green, and covered in warty pustules. The frog man stops in front of Kurobasanir and smiles, arms outspread.

“Kurobasanir,” he greets, green eyes twinkling. “You look well. I’d heard some frightful rumors.”

“Hezrou,” Kurobasanir says, inclining his head in a show of deference that Keith does not miss. “I am well. The rumors are wrong, as rumors often are. Happy Samhain.”

“Happy Samhain, indeed!” Hezrou eyes Keith, who resolutely does not eye him. “Ah, a new contract, fulfilled already? No wonder you look so well-fed.”

“Mm, yes,” Kurobasanir says, and pulls the chain taut. Keith gags and is forced a step forward; he doesn’t fight it. “Say hello to Lord Hezrou, pet.”

Keith blinks, and whispers, “H-hello, Lord Hezrou?”

Hezrou throws back his head and laughs. “Timid one, is he? You always do good work. But, really, pet? Hasn’t he got a proper name? As I recall, you’ve always tended to get attached to your playthings. One of your more redeeming qualities.”

Kurobasanir chuckles, and cards his claws through Keith’s hair. “I call him Red,” he says.

Hezrou looks at Keith’s pale skin, black hair, and violet eyes, and replies, “I’m afraid I don’t see your reasoning.”

Cold claws dig into the nape of Keith’s neck and he hunches over, feeling the very tips pierce through. “It’s the color he bleeds,” Kurobasanir replies, claws dragging away in points of ice down Keith’s back. “My Red.”


Kurobasanir growls under his breath, “We must hurry. Hezrou has friends, and I hate them all.”
“Do they all have frog legs?” Keith asks.

Kurobasanir shoots him a look and tugs him through the crowd. “No,” he adds. “They’re toad legs.”

Keith’s snarky retort dies in his throat when what can only be the arena looms into view. It’s a huge circular amphitheater, all built of the same glossy black mirrors as the skyscrapers, seats filled with Voidborn of every shape and size; thousands of them.

There are humans, too – they’d been hidden in the crowd, but it’s easier to see them in the spread out audience. Every one of them is chained and bound in some way, and the Voidborn have decorated them as they see fit – some wear feathers and furs, others are so heavily laden with jewels and gold that their mobility is hindered. Keith sees several with colorful tattoos sleeving their arms and wrapping around their necks, and shudders.

“Stay close,” Kurobasanir mutters, and this time Keith welcomes the claws framing the back of his neck. They feel like a shield.

The incubus leads him to the first few rows of the amphitheater, which seem to be reserved for greater demons, many of them Galra.

For chaos entities, they’re almost...elegant. Their skin ranges from pale lavender to bruised plum, they all stand well over seven feet, and most have yellow eyes and sharp teeth, but that’s where the similarities end. Some have fur, others scales, others shells. Some have grotesquely large hands; others have more human digits tipped with curved claws. Some have tails, others have fins or horns or both. Every one of them has a human pet, and emanates such strong magic that Keith’s eyes water.

Thankfully, Kurobasanir’s seat is not next to a Galra. The demon they sit beside must be another greater incubus, slightly larger than Kurobasanir, with blue skin and a strange crest that reminds Keith of an ocean creature. He grins at Kurobasanir as he takes his seat, and his teeth are serrated like a shark’s. There’s a human at his feet...no, not a human; its skin is purple and its eyes are yellow. A Galra pet? It leans against the blue incubus’s calf and arches up into his casual stroking like a cat.

“Blaytz,” Kurobasanir says, settling in his seat and bringing Keith with him. Keith perches awkwardly on his thigh, and looks at his feet, trying to make eye contact with the Galra pet. Its eyes are closed now, though, and it’s purring.

The blue incubus, Blaytz, smiles wider and claps Kurobasanir on the back. “Kuro!” he exclaims. Kurobasanir’s nose wrinkles at the nickname, but he returns the smile, pained. “Wasn’t sure if you’d make it this year, but I should’ve known better. You’re not one to miss the Tourney. And I see you’ve brought a new pet, too.” Blaytz winks at Keith, who huddles closer to Kurobasanir. Blaytz’s smile falls. “He looks spooked. Wait...don’t tell me Hezrou already found you?”

Kurobasanir grimaces. “I’m afraid so.”

“Greedy bastard,” Blaytz grumbles. “Not our fault he can’t get his own damn contracts. Speaking of which...”

“Ah,” Kurobasanir says. “This is Red. Recently completed contract.”

Blaytz makes a thoughtful sound. “He a witch, then?”

“No,” Kurobasanir says. “Just clever, managed to get ahold of some books I thought were lost for
centuries. Curiosity killed the cat, as they say.”

Blaytz looks like he doesn’t quite buy it, but he nods sagely. “That it did.”

Kurobasanir nods to the Galra pet. “I see you still have your Seth?”

“Of course.” The blue incubus pets the Galra’s bare head, and it purrs louder. “He’s all I need. Contracts tire me, as you know. Humans are such petty creatures, and if I receive one more summoning from a man who wants to rule the world or kill his brother or make a woman so far out of his league it’s laughable fall in love with him...well, I don’t know what I’ll do, but it won’t be pretty.”

Kurobasanir laughs, but it’s quiet, contained. The lights overhead, violet like all the others, begin to dim. Blaytz leans forward, lips parted, and Kurobasanir does the same. He nudges Keith off his lap to sit at his feet, and doesn’t stop Keith from peeking through the railings to get a better view of the arena below.

Spotlights glare on the packed earth, and an announcer’s voice echoes through the amphitheater, speaking words in a language Keith does not know. Whatever they say makes the crowd go wild, though, and with the din as cover, Kurobasanir mutters to Blaytz, “I’ll be honest with you. I’m looking for someone; one of the competitors. Human gladiator by the name of Takashi Shirogane. Have you heard of him?”

Blaytz’s eyes widen. “Heard of him?! Kuro, who hasn’t? That thing is death incarnate; human or not, my bets are on him winning. Him, or Myzax.” He frowns. “Why are you looking for him?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Kurobasanir hisses. “I need to speak to him. Do you know the way into the holding cells?”

Blaytz glances about nervously. “Kuro,” he says under his breath, “you don’t wanna go down there. Lady Haggar, she’s...that’s her domain. Shirogane, the Champion, is all hers. She doesn’t let anyone else so much as breathe on him –”

“Don’t presume to lie to me,” Kurobasanir growls. “I know you have friends behind the scenes. Can they get me in, or not?”

Blaytz gulps. “I...they could, I think, but once you’re in –”

“How?” Kurobasanir interrupts.

The blue incubus is sweating visibly. “During...during intermission; that’s your best chance. The Champion is slated to fight just before then, and they’ll return him to his cell to recuperate, if he survives.”

Keith’s heart pounds. He closes his eyes and thinks, Shiro, just a little longer. You just have to fight one last time, and then we’ll get you out of here.

“Very well,” Kurobasanir says, leaning back in his chair. “Until intermission, then.”

With a deafening fanfare of music and cheers, the Tourney begins.

*  

Keith doesn’t have a weak stomach, but the next several hours are...difficult to watch.
As far as he can determine, there aren’t any rules except kill or be killed. Honor and chivalry do not factor into the fights; it’s just pure, raw savagery, tooth and blade ripping armor and flesh open with relish. Dismemberment is expected, and the crowd howls when a particularly gruesome fight ends with one gladiator literally ripped in half, their still-twitching torso landing on the stained red sand and their legs flying off into the stands.

Some gladiators are less brute force and more calculated violence. A slight demon with a spider’s head and long, spindly claws plucks out its opponent’s eyes and proceeds to circle the screaming victim for several more agonizing minutes, finishing it off with clean slices across vital veins. It clicks its forelimbs together in delight when they finally fall.

Kurobasanir does not watch the fights half so much as he watches Keith; the incubus’s eyes are hot on the back of his neck, impossible to ignore.

But Keith does not react to the gore, not even when a beast with a crown of horns impales the other gladiator and tears him to bloody shreds which it gobbles up as if starving. Maybe it is. What do they do to the gladiators to make them so vicious and bloodthirsty? Torture, Keith thinks, or maybe some kind of reconditioning. Or maybe they give them some kind of choice, and this choice is somehow the better one.

Shiro has had to endure this for over a year. How has he survived? A better question – how much of him has survived?

Just before Shiro’s fight, Blaytz leans over and mutters, “Hezrou and his cronies have their eye on your pet. Sure he’s just a clever human?”

Kurobasanir pulls Keith to him, glancing subtly back and stiffening. “I’m sure,” he growls. “What does Hezrou want?”

“I’ve heard he’s been working with Lady Haggar,” Blaytz whispers. “Maybe as her spy.”

Kurobasanir’s lip curls back from his teeth. “We’ll see,” he mutters, and does not let go of Keith.

Keith isn’t listening to them anymore. He’s staring out at the arena as the announcer’s voice blares through the amphitheater again, and this time, Keith catches Shiro’s name. His entire body strains forward, and Kurobasanir’s claws dig in.

The first figure to enter the arena is Myzax. The demon is a giant, well over ten feet tall, and just as broad; his arms are huge, meaty; his legs are thick as tree trunks. Myzax roars as he lumbers over the sand, dragging his weapon, a glowing club, behind him. He gnashes cracked teeth and glares at the other side of the arena with squinting yellow eyes.

The other gate opens, and a much smaller figure steps out.

Keith stops breathing. It’s him. Shiro strides into the arena with the measured gait of a predator, his entire right side illuminating with a sickly violet glow as the Galran arm activates. The illumination gives Keith a glimpse of his face, and as it does he flinches back – Shiro is sneering, his expression one of open, unadulterated cruelty. It looks wrong. It is wrong.

“Shiro,” Keith whispers, “what have they done to you?”

“Keith,” Kurobasanir hisses, leaning over him, “quiet.”

Shiro lifts his arm, and blinding light fills the arena.
Myzax howls, too big and slow to escape the blast, and when the dust clears, there’s a chunk of flesh missing from one arm, smoking and burnt. Shiro laughs, and Keith goes cold. The sound is wild, maniacal, unhinged. Keith shifts back instinctively, his back hitting Kurobasanir’s legs, trembling. Myzax snarls in rage and pain, charging for Shiro, who dodges and rolls just in time to miss the deadly swing of the club. It pulses with the same violet energy, and Keith knows that if it so much as touches Shiro, he’ll be in trouble.

So when Myzax’s next hit sends Shiro sprawling as energy arcs off it and into Shiro’s back, Keith bites his lip so hard he tastes blood. There’s an agonizing second during which the entire crowd is silent, and then Shiro leaps to his feet, burnt shreds of fabric falling from his ragged shirt, and fires at Myzax again. He’s injured, walking unbalanced and blood dripping behind him, but it doesn’t slow him down at all, as if he feels no pain.

The second blast catches Myzax in the abdomen, and the behemoth goes down to his knees with a thunderous grunt, spittle falling from his lolling jaws. Shiro approaches without hesitation, the glowing arm coalescing into a thin blade of light. Myzax roars and raises the club again; it connects with the light sword and is sawed in half in a horrific screech. The end of the club rolls across the arena and the audience shouts, chanting Shiro’s name.

He takes his time responding to their call, circling Myzax lazily, easily avoiding the demon’s frantic swipes at him. On one swipe, Shiro’s blade catches his fingers, slicing three of them clean off. Keith covers his mouth. He thinks he might throw up. Kurobasanir is hunched over him, and if Keith had been looking at his face, he would have seen fear and uncertainty plastered all over it, yellow eyes darting between Keith and Shiro.

The fight ends quickly after that. It only takes a stab to the chest as Shiro leaps in a graceful upwards arc, kicking Myzak in the gut and knocking him backwards as he plunges his sword into the demon’s heaving chest.

As the crowd rises to their feet in thunderous applause, Kurobasanir hefts Keith under his arm and stands. “Blaytz,” he hisses. “Now.”

“Alright, alright!” Blaytz mutters. “Her name is Acxa; she’s a Galra, blue skin and constantly looks constipated, can’t miss her. She should be guarding the holding cells.” He bites his lip. “Tell her she owes me a favor. Big one. She tries to give you shit; tell her I still know where Ezor lives.”

Kurobasanir nods. “Thank you, Blaytz. Enjoy the rest of the Tourney.”

The incubus carries Keith down through the stands, weaving around the obliviously cheering audience which is slowly beginning to settle as guards come to retrieve Shiro from the arena. He’s being showered with flowers, coins, and showers of magical sparks, but he doesn’t cheer with them. He just stands there, head bowed, suddenly drained. Hope flutters in Keith’s chest – it’s not too late. After all, he’s still Shiro. And the Shiro Keith knows would rather die than become the monster they want him to be.

“We’re being followed,” Kurobasanir snaps, pushing past a turtle with long antennae. “We’ll have to make this quick.”

