Where the Light Doesn't Reach

by rosegardenlake

Summary

Football Captain Takashi Shirogane always looked like he had a charmed life. A full ride scholarship to a top university, worshipping fans wherever he turned, never wanting for a single thing. Keith’s never needed to have anything to do with him. Keith has his own problems, his own friends, his art. They’re from two different worlds.

But one day, Shiro doesn’t come home. One day, there’s blood all over the streets but no body. And it’s Keith, and only Keith, who can see Shiro, shirt splattered with blood, panicking through a hallway of people who ignore and pass right through him.

It’s only Keith who can see his ghost. And it’s only Keith who can help him find who did it.

Notes

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Thanks to кия there is a Russian translation!
Chapter 1

It’s a perfect day.

Keith and Pidge make their way across the campus’ field, still soggy from last night’s rain, mud squelching beneath their feet. Pidge carries their sketch boards and Keith limps on his crutches, bag full of their art supplies tossed over his shoulder. It all works out.

They’re in the advanced art class, so their teacher gives them more freedom, letting them sketch outside in the rare times the weather decides to behave. Today, the sun is actually peeking through the dark clouds and the breeze that’s there is cool, not cold. The bleachers overlook the deep green forest, settled in a silence that’s comforting and peaceful. Everything seems just perfect.

They sit; Pidge takes out her earbuds, turns on some music, pops one in her ear and hands Keith the other. The sound of soft guitar weaves through the field...and they draw.

Keith’s always the one who gets sucked into it. It’s Pidge who’s just along for the ride, but she’s content. They enjoy sitting together in their bubble of art for about twenty minutes, sun shining and music gently accompanying the experience, until the inevitable happens: the sky clouds over and the football players come out, yelling loudly.

Keith and Pidge share looks but their sketches already have their roots and it’s too late to move. They try to ignore the football players, they really do, but their loud energetic shouting is a direct contrast to the peace of only five minutes ago. The soft fog had been rolling over the redwoods like a song from the sea and now the atmosphere is ruined.

“God, help me,” Pidge mutters as she scribbles something out with a heavy hand. Keith can hear the page ripping.

“Guh.” She tears a page from her board, stuffs it into a ball, and tosses at their feet. “Don’t let me forget that later.”

He takes a deep breath in and keeps going.

But Pidge grunts, sketch forgotten as she hunches over like a little gremlin and stares down all of the football players, disdain in her eye. They pay no mind to her, but it’s no matter. Her energy is fierce enough to scare Keith at least.

She chews so hard on the end of her pencil that Keith can smell the wood from it. “Look at them,” she says around her eraser. “They annoy me so much... Are they not driving you insane? All so full of themselves...clapping each other on the backs all self-assured like they just won the Nobel Peace Prize or something. I can’t concentrate like this.”

The chill in the air is starting to smell of rain. Keith rubs the back of his hand against the cold tip of his running nose but doesn’t take his eyes off his paper.

“Oooh, look at me, I’m Lotor,” Pidge mocks in a high voice, swinging her shoulders back forth haughtily. “My hair rivals that of a unicorn’s mane and my muscles are the cure for cancer.” She switches to a deeper voice. “And my name’s Shiro, captain of the football team. My tears heal the sick and give long life to the elderly.”
Keith snorts out a shallow laugh. “That kind of sounds like him.”

She rolls back, tossing her arms into the air. “God. Did you hear about Shiro’s scholarship? Sometimes I think I’ve been blessed with the wrong gifts. Ivy league school and he doesn’t have to pay a dime. A dime! All he does is just toss a ball around and they’re bowing at his feet, paying for his entire education. What’s he going to do? It’s a ball, not the solution for world peace. It’s beyond ridiculous!”

She waits. When there’s no response, she elbows Keith in the ribs. “Are you listening?”

“Mmmmmmmmm,” Keith hums, eyes trained on the paper in his lap, still fully absorbed in his sketch. The redwoods are beautiful. Tall and noble…and with the clouds as active and moody as they are today, it makes for a very dramatic sketch. He feels that twitch of excitement deep in his chest, like a spark, because he can just knows that this is going to be a good piece when it’s finished. It already is.

“I’m listening,” he adds as he senses her staring at him with that look. Eyebrows raised. Mouth pursed. Classic Pidge.

“Oh,” she challenges. “Then, what’d I say?”

“You were making fun of Lotor and Shiro...again.”

“The dream team,” she rolls her eyes and tosses her drawing board aside to glare ahead properly. She swings her feet against the dirt on the ground in irritation and then her eyes catch sight of something on the other end of the bleachers. “Is that Shiro’s superfan? Does she not have class? How am I not surprised? I’d bet the teachers let her stay out here because it’s for Shiro. God, I hate this school. Will they have party streamers and painted portraits of them in the hallways next? What a bunch of assholes.”

He chuckles under his breath, eyes flashing up to the sky as he inspects the clouds. “Yep,” he hums. He lets his lips pop around the ‘p’.

“Oh,” Pidge laughs softly. “He’s looking over here now. I guess I should be quiet.”

Keith looks up, but football players are not what interests him, so he looks around, out toward the dark redwoods. He knows the trees are everywhere in this town - he’s lived here his entire life - but he doesn’t think he can ever get tired of them. There’s something gentle about their shape. Tall and sturdy. If a redwood were a person, they’d be trustworthy. He tries to emulate that in his sketch.

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this,” Pidge frowns, reaching into her backpack. “I’m texting Matt. I feel like you’re not spiteful enough for this conversation.”

“I really couldn’t care less about either of them.”

“Oh-huh. See, that’s my point.”

“We don’t even know them.”

“Keith,” she groans with a dramatic head toss. “Don’t you know you don’t have to know a person to bash on them? You’re really not good at this high school thing.”

“Oh... Huh.” He scrubs out a rogue bird in his sketch with his eraser. “Sorry, I’m just having a good drawing day.”
She leans over and places her chin on his shoulder, looking down at his work. “Yeah,” she says, humming in pleasantly surprised approval. “You are.”

“Thanks, Pidge. You should try drawing the football players; you’re focused on them enough.”

“What a good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?” She pushes herself back up, curling around her phone in her lap for awhile, but nothing interests her and she doesn’t get any notifications - everyone’s in class and all that - so she shoves it back into her pocket and pretends to put her pencil to work. But she keeps tossing disgruntled looks up at the football players. They just won’t shut up.

Keith’s focus is iron held together by his will. It helps that Pidge’s phone is still playing music in one ear, and his other ear was damaged a few years back. He can’t hear much out of it. That is, until the coach starts roaring.

Keith tsks, finally backing away from his drawing to press his fingers into his eyes. He rips the earbud from his ear and hands it back to Pidge. “Jesus, what’s wrong with people? Does that actually work? Screaming at others?”

Pidge shrugs, taking out her own earbud and spinning the cord around her finger. She leans back to watch the players all come to a stumbling halt and turn quickly to pay attention. “Guess there’s a reason they win all their games. They’re a national treasure. And for this lame town, that means something.”

“God,” Keith huffs, narrowing his eyes in a glare as he seeks out the man in question. He stops, face draining of color as he sees. “Oh…” He draws in a shaky breath. “That’s Coach Zarkon.”

Coach Zarkon is as huge as his voice and temper. He’s in the middle of the field, screaming at a player, getting in their space until they shrivel to half their usual size. Even then, he keeps going. The boy’s going to crumble. Keith can see it on his face; everyone can see it on his face. He’s pale and shivering and scared. It’s sickening.

“Indeed.” She leans back and chews on the end of her pencil.

“I thought...I thought he didn’t do P.E.”

“I don’t think it’s P.E. It must be some special thing for the game. I dunno.”

Pidge’s eyes go up to Keith’s face as he stares at Zarkon. His whole body is tight like a spring ready to snap. With a soft sigh, she rolls onto her feet and leans forward in Keith’s face, blocking out his vision of the field. Her jacket’s too big for her and swallows her whole. It’s so dorky. It’s so Pidge. It comforts him.

He takes in a deep breath and shakes his head, trying to ground himself. He doesn’t need to be such a huge baby.

Gently, Pidge asks, tilting her head and patting him on the shoulders, “…Wanna leave?”

He allows his eyes to fall down to the sketch in his hands. It’s almost there, a few more details and it’ll be perfect. If he leaves now, it might as well be ruined. The lighting will be different by the time he can return. The atmosphere. His own heart.

The yelling is ringing in his ears. He can feel that sticky sensation of panic developing up the back of his neck and clenching his stomach tightly.
...It’s just a sketch. He grabs his crutches and heaves himself up with a pained grunt. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Lotor and Shiro are a dynamic duo. Everyone knows that. They’ve been best friends since they were toddlers, grown up together and always locked in some sort of strange “friendly” rivalry. They’re like siblings really, only they look nothing like each other and act nothing like each other. When they both smile, their expressions are worlds away. Shiro is the sweet, while Lotor is the sour.

They’re in Keith’s chemistry class together, seated at the far back, and Lotor is leaning on the back two legs of his seat, boasting loudly about some party he’d been to the past week. He’s flipping his mane of hair back and forth like he’s the star of his own beauty commercial; it’s ridiculous how much he sparkles. Shiro listens, chuckling regretfully in the back of his throat and laughing outright sometimes, saying in a preachy voice the occasional, “I can’t believe you.”

But they seem to get along well enough.

Keith sort of gets why Pidge hates them. They fit the stereotype of jock perfectly. Though they’re smart, they’re loud, brawny, and trample around school like they expect everyone to bow to them. And people do. The football team is the school’s pride and joy. Keith doesn’t really get it; he hasn’t really been into sports for years now.

Anyway, he doesn’t care. He just wants to draw. He doodles in his chem book as the teacher comes in and begins his lecture. Even then, he can hear Lotor and Shiro talking in the back, like this is their domain and everyone else is the true nuisance here.

“I can’t believe you got the scholarship over me,” Lotor is saying. Keith can’t tell if he’s joking or not; that’s the sickening part. “Me.”

Shiro just laughs. “I had a good day.”

“Regardless. I was there.”

God. Keith wants to vomit a little.

The teacher says nothing because they are Lotor and Shiro, and Keith can’t help but want to roll his eyes, especially when the teacher calls Keith out for drawing during class. He’s forced to put his art away like he’s the one disturbing the peace, even though he can barely even hear the teacher calling him out because of Lotor’s incessant prattle.

When Keith, disgruntled but not disobedient, shifts to grab his lab book out and start paying attention, his elbow catches his pencil and sends it flying. It skitters across the tile floor and continues rolling until it’s 100% underneath the side cabinets, right where Keith will definitely not be able to retrieve it easily with his stupid shitty leg.

But he’s not going to let his weaknesses get the best of him. He can pick up a pencil, dammit. With an aggravated huff, he pulls himself up, preparing for pain, but he blinks when he sees Shiro already there, bending over in one easy swoop to scoop it from the shadows. Shiro’s grinning. Sparkling. What’s with all the fucking sparkles on them...?

It’s so easy for Shiro. Keith can’t help but bite the inside of his cheek with jealousy as he watches. If only it’d be that easy for Keith too, but everything’s a production for him now. He manages a forced smile as he thanks Shiro, the star of their school, their hero. And when Shiro mumbles out a
‘thank you’ instead of a ‘you're welcome’ in return, face flaring red as he realizes his mistake too late, Keith can’t help but think maybe Pidge was right about that scholarship all along.

After the final bell rings, Keith goes to his locker to shove his books away and it's there Pidge finds him. She sneaks up behind him, snakes a hand beneath his arm, grabs his sketchbook from the top of the book pile and flips through to the end. “Ooh. These are interesting. Dark again. ...I haven't seen stuff like this from you in years though. You okay?”

He pulls a face and shrugs his shoulders. “Yeah, I’m fine. It’s this dang weather; winter’s come early. I’m just thinking about things again.”

“Let’s do something then. Want to hang out today? We can play video games all afternoon.”

He hesitates. He loves Pidge, he does, but he’s too antsy for that today. “I sort of wanted to finish my sketch from earlier... It’s still in my hands right now, you know? They’re buzzing? See?” He holds them out for her to inspect and she just raises an amused eyebrow at him. “Raincheck?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know that look,” she grunts, pushing herself off the lockers with a big dramatic sigh. “No worries. I’ll go ask Lance and Hunk since my best friend is too busy for me. It's fine. My heart's not broken.”

He presses his hands together in a plea for forgiveness. “I’m sorry, Pidge. Forgive me. You’re the best in the entire world, no one could rival you.”

“Mm... Keep going.”

“The most beautiful, most talented, sweetest person ever. You are a queen. But I feel lucky today. Like I’m going to make something good.”

She watches his face with mirth twinkling in her eyes before handing his sketchbook back over. “Fine. But you better draw something worthwhile then. I expect to see results tomorrow.” She grunts as she pushes herself off the side of the lockers. “Oh, god, I hope Hunk and Lance don’t want to go to the football game tonight. Imagine.”

Keith laughs. “Stop by my house; you can watch me draw.”

“You’re no fun when you’re all focused. I might as well just pester Matt.”

“Mmkay, but the offer’s open. Tell the others I said ‘hi’. Be careful on your walk home.”

“That’s what I should be saying to you. You get so lost in your head sometimes, I worry you’ll walk straight into a ditch. Lose your crutches. Twist your leg.”

“I’ll call you if I need you.”

“Good. I’ll be waiting. See you.”

Keith loves his walks. The roads that lead away from the school grounds and toward his neighborhood are peaceful and quiet. Their town is a cozy little place; you can walk around the whole perimeter in basically one day, but it’s usually raining, so people usually drive. They’re all missing out.

The crutches are a pain, but it's not a long way, barely even ten minutes, and most of his good ideas for his artwork come to him on this long stretch of road. His parents hadn’t wanted him to walk at first (“what if something happens to your leg??”) but very few cars actually come through this
road, so he managed to convince them. They know how important it is for him to do at least some things for himself.

It smells lately though. It’s that weird in-between of just heady with fall weather and rotted pungent diseased leaves. Keith has to walk in the middle of the road to avoid it. The recent storm has blown the leaves from the trees’ branches and there are piles of them covering the road, taking up more of it than leaving open ground. He likes that about this sleepy town, that it’s not sterile and doesn’t come straight out of a box. There are parts of it that are quiet and untouched by human hands. Those are the places he’d like to draw.

He wishes he could wander into the trees for inspiration, deep into the depths of the forest, but he knows getting lost could be a real threat to him, and his sense of direction has never been the sharpest, so he files the idea away for later.

He’s daydreaming about doing it anyway.

...The wind blows through his hair, crackling the orange and red leaves along the floor...

A loud crack bursts through the air.

It’s sudden.

It’s disorientating.

Keith jumps, ripped from his peace, eyes flying wide. With a yelp, he nearly stumbles into the ditch.

He turns with a sharp jerk, wildly seeking the source of the sound, narrowing his eyes down the road. Into the forests. Behind him. Above. All around.

The sound echoes oddly against the scattered wall of trees encompassing him. Instead of one sound, it feels like many. The trees’ brushy growth covers the sound from the sky overhead and it just bounces, striking back and forth, stretching on forever. It fills Keith with anxiety that presses down on his chest and mouth.

The sound thins until it fades into nothingness...but the serenity that had been part of the land earlier is gone; there’s just muted silence. Hollow. Open. Pregnant with apprehension.

The wind blows around him, upturning the piles of leaves in a tunnel headed right at him. He shudders as it overcomes him - the cold autumn chill, tousling his hair and pushing at him. Almost like a message.

There’s nothing. Whatever it was sounded distant, maybe another road nearby. But that’s it. He doesn’t hear a car skidding away, or the curse of a frustrated human being. There’s just silence. It bothers Keith for some reason. The silence feels sick.