“What about the Holts?” Keith hisses, elbowing him.

The incubus squeezes him tighter. “We’ll figure it out.”

Cool shadow washes over them as Kurobasanir steps into some kind of passage. It must lead below the arena, but it’s flanked by guards, helmets hiding their faces and gleaming spears strapped to
their backs. From where he’s held under Kurobasanir’s arm, Keith can see someone moving through the crowd towards them – it’s Hezrou, followed by a small troupe of other demons, many with toadlike characteristics.

“State your business,” the guards say.

Kurobasanir’s brow lowers. “Let us through,” he says, voice low and persuasive. “We must speak to Acxa.”

The guards shudder, but do not yield. “Acxa is busy at her post,” the guards reply. “You must return after the Tourney is complete.”

Hezrou is getting closer. Keith drives his elbow into the incubus’s ribs as hard as he can, and Kurobasanir lets go of him with a grunt. Keith whirls on his heel, lifts his chin, and summons up that voice in his head as he points at the guards and says, “You will let us through, or you will regret it.”

“What are you doing –” Kurobasanir starts.

Wordlessly, the guards step aside. Keith runs past them, and the bewildered incubus hurries after him.

“Keith, what was that,” Kurobasanir demands, but Keith can’t hear him, blood roaring in his ears. They’re so close. All of it, everything, has led up to this.

The passage is dark and narrow, lined with violet wall sconces, and though it forks off into many other paths, Keith knows where to go. He can feel it. He runs down the left fork, the incubus hot on his heels, and sees a lone figure standing in front of a barred gate.

“Acxa,” Keith pants, coming to a halt. Kurobasanir stops beside him. The Galra looks up at them, her yellow eyes narrowed and dark lips pursed. She’s heavily armored, twin curved scimitars sheathed on each hip, and narrow bat wings rustle warily on her back.

“Who are you?” Acxa retorts, her suspicious glance turning into a glare as she looks Kurobasanir over. “What business does a greater incubus have in the fighting pits?”

“You owe Blaytz a favor,” Kurobasanir drawls. She blanches, hands going to her scimitars. “He told me to tell you he knows where Ezor lives.”

She bares her teeth, jaw working. “How dare you threaten me,” Acxa snarls.

“His threat, not mine,” Kurobasanir says. “We just need to get into the cellblock, and be given access to Takashi Shirogane’s cell.”

She gapes at them. “Just? Do you know how valuable of an asset he is to Lady Haggar?”


Acxa hesitates, then shakes her head. “Can’t let you in. Just the pet.” Kurobasanir opens his mouth to protest, and she holds up a warning hand tipped with silver claws. “You’ll be noticed within five seconds. If you want the Champion, only the pet has a chance at getting him out.”


“Keith, no,” Kurobasanir mutters. “I don’t like this…”
“It’s my contract,” Keith retorts. “Not yours.”

Kurobasanir doesn’t look happy about it, but he stands by while Acxa opens the gate and walks in with Keith. She grasps his wrist in a loose grip and murmurs, “The Champion is at the end of the hall. You can speak to him through the bars –”

“I have to get inside the cell,” Keith interrupts, walking faster.

“You can’t be serious,” Acxa hisses. “You let him go free, and he’ll destroy everything and everyone in his path. I don’t care if you knew him once; he’s not human anymore.”

“You’re wrong,” Keith whispers.

They stop at the end of the hall. The cell before them is a dark, metal box with a single door. Acxa slides back the tiny slitted window at the top of it. “There,” she says. “Talk to him.”

Keith stares her down, hands curling into fists. “Let me in,” he says.

Her eyes widen as her hands move against her own accord. “Wait,” Acxa gasps, “stop, what are you – this wasn’t part of the –”

She turns her key in the lock, and the door clicks. Keith slides it open and steps inside, letting it clang shut behind him.

The cell is dark, illuminated only by the thin, weak square of light from the door’s window. It smells damp and sour, like mold and sweat and piss, with the underlying stench of slow, sickening rot.

“Shiro,” Keith calls softly, extending his hand, waiting for his eyes to adjust. “Shiro, it’s me. It’s Keith. I know it’s been a long time, and I’m sorry, but...but I promised I was gonna get you out, and I’m here now, to do that.”

The shadows shift, and a faint magenta glow issues from the far corner, revealing a tall silhouette. He hunches over, stumbling a little as he gets to his feet. Keith can hear his labored breathing.

“Shiro,” he says again. “Are you hurt? Do you need help?”

The glow intensifies, and Keith blinks, the silhouette’s features cast into the strange light one by one. As soon as Keith sees his face, his gut twists. Shiro isn’t smiling. He isn’t sneering. He isn’t crying. He isn’t grimacing. He’s...nothing. There’s nothing in his expression; it’s as blank as a doll’s, eyes like tarnished coins, reflecting no light, empty.

“Shiro?” Keith whispers, fingertips heating up with tiny blue-gold flames, his heart pounding out of his chest. “Shiro, hey, look at me; it’s me, it’s Keith, you –”

Shiro takes a faltering step forwards, and tilts his head. The movement is mechanical. Then his lips move, dry and cracked with blood, shaping out a word in a hollow, raspy voice Keith does not recognize. “Keith,” he says. His voice, like his face, is nothingness. There is no tone, no emotion, no recognition. It’s just a word, and he’s simply repeating it.

He’s just an echo.

Keith takes a step back, forgetting the metal door behind him. It clangs, and Shiro twitches at the sound, his eyes brightening, but not in a way Keith likes. A low, crackling hum thrums through the air, and he lifts his arm. Keith stares at him. “Shiro,” he whispers, “Shiro, please, don’t –”
Shiro fires at the door, and a ragged hole is left in the metal where Keith was standing a second before. He’d rolled out of the way at the last moment, and stands several feet away, palms filled with fire, shaking his head. This has to be some kind of trick, or test, or both. This isn’t Shiro. This isn’t even human. Is Keith meant to fight him? Is he meant to kill him?

But what if – what if this is him? What if Kurobasanir was right, and there is nothing left to save –

Keith can’t afford to consider that. Shiro is lunging for him, a feral growl in his throat, and Keith scrambles away, trailing sparks, temporarily confusing him in the shifting darkness. “Stop!” Keith cries, lifting up his palms. “Shiro, snap out of it, whatever it is they’ve done to you, you’ve got to – augh!”

A violet sword swings through the air in a sizzling sweep, screeching over the metal and singeing the top of Keith’s hair as he escapes in a crouched run, his head spinning, his flames popping and flickering, as conflicted as he feels. Distantly, he wonders why Shiro isn’t using his magic. Or did they take that from him, too?

But Keith promised he would never give up on Shiro.

So even when Shiro charges for him, sword raised and eyes vacant, Keith is grasping for solutions in his dizzy head, because he can fix this, he can save Shiro; he has to. Tears prick at Keith’s eyes as he forces Shiro back with a wall of fire, but he can’t concentrate long enough for it to hold, because the sight of Shiro’s scarred skin burning is too much; made worse by the fact that he doesn’t so much as flinch. He just keeps advancing, like Keith is nothing, too.

Keith can’t kill him. He didn’t sell his soul for that. He didn’t sell his soul to be killed by Shiro, either, but sometimes, the world is just a bitch like that.

Keith closes his eyes as the sword slashes towards his throat.

Radiant white light explodes in front of him, and Keith’s eyes flash open as Shiro crumples to the ground, his back seared open by crackling lightning. Keith follows its path, eyes fixing upon the incubus, who stands in the cell doorway. The door has been ripped off its hinges by desperate claws, and Kurobasanir’s palm is still glowing. Keith has seen that lightning before, splitting the desert sky in two over a deadly canyon and crashing whitewater. It’s Shiro’s.

His lips part.

“Keith,” the incubus whispers.

Shiro groans at his feet, and Keith falls to his knees, grasping at Shiro’s torn shirt, his bloodied face, his ghostly skin. “Shiro,” Keith gasps, trying to lift him up, “hey, shh, it’s gonna – it’s gonna be alright –”

“No, Keith,” Kurobasanir whispers. “That’s not what I mean. I wasn’t sure, before, I thought...I hoped maybe it was only half. Maybe she hadn’t taken all of it. But...” He swallows, kneeling down beside Shiro, who is choking on his own blood, and pressing his palm to the cauterized wound between his shoulders.
Shiro jerks, coughing harder, and Keith tries to shove the incubus away. “You’re hurting him, stop, stop it –”

If Shiro’s eyes are empty, then Kurobasanir’s are as full as the night sky, a million years and lights and worlds and lives, each and every one of them dripping with untold grief.

“It’s just me, Keith,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

He electrocutes Shiro in a single sharp pulse and Keith knows his heart’s stopped without even checking. Keith looks up at the incubus, his hands trembling where they cradle Shiro’s still, white face. “We had a contract,” Keith says, numb. “How could you – we – you killed him. You weren’t supposed to –”

“He did exactly what he was supposed to. He brought you right to me.”

There’s another figure standing in the doorway, her long white hair carried by an unfelt wind, her eyes glowing beneath the penumbra of her hood.

“No,” Kurobasanir breathes, turning to Keith in horror. “Keith, I didn’t –”

“Almost exactly,” Haggar corrects. “He wasn’t supposed to kill my Champion. But he’ll pay his debt to me, oh yes, he will.” She snaps her fingers, golden energy racing up her arms. “Guards!”

“You won’t take him from me,” Kurobasanir growls, standing between her and Keith. There’s a tremor in his voice. There’s a tremor in Keith, too. Shiro is dead. He shakes himself.

Guards surround the outside of the cell, not like the others they’ve seen here. They’re cloaked, bodies hidden, faces reduced to pale, tapered ovals slitted with four golden eyes and a fifth vertical down their brows. Their hands spark with the same golden energy.

“Archmagus Honerva,” Keith says, rising unsteadily to his feet.

Her lips twist. “That is no longer my name,” she says. Keith looks closer, remembering Allura’s words, and as her robes swirl around her feet, he sees the moment they catch and cling on her abdomen. It’s swollen, round with child. His eyes lift, and he knows she knows he’s seen.

“So it’s true,” Keith says, shock making him bolder, pushing him past Kurobasanir and towards the witch. “You carry Zarkon’s child, a cambion.” He shakes his head. “It will kill you.”

Haggar smiles like she knows something he doesn’t. “It won’t,” she says. “Not as long as I have you.”

The voice in the back of Keith’s mind stirs uneasily.

“Keith,” Kurobasanir pleads, “run.” And he blasts a hole in the side of the cell, ozone smoke clouding the area, giving Keith the cover he needs to sprint out, tossing a fireball over his shoulder as the guards’ hands reach for him, snagging on the golden jewelry. Keith rips free, but the momentum sends him tumbling. Kurobasanir bellows in raw agony behind him, and Keith stumble upright at the sound, feeling his way through the smoke, his hands connecting with silken robes.

Keith is yanked backwards by the leash, choking and grasping at his own throat as he’s dragged across the floor, thrown at Haggar’s feet. She nudges at his face with a hard boot, and he turns away, gasping for air. Her expression is almost fond, if her face had been capable of fondness anymore.
“Why,” Keith grits out, “why are you doing this? You were – you’re brilliant, I read all of your theories, your experiments, you – you were going to change the world –”

She laughs, and Keith’s vision tunnels. Kurobasanir screams, fainter than before, and Keith lifts his head, searching for him, finding no one. Haggar’s shadow lengthens, violet energy intertwining with the gold, wrapping around her in a deadly net of light.

“I will change the world,” she says with certainty. “I will finish what your mother began. But to do it, I need you, Keith. You always had so much potential. How could I let that go to waste?”

“Archmagus,” Keith whispers, “you’ve lost your mind.”

She puts her boot down on his sparking hand, and Keith cries out, bones threatening to break under her heel. “No,” she hisses, “I have lost nothing. You, however, will lose everything, if that’s what it takes. You are the key, Keith.”

He shoves himself up on a scraped elbow, fire ready in his free hand. The flames reflect in her eyes as they fade to the brown Keith remembers, and his magic breaks like a thread strung too tight. She casts the net of energy over him, each line a molten blade, and he blacks out from the pain.

* 

Consciousness evades him, slipping through his grainy vision as the guards drag him down another narrow passage, past cells that rattle and beg in broken voices to be opened. Keith convulses with pain, and someone says in an inhuman rasp, It’s beginning. Lady Haggar quickened the urgency of their bond – the incubus will be weak.

And the boy?

It will be torture for his mortal body. He will do whatever Lady Haggar asks of him to end the pain.

Keith squeezes his eyes shut, his skull throbbing. His hands are bound, cuffed in a clanging metal that sends an unpleasant sensation of pins and needles racing up from wrist to elbow. Dimeritium manacles, he thinks, fighting to stay awake. They cut him off from his magic. A wave of panic crashes over him, fingers twitching uselessly, sending him spiraling once more into crushing darkness.