He stays there for a few minutes, staring, waiting, but nothing more happens. The treetops shudder as the wind picks up and he can hear as rain begins to knock against the leaves, each drop hitting sharp and crisp. He’ll get soaked out here, even with the treecover.

After another moment of unease, he turns and begins his walk slowly, eyes on the lookout.

The fog is coming in, thick and heavy. It’s a relief when he sees his house in the distance. He feels too exposed outside. He doesn’t want to walk anymore.
The first thing he does when he steps into the warmth of his house is text Pidge quickly. He still has his shoes on and his backpack strapped to his shoulder. He’s biting his lip. He’s tense.

You okay?

Her reply is instant: Uh. Yeah. Should I not be?

Nevermind. I just...text me when you get home.

He hears the sound of footstepsoftly approaching from the stairs and he looks up from his phone.

It’s his mother. She blinks slowly at him, tilting her head as she assesses his state. She bridges the distance between them and catches his chin between her hands. Tilts his head up. Inspects his face. “Everything alright?”

He pulls a face, batting her away as he drops his bag to the ground. “Yeah... I just was walking home from school earlier when I felt...strange. I can’t explain it.”

Her eyes fall down to his leg. “Your -”

“No, not that,” he grudges out, trying to shift it out of her sight. “Not me. Like something in the air. I don’t know. There was a crack, like...like something heavy falling or...someone chopping wood? And I just... I don’t know.”

“Hm. Well, you know, it’s not rare for people to be chopping wood. It’s supposed to be a cold winter,” she murmurs softly, giving him one last look before she turns. Keith’s checkup is over.

“I said ‘like’ someone chopping wood. This was different. I don’t know what it was...”

“I’m sure it was nothing. You worry too much.”

“But it felt like something. Does that make sense?”

“Who knows? Maybe you have part of your dear aunt’s blood in your veins.”

She’s joking, of course. His aunt had believed herself to be a witch. She had babbled about it for so long, falling deeper into insanity, until they had to finally put her away. Keith wants to believe she was just the family loon - an exception - but sometimes he just feels and he grasps to understand and never can. And maybe, just maybe, that’s his answer.

“It felt like something bad happened,” he murmurs, gently kneading his fingers into the tender muscle of his thigh. He tries to be rational about it, but that horrible sense of dread sits heavily in his gut. “Like something’s wrong. It’s like I haven’t been able to catch my breath since.”

She frowns slightly, still watching him with her sharp eyes even as she settles into the chair beside him. “Did you need me to call the doctor?”

“The doctor? For what?”

“Maybe your meds are giving you side effects.”

“No, it’s not -” He heaves out a sigh and shakes his head. “...It’s probably nothing.”

She presses her fingers gently to the dark circles under his eyes. A small sigh leaves her. “Maybe you need some rest. I’ll make you your favorite for dinner so go take a nap. Your father will be home soon.”
“Yeah...” he murmurs, slipping off his seat and dragging himself upstairs. He closes his door behind himself, dumps his crutches against his dresser and kicks off his shoes.

His art desk is a huge mess - well used - and he shoves aside some straggling pencils to make room for his sketchbook. He flicks to the next blank page and stares into it.

He waits.

Heaves a sigh.

Ugh, he can’t concentrate at all. He had promised Pidge a nice drawing too. He hangs grudgingly on the back of his chair, staring at the ceiling, trying to descramble his mind until it forms into some sort of brilliant idea.

He starts to scratch at his head in irritation and he can’t take it anymore, so he whips out his phone with his other hand to text Pidge.

What’re you doing?

Wow, another text from Keith. Regretting your decision to not join me?

Kind of. I can’t concentrate after all.

Come over. Hunk made cookies and Lance is showing us his collection of cat videos. Here’s a preview. More awaits you if you come over.

She sends one to him and it’s pretty damn good, but it doesn’t unwind that knot in his chest or unfurrow the tension in his brow.

Can’t. Mom’s got work.

We can come pick you up.

It’s alright. I really do want to draw something today. I just wanted to see what you were up to. I’m glad you’re alright.

He’s in a mood. He shoves his phone away and grabs a pencil anyway, digging into the sketchbook and attempting to let things flow. He had felt inspiration running through his veins earlier, but it’s long gone now, shocked away on that long windy road from school.

There’s really no point. The first drawing he attempts looks like his skill has regressed ten years, he’s using his non-dominant hand, and he’s suffering a horrific hand injury. So he rips the page out, crinkles it, and tosses it into the waste bin with a sigh. The second is much worse. He could be hanging out with Pidge right now, completely avoiding this whole feeling, but no. He wanted to be alone and draw. Great idea.

He collapses on his bed and is about to let himself zone out when his eyes catch on the tree outside his window. He sits up slowly.

The tree has been there since before he was even born. Always tall and white. Sometimes there’s a bird or two. Occasionally, the weather will pull a branch off. But it’s always looked much the same.

Today, its white leafless branches are different. They’re covered in black. There are birds painting the tree, no spot on any branch left untouched. Crows. A murder of crows, all staring
inside the window, staring at him.

Not just any group, more than he’s ever seen. Just on this one tree, right outside his window.

Keith swallows hard, slowly limping to the window seat. They’re still, so unnaturally still.

They’re just sitting there, watching him, black eyes following his every move with an intelligence he’s not prepared for.

His fingers begin to shake. He tries to think rationally. Just birds. Birds are just another animal, like him. There’s nothing bad about a bird. They’re harmless. Yeah.

Harmless.

But his heart is thumping uncomfortably in his chest.

He grabs the latch of his window and tosses it open, shoving his head out into the cold air. “Shoo!” He curses them, waving his arm around. “Get out of here!”

They don’t move. He draws back. Are they even real...? Is he going crazy?

He hears his sister coming home in her usual manner, stomping up the stairs past his room. He turns.

“Acxa!” He calls. “Acxa, come look at this!”

“I can’t,” she groans, shouting back. “I’m sure you can handle whatever it is on your own.”

“But -”

Her door slams.

“Jesus,” he grunts, disgruntled, looking around his room for something to toss. He shifts weight onto his useless shitty leg as he bends over, grunting from the pain.

He grabs the nearest crumpled up piece of paper, heaves himself up, and chucks it at them.

It strikes one and they suddenly burst into a black frenzy of aggravated wings. With both hands, Keith snaps the window shut quickly before they can seek revenge and come after him. He leans forward, face pressed against glass as he watches them closely.

They take off in all directions, a swarm of black swallowing up the sky, twisting up into the dark clouds and away until they shrink into the distance. Gone.

The tree is lonely again, white branches cleaned of their infestation. Normal again. Quiet.

He’s breathing hard. It’s like they were waiting for him. He’s never seen anything like that before.

With one resolute tug, he closes the curtains and collapses on the bed.

Birds are not unusual, he tries to convince himself. They do that sometimes; they’re crows and they travel in families. But, on top of the uneasiness already nesting in his gut, he can’t stop the shaking.

It makes him restless but his leg is starting to ache; it’s sensitive to stress. He snatches up a random sketchbook on his dresser and flips to the nearest empty page. He just stares at the empty
He wants... safety. He wants his friends, family, and him to all be okay. That's all. Protection. Regardless of time or space. Everyone he’s loved, loves, or will love. He wants them safe. He lets his hand sketch lines that feel comfortable for him, that feel right, that bring him back from the edge of panic. They’re abstract and don’t mean anything, but to him, they’re soothing, creating the comfort he needs.

A half hour later, content, he gently tears it out of his book, staring at it. It feels right.

His mom calls for him down the hallway. He folds the drawing up, shoves it in his jacket pocket, and, with one last uneasy look at his window, limps down the stairs to dinner.

In the morning, he wakes up to the annoying ping of his phone. He cracks his eye open. The clock reads six AM. He’s still got at least an hour left, so he rolls onto his side and lets himself fade back into slumber.

Another ping. Then another.

He groans as he reaches for the phone.

The rain outside hasn’t relented since it began last night. It pounds mercilessly on their rooftop, familiar, helping him blink back to consciousness gently. He can hear the clouds rumbling lowly in the distance, powerful and foreboding.

He frowns at the bright light of his phone as he brings it to his face. It’s Pidge.

Keith.

Keith, are you there?

Keith!

He hisses against the light and types blindly, managing some typo-ridden form of what?

Finally! Dad just got off duty, bursting through the door, all serious. The station got a call past midnight, some lady freaking out, saying her son never came home from school, that he didn’t show up for his football game. He won’t answer his phone. No one knows where he is. I’ve never seen Dad so pale. He said he could barely understand the mother.

Wait, wait. Who?

Shiro. Shiro’s missing.

He blinks at the phone again, still rubbing at his eyes.

Missing? He texts. He just saw Shiro yesterday, laughing about some dumb party, casual as could be.

Shiro’s mother’s freaking out. He never does this sort of thing. The last time he was seen was right after school. His brother left early without him.

Keith thinks of the feeling he had following him in his gut. The dread, the uneasiness. He doesn’t say anything back for awhile.
Keith? Pidge texts. **You know Dad. He’s been in the force for years and he’s not one to panic. But he doesn’t want any of us walking to school until he figures more out. Matt’ll drive us. See you in an hour. Okay?**

He lets out a shaky breath. **Okay.**

Matt comes right on time in his beat up little car. His face is stony as he pulls up on Keith’s driveway. The atmosphere is stifling and prickly.

Matt doesn’t even look back to greet him. His usual friendly grin is gone. His hand is gripping the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles are white.

Keith knows Matt and Shiro were close. Keith used to see them through the crack of Matt’s door whenever Keith would hang out with Pidge, laughing and joking together.

Keith slides into the car beside Pidge.

“Hey, Keith,” Pidge murmurs, looping her arm through his as he fits the crutches on the bottom of the floor.

“Hey.”

“Matt will drive us back today too. Dad’s being Dad.”

“It’s raining, Katie,” Matt says lowly. "You normally don't even want to walk in the rain."

“I know, I know. I’m not arguing. You can drive if you want to drive. I’m just saying...there's all this worry, but I'm sure he's fine. He’s probably at a friend’s house. Drunk himself into a coma or something.”

“Look,” Matt says curtly, face pinched into a snarl he’s trying to contain. “I know what the whole school sees him as, but you don’t *know* him. He's not like that. He’s not answering his phone,” Matt says and his voice lowers with each word. “He always answers, *always*. If his friends are ever in trouble, he wants to be available for them. He’s *always* said that. He’s a *good* honest person.”

Pidge heaves a sigh. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I wouldn’t know. I just think if you’re thinking there’s something *sinister* going on, out of everyone, a big boy like him seems like a badly chosen opponent. Someone his size can handle whatever comes his way. I’m sure he’s fine. Maybe his phone died or something. Dad will find him. And I’m sure the whole town will come to his aid if he *is* in trouble. He’s *Shiro*, your friendly neighborhood...football player...or whatever.”

Matt’s quiet. Keith can see his throat bobbing as he swallows hard, eyes tense.

He parks in the school parking lot and takes a deep sigh. “Okay. Out.”

“You’re not coming?” Pidge asks, scooting across the seat.

“I’m going to stay here for a bit. I just...need a second.”

There’s a bulge in his neck that looks like a vein about to pop.

Keith grabs his crutches and pushes the door open.

“Keith,” Matt says suddenly as Keith is in the middle of trying to heave himself from the car. Pidge is already a few feet away, balancing on the back of her heels, looking around campus.
“Yeah?”

“I know she’s just trying to help by downplaying, but...I know what I’m talking about when I say something’s wrong. Shiro would never just run off. Whatever this is... Just... ...Look after Katie, will you? You and her are sort of a unit. I’d feel better if I knew you were watching her when I can’t.”

Keith’s face softens. Matt looks so lost, yet earnest. Keith nods. “Of course.”

“Thanks...”

“Jeez,” Pidge sighs as she leads him out of the parking lot. She weaves her arm through Keith’s again like they always do and Keith pulls her closer,shrugging against the cold. She pats his arm. “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen Matt worried. It makes me worry for him.”

“They’ll find him,” Keith says softly, but he’s not sure if he believes himself.

Keith jumps as someone tosses an arm around his shoulders. He turns to wrinkle his brow at Lance, who's too close for comfort. “You’re talking about Shiro, aren’t you?” Lance jumps into their conversation, eyebrows raised. “The whole thing’s stupid. Nothing can touch that guy. Have you seen how huge he is? And besides, he’s friends with everyone. Why would anyone kidnap him?”

Hunk falls in line beside Pidge, clinging to the end of his backpack’s straps as he nods to them in greeting. “I dunno... I mean, he always looks sort of lonely, don’t you think? I’m thinking of that saying, ‘jack of all trades but master of none’. Maybe it’s kind of that way for him, but with friends. He knows and is friendly with everyone, but...I mean, if your best friend is Lotor, doesn’t that sort of mean something?”

“Yeah, Lotor’s a pompous ass,” Lance says.

“I just think there’s more to him than we know. Than maybe anyone knows.”

“I’m sure, just like with anyone,” Pidge says.

Despite the fact that it’s supposed to be a secret, as they pass through the gates, they see quickly that the whole school is abuzz with it. Groups of people are already crying, pushing past Keith to run into each other's arms and sob. No one can concentrate in class. The teachers address it, voices soft like they’re all wounded animals, asking them if they know anything, to tell someone, anyone. They even have an anonymous line set up. Everyone’s faces are drained and confused and scared.

Shiro’s parking spot he uses when he does drive is empty. It remains empty. Keith can see it looking out the window from his seat in class. The spot is just there, waiting.

Keith’s mom was right: he’s always been sensitive. He tried to snuff it out of himself when he was little, but it’s in him. He picks up on the feelings and people around him. Too empathetic that it hurts.

It hurts now. He just wants to go home. As if a missing person wasn’t enough, the buzzing in the air is piercing right into him. The air is too sharp. Too bitter. It makes him squirm.

During lunch, none of them talk. Even Lance is serious as he eats. Keith just wants to curl into a blanket, sit in between the safety of his mother and father, and let his mind veg out on some movie. He doesn’t want to think of this anymore.
Maybe Shiro was an obnoxious large jock - Keith didn’t know him well - but that was a person he had seen every day. And maybe now he’s just...a stain on the road.

And Keith might’ve been there, heard his last moments. The thought makes him breathless with sickness.

He stares out in the crowd, looking at all the students with their minds on Shiro. He could be anywhere. Maybe he's in a ditch behind the school. Maybe he's miles away by now. Maybe they’ll never find him, hidden too well.

He thinks he spots Shiro among the crowd and has to look down at his sandwich before he gets sick. He can’t eat either though. He’ll be sick then too.

He needs to stop thinking about this but everyone's talking about it. Everyone. He can see it on the tightness of their faces and the stiff chill in the air. It’s too much.

“I want to go home,” Keith whispers, putting his sandwich down and rubbing his brow. “I can’t take it here like this anymore,” he says. “I want to go home.”

“I know,” Pidge says, moving in closer to pry his hand from his face. As he peels his fingers apart, he sees the shine of her glasses, the little divot of her concerned brow as she stares at him. Her kind face. “We all do. Don’t leave without me though. School’s almost over; we can go home together.”

He swallows hard. He wants them all to be together too.

“Hey,” she says, patting his hand. “You didn’t show me your super awesome drawing you did yesterday. You didn’t bail on me for nothing, did you?”

Instead of the drawing, he remembers the crows watching him from the tree outside. He remembers the loud noise on the road, distracting him from his art mood. His stomach sinks even further. “Pidge…”

“I want to see,” she says again, her voice falsely chipper. “Come on.”

He sighs and shoves his hand into his pocket, pulling it out. It had made more sense to him yesterday, like it was an actual charm, but now it just looks like random abstract art, something he’s never been overly fond of.

“Oh,” Pidge murmurs softly, letting her fingers skim over the design as she smooths out the wrinkles over the table. “It’s gentle.”

“Can I see?” Hunk asks already leaning over.