* 

He’s in a cell, and everything hurts.

Keith’s head lolls back against the cold stone wall, eyes opening slow and sticky, as if his lashes had been glued together. He’s been stripped of the jewelry, and the paint on his torso is smeared beyond repair, but he can feel the weight of the collar around his neck. The leather collar is still there, too, hidden under it. That’s something, he tries to tell himself.

But his hope crumples as he realizes Kurobasanir gave him that collar, and Kurobasanir is the one who betrayed him to Haggar. Didn’t he? She’d said that, she’d said... He did exactly what he was supposed to. He brought you right to me.

The incubus had denied it. But he had also murdered Shiro.

Keith swallows back the lump in his throat. He doesn’t know what to think. All he knows is that Shiro is dead; was probably dead long before Keith even made a contract. Keith was too late. He
failed. If he had gotten here a little sooner, maybe…maybe things would have turned out alright.

But, the look in Kurobasanir’s eyes…the sound of his voice, of his cries…

No. Incubi are masters of deception. Keith was a fool.

He stares dully at the stone walls. They drip with grimy water, puddling in the corners of the cell, lending an unwelcome chill to the air. Keith shivers, but as the minutes pass, it’s not because he’s cold. He’s burning up, skin flushed and feverish, squirming against the thin fabric around his hips before he freezes, panting, revulsion creeping over his skin as he understands what Haggar has done.

Keith is not going to die here. He is going to suffer.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith slips in and out of awareness in the dark cell for countless hours, digging his nails into his clammy palms as unwanted arousal prickles over his skin, hardening his cock to the point of pain, his gut filled with a phantom ache. He draws blood, and looks dully at the drying red as it flakes off his fingertips. The thought that such a thing has power is laughable, now. Keith was in over his head here from the start. He knew he couldn’t possibly control a greater incubus. But he’d had to try, for Shiro.

The thought of Shiro sharpens the throbbing pain into an agonizing slice through him. A low whimper falls from his lips unbidden, and he hears mocking laughter outside the cell – guards, he thinks, and turns his head to see them. But the cell has only the one slitted window in the door, and all he can see are silhouettes, blurry at the edges, twisting into looming horned heads with golden eyes. Keith’s eyes water, and he looks away, leaning his head against the cold stone and closing his eyes.

He dreams of home. Hot desert wind blows dust over creaking wooden steps, and Keith savors the warm rough wood under his palms, leaning forward on the porch railing. His father built this house, years ago...hadn’t he? Keith frowns, remembering rumors, whispers through town – his father wasn’t from this place; he’d been born much further west, engaged to a wealthy heiress...and then things had fallen apart. Why had his father left? Who had his father left for?

Keith squints into the swirling dust as someone emerges from it, black cloak flowing behind them. The ground they walk upon blackens and burns with every step, boots thudding heavy and final on the porch steps.

Shiro’s eyes are quicksilver and his smile is deadly. “It’s been awhile, Keith,” he says, and presses himself smooth and close all along Keith’s back. Keith is caged in, staring blankly into the dust storm, shivering as dry chapped lips drag over his neck. Teeth tug at the leather cord.

“Why did you leave?” Keith whispers, dust rushing into his mouth, choking all down his throat.

“I never left,” Shiro whispers back, hand sliding down Keith’s chest, stopping to squeeze and press down between his legs. Keith’s body bows. He gasps, coughing up brown dust turned black, clouds of it blocking out the faded blue of the sky, surrounding the two of them in darkness. Shiro’s hand is bigger than he remembers, and his nails dig in like fine knives.

“I was right beside you,” he murmurs, and then they’re falling, black dust taking shape, countless shadow hands grasping at Keith as he tumbles through a gaping void, the smell of rot and blood and death growing stronger the longer he falls. Shiro is gone, ripped away from him like mist. Keith screams, but his voice is broken, hoarse and strangled, and he knows no one can hear him.

Keith lands with a crunch on a dry, shifting surface, and when he looks, he sees bones; bleached skulls and yellow teeth and cracked femurs and empty rib cages and spines fractured in fifty places.

Where are you, little one?

The voice that calls for him is ancient and terrible, followed by the dry rustle of scales on stone –
no, bone. Keith sees its slitted eyes in the gloom, cold gold, smoke billowing from parted jaws. Keith tries to run, but he might as well be running through a pit of glass. The bone splinters and slices into his skin, his blood staining the fragmented skeletons starkly, and the voice growls in disapproval.

*Stop,* it commands, and Keith stops, covered in cuts and dust, his breath shallow. *I never wanted your pain.*

Keith’s mind says *dragon,* but his instincts say *demon.* Either way, it towers over him, the imperious curve of its neck shining oil black, wings spread in a canopy of night. Its head lowers, and he sees the scar over its muzzle, a thick pink slash, a vulnerability it has chosen to show him. *I’m sorry,* Kurobasanir says. *She made me forget. But I remember now, Keith. Let me show you. Let me help you to understand, before it is too late.*

*Who are you?* Keith whispers as golden eyes fade to gray. *You were dead.*

*Yes,* Kurobasanir says, and bathes him in flame.

*Shiro* is strapped to a metal table, face frozen in an expression of raw terror. The only movement is his twitching fingers. His skin has a grayish hue.

“Well?” Honerva says, because she still looks like Honerva, here; brown hair streaked white and eyes wild but still human. “What are the results?”

The laboratory shakes, then, a dull rumble growing to a thunderous roar, and the hooded druids around the table turn to face the sound. It issues from a tall glass tube across the narrow hall, and inside the tube is a monster. It cannot settle on a single shape, and twists in a writhing protean mass of shadow and flickering lightning, howling in agony. Honerva draws in a sharp breath, hurrying to the tube, pressing her palms to the glass and staring in at the tortured being.

“Lady Haggar,” a druid says, touching Shiro’s brow with a thin finger, “we have a pulse.”

“Lightning,” Honerva whispers. “Do you see it? He’s there. It’s working.”

“The infernal quintessence used to power the subject’s arm has eroded his soul,” another druid adds. “He may not be strong enough to overpower the demon’s quintessence.”

“Good,” Honerva says. “We may have slain Kurobasanir, but demons are difficult to erase completely. The incubus’s remaining quintessence should latch onto the human’s soul in the symbiosis I hypothesized. Kurobasanir is dead, but he will live on through Takashi Shirogane.”

“As a parasite,” a druid says.

“In a way,” Honerva muses. “But Kurobasanir will make him stronger. He will have the incubus’s memories, not his own. He will not know or remember the boy. He will only know his nature – an incubus. And he will bring the boy to us, when the time is ripe.”

“How can we be certain the incubus will not destroy the boy before bringing him to us?” one of the druids asks. “Even Kurobasanir was often uncaring of the limits of human bodies.”

“The subconscious can be a powerful thing,” Honerva replies, stepping back with a smile. “When the demonic quintessence overpowers the human soul, that soul will be trapped in the back of the incubus’s mind. His fondness for the boy was immense, and I suspect that will translate as a kind
of sentimental protective streak in the incubus. If not…” She shakes her head. “We only need the boy alive, not well.”

“Hecate will be displeased,” another druid murmurs, and Honerva stiffens, turning slowly to face them. “You know the boy is among the most favored of her offspring. Surely it would be wiser to find another less valued –”

Honerva ensnares the druid in a net of vicious light, and snarls, “He is favored because he is powerful. I know Hecate, and I know her affections are not given without reason. My son will be just as powerful, if not moreso. I need a subject who will make me stronger, not weaker. Besides, he is the only one of her offspring who is not yet mature, and has not yet discovered his nature. I will take his soul and its dormant Void magic now, when it is easily molded and altered. That will give me the immortality he would have had, while retaining my human soul.”

“No human has ever succeeded in making themselves a cambion,” the druid says, voice faint with pain.

“That is not my goal,” Honerva retorts. “All I need is the power of a cambion.”

“But the quintessence treatments –”

“The quintessence is not enough!” Honerva cries. “If I am to be immortal and access the power of Oriande, this is the only way, short of capturing Hecate herself.”

“You will draw her wrath,” the druid warns.

Honerva’s lips twist. “She was my mentor,” the witch says. “I learned a great deal from her, including how to hide things from her. She cannot be wrathful if she cannot even see her child. The incubus will only serve to shield him further. Now, silence.” She flicks her wrist.

The ensnared druid explodes in a burst of dust and shredded shadow.

Shiro, no longer Shiro, lies still on the table, blinking slow and blank at the ceiling.

The creature in the tube moans, clawing weakly at the glass; a damned, helpless thing.

* Glass shatters and Honerva, now Haggar, twisted beyond human, screams.

“How,” she hisses, “how did he slip away?”

The naga before her shifts uneasily, head bowed. “The incubus rescued him, my Lady. He shifted into a dragon and killed the harpies you sent, too.”

“The boy was paralyzed –”

“It took three of our bites,” the naga admits. “He fought us off with more strength than we expected.”

“Three bites,” Haggar repeats, and her face purples in rage. “How dare that incubus betray me – I knew he had grown to care for the boy too much, but this…” She exhales in an attempt to calm herself. “But perhaps we can use this to our advantage. The incubus will stop Hecate from getting too close, and he will protect the boy before delivering him to us on Samhain.”

“Can you wait until then, my Lady?” a druid beside her asks. “The baby –”
“Can wait,” Haggar mutters. “I will continue with the quintessence treatments in the meantime.”

“Do you think it may be possible that the human has…” The druid trails off.

“That the human has what,” Haggar bites out.

“Taken control,” the druid murmurs. Haggar’s eyes narrow. “Takashi Shirogane was a resilient soul, and primed with Void magic from the infernal quintessence. He could be grasping at self-awareness, and thus acting out against you, my Lady. Perhaps being in such close proximity with the boy has unearthed suppressed memories –”

“No,” Haggar snaps. “It is not possible. Those memories are buried too deep, and Kurobasanir was too powerful. Unless…”

“Unless the incubus is no longer fighting the human’s attempts to retain control,” the druid says.

“Why would he do such a thing?!” Haggar demands. “He is a demon.”

“And so is half of the boy. He may sense a kindred spirit –”

“This is not science, this is nonsense,” Haggar growls. “Enough. It does not matter. When they both come to me in their useless quest to save the Champion’s empty shell of a body, I will make the incubus pay for his insolence, and experiment on the boy as planned. This changes nothing.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

*

Keith lays upon the bones and whispers, *It was you.*

*I cannot stay much longer,* Shiro sighs, claws softening to fingers, human and gentle as they stroke Keith’s hair. *She is coming for both of us. You must fight it, Keith. You cannot let her take your soul.*

*But she took yours,* Keith says, turning his head, staring into golden eyes in the monstrous face he has come to love. *How did you take control?*

Strong arms enfold him. *I remembered you,* Shiro says, and kisses him back into the waking world.

A body thuds against the outer wall of the cell with a sickening crack. Keith bolts upright, only to double over, panting and soaked in sweat, his legs splayed wide and spine arching, desperate for contact.

“What has she done to him?” Keith knows that voice, but in his feverish state cannot place it. It’s angry, furious, that’s all he knows. The guard answers, his words drowned out in Keith’s hazy thoughts, and the voice screeches in a primal rage that raises the hairs on the back of Keith’s neck. “Has anyone touched him?!” it demands, and the guard whimpered, and an explosion echoes through the cellblock. Then the door is wrenched off its hinges.

Keith can barely lift his head, sweat dripping into his eyes, but he tries anyway. The movement sends his whole body askew, and he collapses sideways towards the stone floor. He doesn’t expect the careful hands that catch him before his head can connect with it, but he welcomes them, shaking anew as soft folds of black fabric fall over him – a cloak. The stranger covers his nearly bare body, but not before unlocking the manacles around his wrists.
“Fucking monsters,” the stranger hisses, and it’s a woman; it’s the shadow woman, Hecate. Slim violet fingers tipped in black claws massage sensation back into his bruised hands, and Keith blinks in confusion, letting out a thin sound of pain as she slips her hands under him and heaves him up into her arms. “Hush,” she murmers, voice as pained as he feels. “Oh, Keith. I tried to find you sooner, but it was…” She inhales sharply. “Has anyone visited you? Anyone hurt you?”

He grasps at the front of her cloak, clinging to the fabric and burying his face in the sharp curve of her shoulder. “Dreams,” he whispers. “Shiro…”

His grip on him tightens and she nods, determined. “Yes,” she says. “I know. We’re finding him, next. Can you hold on until then, Keith?”

“Uh-huh,” Keith groans, lashes fluttering as another spasm of pain and want wracks him. “Hurts…”

“Shhh.” Her mouth twists, revealing serrated teeth, and she hurries out of the cell her hood shifts off and Keith understands at once why she’d kept her face hidden from him before.

The resemblance is unmistakable. It’s like looking in a mirror. Almost.

Her skin is violet striped with lavender and her eyes are gold and her head is crowned with black, curling horns tipped in red, but he has her nose, her lips, her brows, her chin...her magic.

Keith stares up at her, heart racing. “Mom?” he croaks. “Hecate?”

Her face crumples and she nods, tight and quick. “I’m sorry,” she says. “This was not how I imagined our first introduction. But, for future reference...Hecate is more of a title. My name is Krolia.”

“Krolia,” Keith repeats, awed, and presses himself closer, trembling. “Mom.”

“I’ve got you,” she whispers, brows drawing together. “Don’t let go of me, Keith.”

She holds him with one hand, blasts the approaching guards to smithereens in a blinding inferno of purple and white flames, and runs.

*K*

Keith is barely conscious by the time her pace slows, then stops, outside a different cell in a different cell block. She kills every single guard with calculated fireballs, each one leaving behind little more than a smear of smoldering ashes. The silence that follows is crushing.

Krolia raps on the metallic cell door, hard. “Incubus,” she says. Her tone is that of one very used to commanding others. “Can you hear me?”

The sound that issues from within is a low, animal growl, followed by the uneven clanking of chains dragging over the ground. “Keith.”

She exhales. “I have him here.”

Something huge and heavy slams against the other side of the door, and Krolia flinches back. “Keith,” the cell groans, “need…”

“Not until you promise me you will not hurt him,” Krolia retorts. “I will not save my son only for you to consume his energy beyond repair.”
“Shiro?” Keith whispers, before the cell can answer.

A plaintive whine replies. Krolia slides back the window in the door, and a pair of wide, golden eyes meet hers. “Keith?” When the eyes see him, a clawed hand reaches up, trying and failing to fit through the bars. Krolia glares, unrelenting. The hand falls limply. “Promise,” Shiro rumbles. “Don’t wanna hurt Keith. Never. never.”

Krolia pauses, eying him in suspicion, her expression softening when Keith squirms in her arms and tries to reach out to Shiro, too. “Let us hope you are telling the truth,” she says, “because if not, I will personally set you on fire from the inside out, rend every limb from your body, drop you in a vat of boiling acid, reanimate your skeleton, and repeat the entire process.”

Shiro whimpers pathetically. “Just want Keith,” he whispers. “Please?”

Krolia looks down at Keith. “Please,” Keith echoes.

She bites her lip, sighs, and kisses his forehead. Keith blinks. Then she snaps her fingers, severing the incubus’s chains, obliterates the cell lock, yanks the door open, and tosses Keith inside unceremoniously. “Thanks to my silencing spell, you have at least ten minutes before we have to get the hell out of here,” she says, and slams the door shut.

Before the door even closes all the way, Keith is smothered by half a ton of needy demon.

“Keith, Keith, baby,” Shiro groans, pressing messy kisses over his face and neck and pawing at the cloak until it unclasps so he can get to Keith’s chest, and then further down, claws slicing away the gauzy fabric there.

Keith keens as soon as Shiro touches him, whines caught and choked in his throat, tears spilling down his face from sensitivity. “Shiro,” he gasps, clutching at the incubus, fingers faltering over bulging muscle and patches of scale, “is it really you? All this time…”

“It’s me, Keith,” Shiro whispers, managing to lift his head from Keith’s skin for long enough to speak, though his hands continue their frantic petting, rubbing warmth over Keith’s ribs and hips and spread legs. “I’m sorry – I’m so sorry –”

“Don’t be sorry, kiss me,” Keith sobs, and scratches blindly at his shoulders, dragging him in. Shiro goes without complaint, kissing him deep and messy, forked tongue filling Keith’s mouth as he sucks on it in some perverse instinct. Shiro groans louder above him, rutting down against Keith’s splayed thighs. Keith braces his feet on the ground and rolls his hips up, his cock pink and swollen and all too easily devoured by Shiro as he breaks the kiss to sink down Keith’s body and swallow his cock to the root.

Keith comes at the first swipe of his tongue and Shiro shudders as Keith’s orgasm ripples through both of them. Keith stays hard, though the pain ebbs away like a receding tide. Shiro keeps licking, flexible tongue squeezing his cock in a vice grip that leaves Keith writhing, drawing blood as he scrapes his fingertips over the rough floor in uncaring desperation.

Shiro growls around his cock and grabs Keith’s hands tight in his own, pulling off to murmur, “Don’t hurt yourself,” and then, distracted by the blood, sucks Keith’s fingers into his mouth hungrily. Keith arches and kicks, cock dripping with saliva and precum, and when Shiro guides Keith’s hand between his legs, he plunges two fingers inside himself without hesitation, sticky and slick from demon spit.

Shiro helps Keith open himself up with his sloppy tongue, looking up at him with hooded eyes.
Fingers curling deep, eyes locked on Shiro’s in helpless magnetism, Keith is overwhelmed by the realization that the incubus was him all along.

And everything begins to fall into place; the scar and arm and white hair, the paper crane, the identity crisis, the telepathy and astral projection, the incubus’s selective feeding, the gray morality, the curiosity and jealousy about Shiro’s past, patience yields focus, the precognition of his friends’ gifts, the tender proclivities and lack of sadism, the cherry pie, the amnesia, Shiro’s horse recognizing him, the inability to wear any face but Shiro’s.

“How long,” Keith gasps, toes curling and chest seizing, “how long have you known – you were him –”

Shiro pulls away with effort, flushed and earnest. “Since you astrally projected in the oasis.” Keith’s eyes widen, and he nods, ears flicking back. “I suspected before then, but – when you contacted my, my soul, or spirit, it was like...everything just clicked into place.”

Keith swallows. “So – so when Kurobasanir found me in the oasis –”

“That was me,” Shiro says, avoiding his searching gaze.

Keith touches his face with trembling fingers. “You were panicked,” he whispers. “You said you thought I’d tried to hurt myself...”

“I realized what the demon had – what I had done to you,” Shiro breathes, hunched over and miserable. “I knew if I tried to tell you then, to explain...you would just hate me more. And I couldn’t ever blame you for that, Keith.”

“I didn’t hate you,” Keith whispers, shaking his head, remembering how he had all but forced Shiro to take him against his will, and shuddering. “Shiro, I don’t hate you.”

“What I said, then, at the oasis,” Shiro says, “I meant it. You deserve better than this, Keith, better than me –”

“No –”

“You deserve someone human, someone whole!” Shiro pleads, tail tucked close to himself, clawed hands shaking, horned head bowed. “I hurt you, Keith, I used you, abused you, even, and you deserve someone who can treat you tenderly, who you can love fully –”

“Shut up,” Keith gasps, surging up, wrapping his arms tight around Shiro’s neck and forcing him to look up, into his eyes. “I love you with my entire being,” he snaps. “This, this doesn’t change that. You are whole.”

“I’m a monster,” Shiro whispers, tears brimming in his eyes, face a raw wound. “No matter what face I wear, that fact doesn’t change. That’s why – I hoped that Haggar had left some of my soul in my old body, because I thought it would have been better if you could stay with him instead, and...”

“And what?” Keith demands, framing Shiro’s tearstained face in his hands. “And left you alone in Kurobasanir’s home for eternity while I returned to our world with your other half, blissfully unaware?”

“That was the plan,” Shiro admits, lower lip trembling.

“That’s a stupid plan,” Keith tells him, and kisses him as hard as he can, trying to convey with lips
and tongue and hands in soft black hair that he’s not leaving Shiro alone anywhere, not again.
Shiro groans and, slowly, his hands settle on Keith’s hips, holding him delicately, as if he’s afraid too much pressure will make Keith shatter. Keith breaks the kiss to run his fingers over smooth black scales and add, “I don’t care about all this, Shiro, I care about you, and if I’m being honest, this whole incubus thing really does it for me, anyway.”

Shiro stares at him, shocked and desperate, and then he holds Keith much less carefully, nipping at his lower lip with sharp, sharp teeth, letting his grip leave bruises, manhandling Keith into his lap until Keith can feel Shiro’s cock pushing up against his hole. And Keith thinks, Every time, it was him. The first time, it was him.

The relief he feels at the thought is overwhelming, as is the pleasure when he sinks down and finally lets Shiro’s cock breach him. Shiro’s head thuds back against the cell wall and Keith arches in his lap, moving before his body has adjusted because every slide of Shiro’s cock inside of him sends sparks of ecstasy through his veins, and real sparks through his fingertips, igniting the darkness of the cell in bright staccato flashes.

The light makes Shiro laugh, a ragged chuckle that Keith echoes, turning to a moan when Shiro grabs his ass and hitches their hips together harder, forcing Keith to bottom out. Keith moans, clawing at Shiro’s back and nosing into his throat, reaching down to stroke his leaking cock.

Shiro’s hand covers his, and Keith mewls, thrusting up into his leathery palm, throwing his head back, exposing his neck and chest to the mercy of fangs and molten golden eyes. Shiro twists his hand around Keith’s cock and kisses over his jaw and whispers, “I love you too, Keith, since I first saw you in my dreams, I knew; I knew we were meant to spend our lives with each other and that I would never love another as much as I love you –”

Keith’s eyes snap open in disbelief. “What?! You – you fucker, you knew since – since the day in the canyon – and you never said anything?”

“I didn’t want to mess it up,” Shiro gasps, “the future can always be changed, and I didn’t want that to change, I wanted it to be you, Keith, and when Kerberos happened I thought I’d ruined everything –”

“You didn’t, you didn’t,” Keith promises, his heart racing and his cock throbbing, “I never stopped loving you, I never gave up on you, I will never give up on you, Shiro,” and he comes a second time, slumped into Shiro’s chest, Shiro’s arms around him, Shiro’s cock inside him, Shiro’s lips on his, and for the first time in a long time, he thinks maybe everything is going to be okay.

Shiro shudders and comes, too, and they break apart too fast, but their ten minutes is nearly up and Keith can hear shouts from the cell block. He tries to stand up, but his legs promptly give out from under him, sore and shaky, and he swears with feeling. “Shiro,” he mutters, “I don’t think walking is really an option for me, right now…”

“I’ve got you,” Shiro says, biting his lip in consideration before wrapping the cloak back around Keith, giving him some decency, and lifting him up onto his shoulders. Keith blinks at the rather high vantage point. “How’s that?”

Keith squeezes his thighs around Shiro’s head and Shiro snorts. “Good,” Keith says, very satisfied with this position. “Let’s go. My mom is waiting.”

Shiro stumbles. “Your...your mom? Your mom is Hecate, the first witch, old god of witchcraft, alchemy, and the night?! Keith!”
“Yeah. Her name is Krolia.” Keith shakes his head as Shiro gapes at him. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, okay? Right now...Shiro, we still need to find the Holts.”


“You’re not panicking, are you?” Keith whispers, patting the side of his face gently.

Shiro grimaces. “Nooo, me? Panicking? Nope. I am calm. I am so calm. I’m an ancient and powerful incubus with a son of Hecate on my shoulders, and I am ready to kick some ass.”

“That’s the spirit,” Keith says, giddy with adrenaline, and they leave the cell.

Krolia is waiting outside, and her eyebrows go up at the sight of Keith perched atop Shiro’s shoulders, but she visibly relaxes at the sight of him alive, not dismembered, and generally uninjured. “Oh, good,” she says. “You tamed the beast, just in time. We’re about to be discovered.”

Shiro winces. Krolia looks unimpressed. “We need to find Sam and Matt Holt,” Keith tells her.

“No, we need to leave,” Krolia retorts, turning on her heel.

“It’s part of his contract,” Shiro adds, and she pauses. “It wasn’t just my life on the line. We have to get them out, or the contract will never be completed.”

Krolia presses the heel of her palm to her eyes. “Fuck,” she says. “As selfless as his damn father….fine. Why not? Let’s just saunter into Haggar’s laboratory and rescue two of her most high priority prisoners. What could go wrong?”

“They’re in her laboratory?” Shiro whispers in horror.

“Not as test subjects, as alchemists,” Krolia mutters. “They’d be dead by now, otherwise.”

“Let’s go,” Keith says. “Quickly.”

Shiro follows Krolia through the dark and twisting halls. She seems to know them like the back of her hand, and Keith remembers Haggar saying Hecate was her mentor. That must have been a different time – Keith doesn’t want to think of his mother aiding Haggar in her wicked experiments. Then again, he had admired Honerva’s theories and studies, once. Maybe his mother had seen potential in her, an ambition not unlike her own...Keith wonders if Krolia blames herself for Haggar’s descent into madness.

Keith’s thoughts hit a wall as they turn a corner and come face to face with three angry druids. Well, Keith assumes they’re angry. They don’t really have faces.

“We’re getting close to her lab,” Krolia hisses, readying a ball of violet flames in her hand.