Keith sighs. “It's not anything special.”

Hunk says, “Ooh, no, no. I like it. It looks so soft... Like nothing bad can happen as long as you have this around.”

Lance leans in, shoving his face full of food. “It’s different than your usual stuff. It’s like you actually have a heart or something.”

“I have a heart,” Keith grumbles, snatching it back. “Anyway, you’re all right. Protection of a loved one. ...It's what I meant for it to be anyway.”
“That’s awfully sweet of you,” Pidge murmurs, arching an eyebrow. “Unlike your usual work.”

“I was…feeling weird yesterday,” he says quietly.

“You mentioned that,” Pidge says. “You kept texting me. It was a very rare Keith move.”

“Yeah,” Keith sighs again, rubbing at the back of his head.

Maybe it’s not raining, but the clouds are dark enough that the air feels pregnant with that awful dread. He can’t wait for lunch to be over.

Hunk starts talking about the local pie competition, probably hoping for a distraction. Pidge and Lance join in, but Keith can’t concentrate.

And then, upsetting the tense air, a horrible scream pierces through the campus.

It’s distant, from the forest again - a woman crying out in anguish.

For one moment, a hush falls over the school grounds, and then, everyone scatters. Some head toward the sound, others fall back, running as far away as they can as fast as they can. There’s chaos.

Keith gets to his feet, grabbing onto his crutches, but people keep ramming into him and his balance isn’t the best to begin with. But he wants to see.

The others are already at his side.

“Come on,” Lance huffs.

“I-I can’t run like you,” Keith growls.

Hunk holds out his hand, “mind if I carry you?”

“Please,” Keith grunts. He grabs Keith and tosses him onto his back with a small oomf. Hunk’s on the wrestling team and he’s huge and strong. It’s easy for him.

He hands off his crutches to Pidge and they run.

The screaming has changed into sobbing. They know before they see. Bouncing off the trees are blue and red lights, flashing and obvious.

There’s yellow tape blocking off the gathering of students already there. And beyond, on the road, is blood.

It’s been raining - it's starting again - but the treetops have preserved much of the red spread across the road, drizzled into the mud, feeding the plants.

“Oh, my god,” Keith can hear Pidge whispering at his side, hand covering her mouth. “Dad?”

“Katie,” Mr. Holt curses as he runs over, frowning. He opens his arms wide, using his own body to block the sight. “Everyone, return to your classrooms. This is a crime scene, not some sort of spectacle. Go. We need this place untouched to further investigations.”

Keith can see, though she’s being blocked by several police officers consoling her, Mrs. Shirogane’s small shoulders, shaking with her awful hysterical sobs. She’s holding a white shirt like it’s a tiny baby. It’s stained with red.
Students are screaming too, crying, calling out for Shiro.

“Katie,” Mr. Holt says again, more firmly. “I don’t want you seeing this. Go.”

“Is it him, Dad?” She asks, voice tight. “Is it Shiro?”

“We don’t know yet, Katie. We just don’t know. I’ll see you tonight, okay? I’m going to be late.”

Hunk turns them around and Keith can see no longer. He doesn’t want to. He shoves his face into the back of Hunk’s back, closing his eyes, but even then, it’s in his head - the red on the pavement is deep and rich. There is so much of it, even after the rain probably washed most of it away. How is there still so much? Keith knows the image will be burned into his mind forever.

They walk back in silence, only stopping at their lunch table to pick up their bags. Pidge hands over Keith’s crutches again.

“That was a lot of blood,” Lance murmurs, face wiped of his trademark jest.

Pidge looks bleak. “And it rained last night. That’s probably not all of it. ...Definitely a lot.”

“I’ve never seen so much,” Keith whispers.

Lance says lowly, speaking fast as he leans into the group. “We were just talking about this in class - if you cut an artery, it just...bursts out of you like a busted pipe. Not a vein. A vein’s different. An artery has the pumping of the heart working against you. That’s probably what this was, don’t you think?”

“Can you stop it?” Hunk asks, looking green.

“...Our teacher said you can die in less than a minute depending on the artery you hit. And just from what we saw -”

“-Lance,” Keith cuts off sharply, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “Can we stop this? This is a real person who went through this. It’s real life, not some t.v. drama. He sat behind me in class, for god’s sake. I just saw him yesterday.”

Pidge takes in a deep breath. “...Looks like Matt was right to worry... We should get to class before the teachers think we’re missing next.” She points to each of them. “Let’s all meet here when school ends. I want us to stay close to each other, no matter what. There’s strength in numbers.”

“Right,” they all whisper, exchanging looks.

“You too,” Pidge pokes Keith softly in the ribs. “I’m always worried you’re going to get hurt somehow. ...You’ll come here right after class, right?”

He nods and tries to swallow, but his throat is dry. The drawing of protection in his pocket seems useless, naive.

Shiro’s seat is empty. It’s right behind Keith, a gaping wide space that’s nagging at him. Keith can’t see it, not even from his peripheral, but he can feel it looming up behind him, like a shadow that’s trying to grab at him and pull him down. It’s watching him.

He doesn’t even want to draw during class. His notebook is empty and his hand clutches his pencil
as if it’s at the ready, but there’s this gnawing sensation in the bottom of his gut like he might be sick and he can’t think around that. The teacher hands out papers for them and gives him one too many. The last one is for Shiro. With quivering breath, he quickly shoves it under his book, out of sight, out of mind.

He startles when the intercom clacks on. Rarely is it ever used. It’s the principal, voice frazzled and grey. They’re all instructed to go straight home, to call their parents, to get safe rides. The students that stayed after lunch burst into panic. The fear is palpable.

Keith hobbles through the crowds for their meeting spot. He’s slow but the others know and they’ll wait for him. He’s even slower than usual, drained. That red spot is still there in his head.

He didn’t even know Shiro, but he can’t get him out of his mind. Not just the blood, but the heart. Everyone was so fond of him. He was the beloved captain of the famed football team. But he was more than that, people trusted him. He was like the big brother of the entire school, and now their family is torn apart.

Keith catches a glimpse of Shiro’s younger brother as he’s on his way out. Ryou. His head is down. His eyes are empty. He looks just like Shiro, he always has, and the thought makes Keith’s stomach churn.

Keith screeches to a halt. It’s not Ryou that makes him stop.

Someone is there, running alongside Ryou, bending down to get in his face. He’s crying, crazed, full tilt in hysteria. His pleas slice through the hallway.

Keith can hardly recognize him.

“Shiro...?” Keith whispers.

There is blood all over him. His hands are covered in it, dripping from him, leaving a messy trail. His clothes are soaked through. What is not coated in deep red is splattered with it, viciously, as if he were maimed in many different, horrific ways.

But he’s standing. His arms are flailing. He’s pleading with Ryou.

“Please!” He’s crying. “Please, Ryou! Why won’t you look at me? I’m right here! Please, help me!”

Keith just stares.

Ryou isn’t reacting. Ryou keeps walking as if he’s heard nothing at all, face dark and dreary.

“Please!” Shiro begs, gripping his hair and pulling. His eyes are wide with mania. He’s freaking out.

Keith’s breathing stutters. “Shiro,” he says, softly, hesitantly.

“Why can’t you hear me?” He wheezes, turning like a madman to the next person. He’s spinning, totally beyond his sanity, reaching for everyone he can find. “Allura? Acxa! Lotor. Anyone!”

“Shiro,” Keith says again, louder this time, stepping forward to catch him as he panics away.

“God, oh, God... Why is this happening? What’s going on...?”

“Shiro!” Keith calls loudly, voice ringing through the hallway.
Shiro stumbles to a stop, freezing, hands going still in his hair. Keith can hear the heaving of his chest from where he stands. It’s jagged and uneven.

“Shiro...” Keith whispers.

He turns finally, biting his lip. Tears are spilling from his eyes as he stares, but they’re stunned and blown wide, almost as if he can’t bring himself to believe. “Keith. Keith Kogane,” he whispers. “...You...You can hear me?”

Keith watches him for a moment. Nods his head wordlessly.

“Oh, god.” Shiro sobs, pressing a hand over his face. “Oh, god, I thought...”

Keith is shaking. What the hell? Whatever is in front of him looks like Shiro and it talks like Shiro and it feels like Shiro. But what’s with the blood? Why can’t anyone else see him?

“It’s alright,” Keith mutters, though he’s not sure who he’s trying to convince. He forces himself to make his way toward Shiro’s shuddering form. The bloodied outfit.

“Maybe we should take this outside,” he says quietly, dimly becoming aware of the attention he’s attracting. Shiro rubs at his face roughly, bringing in small little gasps of breath.

“Can you follow me?” Keith breathes. When he gets no answer, he whispers softly, “...Shiro?”

Keith thinks he might get an answer when he feels hands, rough and fierce, push him hard from behind. He stumbles forward, his grip on the crutches coming undone. He manages to catch himself at the last second on the staircase railing nearby, but his crutches hit the floor with a loud unpleasant clang. It echoes through the hall.

He turns and comes nose-to-nose with Ryou.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Ryou says lowly.

“What?” Keith mutters, eyes flashing to Shiro, who’s looking up again, staring at Ryou in anguish.

“No,” Shiro whispers.

“You heard me! What the hell’s your problem?! Saying my brother’s name like that? You think it’s funny? Shut the fuck up! He’s missing, asshole! Missing! He could be dead!”

“No, I -”

“Don’t say his name around me!” Ryou screams. He pushes at Keith again, hard, and Keith slips, legs crumpling to the floor. The whole hallway goes silent.

“Hey... Ryou....” Someone says meekly from the crowd. Another comes out to grab him by the shoulder and hold him back, but he tears himself from their grasp.

Ryou breathes hard like a wounded animal. “How dare you?” He whispers, enough anguish and turmoil in his voice to trump that of a scream. “He’s my brother. He’s the best person I know. And you think this is some sort of joke.”

“No, I...I can see him,” slips out of Keith, too late to catch.
Ryou rolls his shoulders, staring Keith down with an unfathomable look. “What did you just say?”

“Stop,” Shiro whispers, stepping in front of his brother, who still is just looking past him. “Stop it.”

“A ghost? You can see the ghost of my brother?!”

A crowd is forming. Keith can see Acxa pushing through to the front. Her face goes still as she sees him. “Keith,” she exhales, like he's the one causing the trouble.

Maybe he is.

Keith stares up at him for a moment, bloodied sobbing Shiro, then back to Ryou. Ryou cannot see Shiro. No one can see Shiro but him.

“Keith!” Acxa says again, sharply, as she stares between the two of them.

Can he see ghosts? Is he insane? Neither thought sounds good. It’s too much. He doesn’t get what he’s seeing, he just knows that everyone’s looking at him, the students, Ryou, the bloodied up Shiro who’s still breathing like a wild animal. This is...insane.

Keith forgets the crutches, pushes himself up, and runs the hell out of there.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. It's been awhile, hasn't it? Ahh...I'm nervous to post this; I've been procrastinating so hard. I meant to have this totally posted like...a month ago. *laughs and cries at the same time* I just really hope that you enjoy this! I've always wanted to write something like this.

It's all finished. It's a little over 140K words. I should be posting a chapter every Friday. We'll see. You know how I get impatient and jump the gun. Or get nervous and re-read one chapter 50 times. YEAH.

THANK YOU FOR READING!! <33

Chat with me on Twitter? ;)}
“Wait!” He can hear Shiro chasing him. It doesn’t take much for him to catch up. Keith’s just out the door and stumbling into the field when Shiro finally cuts off his path, arms spread out wide. “Wait, you’ll hurt yourself without your crutches.”

A ghost? A hallucination? Keith shakes his head, in a daze, as he stumbles around Shiro. He’s limping and it hurts like hell, but he’s detached enough from his body that it doesn’t register.

“Stop,” Shiro pleads. “Please. I want to talk with you.”

“Okay,” Keith breathes, but he doesn’t look back. “Okay, let’s talk.”

“Where are you going?”

Keith lets out a laugh. It sounds crazed. It forces its way out of him even though he tries to swallow it down. He pushes his hair away from his face as more laughter bubbles up from his gut.

Shiro just stands and waits.

Keith whips around. Points sharply. “There’s blood all over you.”

“I know.”

“Are you dead?”

“I don’t know.”

“Are you a ghost?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why can I see you?”

Shiro takes in a deep breath, shoulders raising up and down in a little helpless shrug. “I was hoping you would know.”

“God...” Keith mutters to himself, pressing his fingers to his lips. He’s shaking all over. “I’m like my Aunt Aiphos. Just like my Aunt Aiphos.”

He doesn’t know what’s going to go out first - his heart or his sanity. It turns out to be neither. It’s his leg. With a sudden soft gasp, he topples to the floor like a string’s cut from him.

“God dammit,” he grits, using his arms to heave himself into a proper position.

“You’re hurt.” Shiro rushes forward. “I tried to get your crutches but I can’t grab onto things. My hands just pass through everything. Look.” He waves his hand through Keith’s arm and Keith blanches, trying to jerk away.

Shiro’s hand smears right through Keith’s arm like it’s a realistic hologram. Skin does not touch skin. Keith can’t feel anything besides the faint tickle of a breeze, but maybe it’s actually the wind; he doesn’t know.

“Too close,” Keith croaks, shocked into stillness as he stares at Shiro’s hand. “Too close.”
“Sorry.” Shiro jumps back as if electrocuted, giving them a wide berth. He falls back several feet and stays there.

Keith holds up a finger. He can feel his eyes popping out of his face like a bug as he stares at Shiro’s body. Shiro looks like he’s really there, fully, wholly there. Maybe he’s a bit paler, maybe he’s covered in blood, but if Keith didn’t know better, he would think he could reach out and touch him.

Keith can just stare. He’s taking it all in in hyperactive detail. Each color seems too bright. Each movement of Shiro’s too fast. But Shiro’s shivering. He’s still breathing hard, looking terrified. Keith’s got to get it together. There’s no time to freeze.

He swallows hard and says as steadily as he can manage: “A moment. I’m sorry. Give me a moment. This is all...a lot.”

“Yes,” Shiro nods eagerly. “Yes, it is. Of course is it. I’ll be quiet. I’ll shut up.”


“Yeah. Yeah, good.” Shiro takes another few steps back, turning around nervously, hands clenched tightly at his sides. He’s wired, but he’s calmed down. Though his eyes are red, he’s no longer sobbing.

Keith can see that blood stain in his mind’s eye still, the same smear of color that matches the gore across Shiro’s shirt. A stain on the road.

And this person, still standing, trembling, breathing in the middle of it all.

*Just a person,* Keith tells himself, absorbing the similarities and not the thoughts screaming “*undead!*” If there wasn’t the blood and the crazed fear in Shiro’s eyes, Keith wouldn’t have even known. He holds onto that thought, trying to pretend the shirt wasn’t once white. *A friendly, nice person, who is more scared right now than you are.*

And Shiro is definitely that - looking into the deep dark depths of the forests as if the Grim Reaper is waiting to collect him. His shoulders are hunched, eyes staring in blank horror.

He looks all alone, a tiny solo figure against the wide field of dark tall trees. He’s still standing those several careful feet away from Keith, afraid to get too close. Afraid to stray too far. Not a soul to help.

And Keith... Keith knows how that feels.

Keith’s had enough time to think. He pushes himself up, testing out his weight and groaning when the pressure starts to send shooting bolts of pain up his leg.

Shiro turns, hands going out to help Keith before remembering himself. With visible effort, he reigns them back in. He takes another step back. “God - Keith -”

“It’s fine,” Keith pants, catching himself on his other leg before he falls. “I can walk on it sometimes. It’s fine.”

But it’s not. He seeks out the nearest place to sit and grits through the pain as he drags himself to the bleachers - the very same bleachers he’d been the day before with Pidge, looking out at these same trees, Shiro playing innocently in the field. That was only twenty-four hours ago, when everything was still perfectly fine. It seems like a world away.
He collapses onto the bleacher’s hard cold support, trying not to make any noise at all - he hates his weaknesses. He bites down on his lip to force back sound, forgetting some of his fear and panic for the grudging blankness pain brings.