Keith beats her to it, antsy from having his magic pent up against his will for so long, and sends a wide, whirling ribbon of fire around the three of them, searing through their robes and filling the corridor with the smell of burnt flesh.

One of the less injured druids darts forward, energy crackling up its arm, but it’s stopped abruptly from firing at Keith by Shiro’s claws slicing deep into its chest. Black blood spatters to the ground just before it staggers and falls. Krolia finishes off the other two in a burst of white combustion, and shoots a sharklike smile at them over her shoulder. “Good work,” she says, and pushes forward.
The cell blocks are mostly empty, but they pass some with occupants who bang on the doors and howl in inhuman voices. Keith glances at one as they pass, conflicted – likelier than not, they will die in this place.

Shiro says, “They aren’t human, Keith. Not anymore.”

“Neither are you,” Keith says, and regrets it as Shiro stiffens under him and falls silent. The next druids they encounter are thrown against the wall by Shiro’s glowing arm, spines cracking on impact. Krolia skewers one to the floor with a well-placed metal stake.

“I didn’t mean...” Keith starts, and stops.

“The things in those cells are like what she turned my body into,” Shiro mutters, breath heavy from exertion. “Empty husks of who they once were. Haggar takes souls, and locks up the leftovers. It’s what she would have done to you.”

“I think she had something different planned for me,” Keith whispers, remembering the swell of her belly and the frustration in her eyes. “She wanted me alive, remember?”

“Doesn’t matter anymore; she won’t get you,” Shiro says, and skids to a halt with Krolia as they enter an antechamber swarming with demons.

“Well, shit,” Krolia says, taking a step back and folding her arms.

Three dretches crawl towards her, their acidic tongues leaving hissing hollows in the stone floor. Three more barghest growl and click their claws against the walls, hanging from prehensile tiles. A pack of chattering imps spit fire and curses. And at the center of them all, the toad man Hezrou glares, his eyes more bulbous and skin more jaundiced than Keith remembers.

“Oh, Kurobasanir,” he drawls, examining his spongy green fingertips, each one gleaming with what can only be poison. Shiro flinches at the name, but stands his ground, a low growl raising in his throat. “Such a pity, what happened to you. An even bigger pity, what will happen to your contract.”

“And who are you?” Krolia retorts, tone frigid and arms igniting with purple fire. “Other than ugly as sin, that is.”

Hezrou glowers at her and lifts his chin. “I am Lord Hezrou, greater fiend of swamps and bogs and all the poor little children who drown in them.”

Krolia bares her teeth. “There is nothing great about you,” she snarls, and is replaced by a flock of crows which dive and caw at the assembled demons in a flurry of wings and vicious beaks, sending them scattering. In the chaos, a barghest leaps at Keith from the ceiling, and Keith catches it before its claws can sink into his throat, letting his palms burn as it shrieks and fights against him. Three claws catch him across the chest when the demon jostles the cloak to the side, and Keith sucks in a pained breath, momentarily distracted.

It gives the barghest enough time to knock Keith off of Shiro’s shoulders and onto the cold, hard ground. The fall knocks the air out of his lungs, stunning him while the barghest grabs a handful of his hair and drags him down the hall by it, away from Shiro and Krolia, who are engaged in grueling combat with the other demons. Keith hisses and kicks out as soon as the pain thudding through his head recedes enough for him to focus. Still, the angle isn’t working; his haphazard blasts of fire don’t reach the barghest where it’s determinedly dragging him. Keith grits his teeth, closes his eyes, and brings electricity to the surface of his skin.
The barghest leaps away with a yelp and Keith scrambles to his feet, staggering – his knees are still unsteady, and the demon sees the weakness, leaping at him again, trying to knock him prone. Keith’s fire singes its wrinkled flesh but it’s undeterred, sinking claws into Krolia’s cloak and ripping a slit down the side of it. Violet magic shimmers faintly on the fabric.

The flock of crows stops mid-flight, each and every one of them blurring at the edges before they explode into flight towards Keith, screeching their displeasure. Krolia leaps from the center of them and lands beside Keith, dispatching the barghest with a spear through the head, which is a little over the top but gets the job done. Her eyes flick to his wounded chest and Keith shakes his head.

“I’m fine,” he pants, just as a druid materializes beside him and sinks its blade into Keith’s side.

Krolia’s bloodcurdling scream sends the imps into a blind panic and Shiro and Hezrou fall to their knees, covering their ears. Keith gasps, choking on a gurgle of blood, and turns to face the druid in slow motion. It goes in for a second stab and gets a faceful of crows ripping out its eyes for its trouble.

Keith is still standing, holding his hand to the wound, blood dribbling out between his fingers. “Ah,” he says, and sways, slumping against Krolia as she catches him. “I think...I’ve been stabbed in the kidney.”

Krolia inhales like she’s the one who’s been stabbed, claws digging into his skin as she cradles him close to her chest. “Stay with me, Keith,” she whispers, and Keith blinks, struggling to stave off the blackness creeping into the edges of his vision. In his disappearing peripherals, Keith sees Shiro turn and sees the horror spread over his face, followed by rage and a roar that echoes through the halls like a funeral gong.

Keith’s tunneling gaze catches on Krolia horns, black and deadly and beautiful, framed by the harsh cell block lights like a halo, and Keith whispers, “Why don’t I get horns, huh?”

Her eyes light up in sudden epiphany. She bites her lip. “Do you want horns, Keith?” she whispers back, stroking the hair away from his face hurriedly, clumsy and desperate. Keith traces the path of a bead of sweat down the side of her face, and thinks, She was human once, too.

“Yes,” Keith breathes, lashes fluttering and vision fading.

She exhales, jaw tight, and nods once as if to convince herself before cupping Keith’s face in her hands and chanting a low series of words Keith does not understand but feels that he must have known since the day he was born.

The overpowering scents of cinnamon and myrrh wreathe the air in a heady miasma, and Keith swears he sees a black snake unwinding from Krolia’s neck, fangs poised just over Keith’s heart. The shadowy snake strikes and Keith is wracked by a pain very unlike the one Haggar forced upon him – it’s a rhythmic shudder not unlike electrocution, but Keith can feel it manifesting on him, in him, and when heat washes over him, blinding him in a split second of bright white nothing, he understands.

And when the next druid appears with another knife at the ready, Keith is ready for it, and tears its throat open with ruthless red claws tipped in flame, its neck still smoking as it falls.

Krolia looks at him like he is the sun, moon, and stars all in one and says, “That’s my boy.”

Shiro gasps, “Keith?”
Keith looks up at him with lantern eyes and grins, all sharp teeth, wiping the blood casually off of his healed side. “Hi,” he says.

“I forgot to give you this earlier!” Shiro tosses him something; it’s the knife Lance gave him, and Keith catches it deftly. “You got stabbed in the kidney!” Shiro exclaims while batting a shrieking imp away like a fly. It slams against the far wall and stops moving.

He stabs an imp with Lance’s knife and it dies instantly. A barghest snapping at Keith’s heels meets the same fate. Keith wishes he’d had this knife a few minutes ago, damn.

“I did, but my mom is Hecate!” Keith says gleefully, and reaches up to his head, just to check. “And I have horns!”

Hezrou, surrounded by the crows, freezes. “Wait,” he says, “you’re Hecate?”

“Surprise, you bastard,” Krolia snarls, and this time the snake she sends racing towards the toad man is definitely real, and definitely venomous when it plunges its fangs into his warty leg. Hezrou screams, kicking and trying to hop away, but the crows are relentless, picking at his eyes and skin and tearing bits of flesh away until he tumbles to the ground, buried in a mound of flapping black wings and savage talons.

Keith, Krolia, and Shiro run through the carnage, towards the sturdy metal door Hezrou had been blocking. Krolia shoves at it, but it’s firmly locked, and her eyes narrow in frustration.

“Please step aside,” Shiro says, and blasts a hole in the door with a resounding crack of lightning. Glass shatters and screams issue from inside; they hurry through the ruined door and find themselves in a laboratory lined with bubbling, six foot tall test tubes. Some are vacant, while others contain bodies suspended in violet fluid. Shiro stills, uneasily glancing around. Keith places a protective hand on his arm, struck for a moment by the way the new red-violet scales on the back of his hand contrast with the incubus’s black ones.

Shiro’s hand covers his. “Don’t get stabbed again,” he whispers.

“Noted,” Keith whispers back, patting Lance’s knife. “Same goes for you.”

“We are looking for Sam and Matt Holt,” Krolia declares, hands on her hips. She strides through the lab, wrinkling her nose at the test tubes and casually knocking three glass vials filled with golden liquid to the ground, like a cat. “Speak now or forever hold your peace; I will be setting this lab aflame in about three seconds. One, two…”

“Wait, stop!” A head of messy brown hair pops up from behind a nearby countertop, brown eyes magnified by large round glasses blinking at them in alarm. “Don’t set anything aflame, all the chemicals in this room are highly flammable!”

Krolia crosses her arms. “Good.”

“Matt!” Shiro exclaims, starting forward, only for Matt to flinch away in terror. He has an arm around his father, Sam, who looks older and more exhausted than Keith remembers. Shiro falters, his ears drooping. “Matt,” he says, quieter, “it’s me. It’s Shiro.”

Matt’s jaw drops. Sam straightens up, peering at them through his slightly less round glasses. “Master Shirogane?” he murmurs, voice as weak as he looks. “Can it be? We thought...you had been killed…”

“It’s a long story,” Shiro says. He holds himself in a sort of hunched bow, as if to appear as non-
threatening as possible.

Keith keeps a hand on his arm and adds, “But right now, we don’t have time. We have to get you two out of here.”

“Keith?!” Matt splutters. “Why do you have scales and glowing eyes?”

“That’s my mom,” Keith says, pointing at Krolia, who lets out a soft huff.


“Less talking, more leaving,” Krolia growls, and the Holts nod hastily and hurry over – what other choice have they got? “But first, all this research of Honerva’s must be destroyed. We cannot allow her to continue these...experiments.” She gives Shiro a sidelong glance and Matt’s eyes widen in understanding. Shiro hunches down further.

“Hecate, do not make a choice you will come to regret.” Haggar stands in the doorway, or what’s left of it, flanked by two druids.

She steps forward and Krolia bristles, lifting her chin and summoning her two black snakes, which curl in warning around each ankle. “I regret many things, but destroying this place will not be one of them,” she snarls.

“Please, Krolia,” Haggar entreats, throwing back her hood, revealing a face that could almost be human, if her jaw was not marred by two jagged red lines, and if her eyes did not gleam with a mad inner light. “You once taught me how to seek and harness the power you found many ages ago. We were to return to Oriande together, don’t you remember?”

“That was a mistake,” Krolia says. “I never should have taken you on as my apprentice. I thought I saw power in you. Potential. But you squandered it as soon as you fell for Zarkon and discovered the infernal strain of quintessence here in Daibazaal.”

“I squandered nothing,” Haggar argues. “It was you who were so afraid of the possibilities that you abandoned me.”

“Look at yourself, Honerva,” Krolia says. Her voice is flat but her face is full of pain. “It has ruined you. This evil energy is corrupting you from the inside out. The child you bear –”

“Will be a prince,” Haggar snaps, taking a step into the room. “He has the power of the quintessence I found, and with your son’s soul I could, too –”

“As soon as you decided to interfere with my son’s life, I knew you were beyond help,” Hecate says. “You will not lay a finger on him.”

“Why do you protect him?” Haggar snaps. “You have so many other children. This one is not special. He is not your most powerful nor your oldest nor your wisest. He is just a boy who has known only humanity...up until this point.” Haggar’s gaze rakes over Keith’s horns, scales, and claws, cold and derisive. “You revealed his cambion side only now...why? To save his fragile mortal life, perhaps?”

Keith swallows, eyes darting from Krolia to Haggar.

Krolia’s eyes narrow. “So I am correct. You see, Krolia? He is a weakling, too young and wild and inexperienced to benefit you. He was not even able to save his beloved Shiro without the help of another demon. Do you not find this shameful? Do you not see how I could find a better use for
him, one that would bring into this world a being far more gifted and fit to rule –”

“Enough.” Krolia spits the word, her snakes hissing and flames building around her like a pyre. “You have said your piece and it is as selfish and foolish as I expected. You’ve done this to yourself.”

“No!” Haggar lifts out a hand, and Krolia raises a shield of shimmering energy in instant reflex. “You cannot destroy my research! Without it, I cannot restore your Shiro to you as he was, Keith.”

Keith stares at her. “As if you could do such a thing,” he mutters, but she’s opened up a thread of uncertainty, and she knows it. Shiro leans forward earnestly, eyes wide and hopeful.

“I can,” Haggar promises. “If you spare me and my work, I can separate Shiro’s soul from Kurobasanir. The incubus will perish, and your Shiro will be returned to you as human as he was on the day that you last –”

“No,” Keith says.

Shiro turns to look at him, bewildered. “No? But – Keith, I, don’t you want...you deserve better than a twisted experiment! And, and what if Kurobasanir turns on me again, and tries to fight back and regain control? What if I hurt you?!”

Haggar smiles. “Yes, what if he hurts you?” she echoes. “That would be terrible. Don’t you want to be certain that will never happen again?”

“Keith, she’s lying,” Krolia says under her breath, though her brow is furrowed.

But Keith has already made up his mind.

He thinks of Shiro, strapped to a cold table in this laboratory, alone and afraid and begging for mercy that he will never receive. He thinks of Haggar leaning over him, sliding cold needles into his scarred skin, treating him not as a human being but as a piece of meat, a subject to be tested on, used, and discarded when done. He thinks of how much pain Shiro must have suffered at her hands, and how much pain her hands have caused so many others, and how much pain she will continue to cause if they let her go free.

He thinks of the unborn child in Haggar’s womb, a cambion like him, but one who will grow up in the depths of Hell, raised by a demon Emperor and a witch mad with cruel ambitions.

He thinks that can only end badly.

“I would love Shiro even if you had only left behind the soulless shell of his body,” Keith says, taking a step towards her, giving in to the fire within him. His flames roar to life along the walls of test tubes, creating a furnace of scorching heat which incinerates everything in its path. Haggar cries out in fury, lunging towards him, but Shiro’s lightning stops her, trapping her in a web of deadly plasma. She howls and throws herself against it, jerking like a marionette and screaming like a banshee as she watches her life’s work burn to ash.

“But as it is,” Keith tells her, “you’ve left him with a lot more than that. You were wrong, Haggar. You can’t control this power, the power of souls. It isn’t meant for you to take and use for your own ends.”

“What do you know?!” she shrieks, her golden energy arcing and breaking haphazardly through the smoky air. “You were only born because a common human man was desperate and weak enough to turn to Hecate for help! Without the work of your mother and I, your very existence would not
even be possible!”

Krolia steps forward and takes Keith’s hand in her own. His flames don’t harm her, either. “His existence is the result of pure quintessence,” she says. “He was not born from a test tube and an endless score of deaths, mutations, and torture. He was born from resolve and courage and selflessness and love. Your child should have been born from the same. But it is too late, now.”

“No!” Haggar screams, one last time, just before the laboratory is engulfed in the combined fire of the both of them, violet and red erasing a lifetime’s worth of wickedness alongside its creator.

Krolia presses a cold blue crystal into Keith’s hands, and tugs the other three close. They wink out of sight, leaving Daibazaal to burn.

*

“He’s waking up.”

“Keith. Keith, hey.”

Keith opens his eyes. Shiro is kneeling beside him, mostly human, a little not. He’s perfect, and he’s safe, and he’s smiling, and that’s all that matters. “Hey,” Keith whispers, voice dry as the desert and raspy as sandpaper. “Whoa.” He clears his throat, for all the good that does. “What...what happened?” Then he takes in their surroundings and gasps, “Where are we?!”

He’s lying on a low bed piled with silks and cushions, and the ceiling is strung with more silks, delicate golden chains, and vaulted sections covered in intricate, beautiful murals of night scenes, stars and bats and forests and lakes radiant with moonlight.

Cool air blows in through open balcony doors, and at the other set of doors, which are cracked open, Krolia stands. She’s shed her plain black attire for a loose lavender tunic and black trousers which flare around her calves, and her arms and neck are laden with silver jewelry and strange onyx and opal and crystalline carvings which shine with the promise of magic. She stands taller than any human woman and has the regal air of a queen. Keith supposes she sort of is one.

“Krolia used one of Haggar’s traveling crystals to transport us out of Daibazaal,” Shiro explains, seemingly unable to look away from Keith. Keith sits up, dizzy, and Shiro steadies him. “You used a lot of magic to destroy her laboratory,” he adds. “And you did get stabbed in the kidney, cambion transformation or not.”

“You are in Stratonikeia,” Krolia says, walking towards the bed with a cautious couple of steps, as if she expects Keith might be angry at her. He isn’t, just confused. “This is my realm,” she murmurs. “It is still Samhain, so the festivities are in full swing here, but I thought you might want some...quiet. The Holts are also safe and resting nearby. I will return them to the Citadel in the morning, if they wish.” She hesitates.

“Is there something else?” Keith asks.

She sighs. “Keith,” she says, “I wish things could have been different. But, since I cannot change the past...you deserve to know the truth.”

Shiro shifts uncertainly. “I can give you two some space…”

“No, stay,” Keith whispers, touching Shiro’s hand, which curls around his fingers in silent reassurance. “What do you mean?”
“Your father,” she says, head bowed. “He is a good man. He summoned me twenty years, nine months, and seven days ago, with a desperate request. He had been engaged to a woman of high social standing and wealth, a woman who he in fact married, but they could not conceive. She blamed herself, until one night she betrayed her wedding vows and your father, and became pregnant from the tryst. It was your father who was infertile. I had been watching him for some time from afar, and because I do not like traitors and liars, I told him in a dream what his wife had done. He knew it to be true. Your father has a good sense of intuition, just like you. So he left her on his horse in the middle of the night, and made a new life as a simple farmer in the Wastes. But he was not content there. He was lonely.”

Shiro squeezes Keith’s hand. Keith stares at Krolia and waits for her to continue. She’s gathering herself, touching the onyx carving of the moon at her throat.

“I did not expect him to summon me,” she finally says. “But he is clever, and had made it his goal to learn who exactly had contacted him on that fateful night. I appeared to him, curious more than anything, and this was the contract he proposed to me: I would give him a child, of my blood and of his own, but who appeared human in every way, and in return, he would give me his soul after thirty years.”


She does not meet his eye. “I did not accept his terms,” she admits. “I told him thirty years was too long. Fifteen would be better. He pled for eighteen. I allowed him sixteen.”

“So…so when he left…?”

“He knew, all along, that he would have to leave you that night,” Krolia sighs. “I took his soul and left you, Keith. That was my doing, not his. Please, do not blame him, and know that he wanted to spend his entire life with you.”

Keith wipes a hand over his eyes as they fill up with tears. “You – you’re the reason he left. I thought – I don’t know what I thought, but…”

“I never said I was good, Keith,” Krolia replies. “Afterwards, I…reconsidered. Especially when your father told me of the town’s animosity towards you. So I returned, hoping to explain things to you, only to find you gone, and hidden from me. That was when Haggar began to blot me out from your life. I searched for years, and it was only after you summoned Kurobasanir that I heard whispers of a fiery boy at the Citadel and I just…I knew it had to be you.”

“But you still explained nothing to me,” Keith whispers.

“The incubus presented…an unforeseen obstacle,” she mutters. “I thought he must be removed from the picture first, thus why I attempted to break your contract. But then, again, I reconsidered. He protected you well, perhaps better than I could. He was there for you when I was not. I protected you in the ways I could – shielded your true nature from the Altean princess, and spirited you away from her prison sentence. But in the end, I decided I would be there in person on Samhain.” Her lips twist. “Again…I was nearly too late.”

“Nearly,” Shiro says. “You saved both our lives.”

Keith’s throat has a lump lodged deep in it; he doesn’t trust himself to speak, but has to try. “My father,” he manages, “is he…did you kill him?”

Krolia’s eyes widen. “No!” she exclaims. “No, I…” She scratches her head, flushing. “He’s, er,
valuable. Alive. Here. With me.” She heaves a sad little sigh. “But he would have been more
valuable in your world, at your side, as your father. And for keeping him from you, I am very
sorry, Keith. And I hope that, perhaps, I can begin to right this wrong now.”

Keith blinks, confused, as she turns to the cracked open door and calls softly, “James?”

Keith’s first thought is that he hasn’t aged a day. Keith’s second thought is that he’s never seen his
father so clean, bare of the thin layer of dust that every Wasteborn wears like a badge of honor and
wearing fine, black silk clothing along with a few pendants and leather ornamentation.

His third thought is that he probably shouldn’t be stumbling to his feet and out of bed when he’s
meant to be resting, but it’s too late now.

James Kogane says, “Keith,” in the voice he thought he would never hear again.

A few months ago, Keith might have stood stoic and silent beside the bed, conflicted and stewing
in his feelings of abandonment and the fear of not being good enough. He might have turned away
from his father, bitter and demanding answers he wanted four years ago.

But things are a little different, now. Keith is a little different, now. So when his father looks at
him, eyes full and arms open, Keith doesn’t hesitate to embrace him, burying his face in his
father’s shoulder and hugging him tight. “Keith,” James whispers again, and Keith can feel his
tears dampening his hair. “My boy, my boy.”

“Da,” Keith breathes, squeezing his eyes shut. “You’re really here.”

“I’m so sorry, son,” James sobs, cradling Keith’s head in his palm as he pulls back to look at him,
keeping him close. “Not a day went by that I didn’t miss ya.”

“I missed you, too,” Keith whispers. “I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

James wipes gruffly at his tearstained face and shakes his head. “I wasn’t allowed to tell ya,” he
sighs. “Broke my heart, Keith. And when yer Ma went back down to Blackwater to find ya...and
we heard ‘bout the mob at the canyon…” His hands shake and he gathers Keith back to his chest.
“I never shoulda left,” he whispers. “I never wanted to.”

Keith opens his eyes, and sees Krolia, standing off to the side, frowning at the ground. “She came
back for me?” he asks.

James nods, following his gaze. “Yer Ma amended the contract, then tried to break it,” he says.
“That didn’t go so well.” He shoots Keith a lopsided smile. “I heard yer contract couldn’t be
broken, neither. Though I’m sorry ya ever felt ya had to make a damn contract in the first place.”

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Krolia mumbles, examining her claws. “He is your son,
James.”

“He’s yer son, too,” James says.

Keith takes a step back. “You don’t...hate her?”

Krolia hunches her shoulders and James shakes his head slowly. “Naw,” he says. “Course not. I
love yer mother. I did leave ya because’a her, Keith, but she knows that was wrong. She searched
to the ends of the earth fer ya, son. And she blames herself fer leavin’ ya. It’s yer choice whether ya
want to accept her apologies, ‘course, but...know that she loves ya just as much as I do, Keith.”
Keith is quiet. Krolia looks up, and says, “I do, Keith. I do love you, very much.”

Keith is tired of being angry. “Okay,” he says, and extends an arm to her.

She stares, uncomprehending, and when she takes his hand gingerly, he tugs her into a clumsy three-sided hug. James squeezes her close, and she yelps, still the tallest of the trio, before sighing, nestling close to them both, and muttering something under her breath that sounds suspiciously like, “Ugh, humans.”

The hug lasts a long, long time. Keith thinks they all have some missing years to make up for.

“I love you, too,” he whispers, and Krolia’s claws fumble a little on his back, and he smiles against the warmth of her chest and into the crook of his father’s neck.

When they all pull away, the first thing Keith sees is Shiro, sitting awkwardly beside the bed and playing absently with the tassels on a nearby pillow. James clears his throat. “Guess I have you to thank fer keepin’ my son safe, too,” he says to Shiro.

Shiro’s head jerks up and he hurries to stand, face red and head ducked down. “Uh,” he says. “I didn’t...you don’t need to thank me for anything, Mr. Kogane, sir. Keith is, that is, Keith can take care of himself, and he has, he’s a fine young man and I know you would be proud of him and –”

“Shiro,” Keith mumbles, face as red as the incubus’s. “C’mon. That’s not...you saved my life in Blackwater.” He turns to his parents. “He brought me to the Citadel after you left, Da. And he was there for me, always.” Keith smiles. “I love him. I love him a lot.”

Shiro bites his lip. “I love you too, Keith,” he whispers helplessly.


But the longer Keith looks at Shiro, the more he recognizes the tension between them, of unspoken and unresolved things. Maybe Krolia recognizes it, too, because she says, “Keith, we will all be here in the morning. As long as you stay within my palace, you will be safe. You are welcome here...it is as much your home as it is mine.” She touches his cheek, a brief and sweet stroke, and steps away with his father. “Goodnight...my son.”

“Goodnight, Ma,” Keith whispers. His father leans in and kisses his brow, warm and lingering. “Goodnight, Da.”

“Until tomorrow, Keith,” his father says, and the two of them slip out of the room, leaving Shiro and Keith alone.

Keith lets out all his breath in a rush and runs a hand through his hair. It’s then that he realizes the horns are gone. Slowly, he approaches the mirror against the far wall, and examines himself in it. Somewhere between Daibazaal and Stratonikeia he was given clothes, simple and soft and white. The collar is gone, but the leather cord and the iron rose remain. The dagger is strapped to his hip. He looks human, as before, but as he keeps looking, scales shimmer into being on his skin, and an echo of the first transformation rolls through him.