“I’m so sorry,” Shiro whispers, still keeping a few feet of distance between them. “That was wrong of my brother, no matter what’s happened. He’s scared, but that’s no excuse.”

“Stop.” Keith sags forward, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “You. You. We need to talk about you. Are you dead?”

“Dead?” Shiro whispers. He lets out a small hysterical laugh and then forces himself to calm just enough to answer. “I - I guess it’s a real possibility. I don’t know. I don’t know anything. One minute, I was walking home from school and the next there’s just... just darkness. Like...Like I blacked out or all my senses were just wiped clean or...I don’t know... Then I just woke up here. I thought maybe it was all a dream. I went to my class this afternoon, but no one can see me. No one can hear me. I can’t touch anything. I can walk through walls! Everyone was saying I went missing.” He sags straight down to the floor, pressing his hands into the dirt and taking in a jagged forced breath. “I don’t know anything else. That’s it. That’s all.”

“My aunt,” Keith whispers. “She used to claim she could see ghosts, the spirits of people who’ve died.”

“Oh, god,” Shiro wheezes, running a hand through his hair. “Maybe that's what I am. I think I might be.”

Keith swallows hard, watching as the panic begins to set into Shiro’s face again. “This has never happened to me before...” Keith mutters. “There’s got to be some sort of explanation for this. Whatever you’re here for, in this form, we’ll figure it out, okay? You’re not alone.”

“Like...like revenge? Like unfinished business?”

“I don’t know,” Keith whispers. “I have no idea. But we’ll figure it out. We’ll figure it out.” He starts to shake his foot restlessly as he thinks. “You don’t...I don’t know sense anything? Like...where you are? That’d be too easy, wouldn’t it?”

Shiro shakes his head. “Nothing. I feel completely normal. Scared. And my mind’s running a mile a minute,” he lets out a breathless laugh. “But no new powers or anything. Your aunt...can you ask her? Maybe she knows something that could help us.”

Keith gives his head one sharp shake. He cups his cold hands over his mouth and nose and breathes out. His breath is warm against his icicle fingers but it doesn’t help the jittery feeling in his bones. “She’s dead.”

“Oh... Oh, no...”

Keith thinks.

The wind is howling. Keith can see the silhouettes of two birds set against the dark clouds. They’re flying against the wind’s direction, going nowhere, trapped against a force too strong for them. He closes his eyes against the sight. “When you were walking home yesterday, were you on the northbound road?”

“I take that road with my brother everyday, but he had gone ahead yesterday... Why...?”

“Okay. Um...I take it you weren’t here for lunch?”
“No, I just woke up for last period,” Shiro whispers. “Why?”

Keith exhales sharply, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. He says, “There was blood.”


“And...a shirt...”

The clouds just swirl and tumble. “…I took that road. That’s the last place I remember being.”

Shiro breathes out in one long slow exhale and lets his eyes fall down to his shirt. He brings a shaky hand over the blood, pressing it down like he’s trying to smear it off. It just stays, like it’s ingrained.

In a soft voice, he asks, “What did the shirt look like?”

It’s the same damn shirt. Keith bites his lip as he stares. “…We’ll figure it out. I promise. Whatever this is about, you don’t have to do this alone. I’m best friends with Pidge and her dad’s the chief, right? So we’ll hear any news. We can investigate for clues, I can ask around...anything you want. Think of me as a resource. I’m here to help.”


Shiro leans forward onto his elbows, letting his neck fall forward, forehead pressing into his fists. “I almost can’t believe this is all happening. I keep feeling like I’m going to wake up at any moment...but I can’t get myself to.”

Shiro lifts his head up wearily to stare at Keith. There’s a dark intensity in his eyes as he searches Keith’s face, one that Keith cannot comprehend on this other side, still human. “You have no idea how good it is to hear you talking to me... Back in that hall...everyone just walking through me, paying no attention... I thought I was stuck in limbo forever. I thought I’d just have to scream and scream to no one and that would be it. I thought everything was over. I’d just be alone for the rest of eternity... My mind just breaking down until I go insane... I...” He’s panting again, his eyes wide and wired, seeing things that aren’t there. “God...”

“I’m here,” Keith says firmly, leaning down slightly in hopes he’ll catch Shiro’s attention. “I can hear you.”

Shiro looks over at Keith, letting his gaze hold steady there. Keith can see as the panic building in his eyes stutters to a stop and just holds...then slowly, lessens. Shiro lets out a small gritted sound that sounds like half whimper, half sob. He tears up, rubbing at his eyes as he nods quickly. “Thank you. I’m so glad. Thank you.”

Keith looks down at his leg. He runs his hand over the tender muscle, eyes dim as he feels it burning with inflammation at the touch, “But I want to be truthful with you...my leg’s basically shot. It’s even worse in this weather. It’s almost too bad it’s me who can see you...I won’t be much help.”

Shiro shakes his head slowly, “No. That’s not -”

Keith jumps as an angry yell cracks through the bleachers, bouncing off the metal and assaulting his ears. He sees Shiro jolt beside him, turning quickly.

“There you are!” Pidge roars, finger stabbed at Keith, stomping from the hallway exit. She has his
crutches in her other hand. “You little shit! I hate you!”


“We waited and waited and waited and you didn’t come! I thought something was wrong and you’d been taken too and I freaked out. And then I saw your fucking crutches in the hallway just laying there in a mess. God, Keith. God, I thought...”

Pidge walks right past Shiro, not sparing him a glance. She presses a hand to her face, fixing Keith with her stare, trying to maintain anger, but her eyes are glittering with tears. “What are you doing out here?”

He opens his mouth to explain, but hesitates. Pidge is his best friend. He tells Pidge everything, even things that are probably way too much information. But this isn’t the same thing as having a wet dream over a video game character. Pidge is nothing if not logical. Ghosts don’t factor into that.

He clears his throat, shakes his head. “Ryou and I sort of...fought.”

“Are you okay?” She whispers, eyes automatically scanning him for injury.

“He didn’t hurt me, but I... I ran out like an idiot. I fucked up my leg again.”

“Keith. A fight?”

She lets the crutches drop and throws herself on top of Keith, wrapping her arms around him and hugging him tightly. She shoves her head into his shoulder. Her face is freezing. “You ass. You utter ass. You should’ve texted me! I thought you were kidnapped. I kept thinking of all that blood on the road and my dad’s warnings and how that could be you next... I couldn’t take it if it was you.”

He wraps his arms around her, patting her small back. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

She holds him for awhile, keeping him close. He can feel her small hummingbird heart fluttering against his chest.

“I’m sorry, Pidge,” he says again softly.

She pulls back and wipes her face. She shakes her head. “No. I think this whole thing is getting to me too. I’m just glad you’re alright.” She pats his cheeks roughly before passing her arm over her face in another quick discreet gesture. “I can’t believe you. I thought we were done with this. Why were you fighting?”

“I didn’t start it -” he quickly defends, but then stops. “Well...maybe I did.”

He’s quiet for a moment as he thinks. He looks over at Shiro who appears just as confused as he is. It would be nice to have one person involved who had a good clear head on her shoulders.

“Pidge,” Keith says softly. “Do you think my aunt was crazy?”

“Huh? Your aunt? The one they literally put away in the loony bin?”

“...Yeah.”

“Uh... I think that sort of says it all.” She flicks her eyes over at him. “Why?”
He hesitates. “I just... I want to tell you something...but I don’t want you to think I’m crazy.”

She rocks back, tilting her head up so she can look at him down her glasses. “Try me.”

“...I need you to really listen. I’m not making a joke. I’m being serious.” He hopes it conveys on his face.

She nods her head again. “Keith, I get it. Just spit it out.”

He presses his lips together. Stares at her for a few more seconds. “What...what would you say if I told you I could see Shiro?”

She waits, as if expecting the punchline. After a few moments of awkward silence, she smacks her lips. “Like...you know...where he is?”

He holds her gaze. His stomach feels sick as he fights to appear calm. “No. Like, I see Shiro, Pidge. I saw him just now, in the hallway.” He lets out a shaky breath. “I called out to him. Ryou was there and he heard me. That’s why we fought. It’s like the ghost of Shiro. There’s blood all over his clothes and no one else can hear or see him, just me.”

Shiro and Keith watch Pidge’s face, both tense on bated breath.

Pidge blinks, looking taken aback for a moment. Keith can see the shift in her eyes as she thinks, changes her mind, then thinks some more. She pulls herself together stiffly, forcing out a laugh. “Oh. Keith, that’s nothing. You’re just stressed and you’re making your mind think it sees things that aren’t really there,” Pidge rationalizes. She nods to herself like she just figured out the answer to a difficult problem on homework. She pats Keith on the shoulder in what’s supposed to be a comforting gesture. “This happens to a lot of people, it’s not new. They’re going to bring counselors into the school tomorrow; I can go with you. It’ll probably help.”

“No, I... It’s not that.” He and Shiro share a look. Keith’s afraid to push the matter too much further. “What if it’s not stress, what if it’s something more?”

“Then I guess your family already knows of a good loony bin to put you in.” She nudges him, laughing lightly. A joke. She only meant it to be a joke, but it stabs through Keith.

He wants to get Pidge to believe him; they’ve been best friends since forever. But the calm he’s displaying is only a facade. He feels like just a few more hits and he’ll crumble. He can’t take the weight of Pidge thinking he’s crazy too. Not Pidge.

He doesn’t say any more, still looking over at Shiro. They just stare at each other, lost.

“So...” Pidge says eventually. “It’s not appropriate to joke at times like these, I’m just... Trying to balance out this weird fucking feeling in my chest with some sort of normalcy, you know? All that’s happening and then... I’m not going to lie, Keith, you look like shit. There’s something in your face that’s freaking me out. I don’t even know how to describe it. You look...” She hesitates. “Well, I’d hate to use this saying after what you just said, but you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Oh,” Keith murmurs.

“I’m sorry,” she grunts, passing a hand over her face. “What I’m trying to ask is, ‘are you okay?’”

Keith nods slowly.
“My dad’s going to find him, Keith. Don’t let it bother you so much. I know how you like to let things do that... And whatever Ryou said to you, I’m sure he didn’t mean it. His brother’s missing; I’d be a mess too if you or Matt disappeared. Right?”

“Yeah,” Keith breathes.

“Come on. Let’s go.” She pulls out her phone and starts texting. “I’m going to tell Lance and Hunk I found you. I can get Matt to drop you off at the doctor’s if you need it.”

“No, I just want to go home.”

“No kidding.” She scoots off of him and grabs his crutches, handing over one at a time.

He shifts the crutches and stares hard at the ground. “This is going to suck...” he mutters, already feeling sick. “Okay.”

“...Okay?” Pidge says doubtfully.

He nods quickly. “Yeah, it’s -” His breath cuts off sharply.

Even with aid from his crutches, as he pushes himself to his feet, the pain is there, strong and sudden. It’s like gravity is trying to pull his muscles from his core all the way down his leg and out from his toes. His shock from earlier isn’t numbing the pain anymore and it suffocates him. He makes a strangled noise in his throat as he fumbles.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck... Pidge.”

“Okay,” she says quickly, grabing him tightly around the waist. He’s small, but she’s smaller. She can barely hold his weight. She presses her lips together tightly and bears it anyway. “I’ve got you. Let’s sit and -”

“No.” He grits out sharply. “No, I’ve got this.” He seeks out Shiro, making sure he knows he’s invited, and pushes forward.

“Keith,” she tries to say gently, but it’s curt in exasperation.

“It’s fine,” he breathes, trying to convince her. “I can do it.”

He feels like a bulldozer, plowing ahead even on its last leg. He can’t stand when people look down on him.

Pidge sighs heavily and follows behind in mute forfeit.

It’s just walking. He can do that much. The pain beyond that he forces himself to ignore.

Matt is waiting at the front of the parking lot, thank god. He’s sitting on the hood of his car, scrolling through his phone looking forlorn, when he peers up and sees Keith. He stops, jams his phone in his pocket, then runs to the front seat and opens it.

“Jesus, what happened to you?”

Keith grunts like a strangled cat.

He collapses into the car, gasping. Beads of sweat are falling down his face even though the air is almost cold enough to freeze.
Pidge takes his crutches from his hands so she can slide them into the back. Her voice is low. “I haven’t seen you in this much pain since it happened.”

Keith lets his head fall back against the seat as he closes his eyes and nods. “It’s been a long fucking day.”

“Yeah...” Matt says softly, walking around to the driver’s seat and starting the car. Pidge scoots into the back and Shiro hesitantly steps inside. Keith watches him from the rear view mirror. Shiro spreads his fingers wide and presses his palm into the cushions like he’s not sure it’ll hold him.

Matt starts the car and begins the drive. They’re all silent except for Keith’s labored breathing. He shuts his eyes and presses his fingers hard into the soft skin on his cheek to try to distract himself from the pain.

Pidge says quietly, “Did you see, Matt? At lunch?”

He stares ahead at the long road for awhile as if he hasn’t heard. Finally, he says, quietly, “...How could you not have heard...??”

“But did you see?”

He says, even quieter than before, more a whisper than anything. “Yes.”

The silence is static. It almost hurts it’s so sharp and chaotic. It would feel like a lie to try to refute the blood they had seen, so Matt just keeps driving, the tall trees looming around them. Sometimes it feels like the trees are offering their shelter, keeping them close. Other times, it feels like they’re burying them beneath their leaves. A tomb instead of a sanctuary.

Pidge says quietly, “Keith, I think you should call the doctor when you get home.”

He tsks. Ignores her.

“I think -”

“Pidge.” He tries to stay calm. “What we saw at lunch today... That happened. That was real. In comparison, my leg is nothing. Shiro could be out there, hurt. My leg is nothing.”

“It’s not nothing,” Pidge murmurs quietly. "We could drop you off."

He takes in a deep breath, trying to center himself. His voice is dark and sharp as the tip of a blade. “Please don’t start. Please don’t. You know how I hate when everyone tells me what I need to do, like it was my brain fucked up and not my leg. I can think for myself. I know you’re just worried and you’re only trying to help. Thank you. But the doctor is the last thing I want to think about right now. Shiro’s missing. And all that blood... Just...leave it, okay?”

He can see how dejected her expression is in from the side mirror. She shifts, holding her arms close, upset.

He hadn’t realized how high his nerves are. This whole thing with Shiro, even just seeing the bloodied mess in the rear view mirror, is weighing on him. But Shiro can’t run from it, so neither will he. He’s just got to endure.

“I’m sorry, Pidge,” Keith says softly as his house approaches on the horizon. He presses his fingers back into his eyes. “I didn’t mean to yell. I just don’t want to think about my leg now. Not
ever actually, but especially not now. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Pidge says lowly, clearing her throat. “I know you get angry when you’re in pain. I’ve dealt with it once before and I’ll do it again. I just want you to get better. And you will, Keith. Hang in there.”

“Yeah, well,” Keith sighs as Matt pulls up into his driveway. He goes for the door handle, but Pidge beats him to it, popping out of her side and to his door so quickly Keith almost falls out the side. “Sometimes I wish I didn’t have the leg at all.”

“Don’t say that,” she hums, helping him up. “Text me when you’ve cooled down. Are your parents home? I don’t want you to be alone.”

Keith heaves a sigh. Shiro has crawled from the car and stops a few feet from Keith, turning to look up at Keith’s house. “There’s Mom’s car. She’s home. Thanks for the ride.”

“Don’t forget to text,” Pidge says, patting his arm with one last concerned frown at him. She turns and goes back to the car. They don’t leave until Keith is fully in the house, Shiro right behind him.