He can see Shiro in the mirror, standing beside the bed and looking lost.

Keith turns back to him. “Do you want to go out onto the balcony?”

Shiro nods, though he does not smile, and they walk out into the cool night air together.
Keith leans against the railing, and Shiro follows suit. Keith studies him for a moment. It’s clear that he’s trying, and failing, to repress his demonic appearance. The strain shows in his face, and his horns won’t go away no matter how much he grits his teeth. Keith murmurs, “You used a lot of magic in Daibazaal, too. Let yourself rest, Shiro.”

Shiro looks down at his huge, clawed hands. They curl in on themselves, and he lets out a soft, choked sound. “I’m sorry, Keith,” he whispers. “I know I said it before, in the cell, but I feel like no matter how many times I say it, it will never be enough.”

Keith exhales. “You don’t need to apologize,” he says. “You weren’t –”

“I was still me, Keith,” Shiro says, voice wrecked. “I just had no memories, and my soul was influenced by Kurobasanir’s quintessence, but I was still...that was me, Keith, me doing...all those awful things to you.”

Keith pushes off from the railing, shifting closer to him. “Were they awful?” he asks. “I don’t think so.”

Shiro closes his eyes. “Keith, please don’t defend my actions –”

“I’m just telling you the truth,” Keith says. “The truth, from my perspective, is that you fucked me when I asked for it. You didn’t fuck me when I didn’t ask for it. You hurt me sometimes, but you cared for me other times, and it always felt like the care far outweighed the hurt.” Shiro cracks his eyes open, mouth still downturned, but the lines of his face soften. “Shiro, I don’t think you understand. I summoned a greater incubus. I knew the risks. I...I was preparing myself for torture and cruelty of the worst kind, not you.”

Shiro’s face crumples beautifully. “Keith…”

“I fell in love with both sides of you,” Keith confesses, tipping his head up to look into eyes whose glow now matches his own. “In the carriage, on the way to Daibazaal, I realized that. I realized I was going to miss you. And I didn’t even know the truth, then, not really; even though there were times, so many times, when I thought Kurobasanir was a little too good at pretending to be you.”

Keith cups Shiro’s jaw, and he leans into it. Then, after a moment, he steps away.

“Even still,” Shiro murmurs, “I can’t help but feel that the way I treated you was still wrong. I was – Haggar made me...wrong. And the fact that you were willing to hand yourself over to an incubus for me, I...that’s too much, Keith.”

“How can you say that?” Keith whispers. “I know you would do the same for me. You rode three days straight through a desert wasteland towards a boy you’d never met who you didn’t know for certain even existed. You did that for me. So like Hell I wasn’t gonna do my damnedest to save you, too, Shiro. Like Hell.”

Shiro doesn’t deny it. But he does say, “I just...I want you to know that I understand if you want to...to break ties, now that this is over. You don’t have to see me ever again if you don’t want to.” Keith opens his mouth in protest, but Shiro continues. “I need you to know that you have that option, Keith. You have that option, and I...I don’t want to end things between us, but I think maybe, all things considered, that would be best.”

Shiro looks like he believes that about as much as Keith does, which is not at all. But stubborn, steadfast Shiro always has to play the martyr. Keith tried playing the martyr. It kind of sucks. He’s over it.
Keith takes a deep, steadying breath and says in a tone much calmer than he feels, “Nothing is ending, Shiro. As a cambion, I’m immortal. So are you. I’m offering you my eternity.”

Shiro takes a hurried step away, horrified. “What? No, Keith, I’m not – I’m not taking your soul! I don’t want – I’ll leave you alone, I’d never –”

“Takashi.” Keith grabs his shoulder, claws digging in, and glares at him. Shiro looks at him, flustered and panicky. “Listen to me. I’m not talking about the contract. Fuck the contract. It’s over. But this,” he steps in and presses his hand over where Shiro’s heart pounds in his chest, “isn’t. I don’t want this to be over, and I don’t think you do, either. I told you I loved you and I meant it. Did you?”

“Of course I meant it,” Shiro whispers. “I just…” He swallows. “I didn’t want things to happen this way, Keith. I wanted...I had a whole plan, in my head.” He smiles, and his sorrow is tangible. “I was going to tell you when I returned from Kerberos. I thought you were too young, before, and I didn’t want to rush things. I didn’t want to do anything that would endanger the future from coming true, the way I’d seen it. But I couldn’t help it, Keith. I couldn’t help but fall in love with you.”

“I couldn’t help but fall in love with you, either,” Keith breathes, and the relief he feels when Shiro’s arms finally settle around him is indescribable. “So,” he says, “eternity? What do you think?”

Shiro leans his forehead against Keith’s and says, “I think I still owe you an apology or two. Or a hundred. And we need to sit down and talk, if you’re serious about this.” He sighs, longing. “But I also think there’s no one else I’d rather spend eternity with.”

“Hmm,” Keith says, clasping his hand. “Maybe we can try out eternity tonight, see how we feel in the morning?”

Shiro’s lips twitch upwards, and he chuckles, and nods. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, okay. I can do that.”

“Okay,” Keith agrees, and kisses him under the stars.

*Krolia wasn’t joking when she said the Samhain festivities were in full swing. Keith thinks the swing is broken, it’s so full.

Shiro covers Keith’s eyes as soon as they walk out of the hall leading from their room to a large, crowded rotunda, and Keith squawks at him, squirming away. “Really?!”

“There are at least two dozen demons having an orgy right there,” Shiro wheezes, looking determinedly at the ceiling.

Keith squints at the mass of bodies several meters away. Huh. That sure is an orgy. It looks like a classy orgy, though. There’s grapes, and stuff. He elbows Shiro. “You’re literally a greater incubus,” he points out. “I’m not sure you can also be a prude.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” Shiro hisses. He’s beet red.

Then, because they’ve been standing too close for too long, one of the orgy demons approaches them. Keith is pretty certain it’s a succubus. A male one. He has speckled lavender skin and a leer than somehow manages to be charming. He bats long lashes and yellow eyes with black scleras at
them and purrs, “You two look like you’re in need of entertainment.”

His gaze settles approvingly on Shiro, who is still staring at the ceiling. Keith drapes an arm around Shiro’s waist and says, “Sorry. He’s a little embarrassed. First Samhain.”

The succubus claps his hands. “Ooh, really? Then we’ve got to make it special.”

One of the other succubi in the orgy, a shorter female with orange skin and huge blue eyes, squeals and leaps to her feet when she catches sight of the succubus talking to them (causing her partner to fall flat on his face), and hurries over.

“Simon!” she yelps, tugging on his arm. He eyes her and she hisses, “That’s him! That’s Lady Hecate’s son!”

The lavender succubus, Simon, blanches. “Oh, shitballs,” he says, and drops prone to the floor at Keith’s feet.

“Uh,” Keith says. “That’s really not...necessary…”

“No, no,” Shiro says, cautiously looking down at the kneeling succubus and raising an approving eyebrow, “I think that’s the appropriate response.” Keith elbows him again.

The orange one drops into a deep curtsy and says, “It’s a pleasure, sir! I’m Ezor, and –”

“Wait,” Keith blurts, “you’re Ezor?”

She pauses. “Um. Last I checked, yeah?”

“Acxa says hi,” Shiro says, and coughs, looking away again.

“Is your incubus ill?” Ezor asks, head tilted like an owl. “But oh, you know Acxa? She’s great, lovely, really. She’s here, somewhere…”

“Really? She got out of Daibazaal?” Keith asks.

“Yep.” Ezor rocks on the balls of her feet. “Said the whole place was a shithow. Lady Haggar murdered, big oops all around. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“No,” Keith says. “Nothing. At all. Say, would you happen to know where we could find some food and drink?”

“Oh, just over thataway!” Ezor exclaims, pointing to the other side of the rotunda, where Keith can make out a long table beside a longer bar, both bustling with Voidborn. Shiro is already marching towards it, dragging Keith along with him. “Bye?” Ezor says, shaking her head and skipping back to rejoin her whining partner.

“Are you suddenly forgetting the time you fucked me in front of way more demons than this?” Keith asks Shiro.

Shiro grimaces. “Fuck, no, do not remind me,” he mutters, but this time the blush isn’t just from embarrassment.

“That was kind of fucked up, huh,” Keith muses, letting their sides brush deliberately and watching Shiro’s gaze flick to him. “But very memorable.”

“I need a drink,” Shiro groans, and as if on command, a spindly little demon with rabbit ears
shoves a tray full of fizzy black drinks at them. “Is this toxic?” Shiro asks, lifting a glass warily.

“The polite thing to do is say thank you,” Keith snorts, taking a glass of his own. “Thank you,” he says to the rabbit demon.

“You are very welcome! It is only mildly toxic, son of Hecate!” the rabbit chirps, hopping away with a wink.

Shiro, who has already chugged half his glass, chokes. Keith pats him on the back and takes a sip. It tastes good, like extremely alcoholic blackberries. “What a way to go, though,” Keith says, leaning against the bar and taking another sip.

Shiro watches him in bewilderment. “Keith,” he mumbles, “why aren’t you more freaked out about...all this?”

“What part?” Keith says. “The ‘half demon’ part? The ‘love of my life is the incubus I’ve been sleeping with for the past four months’ part? The ‘my father is alive and well and loves my mother’ part? The ‘we’re all alive’ part? Or the ‘demon orgy and delicious alcohol’ part?”

Shiro sets down his drink, eyes soft. “So you are freaked out.”

“Obviously,” Keith laughs. “Well, not about you. I’m happy about you, not freaked out.”

This drink is strong. Keith takes another sip, and Shiro does the same. He watches Keith over the rim of his glass and murmurs, “I never got the chance to tell you earlier. You look...beautiful, Keith. This doesn’t make any sense, I know it doesn’t, but when you look like this…” He traces one of Keith’s curling black horns with a slow finger and Keith holds perfectly still. “It’s like all your fire is visible, now, on your skin. You look as powerful as you are, within.”

Keith bites his lip and takes another sip. It burns the back of his throat. “You saying I didn’t look powerful before?” he teases.

“You did,” Shiro replies, low and thoughtful. “But there was always something more about you, Keith. A spark that was all your own. I’d never seen anything like it before, and it drew me to you, like moth to flame. I remember when I told you that...I said then that you were powerful, beautiful, and good. It’s true, Keith. You are.”

“You’re much prettier than a moth,” is all Keith can say, his lips tingling as he sets aside his empty glass.

“Remember the moth that landed on my horns that day in the greenhouse?” Shiro chuckles. “That was a pretty moth.”

“It was,” Keith breathes, and tugs him into a kiss. Shiro melts into it, sliding a hand into Keith’s hair, and Keith drapes his arms around Shiro’s neck with a soft, relieved sigh against his lips. Shiro can’t seem to stop kissing him, pressing Keith up into the bar and licking into Keith’s mouth in earnest, slow and dirty and edged with a need that Keith mirrors.

Keith’s hand finds Shiro’s hip, and when Shiro bites at his lips Keith palms over his ass and Shiro jolts away, panting. Not too far away, though. Keith nudges their noses together, playful and reassuring, and Shiro’s heavy breaths even out.

“I told you I had a plan,” Shiro whispers into the fogged-up space between them. “A plan to tell you I loved you before this mess happened, remember?”
Keith places a finger over his lips. “Don’t tell me,” he says. “Show me.”

Shiro tucks his head into Keith’s neck and just breathes for a minute or two, and Keith lets him, holding him, stroking the curve of Shiro’s back, caught in the staggering reality of the two of them here, together, at last.

When Shiro has grounded himself, he kisses Keith again, softer than before, and leads him back to their room.

*  

“When you first summoned me,” Shiro whispers, “it was like awakening from the deepest, darkest sleep you can imagine. Your voice was the light, and I could do nothing but follow it.”

They stand, facing each other, in their room in Hecate’s palace which is darker than before, illuminated only by the warm little lamps strung from the ceiling like a sky full of fireflies.

Keith tips his head to the side as Shiro runs his hand over Keith’s neck, fingers curling around it in a tender parody of that first night. The memory of a clawed, shadowy hand pinning him to the wall as its owner taunted him flickers through his mind, but it’s distant, muted, unimportant when compared to the present: he has Shiro right here.

“I remember you were afraid,” Shiro murmurs. It isn’t a question. “Afraid, and angry, and overflowing with grief.” His hand drifts from Keith’s throat to his hair, stroking it away from his face. “I remember I wanted to help you. I wanted to show you that light I had seen.”

“Show me,” Keith repeats.

Shiro’s form shrinks, shifts, and it is exactly like that night when the incubus shifted into Shiro, black hair and kind eyes and unscarred face. It is only a little less unnerving, and this time Keith accepts his touch with a sigh, eyes fluttering shut.