“Mom?” Keith calls through the house. She doesn’t answer, so he figures she’s either in her room or messing with the plants in the back. He presses his shoes off with his feet and goes over to the fridge.

He sighs. “Shiro, I’m sorry,” he says lowly to Shiro. “I swear I usually have a better handle on my temper. I...I know it’s nothing in comparison to what you’re going through, but I think I’m freaking out a little bit. I need some time to let this soak in and everything’s just...” He heaves another sigh.

“You’re seeing your first ghost...and your leg... It’s understandable.”

Keith takes in a deep breath; he sets out some leftovers on the counter and looks to Shiro. “Can you eat? Drink? Have you tried?”

Shiro frowns as he runs his hands through the meals. They just pass through. “No.”

“Do you feel hunger?”

“I don’t know... Sort of. I ache all over. And I just...feel strange. If I am a ghost, it sucks.”

“Maybe...maybe it’s like those movies, you know, where if you focus hard enough you can touch it?”

Shiro stares doubtfully at the food as he reaches for it again. Nothing happens. His frustration grows, a pronounced divot developing on his brow. He looks so sad.

Footsteps come from the hallway and he turns to see his mother standing there, striding across the kitchen, arms wide. “Hey,” she murmurs. She wraps him in a hug. She’s taller than him and just feels sturdy and comforting; it’s easy to melt into the touch.

“Hey, Mom,” he murmurs.

She pulls back, tilting his chin up. “I heard about that boy. And the police found something by the school...?”

Keith nods. “I saw it. Blood all over the road.” He thinks of Mrs. Shirogane, sobbing, clutching
his blooded shirt to her chest. He doesn’t say it in front of Shiro.

“You okay?” She inspects his face just like Pidge did, and her eyes grow serious.

“My leg’s acting up. It just feels like a lot has happened today. My head's a mess.”

Her eyes fall down to his leg and she inspects it carefully. “Do you need me to call the doctor?”

“No,” he whispers, shaking his head. He gathers his crutches and begins his journey up the stairs.

“...Your leg looks bad, honey. I can see it swollen from here.”

“I’m going to go rest it. I can’t stop everything all the time for it; I’d never get anywhere if I did.”

He stops and turns. “Hey, Mom? What ever happened to Aunt Aiphos?”

“Aunt Aiphos? She died a few years back.”

“Didn’t she used to say she could see ghosts?”

She crosses her arms as she looks at him a bit closer. “Her hallucinations?”

“Yeah. When did that start?”

She shrugs. “I don’t remember exactly. She was always a little off, but she didn’t really start talking about it until around the time we graduated high school.”

Keith sighs. High school age. But he looks toward Shiro, who feels very real. “What sort of things did she say about them? Were her ghosts always dead people?”

“She was hallucinating, Keith. She was very sick. She didn’t know what she was saying. Why do you ask?”

He rubs at his nose in an attempt to hide a bit of his face. “Well, it’s not due for awhile, but we have a family history project. We’re supposed to choose someone distant, someone interesting.”

“Well, she certainly was that. But I don’t know if she’s really the right choice to write about... Your grandfather was a war hero.”

“Yeah,” Keith murmurs, attention already drawing away. “I’ll think about it.”

Shiro is still in the kitchen, staring around himself uncomfortably. Keith clears his throat to get his attention and nods him upstairs, pushing into his room, tossing the crutches to the ground and releasing himself face-first onto the bed.

“Okay,” he breathes into his blankets. “Now we can talk. Give me a second. Just a second. I just...” He grits his teeth in discomfort. “Let me change my pants.”

“Right... Take all the time you need.”

Shiro is out of place. He is looking around Keith’s room like it’s the most interesting thing he’s ever seen. And maybe it is a bit of a place of wonders - Keith's world, a part of his soul, bundled away from the rest of the world.

Shiro gazes up at the tall wooden ceiling, inspecting the spiders in the corners Keith has given up trying to get, before he wanders over to Keith’s art desk, fingers grazing over the tops of everything gently. Keith's many different kinds of pens and pencils are strewn about in an awful mess.
There’s a half-used water container Keith had been using to rinse out his paintbrushes the other week he’d forgotten about and a few nibs of dark charcoal that are scattered carelessly everywhere. And where would Keith be without a few of his drawings pinned to the wall, some of his favorites? And a few posters too - art he admires - and a few of his favorite bands and games. Various charms hang.

There’s a dream catcher that his aunt had gotten his mother at his baby shower that he hangs on the window to burn away his bad dreams. He thinks it probably helps. Shiro walks to the window and gently skims his fingers over it, drawing back when he remembers he can’t touch anything. He sits down on the bench there, peering out, indecipherable look on his face.

“Oh, hey, Red,” Keith murmurs, leaning back and holding his hand out.

“Uh,” Keith says lowly, “Looks like I’m not the only one who can see you. Red, come here, girl. It’s okay.”

She doesn’t release her spooked gaze from Shiro.

"We don’t get a lot of visitors..."

Keith catches the hurt crossing Shiro’s face. “Sorry,” Keith murmurs, getting up to close the door behind her. “...Maybe it’s a ghost thing.”

“Um. I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced... I’m Keith,” he says, waving slightly. “I’m a junior.”

Shiro smiles shakily, some of the darkness beneath his eyes brightening. “...I’m Shiro. I’m a senior. I know who you are, Keith. We’ve had a few classes together. Chemistry this semester. You’re always getting in trouble for drawing all the time.”
“Oh, yeah, I just... We never talked, so...” Keith rubs the back of his head.

Shiro smiles, small and somewhat more at peace now than before. “You’re always so quiet.”

Keith hums, casting his mind about for the first step. “I don’t even know where to begin...”

Shiro nods slowly, thoughts in his eyes. He’s quiet for awhile. And then, without any preamble: “...I'm dead.”

“We don’t know that,” Keith says softly. “You’re assuming.”

“Look at my shirt,” Shiro says. He looks down, his neck rearing back a little like he wants to run from himself.

“The body has a lot of blood...”

“And it looks like this is it.”

“We don’t know yet.”

Shiro exhales sharply. His brow crinkles as he brings his feet up. “I'm dead,” he says again, like he's trying to get it through his head. “I'm dead and you can see ghosts.”

Keith goes to protest again and Shiro cuts him off, shaking his head, "what else would I be?"

“You mentioned you were hungry, thirsty. Those are bodily functions. Eating, drinking. If you don’t have a body, then why would you feel those things? Maybe you’re still connected to it.”

“Maybe it’s just an echo of who I was.”

“Maybe. Or maybe you’re still alive,” Keith says. “Maybe your body’s failing you and as some last desperate fight, you astral projected or something.”

Shiro hugs himself tightly. “That sounds like something from a movie... This is real life.”

Keith lets out a winded chuckle as he presses a finger to his temple. “Yeah? I think anything’s on the table right now honestly. Who knows...maybe tomorrow morning, I’ll wake up and this will all be a dream.”

“That’d be nice,” Shiro mutters. He lets his head fall to the wall, eyes staring down at Keith’s floor blankly. “This is all...surreal. I’m a little numb. I feel kind of like I’m floating.”

“Yeah,” Keith whispers.

Shiro closes his eyes and breathes out softly, “I’m so glad you’re here.”

Keith watches Shiro against the grey light making its way through his window, his shadow swallowing the room. He looks so lonely.

Keith rubs his finger over his lip and thinks. He leans over to his desk, takes out a notebook and begins to write. “I guess the real first question to ask would be if you know of anyone who might’ve done this. That seems like the best place to start... Whoever hurt you most likely has you or at least knows where you are. We can go from there. So...do you know of anyone who hates you?”

Shiro lets out a large lungful of air. He shakes his head as he shrugs, a small helpless movement.
“...Someone who hates me so much they want to kill me?” Shiro breathes in deeply, his fingers digging into his pants tightly. “I know a lot of people, but I’ve never had any big fights with anyone... I can’t even imagine.”

“Maybe they’re jealous of you, or of something you have, someone you’re with.”

“Jealousy...?” He says the word as if he’s never heard of it. “Maybe it was an accident.”

Keith runs his fingers through his hair. So Shiro is one of those kinds of people. He lets out a small laugh. Patience. He’s got to learn patience. “I mean, maybe, but if it was just an accident, why take your body? Why all the blood? It looked...” He stops. Shiro doesn’t need to hear that.

Shiro clears his throat. His eyes are wide and innocent, like a lamb’s. “I... Yeah, I guess you’re probably right.”

“I have a yearbook around here somewhere we can look through... Let’s just make a list of suspects and we’ll go down the line of them. I can go to school and investigate them.”

“Like a detective...” Shiro says.

“Right, just like that. Let me find my yearbook...”

Keith owns a lot of books. Over the years, they’ve taken more and more space in his room and he’s shoved them into different places - his bookcase, his closet, his dresser, the shelf over the window, underneath the bed, in between the mattress and box spring. It’s a mess.

As he digs, Shiro clears his throat. “Um. You and Katie look really close.”

“Oh, Pidge? Yeah,” Keith murmurs, coughing as a big puff of dust escapes the confines of the belly of his bed. “We’ve known each other since before we could even walk. She’s amazing. I don’t know why she sticks around. She’s so smart; she’d be great to toss ideas around with, but...she just might be too smart. If I get stuck in some sort of therapy then we’ll have an even harder time finding your killer. But her dad’s on the case and he’s really smart too. I’m sure he’s bouncing ideas off of her.”

“Yeah... I’m grateful for what you’re doing. You don’t have to, you know. It’s enough...just to know you can hear me. That I’m not totally alone. That helps more than you know.”

Keith smiles faintly. “No, I want to do this. I don’t know you or anything, but I get the feeling if this situation were reversed, you’d do that same for me.” He pats his pockets as he thinks, eyes roaming the room.

“Oh! There it is,” he says, pulling a chair up to his bookcase and climbing on top of it, balancing on his good leg to reach on top of it.

“Uh, Keith...”

“I’ve got it,” he says as he teeters, “I do this all the time.” He slides the books out and tosses them to his bed. Carefully, he steps down.

Shiro can’t touch books, so Keith pats the bed beside him. But Shiro hesitates, staying at the window, looking more uncomfortable than ever. “I don't want to intrude..."

It’s just a bed. With a small sigh, Keith pushes himself off of it and goes to sit beside him by the window. He opens the book on his lap and slowly turns the pages.
“Even if you think there’s only a slight chance, we’ll write their names down. Better to be suspicious and cross their names out later than let them get away with it.”

“Yeah…” Shiro says, frowning into the book as Keith turns the pages, his face growing more and more confused by the moment.

It’s quiet. Just Keith turning the pages.

He’s halfway through the book when he clears his throat. “There’s got to be someone you’re at least a little suspicious of.”

“Um… I don’t know, I like all of these people.”

Keith sighs. He remembers Pidge mocking Lotor and Shiro only a day ago. Shiro’s heart is too pure.

“Okay,” Keith says as they finish the book. There are only two names on the list of people Shiro says ‘looked awkward around him’ a few times. One of them is Lance, who Keith knows idolizes Shiro and wouldn’t be able to kill Shiro even if he tried, and the other moved to another state a year ago.

“I’m sorry,” Shiro says.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll just look around school tomorrow. But tonight, I want to poke around the crime scene. It’s taped off and probably guarded at all times. Mr. Holt knows what a nosy town we are. I don’t want to mess up any evidence, but maybe if we sneak out at night, we can look around the area and not in it. I dunno. Maybe we’ll find something. A clue. What do you think?”

“Your leg…”

“If I have to hear that one more time…” He rubs his forehead. “Look. I only want to tell you this once: I have to hear this shit from my parents, from Pidge, from the teachers at school, from my doctors, from my own damn head… I am sick of it. So sick of it. I’m still just a regular person like you or anyone else. I can decide when or when not to use my leg. I am going to help you. Don’t try to stop me. Got it?”

“I… Yeah. …Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that… I’m just… I don’t want you to be in pain because of me.”

“Thanks, but I’ll take some pain meds and it’ll all be fine. It’s not like we have any other choice.

He fishes for his phone on the nightstand and sighs when he sees Pidge has attacked him with a wall of messages and two missed calls. It’s almost midnight. He’s not sure where the time went.

He sends an apologetic text to Pidge and then shoves it into his pocket.

“Let’s go,” he says.

Keith tries to stay quiet as he makes his way through the house. His crutches aren’t as bad as the first pair he got when this whole shitty ordeal started - he hates those fucking things - but these new ones are all about being ‘active’ not being silent. He’s just thankful they have a lot of plush rugs.

“I was thinking,” Shiro says into the silence of the house. “Maybe you should bring a weapon. What if the murderer returns to the scene of the crime?”
“A lot of damage I’ll be able to do,” Keith mutters bitterly. “But way ahead of you.” He stops to flick a knife out of his pocket. “I used to take lessons.”

“Knife lessons?” Shiro says in confusion.

Keith laughs softly. “Knife lessons.’ Right.”

“But what?”

He’s careful when he unlocks the door. It sticks sometimes and can be loud. He eases it open, slips through, and then carefully closes it again.

“Home free,” Keith hums happily. “Pidge and I used to sneak out and go running through the forests at night with our flashlight, hunting ghosts.”

“Ever find one?”

He laughs softly. “Not until today, no.” The night is cold and he can see his breath in the air whenever he talks, little puffs of clouds. Shiro’s does nothing. “I had no fear back then. It’s different now.”

“I don’t know,” Shiro says. “You didn’t run away screaming.”


Shiro smiles softly as they make their way through the dark roads. Their laughter dies and trails off into silence, completely consumed by these forests. Their pace slows, uneasy and cautious.

“...There’s something eerie about being out here right now,” Shiro says.

Keith can feel it too. Exposed. He hunches his shoulders over. “Yeah...”

It’s so quiet and dark. It feels wrong somehow, like they’re encroaching on someone else’s territory, moments from being caught. Even the crickets know not to make a sound. The only thing to keep them company is the sound of the wind blowing through trees, crackling the leaves in the road. It feels as if they’re alone, the last two people on this wide expansive earth. Just them and every single one of their enemies, all blood-hungry with eyes that can actually see in this darkness, following behind them just far enough where they can’t sense.

Keith shudders in the cold. He should’ve brought another jacket.

He looks over at Shiro, wishing he could distract him. He doesn’t really know what to say. Nothing seems adequate. “I was thinking... Maybe I could...leave a note to your family for you. Or send them a letter? I don’t know. I’ll do what you want me to.”

“Thanks, Keith.” He rubs his hands together for warmth, but looks at them in dismay when nothing happens. “Honestly, I don’t know what’s worse; having to come to terms that you’ll never live out the life you planned for yourself, or knowing that your family will never see it happen. Who really suffers more? The one who dies, or the ones left behind?”

A cold wind presses at Keith and he hunches his shoulders, cringing against it. “None of you deserve this. We’ll find who did this, Shiro.”

“Okay,” he says softly.

There are floodlights in the distance, powerful and glaring. The contrast to the forests is
disconcerting. It just spews crime scene.

Keith says, “I wonder if Mr. Holt is there. If anyone will find us, it’ll be him.”

“Make sure to cover any tracks you make.”

“No kidding,” Keith mutters, looking down at his crutches. He’s the only one in the school with them, maybe the entire town. It’s too suspicious. He stops, licks his lips, and after another moment of thought, sets his crutches down and covers them in the underbrush by the road.

Keith can feel the disapproval radiating from Shiro. He doesn’t look, doesn’t acknowledge it. He walks off the road and slips into the cover of the trees, walking deeper into the forest.

Shiro says, “let me see what the officer is doing up ahead. I’ll be right back.”

The air is rich and thick with scent. It’s heady with blood. It ties his stomach and throat up into little knots and he thinks he might be sick. Keith leans against a tree and closes his eyes. He can do this. He can do this. He is searching for a body. Yes, he’d much rather find Shiro alive and well, but after all that blood...

A dead, lifeless, cold body. He’s never seen one before. There will be wounds. How bad he doesn’t know.

He swallows hard and tries to count out his breaths to slow them. ...He can do this.

Shiro comes back, startling him even though he was expecting him. “He’s asleep. He’s in his car, seat rolled back, asleep.”

“...Jesus,” Keith snorts, taking his phone out. He tries to hold it tightly to stop the shaking but it only makes it worse. He presses it against the tree to hold it steady. “Officer of the year. Works out for us. Let’s check out the crime scene first.”

“I thought we were staying out of the crime scene.”

“Yeah, I’ll stay beyond the tape. My phone gets pretty good zoom.”

He stops just beyond the perimeter, looking in. The gore is confined within the strings of yellow tape. It's surreal. The floodlights are harshly bright, making everything feel like too much. He can smell the blood just as well as he can see it - a stark bright mess over the dirt and road still. There are splatters painted viciously over the trees, some areas of it melted by the rain's touch.

Shiro stares.

Keith turns to him, holding a hand out hesitantly. “Maybe...maybe you shouldn’t get closer.”

“How could you possibly think I’m still alive...?” Shiro breathes out in a shaky whisper. “...I didn’t realize the body even had this much blood.”

Keith swallows hard, looking away from the broken sharp edges of Shiro’s expression. It hurts to see. “They always say that though... In movies and stuff. That there’s more blood than you’d expect. It’s probably not even that much here. It’s just...we’re unused to it,” Keith tries to rationalize, but even he doesn’t really believe it. This is after the rain, he tries to forget. It’s like someone tipped over a few buckets of paint.

Keith slowly surveys the perimeter, but beyond the blood, there doesn’t seem to be anything of
interest.

Shiro’s a few feet away in the darkness, taking space from the scene. Keith rejoins him, turning on the flashlight and flashing it about.

Shiro bites his lip nervously as he looks over and down at the light glaring from Keith’s hand. “...Isn’t the flashlight a little much?”

“I can’t see out here. If I get caught, worst case is I’ll be taken into the station and have to talk to Pidge’s dad and he’s known me since I’ve been in diapers, so...”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me.”

“Don’t chicken out on me now... Make yourself useful and look around.”

Shiro huffs a worried sigh but starts to walk through the trees beside Keith, frightened eyes picking out details. His posture loosens the further from the floodlights they get.

It’s funny how night can make everything feel so different. Keith is still on edge, feeling like he might be two seconds from darting the other way. He has to fight himself to keep heading forward.

Each leaf that crunches beneath his feet, each soft hooting of an owl in the distance or hiss of a creature reminds Keith how much is in the world and how vulnerable he is if something wanted to attack.

Not just once, Keith jumps at nothing and whips around. He lets out an embarrassed laugh as Shiro looks over.

“Hey, um... Keith?”

Keith looks back at Shiro’s uneasy face. “Yeah?”

There’s a pregnant pause and then a small, “nevermind.”

“No, say it.”

“No... It’s fine. I don’t want to step on anyone’s toes and be all problematic.”

Keith snorts. What’s that all about? “Say it anyway.”

Shiro blinks. “What?”

“Say it anyway,” Keith shrugs. "I don't care."

“O-okay, well... I just... I don’t want to generalize...but I just...you’ve always seemed so quiet and hesitant at school. I wouldn’t have really thought you’d do something like this. So...why were you so quick to help me? You didn’t hesitate at all.”

Keith raises his eyebrows.

“See? It was a bad question.”

Keith laughs softly, pulling a branch back. “No. It’s just...I don’t know.”

Shiro’s quiet for a moment before he says, “I’m sorry. Really. I didn’t mean anything by it -”
“No, I’m not offended, it’s just the reason’s sort of lame.” He hesitates and then tsks before admitting, “...There was a time in my life when I felt like I was the only person in the world, fighting against everyone else...and it would’ve been nice to have a friend.”

“...Oh,” Shiro breathes.

“And I did. I had one,” Keith forces out a laugh. “I don’t know why I said that.”

“Pidge. You’ve always been friends with Pidge since I’ve seen you.”

“Yeah,” Keith says. “I wouldn’t have made it through without her. It’s just...sometimes things get beyond our control and...I think we should be there for each other when they do. No matter how crazy it gets.”

He looks up toward the trees as he can hear an owl hooting softly, their rich rolling sounds.

“Thanks, Keith,” Shiro says softly.

“Of course. Not that we’re finding anything,” Keith hums, hanging on a tree with one hand to hit a rock off into the distance. It knocks against a tree with a small clack.

“I wish I had been in the boy scouts,” Shiro mutters. “Maybe I’d be able to track things then.”

Keith wrinkles his nose and mutters softly, “I was. It was kind of cool.”

“Oh, yeah? I can’t imagine you in those uniforms.”

“I used to rock that uniform. I had so many pins.”

Shiro laughs and it sounds actually warm. “Wow. I didn’t know that about you.”

“What do you know about me?” Keith hums, flashing his light toward a dark mound in the distance. It’s just a bush, but it’s warped and twisted and even though it’s just wood and leaves, Keith doesn’t like it.

“Not much honestly. I know you’re an artist; I see you drawing a lot in class. You won some award last year. Your picture was in the newspaper.”

Keith snorts. “God. Yeah, that was awful. My mom entered my piece without even telling me. I was so mad. I had to meet the Governor and pose for the newspapers. My own personal hell.”

Shiro laughs softly. “I dunno, I thought it was cool. I heard you beat out a ton of others from all over the state.”

Keith pinches his nose bitterly. “Yeah. I definitely wouldn’t do it again.”

Shiro smiles sympathetically. “Let’s see... What else? You used to be on the track team. The best runner this school has ever seen, or so I heard. That gold medal in the center of the trophy case is yours, isn’t it? Coach talks about you sometimes.”

Keith tsks, mood instantly sour. He can’t stop himself. “Fuck him.”

“Coach Zarkon?” Shiro says in surprise. “Why?”

Keith shrugs sharply, rubbing at his nose with rough quick movements. “I can’t convince you.”
Shiro watches him uncertainly. “Okay... Well, do you know me?”

Keith smiles crookedly, chuckling. “Everyone knows you. Captain of the football team. You got some huge scholarship to one of the Ivy League schools recently. You’re supposedly really smart but you talk all throughout class so I dunno how true that is.”

Shiro laughs again and it sounds almost normal, like they aren’t walking through the forest past midnight hunting for a body. “I study a lot.”

“Let’s see... What have I heard about the school’s beloved Shiro? You don’t date high school girls.” Shiro laughs at that. “You’re best friends with Lotor so everyone thinks you’re secretly really stuck up, but Matt is really fond of you, so that says something good. Aannnnnd, I don’t know. There are a lot of rumors and then there are more rumors to counteract those rumors, but I don’t know you and I kind of keep my head down, so...”

“Matt’s a good guy.”

“He says you are too.”

“Well, so far, I think you’re a pretty good guy too,” Shiro says.

Keith snorts. “And how’d you gather that? All I’ve done is flip out today.”

“Me too. You saw me bawling my eyes out... I’m sorry you had to see me like that.”

“Yeah, well, you’re a ghost. I think you’re allowed.”

“And you had your first ghost sighting, so I think you’re allowed.”

Keith snorts, smiling softly. “Okay. I’ll let you get away with that one.” He bites his lip, slowing to a stop. “I need a second. To sit. Sorry.”

“No, please, sit. Take as long as you need.”

Keith switches the flashlight off, gives himself a minute to breathe through the pain, and then turns on the map. “I think we’re getting too far away from the crime scene. We won’t find anything here.”

Shiro turns back toward the floodlights - tiny dots in the distance. “What about -”

“-What is that?” Keith stands abruptly, raising his phone’s light up at the sound of something scurrying through the leaves.

“What?”

He flashes his phone’s light in front of them. “I thought I heard something. In the bushes...”

There. Behind. The leaves shiver and Keith flings the light over, breath caught in his throat.

It’s just a fox. A big one, hefty too, but it looks more afraid of Keith than he is of it, so he lets out a sigh of relief.

“Thank god,” Keith mutters. “Imagine if it had been a bear or a mountain lion or something. I forgot bear spray.”

Shiro shifts. “Maybe we should go. It’s not safe out here and we’re not finding anything anyway.”
The fox ducks its head, retrieving something. When it peeks back over the bush, big eyes still wary, there's something in its mouth.

Keith freezes. His stomach drops.

“Oh, God,” Shiro chokes. “Is that?”

Keith breathes out, voice shaking, "an arm". He pushes himself up. Heaves himself one step forward, hanging on the moment’s silence, and then darts forward.

He used to be good at running. He used to run and run and run, passing up everyone who fought to outdo him. He was short, but he was powerful. He was like the wind, there was no stopping him. He could flit and fly like this unworldly force, powerful, a storm. He had felt so alive, so untouchable.

But now he can hardly walk.

He's pushed himself too hard tonight. The pain binds him. He trips on the first root he comes upon, falling to his knees. His phone flings from his hand and cracks loudly in the distance. Everything goes dark.

“Dammit!” He cries, grabbing the nearest stick and throwing it blindly.

He hears a tiny surprised yipe and then the sound of it scurrying away frantically.

He groans, letting his head sag.

“It’s okay,” Shiro says, stopping beside him. “Look. The fox dropped it.” He stays by Keith’s side, looking forward, eyes stuck on the arm.

Keith pushes himself up.

“You alright?”

“Ugh, yeah. ...I’ve got old mud all over me.”

Shiro lets out a shaky breath that sounds like it meant to be a laugh.

Keith hobbles forward; he uses the trees to help him balance.

He doesn’t want to go near the arm. He really doesn’t. But Shiro needs to know and Shiro’s rooted to the spot. Keith’s the one left.

He grabs his phone on the way, light beaming back up through the columns of trees. His hand is anything but steady as the light quivers and shines onto the pale arm there.

It’s just...an arm. Bone is sticking out of flesh, splintered off. It’s surreal, like looking at one of those fake Halloween props. Only it’s real dried blood and real dirt and real bruises and real bone.

Shiro, from a few feet behind him, breathes out, “is it mine?”

Keith swallows hard, leaning forward, shining the light closer. “I...I don’t know. I...” His stomach clenches. “Um...” It smells, strong, heady. He grabs his shirt and presses it over his face, breathing from his mouth. “There’s a ring. On the thumb. A black paw print.”

There’s a harsh silence.
Keith turns.

He doesn’t need to ask to know. Shiro’s face has gone sheet white. Shiro nods shortly, sharply, pressing his lips together to try to hold the emotion in.

“Yeah,” Shiro says.

“...It’s just an arm,” Keith says softly. “The rest of your body isn’t here.”

“God,” he says.

“It’s okay,” Keith says, taking one last look at the arm before standing straight and walking back to Shiro. He shoves his phone back in his pocket. He can’t touch Shiro, his hand goes right through his arm as he reaches out, but his proximity seems to calm him. Shiro stares at him with hurt eyes, drawing strength from his gaze. They watch each other quietly.

It’s quiet for awhile, only the soft sound of their breathing as it slows.

“Um...” Keith murmurs. “What do we do with it? Leave it? Send in an anonymous tip?”

At the same time, they both pick up on a sound off in the distance - someone trampling through the woods.

“Is someone there?” A man asks, small flashlight beam trying to make its way to them. “Stop right where you are.”


“I can hear you over there!”

Shiro leaps out in the clearing, throwing his arms out as if to protect Keith. “Just leave it! Go!”

Keith blinks at Shiro and then slowly slips around the nearest tree.

Despite Shiro’s valiant efforts, Keith can’t outrace an officer with one leg. He does the only thing he can think of: he cups his hands, presses his thumbs to his mouth, and blows. It makes the low rolling hoot of an owl.

Shiro raises his eyebrows. He walks off into the distance, looking out for the officer. “He’s stopping.”

Keith almost laughs; he didn’t really think it’d work. "Boy Scouts."

“Keep doing it,” Shiro encourages, gesturing his hand forward excitedly.

Keith does.

Shiro laughs. “He’s shrugging his shoulders in relief. He’s still coming, but he looks less suspicious.”

When Shiro pokes around the corner, Keith smiles at him.

“Go,” Shiro breathes, a small smile on his lips. “Don’t get caught.”

Carefully, Keith makes his way out of the forest.
“Steady now,” Shiro says, or, “stop for a moment. He’s pausing to listen.”

With Shiro’s guidance and his own ability to hear an elephant stomping through the leaves, Keith manages to avoid the officer the entire way. It’s like a game of cat and mouse, only Keith feels like a very highly leveled mouse.

It feels almost too easy as he steps out into the road, relief flooding through him as he remembers his crutches only a few feet away.

“Hopefully he finds the arm,” Shiro murmurs as he comes up behind Keith, who’s leaning over to grab his crutches. “He’s so close to it. Maybe then they’ll scour the area better.”

“I just... I have a feeling the rest is not there,” Keith says.

“A feeling...?” Shiro mutters, turning back, eyebrow creased down in worry.

“Yeah, I dunno. I can’t explain it.”

“In any case,” Shiro says, letting out a tiny sigh as he tries to be optimistic, “at least he didn’t catch us.”

Shiro turns, and just as he says that, meets a face full of light.

He yelps. It blares through Shiro’s body and straight onto Keith. Someone has a flashlight on him.

They stop short, blinded by the light.

“Keith,” the person holding the flashlight says. The voice is deep and familiar.

Keith lets out a small groan, pressing his hands to his eyes to block the assault of light. “...Mr. Holt...”

There’s a small click and it goes dark again. Keith has to blink away the afterimage for a few moments to see.

A small exasperated sigh comes from Pidge’s dad as he shakes his head at Keith. “What are you doing here, Keith? I expected it out of others, but not from you. This is a crime scene.”

“I- I know, I was -”

“-It’s the middle of the night. How do you think this looks?”

“Bad. Really bad. I know. I didn’t -”

“-Katie said she was texting you all afternoon and you weren’t responding. She was worried about you. Were you out here?”

“Oh. No. I was asleep... But I woke up and I...I just wanted to find him. What if they dragged his body deeper into the forest? What if he’s passed out or drowning in a puddle? I found an arm.”

“An arm?” He starts in surprise. “Where?”

“Yes. It had a ring on the thumb, the one Shiro always wears. It’s over there.” Keith points. “A fox had it.”
“Can you show it to me?”

“Yeah, follow me.” Keith leads him over, but all the forest looks the same. He thinks he’s brought him to the right place, but there’s nothing. “It was...well, it was somewhere over here,” Keith mutters, looking up to Shiro for help, who shrugs.

“I think this was the right place,” Shiro murmurs, delving a bit deeper into the forest to see.

Keith says, “A fox had it in its mouth; when I tossed a rock at it, it dropped the arm... Maybe it came back for it.”

“A fox with an arm? Foxes are big enough to carry arms...?”

“This one was. It was fat. And round.” Keith presses his lips together. His explanation sounds lame and he knows it, but it’s the truth.

Pidge’s dad frowns, but, with a sigh, he writes it all down anyway. “And you think it’s Shiro’s arm?”

“Yes. It had the ring.”

“How did you come across the fox?”

“I was taking a break from walking when it happened past.”

Mr. Holt takes in a deep breath, face pinched. “Right. Thank you, Keith. We’ll keep looking.”

“...Am I in trouble, Mr. Holt?”

He sighs. “Keith, you need to take care of yourself. I’m sure your parents don’t know you’re out here. Katie and Matt said you looked awful this afternoon and here you are trampling through the forest past midnight. Do you know how many wild animals are out here? They could seriously hurt you, especially when you’re all alone. Think of the damage you’re doing to your leg. You left your crutches behind earlier?”

“...I...Yeah.”