“I saw this place in a dream, you know,” Shiro says, and Keith opens his eyes, questioning. “Hecate’s palace,” he adds. “In my dreams, we got married, here.”

Keith’s lips part and his heart leaps. “We get married?” he whispers.

“Yes,” Shiro says, smiling though his eyes are tearing up, “it’s a wonderful ceremony, and everyone is there, the Holts, and Lance, and Hunk, and my grandparents, and your parents, and so many others we don’t know just yet.”

“But we will,” Keith breathes, searching his gaze. “In the future, we will.”

“After Kerberos, I didn’t think I would have a future, Keith,” Shiro admits, and as his concentration wavers, so does his appearance, black hair fading to a white forelock and familiar scar over his nose.

Keith wipes his tears away as they start to fall. “You will,” he promises. “We will.”

Shiro’s kiss then is a startling echo of their very first one, and Keith groans in wordless invitation when Shiro corners him against the wall, the Shiro who Keith had always wanted so badly, the Shiro who he has had longer than he would have dared to believe.

Shiro slides a thigh between Keith’s legs and Keith arches up into it, kissing him harder, confident in his ability to give Shiro pleasure, to give himself pleasure. They kiss in bruising, shivery
intervals, until Keith squirms against Shiro’s knee, cock trapped and pulsing in anticipation. Shiro’s hands on him are gentle but purposeful, and Keith grins against his lips when Shiro scoops him up, palms spanning his thighs, and walks them over to the bed.

“Show-off,” Keith exhales, ruffling his hair until Shiro laughs and tries to shake him off, and they both flop onto the bed in a tangle of limbs. Shiro pauses once they’re both horizontal, cupping Keith’s face. Keith remembers this part vividly, but Shiro’s not taking charge this time.

“When I planned it,” Shiro admits quietly, “I asked you, what you wanted...how you wanted me.” He frowns. “I wanted it to be your choice, Keith.”

Keith leans in, indulging in a nuzzle that Shiro returns, though the line between his brows remains. “How do I want you...?” Keith rolls, so that Shiro is on top of him, between his half-spread legs. “Shiro,” he murmurs, “I want you however you will have me.” He runs his fingers through Shiro’s white hair and chuckles. “And, don’t get me wrong, I love fucking you, could probably fuck you all day if I was in the mood,” at this Shiro shivers, eyes darkening, “but I like you here, right now.” He pats Shiro’s ass and spreads his legs a little wider. “Fuck me, Takashi.” The way he says it is both a challenge and a plea.

Shiro understands. He kisses Keith on the cheek and sighs, “I’m going to make you feel so good.”

“You deserve to feel good, too,” Keith tells him, hands slipping under clothes, finding the bulge of Shiro’s cock and smirking in giddy wonder. “Heh,” he says. “You really weren’t exaggerating all the times before, were you?”

“Ngh,” Shiro grunts, hips pushing forward into Keith’s palm as he shapes his cock lazily, rubbing his thumb into the slick slit and watching Shiro’s lips part. “No – it’s just – like that – fuck.”

Their clothes vanish. Keith laughs, delighted, cut off with a moan when he sees Shiro’s cock, huge and hard and red as before, dragging over Keith’s thigh, then over his own erection, which fattens at the friction. Keith hums, reaching for Shiro. His eyes shine gold and his lips quirk when he purrs, “Baby.”

Shiro nudges his scarred nose against Keith’s, and it’s not ideal that he’s been turned into an unimaginably powerful interdimensional fiend from the depths of Hell, but right now, Keith isn’t complaining one bit.

“I was always afraid,” Shiro mumbles, nosing into Keith’s throat while their hips grind slow and sticky together, “that you’d find somebody else. That maybe I waited too long, and that one day you’d show up at my room gushing about someone you’d met, and I would have to smile, and congratulate you, and break down later alone.”

Keith stills, and lifts Shiro’s face back up to his own, shaking his head. “There was never anyone else,” he says. “You really didn’t think I loved you? I wasn’t really subtle.”

“I couldn’t let myself hope,” Shiro sighs, eyes falling shut under Keith’s touch. “Hope is dangerous.”

“So are you,” Keith counters, eyebrows raised.

Shiro grins, a little shy and a little sharp. “So are you,” he shoots back, and moves down Keith’s body. Keith is lax under him, shuddering and sighing when Shiro exhaled over his cock and sucks the tip into his mouth, eyes hooded and tongue teasing.

“You’re not going to aim for three times again, are you?” Keith asks in a breathless chuckle.
Shiro hums as he swallows down Keith’s cock, pretending to consider it, and Keith moans, loud and unashamed. He pulls off to retort, “I think one is a good start.”

“Have mercy,” Keith laughs, mouth falling open in another brazen moan as Shiro continues to lick and suck, his cheek bulging as the head of Keith’s cock presses into it again and again. Shiro retreats when Keith is whining, and Keith surges up to kiss away the precum beaded on his rosy lips. Keith rewards him with the low hum of the Galra hand activating, vibrating where the metallic fingers cup Keith’s balls. Keith throws his head back, gasping in surprise, toes curling and legs kicking weakly, and Shiro guides him back down to the bed, letting his buzzing fingertips trace swirling patterns over Keith’s bare skin, working their way up to his nipples.

Keith’s already found Shiro’s and the incubus groans when Keith’s thumbs press into the sensitive nubs, rubbing until the skin is warm and firm and Shiro is panting, eyes hungry. Neither of them are pretending now, if they ever truly were. Keith wraps his legs tight around Shiro’s waist and arches up from the bed, wanting so much that he’s dizzy with it. He keens when Shiro’s vibrating fingers pinch around one of his nipples, rubbing until the skin is warm and firm and Shiro is panting, eyes hungry. Neither of them are pretending now, if they ever truly were. Keith wraps his legs tight around Shiro’s waist and arches up from the bed, wanting so much that he’s dizzy with it. He keens when Shiro’s vibrating fingers pinch around one of his nipples, sending sensation straight to his cock.

“Be loud for me, baby,” Shiro coos in his ear, and Keith is more than happy to oblige, as long as Shiro does the same. He’s satisfied a few seconds later when Keith gets a hand around his cock, a rough twist of his wrist and a soft scrape of claws, and Shiro shouts at the unexpected sting, thrusting into Keith’s grip for more.

Keith kisses and sucks bruises into Shiro’s skin wherever he can reach, and Shiro explores and admires all the new parts of him, over shining scales and sharp horns and sharper teeth – Shiro shivers and gasps whenever Keith drags his teeth over Shiro’s skin, and when once he draws a few dark beads of blood, Keith laps them up without a second thought and Shiro moans his name.

When Shiro’s metal fingers dip between his thighs, Keith welcomes them, and yet Shiro touches him so carefully, with a slow and tender reverence, as if he cannot quite believe Keith is letting him have this, even when he has two slick fingers curling deep inside him.

Keith nudges Shiro’s shoulder with a foot, and Shiro’s head jerks up, eyes wide. He’s nervous, and Keith can’t blame him. The alcohol is wearing off; they only have each other, now.

“Hey,” Keith says, and catches Shiro’s free hand, intertwining their fingers. “I love you.”

Shiro’s face then is one of the few things Keith knows he will remember forever.

Shiro crooks his fingers against Keith’s prostate. Keith cries out his name, hands fisting in the sheets, and Shiro says, “I love you too,” and keeps saying it, whispers it into the crook of Keith’s knee, over the pale skin of his inner thighs, across the patches of scales on his hands, until it fills the room in a soft, secretive mantra, a constant thread of gold through Keith’s mind, *I love you, I love you, oh, how I love you.*

Keith’s fingers join Shiro’s at some point in between the first *I love you* and the fiftieth, and only when Keith is flushed and sweat soaked and on the verge of begging for it does Shiro line his cock up with Keith’s open, waiting hole, and sink home.

Shiro looms over him, shadow and power and light and weakness, and Keith gives himself over to it, and so does Shiro.

He was right all along. He looks into Shiro’s eyes and understands, quietly but completely, that no one has ever looked at him the way Shiro does, and Keith has never felt for anyone else what he
feels for Shiro, and probably never will again.

Shiro understands; in his blissful haze Keith can see it in the wavering, sweet curve of his lips, and Keith captures it, greedy and in love. Magic crackles through the air around them, both of their skin growing hotter to the touch, charging with power, power they have given each other.

Emboldened, and remembering, Keith pushes lightly at Shiro’s chest, not wanting his meaning to be misconstrued, and as Shiro rolls off of him, Keith takes his place, straddling Shiro’s hips with Shiro’s cock under him. He sighs when he sits down on it, and moans when Shiro takes Keith’s cock in hand, stroking loose and unhurried, watching Keith ride him with warm, wondering awe.

Shiro touches the iron rose at Keith’s throat, and Keith leans down so he can kiss it.

They don’t say anything; they don’t need to.

Keith can feel Shiro’s pulse inside him, as rapid as his own, yet the two of them are caught in a kind of timeless limbo. Everything is blurry at the edges, dreamlike, and Keith wonders if Shiro ever dreamed of them like this, letting each other in, giving each other all of themselves. He asks, and Shiro moans, nodding, hands turning claw on Keith’s hips.

“I did,” Shiro gasps. “Maybe – maybe I even dreamed of this moment. I remember somewhere golden, and soft, and I remember you saying please –”

“Please,” Keith says, just to indulge him, and then says it again, out of real need, when Shiro thrusts up hard enough into him.

“I remember,” Shiro breathes, “yes, I remember this, Keith,” and Keith runs his hands over Shiro, free to touch, free to kiss, free to surrender and let Shiro smother him in heat and adoration, rolling Keith back down onto the sheets and fucking him until he cries. He’s laughing, too. He’s a fucking mess. They both are.

“Shiro,” Keith gasps, clawing at his back and dragging his hips in with his legs, “I want to get married. To you. Here. Someday.”

“Are you proposing?” Shiro pants, lifting his head from Keith’s neck in disbelief.

“Yeah,” Keith cackles like a madman, “yeah – ah – I’m proposing. Marry me?”

“Are you serious?”

Keith nods furiously, ruined only a little by the moan that follows.

Shiro laughs back, face aglow, and says, “Then, yes. Yes. Let’s get married.”

“Someday,” Keith reminds him, eyes rolling back in his head, “weddings take a lot of – nngh – planning – and time –”

“Shut up, Keith,” Shiro giggles, and shuts him up, and Keith comes with a soft, pleased cry, Shiro’s arms wrapping around him as he follows with a long, low sigh.

Neither of them move afterwards. Keith is being crushed, and he loves it. The lamps are burning low, but Keith can still see Shiro’s face clearly, inches from his own, tired and sated and smiling. He looks asleep, but Keith knows he’s just savoring the moment. It’s nice, he thinks, to just lay there together.
“Mm,” Shiro says after a while, and eases himself off, blinking his eyes open and gazing into Keith’s eyes. “We’re going to get married, then,” he muses.

“Mhm,” Keith agrees, snuggling to his chest. “I want to ride Strawberry down the aisle.”

Shiro snorts and shakes his head. “What about your father?”

“He has a horse too.”

Shiro chortles, and nods, and strokes Keith’s hair. “Alright,” he says. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

“You promise?” Keith asks, fighting to keep a straight face.

“I promise,” Shiro says. “Seal it with a kiss?” His eyes are full of laughter.

“Gladly,” Keith says with a grin, and kisses him for all he’s worth.

Chapter End Notes

this is a final MONSTER of a chapter, pun very much intended. the end of this chapter also roughly parallels the first chapter. just in case you wanna be extra emotional while reading :(

oh, boy. this story....well, it took a lot outta me, but I'm glad I wrote it. Thank you for all of your support and wonderful comments which made me smile on so many late nights and early mornings. I appreciate every single one of you.

For those of you who guessed Kurobasanir was actually Shiro (mostly) all along, congrats. You smart beans, you. Let's be real, if you know me, you know that I couldn't possibly write THIS MUCH STUFF about Keith/anyone other than Shiro. So. Ya know. Kinda played myself, there. It was Shiro, guys, SURPRISE

Anyway, while this story is over, who knows how many freakin stories I'll write in the future? (probably too many.) You can subscribe to me here on ao3 and follow me on tumblr @saltyshiro for more updates and for various silly fic/life/fandom stuff. Plus, some doodles of Cambion Keith & Incubus Shiro; they're fun to draw. If any of y'all feel inspired to create art for this fic (or any of my other fics) please share it with me on tumblr! I have a tag/page on my blog dedicated solely to fic art; it brings me a lot of joy.

Enjoy this chapter and this story if you find yourself perusing through ~certain scenes~ in the future! Enjoy Season 7! Write and read and draw and create what you love, my dudes. It's fun, and life's too short not to.

(Even if what you love is dragon-demon porn. Fuckin yolo.)

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