“Keith,” he tsks softly, shaking his head. “You know better... You have a whole family worrying about you. I hate to do it, but you know I’ll have to tell your parents about this. Stay out of the investigation, got it? I promise you we’ll find Shiro. We are all doing our best. I am well aware that every moment counts. And this moment right now between you and me could be used for the investigation, do you understand? Go home. Keep Katie company. I’ll have her pass on any info I find, alright?”

“Right. Thank you, Mr. Holt. I’m sorry. I just...”

“I know. You’re curious. I’m sure everyone’s thinking of coming out here to search. Katie tells me you’re interested in joining the police force? Maybe in a few years you and I can figure out things together, how does that sound?”

Keith laughs lowly, hanging his head. “That was years ago. It’s impossible now, with my leg.”

“People used to tell me I’d never make it. Sometimes it pays to be stubborn, which I know you’re a master at.”

Keith raises an eyebrow at him, crooked smile on his lips. “All due respect, sir, you still have a
healthy body that works."

Pidge's dad shoots him the same amused look. "Alright. Get home. Get some rest. I don’t want to find you out here again, okay? Your parents would be worried sick.”

“I promise, Mr. Holt. Good luck on your investigation.”

“Thank you, Keith.”

Keith takes his leave, only feeling about half as awkward and tense as he really ought to. Shiro has all the tension gathered in his face for the both of them.

“I told you it’d be fine,” Keith tries to say optimistically when they’re out of Pidge’s dad’s range. "It’s not like we’re in the city. And, like I said, he and my parents went to school together when they were younger. The Holts are like family.”

“He’ll tell your parents though. Won’t you get in trouble?”

“Priorities. Me getting yelled at somehow doesn’t seem as big of a deal as finding your arm out here.”

“I guess...” Shiro’s still looking ahead, frown on his brow. Keith can see he’s still a little dazed. He wonders if Shiro will ever be able to recover. It would be hard to forget all this mess with the blood splattered on his shirt - a constant reminder. Not to mention the hunger and thirst and pain Keith worries Shiro must feel. Is it sharp? Is it constant? Keith doesn’t know if he has the strength himself to ask.

They walk in beaten down silence. The moon is high, nearly full, and without the tree cover, it’s easy to see everything.

“You were very heroic, by the way,” Keith smiles up at him. “Using your body to shield me.”

Shiro lets out a small breathy laugh, pressing a palm to his forehead. “How embarrassing... I forgot myself... My intangible body won’t be much protection for you.”

“No, it was sweet. Thank you.”

Shiro blushing, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment.

With the stars as their guide, they make it back to Keith’s room without incident. It’s nice to be inside and warm again. The chill from the night has sunken into Keith’s bones and left him feeling raw and lonely. Home is his base, bringing him unconditional safety and comfort.

“How’s the leg?” Shiro asks as Keith falls down on the edge of his bed.

“Sucks,” Keith mutters, slowly moving it into gentle stretches. “But I’m glad we went. I wish we had found better news.”

“It could’ve been worse. Better an arm than my body.” He says it like it’s some sort of joke, but his eyes are wired with a deeply rooted fear that doesn’t feel warmth. He lets out a small breath. “We’ll save that for another day...”

Keith looks from Shiro’s face to his arm. It’s still there, which he thinks is strange. The arm that they had seen in the forest looks just like the arm he’s using now. And Keith can see, even now, the little black ring on his finger.
“You look tired... Rest for tonight,” Shiro says.

It’s true. The clock is blaring 2:14 AM and Keith feels extra weight in his back and limbs. He wants to stay up and keep going, but his brain is empty of thoughts. He’s fading. He nods slowly, wishing there were something else he could do. Lay out a sleeping bag, hand over a blanket, something.

“Can you sleep?” Keith asks.

“I don’t know... I don’t think it’s possible. If you don’t mind, can I stay here? I can go home too, if you’d rather. I know ghosts aren’t usually the first kind of visitor anyone wants...”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind if you stay. You’re not just some random haunting. You’re Shiro, a senior, from Chem.”

“Ha... Yeah. Thanks, Keith,” Shiro whispers, gratitude flooding his eyes, warming their soft sad fragility. “I know we’ve basically only just met, but...being around you brings me comfort. Knowing you can hear me, see me, the help you’ve already provided me... Thank you. I don’t know what I’d be doing without you.”

Keith smiles, crossing his legs with a careful twist and saying softly, “We haven’t accomplished anything yet. Want me to turn on the t.v. for you?”

He sees Shiro hesitate. He picks up the remote and starts channel surfing as he stretches out on his bed. "It helps drone out the rain anyway," Keith yawns. “Anything in particular you like?”

“Um...” His face is going red. Blushing.

Keith almost laughs. He wants to say something about ghosts blushing, but he keeps it to himself. “So many interesting infomercials...which one will we choose?”

“Oh,” Shiro makes a little sound as he watches the screen, face lighting up. “Homeward Bound.”

Keith laughs this time, covering his face with his hand.

“What?” Shiro blinks.

“Nothing, nothing. Guest’s choice. Is the volume good?”

“Yes, perfect. Thank you, Keith. You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s no problem. Anything else I can do before I go to sleep?”

Shiro shakes his head, looking peaceful. For once this entire day.

Keith smiles at that. “Goodnight, Shiro.”

Shiro settles into the window seat, arms going over his knee as he watches Keith through gentle eyes. “Goodnight, Keith. Sleep well.”
Chapter 3

Keith has a bad dream.

He’s sprinting through the school, down the hallways, up the stairs, running for his life. He can hear something chasing him from behind, huge heavy footsteps that shake the earth with each step.

The muscles in his leg pull. It’s going to collapse out from underneath him, he knows it. He can feel it protesting, but he pushes on. He can’t let it render him useless. He can still run. He can still be a normal human being. He can do this.

But he can’t.

Pain shoots through him and he's down. As his knee twists, the floor begins to crumble in front of him, a never ending staircase spiraling down into darkness. He falls right before the edge. He tries to cling onto it - doesn’t want to fall - but there are hands on his back, strong and unyielding and they push, push, push, grabbing at his arms, tangling in his hair, ripping at his jacket until there’s nowhere else for him to go but down.

He fights but it’s not enough. The hands toss him down the staircase into eternal darkness.

Like a fallen star, Keith plummets.

He just cuts through black, plunging through open space. He's swallowed whole, there's nothing left of him. And then he crashes into the ground hard. His mind is knocked around his skull. And his leg...his leg...

He’s so disorientated; he doesn’t even have time to gather himself before the creature is there with him, snatching him up by his vulnerable leg. It’s a beast, a monster, and it twists at his wounds in between its giant fingers; his leg bends like soft plastic to its will. Keith is screaming, fingers digging into the ground as he tries to claw away, but it’s no use.

He’s totally exposed and helpless. He struggles to look up, to see what he’s fighting against.

There, hands gripping his leg, eyes bright with ravenous greed, is Lotor.

“- Keith! Keith!”

Keith darts up in his bed, breathing hard. His leg pulses painfully with each frantic beat of his heart; he can feel Lotor’s claws still digging into him.

“Pidge?” He breathes, his voice small and scared. Pidge is always there. He looks around desperately, panic still blinding him.

“No, it’s me... It’s Shiro. You’re okay. You’re alright.”

“Shiro...?” He recognizes the name, but it’s distant.

Slowly, he comes back to himself.

He’s in his room, on his bed. His heart is racing.
“Shiro,” he says again, quietly. The t.v. is off and there’s a glass of water, a plate of covered food, and a note on the nightstand. Pushing his sweaty hair out of his eyes, he reaches over to grab the note.

_Keith, I’m off to work but if you need anything, call me. I’ll leave my cell in my pocket. Your father will be home during his lunch break to check on you. You look awful. Go back to sleep. Love, Mom._

_P.S. Stop leaving the t.v. on during the night. You’re wasting electricity._

Keith sits there for a moment, eyes closed, trying to get ahold of himself. When he can no longer feel the pounding of his heart in his neck, he blinks his eyes open and lets out a sigh. “Sorry. Bad dream.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Shiro says. Keith no longer in distress, Shiro slips away from his side and returns to his spot by the window. “Are you okay?”

He has his hand around his neck, rubbing at it as he thinks. “...Yeah, I’m fine.” He nods to the t.v. “Did you get to finish your marathon before my mom turned it off?”

A faint smile shows on Shiro’s face that doesn’t meet his eyes. “I did, thanks. I think your cat can sense me still. She was looking over at me again.”

Keith is still just sitting there. His body aches, his leg is a fucking mess, and he’s in a strange in-between where he is starving but he thinks he might throw up if he eats.

He reaches for the plate and uncovers it. Eggs, bacon, and watermelon slices, cut up with care. ...He doesn’t think he can do it.

He looks up at Shiro, who’s staring at it with contained hunger. “How’s the stomach situation?” He asks gently.

Shiro presses his lips together tightly. “Uh... It turns out I’m not immune to it... But there’s nothing to be done, so...”

“Did you want to try to grab it again?”

Shiro inhales deeply, stretching and clenching his hand. “I was trying on various items while you were asleep. I can’t do it. There’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t mean there won’t ever be.”

Shiro holds Keith’s gaze for a moment before hauling himself off the bench and walking over. “Sit,” Keith says, patting the edge of the bed. He sets the plate down and scoots it toward him. With a frown, Shiro kneels on the ground and reaches his hand out. It looks like his hand will touch it, but then it just passes right through.

Shiro deflates. “This is just how it’s been, no matter what state of mind I try to get into. It’s no use.”

“Keep trying,” Keith says softly. “My first doctor told me I’d never be able to use this leg again, and, I mean, it wasn’t really a miraculous recovery by any means, but it does alright most days.”

Shiro is quiet for a moment as he lets his gaze fall to Keith’s leg. After a few moments of
deliberation, he nods to it; Keith has his hand pressed to it in a gentle hold. “What happened to
your leg, anyway? I’ve heard several rumors, none of them nice... I don’t think anyone really
knows the truth of it.”

“Yeah, well...” Keith sighs as he grabs his bottle of pills, dumps a few in his hand, and downs
them with a mouthful of water. “Pick a rumor. You’re not missing anything.”

He doesn’t continue and Shiro doesn’t push.

After a few moments of silence with Keith munching on the edge of a watermelon slice and Shiro
running his hands sadly through the plate, Keith’s phone pings.

“Oh, yeah,” Shiro says, poking through the bacon. “Katie kept calling this morning. I meant to
tell you.”

“Oh,” Keith sighs. He bites his lip as he scrolls through all the texts. “Jesus. You’d think I ran
around with a pack of wolves each night the way she worries... Just a second, let me -”

The phone rings before he can do anything.

He heaves a long sigh, answering the call. “I’m coming to school right now. Let me get some
pants on and I’ll be right over, psycho.”

“Psycho? It’s lunchtime! Where are you?”

“I know, I know. I accidentally slept in. I’ll be right over. See you in a second.”

He hangs up, tossing the phone away and slipping off the side of his bed in search of pants.

“You’re really going to school? Your mom said to stay home.”

“Yes, well, maybe someone at school knows something. The walls sure don’t know anything
here. Or Red either,” he murmurs, catching sight of her through the crack in his door, slipping
through the hallways. “Do you, girl? What’re you up to?”

She takes one curious look inside, eyes falling on Shiro, before continuing her journey away.

Keith tosses a sympathetic look at Shiro.

“She’ll warm up to you. Come on, let’s go.” Keith pushes up the sleeves to his jacket and grabs
his crutches.

Before he can reach it, there’s a soft knock on the door. For how quiet it is, Keith jumps a mile
into the air. He hisses as he comes down on his leg the wrong way and he cringes, shifting his
weight away from it.

The door opens wider and his dad’s head pokes in. His eyes scope out the room, pinched in slight
concern. “Hey, buddy, who’re you talking to?”

“Dad. I thought you weren’t coming back until lunch. I was talking to Red.”

The concern grows. “...Red’s downstairs. She ran out like something was out to get her.”

“Oh, well...before,” Keith says lamely. He wishes he were a better liar.

His dad gives him one more suspicious look and then sighs. “It is lunch, Keith. The end of lunch.
I’ve been here for an hour now. I’m about to head back out. How’re you feeling?”

“Wonderful. You?”

His dad smiles faintly. “You don’t look like you’re on death’s door like your mother said, so I’ll be leaving then. Need a ride to school?”

“I’m fine. Everyone is so suffocating.”

His dad laughs as he closes the door and then it’s just Keith and Shiro again.

“Remember not to talk to me in front of others,” Shiro reminds him as they exit the house and lock it up. “People won’t understand.”

“Yeah. I’ll be careful. It’s not like you look like a ghost though. You just...look like you.”

Shiro tilts his head down, plucking at his shirt. “Uh...”

“Right, but like...you’re not transparent and blue. It’s kind of confusing. ...I’ll try though...”

They get to the school gates, passing through the field and into the quad. Pidge is there, bouncing her leg, peering antsily through the crowd until her eyes lock on him.

“Keith!” She shouts, running over. “Where the heck have you been? One cryptic text last night and that was it? You always answer my texts.”

“Stop worrying so much; nothing bad is going to happen to me.”

“I banged on your door this morning and no one came.”

“I was literally just sleeping. You could’ve used the key under the mat, though. You know literally no one would mind if they saw you lurking around our house.”

She grumbles, pulling at his ear. “Where were you?”

“Ow, ow! In bed. I messed up my leg yesterday and my mom wanted me to stay home. I wanted to, but... Anyway, I just woke up when you called.”

She calms down a bit, falling back onto her heels, her voice sobering. “...That’s unlike you.”

“Mm... I took my meds, so it’s bearable. My stomach hurts though.” He’s already looking around as he lowers himself into a seat. There are still people crying. Gathering in groups, hunching together in ways they never did before. But his sight gets caught on the one sitting beside him, still.

Shiro’s staring at all of them, face somber. The wind tousles his hair gently. He looks like a painting, one that no one else can appreciate. The epitome of unbearable loneliness.

Keith takes a deep breath and focuses on what he can do. He pulls his attention to the other students. There are so many, each with a different story to tell. Who would Keith ask first? He has no idea. He’s not a detective, he’s a dumb high schooler. He frowns at the crowd. Everyone just looks the same. How do you pick from that?

Pidge’s voice softens. “Sorry I yelled. I’ve been worried. I thought maybe something happened.”

“Nah. It’s okay, I’m just...ugh. How’s the school?”
“Like yesterday. You can see everyone still crying. It feels weird and cold and real and everyone’s scared. People are talking about you too, about how Shiro’s brother attacked you in the halls. Did he really punch you in the face?”

Keith snorts and rolls his eyes. “No. He pushed me but I can’t say I didn’t deserve it, that was about all. I probably would’ve pushed me too.”

Pidge has an abandoned tray of fries in front of her so Keith picks through them idly, seeking out the last of the good ones. She pushes it closer to him. “Figures,” she says. “Most people seem to be sympathizing with you though. I almost can’t believe it.”

“Me?” Keith says around a mouthful, taken aback.

“Yeah. They say you went down hard. That it was like you slipped on a banana peel and Ryou tried to snap your crutches in half over his knee. Rumor is there were tears in your eyes as you begged for mercy.”

“You are making that up!”

“I’m not,” Pidge laughs. “Ask Hunk; he never lies.”

“Oh my god,” Keith groans, hanging his head. “I can’t believe people are saying that. I’m humiliated.”

Pidge chuckles, amused. “Well, at least they’re not talking shit about you. It’s a miracle.”

Keith shakes his head tiredly. “What does Ryou think about it all?”

“Ryou’s not here today. It’s just as well, everyone’s pretty certain they know who did it. I imagine he wouldn’t want to hear that, being his friend and all.”

Keith whips his head back up. “Who? Who are they saying?”

“Everyone’s saying it’s Lotor.”

Keith lets that sink in. He sucks on his bottom lip, thinking. He looks to Shiro, but his face is impassive. “Lotor.”

“Yeah. I mean, I get why people are saying it. Shiro gets this scholarship and a bit later he just mysteriously goes missing. I bet you can guess who gets the scholarship if Shiro doesn’t turn up.”

Keith looks over to Shiro for confirmation and he nods, pressing his fingers to his lips. “It was either him or me.”

“And look,” she nods her head to the parking lot. Keith shifts on his seat, pushing himself up slightly to see over the light post.

“What am I looking at -?” He starts to ask, and then he sees it.

In a parking lot filled with plain pieces of junk that have “first car” written all over them, this one is a king in a sea of mere commoners. Lotor has a new car. It is the richest sleekest sportiest car Keith’s ever seen in his entire life. Lotor is laying out casually over the sparkling clean hood of it, flipping his hair like he recently just purchased the place and it’s his. He sticks out like a sore thumb.

“Apparently he’s been saving up for it and it just happened to come in yesterday. So, naturally, the
first thing he did was run over to buy it. On top of the car, people are saying he got a haircut,” Pidge says. “It’s weird. Matt was really mad. He says it’s disrespectful.”

“It is weird,” Keith mutters. Lotor tosses his head back and laughs at something one of his friends tells him. Keith takes in a long slow breath as he watches Lotor through critical eyes. “Do you think Lotor did it?”

“I dunno. Despite everything, they seemed like friends, you know? And who says Lotor can’t afford to toss money to whichever university he wants to attend? But I’ve never talked to the guy. He’s acting weird, but I mean, if you just lost your best friend, wouldn’t you?”

“I’m not sure I’d go out and buy a new car...” He looks over to Shiro who’s looking back quietly, expression comparable to the fog rolling in over the trees. Keith’s not sure how to decipher his look.

“Yeah, well, you’re poor, so...”

Keith misses the joke, still gnawing away at his lip as he thinks. “Did your dad find out anything about Shiro? Did they find anything when they searched last night?”

“He hasn’t gotten back since last night, but he won’t tell me anything. He always says,” she deepens her voice to mimic her dad, “‘Katie, you gotta wait until we know the facts.’ And then he just tells the public. There are no benefits to being his child, let me tell you. I’m sure we’d hear immediately if there was any good news. I don’t think he’s found him yet.”

“‘Yet... Do you think he’s still alive?’

“Keith, how am I supposed to know? It’s still within the first forty-eight hours, so they can still find him. It’s after that you have to worry.”

Keith stares. “...What do you mean?”

“You know,” Pidge says. “They say it in movies and stuff. The first forty-eight hours are the most critical. The clues are still fresh, the suspects are probably still around. After that, your chances reduce by like fifty or something and the trail goes cold.”

He tries to count in his head. But...it’s very nearly almost been forty-eight hours since Shiro went missing. He sees as Shiro goes still, dread filling his eyes. Keith can feel it in himself, like dark knots, twisting up his stomach.

“But...you can still find them afterward, right?”

Pidge shrugs. “We’re just talking odds here, Keith. People have been kidnapped and turn up alive twenty years later so what were the odds of that? Each case is unique. But don’t worry about it. Worry about yourself. My dad’s got it all covered; it’s why he’s been out for so long.”

Keith hums, stomach twinging guiltily. He wants to be someone other people can count on to figure things out, not just...be expected to give up.

Forty-eight hours. Keith’s fucked up already.

Matt walks over, dark circles under his eyes and his posture hunched as he saunters through the crowd. “Hey, guys,” he says, voice low. “Katie, were you still coming to the library with me?”

Shiro’s looking up at Matt, yearning on his face. As if he could look any sadder. “That’s
something Matt and I used to do together,” he says softly.


“He can come.”

She turns to him. “Want to?”

The campus isn’t huge, but it’s big enough and the library is literally on the other side. They won’t make it in time before the bell rings if they bring him along. He shakes his head softly. *Useless.* He pushes the thought away. “I want to see if Lance knows anything.”

“Knows anything?” Pidge frowns. “About Shiro? If Dad didn’t say anything...”

“I mean like rumors and stuff.”

“Keith, you can come... We don’t mind waiting. Seriously.”

He shakes his head. “It’s not a lame excuse. It’s the truth.”

“Well, okay...but if you need me to come help you or anything *call me.* If you’ve fallen or can’t get your Bunsen burner lit again or if you can’t bend over enough to reach the water fountain or...you know. Emergencies.”

“Wow, water fountain emergency. *Thrilling.* Got it. Thanks, Pidge.”

“You got it. Be safe.” She walks off and waves, but she looks back hesitantly at Keith, like she’s leaving a baby alone with a switchblade in his hand.

Keith sighs and looks up at Shiro. Keith presses his hand over his mouth and speaks lowly so the sound only travels between the two of them. They’re shoved away in a corner enough where it shouldn’t be a problem.

“Lotor. What do you think?”

Shiro takes a deep breath and shrugs his shoulders. “I know what he looks like on the outside and I don’t blame you guys, but he’s not as bad as he makes himself look. We’ve been friends since forever...”

“But the car. The acting like he doesn’t care about what happened at all? I mean, I’ve seen people today crying over you who didn’t even *know you.* I didn’t know you and I felt sick before all this. And Lotor acting all nonchalant? I mean, *look at that car.* He heard you went missing and the first thing he thinks to do is buy something?”

Shiro just shakes his head, face tense and uncomfortable. “He’s not *like* most people; he’s spent most of his life ignored so he’s learned his own way of acting and reacting. Maybe he’s upset and so he’s buying himself something nice to balance it out. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“But the car. The acting like he doesn’t care about what happened at all? I mean, I’ve seen people today crying over you who didn’t even *know you.* I didn't know you and I felt sick before all this. And Lotor acting all nonchalant? I mean, *look at that car.* He heard you went missing and the first thing he thinks to do is buy something?”

Shiro shakes his head, eyes pressed closed tightly. “He’s my *friend.* My best friend. We grew up together, just like you and Pidge. Would Pidge kill you if you got a scholarship she wanted?”

“Depends on which school.”
Shiro shoots him a tired look and Keith closes his jaw with a small click. “Sorry. I’m just thinking...you’ve got to admit he’s acting strangely. And I just heard him talking about the scholarship the other day. It’s worth looking into. We’ve got to do something.”

Shiro lets out a weary sigh. “I didn’t even want to tell anyone about the scholarship in the first place... What if this has nothing to do with that? Is a scholarship really worth a life?”

“Until we check it off the list, I think it’s a good route to go. You’re not a murderer or a kidnapper or whatever, of course it won’t make sense to you. Maybe if I were to go to Lotor’s place after school and question him. You know, just corner him. See what kind of info I can find. What kind of social cues he might give off. And while I do that, you look around his house.”

“If you really want to. I’m telling you though, it’s not him.”

“Look. This isn’t a bad thing, but you seem like the kind of person to trust blindly. You trust me. You don’t even know me.”

“What’re you going to do? Kill me?” Shiro says dryly, raising an eyebrow.

“Ha, ha.”

“You seem like a nice person,” Shiro shrugs.

Keith rolls his eyes, shaking his head darkly. He pushes himself to his feet, saying, “Like I said, you trust way too easily. I think -” He shuts up the second he sees Acxa across the quad, frowning over at him. “Oh, Christ,” he spits as she disengages from her group and comes over.

Shiro says, “I didn’t know you knew Acxa.”

Keith shoots a look at Shiro. “What?”

“Keith,” she calls, reaching out and rubbing his head of hair with her hand.

“Stop,” he gripes, trying to elbow her. “Unfair advantage; I can’t push you away when I’m standing.”

“What are you doing in school? Mom said you were staying home.”

Shiro blinks, doing a double take at Acxa and then back at Keith.

“I look fine, don’t I? Mom said I was dying to Dad,” Keith rolls his eyes. “I wanted to see if anyone had any info on Shiro. You love gossip. You know him. Do you know?”

She waves him away. “It’s all just conjecture... Wait for a police report.”

“Ultimately, yeah, but rumors. Know any rumors?”

“Well, my friend heard from her other friend that a teacher says that Sam thinks it’s Rolo.”

“Rolo?” Keith frowns. “Wasn’t he -”

“-on vacation in Hawaii,” Shiro confirms. “There’s no way it could’ve been him. Besides, we’re friends.”

“Wasn’t he what?” Acxa raises an eyebrow at him.
“...Friends?” Keith finishes.

“Who wasn’t Shiro’s friend honestly,” she mutters, crossing her arms and turning her eyes from him. She bites the end of her nail as she looks at the road Shiro was known to last go down. “You shouldn’t walk home by yourself on those roads, you know. Mom will have my head if I let you. I can’t believe you just decided to come to school even when you had a free pass to take today off. You hate school.”

“Acxa.”

“Is Matt driving you home? I don’t want to have to be the one to do it. My friends and I are going into town today.”

“Don’t worry,” Keith rolls his eyes. “I won’t darken your damn doorstep. I’m sure Matt will drive me.”

“Good, because why are you hanging out by yourself? You look like a loser.”

“And here you are, talking to a loser. ...Bye, Acxa.”

“I was checking on you. I was worried!”

“Bye, Acxa,” Keith sings again, walking around her.

“You are such a little brat,” she mutters, smacking him over the head and rolling her eyes as she passes him by. “See you.”

Shiro blinks and then whips his head around to Keith. “Your sister??” His eyes are huge.

Keith laughs as Acxa gets out of hearing range. “Uh. I mean. It's not news. We've been brother and sister for ages. You know. Since birth. I thought Acxa was your friend?”

“Well, yeah. I just...I guess I never really paid attention...”

“Wow. Oblivious.”

“Busy,” Shiro insists but he doesn't sound sure.

“We're twins.” Keith chuckles, watching with amusement as Shiro pales as he comprehends. “...Did you really not know...?”

“No! Twins!” He looks down at Keith and then back to Acxa. “...I can see it.”

“Fraternal. And she took all the gifts in the womb.”

“Wait, but...she’s in my grade.”

“I got held back a year.” Keith purses his lips as he continues his way over to Lance’s table. “Like I said - all the gifts. The good twin. The smarter, prettier, more ambitious twin. And I’m just the stupid, talentless, ugly one. Not something either of us like to flaunt around.”

Shiro chuckles.

Keith looks over at him sharply. He hadn't been joking and it's a sore spot.

Shiro blinks at his reaction, perplexed. “You... You’ve got to know you’re not talentless or
“stupid,” Shiro says. “And definitely not the ugly twin...”

Keith raises an eyebrow. “What?”

Shiro’s eyes go wide as he realizes what he just said. “I-I mean, not that your sister’s ugly at all. She’s very beautiful too. I just... Uh...” He lets out a small embarrassed laugh. He scratches the back of his neck and shakes his head in despair. “Nevermind.”

Keith snorts, tilting his head a bit as he takes in Shiro’s cherry red cheeks. Keith tosses him one last amused look before going up to Lance. Hunk looks up first, big smile growing on his face. “Hey, buddy, how’ve you been? Pidge has been worried about you all day, you know.”

“Hi. Yeah, no, I just slept in. All this bad shit in the air is wearing me down. You know how she worries.” Keith sighs, letting himself fall into the seat beside Hunk. “How are you guys?”

“Alright. Pidge’s dad is amazing; they’ll find him.”

“Any of you hear anything about it? Like, rumors. I asked Pidge already, but you know how she doesn’t really pay attention to that sort of thing.”

Lance, who’s sitting on the table like it’s a seat, twists to look at Keith. “You’ve come to the right place. Did you see Lotor? Head tossing this way and that. Laughing and stuff. He got a haircut, I’m sure of it. He’s acting like nothing happened. It’s really weird.”

“That new car.”

Lance whistles. “Yeah, it’s a beauty. What I wouldn’t give to ride in it just once...”

“I meant Shiro just went missing.”

“Well, yeah, there’s that too. Maybe it’s a coincidence, maybe it’s ill timing...”

“Maybe both,” Hunk says, nodding wisely as he bites into his sandwich.

“Yes, and everyone’s all like, ‘oooh, it’s Lotor’. But then, on the other hand, did you hear cow girl got caught trying to get into the crime scene last night? Beyond the criminal tape lines. The police had to hold her back. She was screaming and thrashing. Apparently, she knocked out an officer’s tooth she was going so wacko. She has a tooth imprint on her forehead.”

“Jesus,” Keith whispers. He leans in. “...Who the fuck is cow girl?”

“Keith,” Lance rolls his eyes in a plea for patience. “Buddy. You’ve got to pay more attention around here or you’re going to be next. Cow girl? The one who was obsessed with Shiro and cut out the heart of a cow to give to him?”

“Um, what?”

“Hello? Where were you two years ago? She wrapped it up in a box, decorated it with a ribbon, and put it on his doorstep. Shiro’s brother stepped in it.” Lance leans in for dramatic effect, rubbing his chin animatedly and raising an eyebrow. “Traumatized him... He’s still not over it. Whenever he opens the front door, he checks all ways. Or so the story goes... Apparently, in her culture, cow hearts are presented to their lover to bind them together for eternity.”

Keith frowns, thinking. “What kind of culture is that?”

“I dunno,” Lance shrugs. “Cow culture?”
“God,” Keith shakes his head. “Okay, well. Doesn’t that sound a bit murder-y to you?” He looks over at Shiro, who’s starting to look tired. He sighs heavily, saying lowly, “it’s true she left the cow heart. We had to file restraining orders. She hasn’t bothered me since though.”

“Her parents own the cemetery,” Hunk says. “Can’t say that’s a healthy environment to live in. Who wouldn’t go crazy when you have dead people planted in your front yard and your bedroom in a funeral home?”

Lance snaps his fingers. “Oh! Keith! Remember when we used to go to football games together and there was that girl hiding under the bleachers like... cloaked in mysterious shadow? She was always staring after Shiro. Her eyes glowed in the dark. Remember?”

“No,” Keith says.

“Bah. I always forget her name because it’s so weird,” Lance says as he leans back and crosses his ankles. “It’s something like...Renegade.... Manzanita... Gretel...”

Hunk shakes his head. “What? None of those sound close at all.”

Lance nods to Keith. “Hey, where’s Pidge, your partner in crime?”

“She’s with Matt at the library.”

“Oooh,” Lance says. “I was wondering why you were hanging out with us.”

“I wouldn’t have made it in time; besides, I wanted to know the gossip. If you hear anything else, let me know.”

“My bet’s on Lotor, honestly. Cow girl is freaking weird, but like...she’s a cow girl. She loves Shiro - too much, but still. Do you think Lotor’s ever loved a single thing besides himself in his life? He could kill you with a look.”

Hunk nods. “I think so too. I’m telling you, something’s up. Lotor’s scary.”

“Is he?” Keith murmurs, looking through the crowd for a glimpse of him. He’s nowhere though. His car’s gone.

Lotor’s never been his favorite, but he never really thought of him as scary. A prick, maybe. Spoiled? Yeah, sure. But scary?

“Of course you wouldn’t think so,” Lance rolls his eyes. “Honestly, I think this leg thing that happened to you is a blessing in disguise. It keeps you out of harm’s way. Otherwise, you’d probably be brawling it out with everyone.”

“That’s not true,” Keith grunts, feeling his stomach drop at the mention of it. He can only take Lance in doses. Very small, very infrequent doses. For this reason exactly.

Lance is still laughing. “Remember - Remember when Keith could still walk and that one kid - what’s his name - he still won’t look over here today. Seriously, what’s his name again? Where is he?” He pokes his head up and looks through the crowd.

“Aw, come on, stop it,” Hunk says to Lance, throwing an arm around Keith’s shoulders and grabbing him into a defensive hug. “Keith gets a bad rap. Really, he’s a soft little teddy bear. He’s just always at the wrong place at the wrong time.”
Lance laughs. “Didn’t he just get into a fight with Ryou the other day?”

Hunk blinks in surprise, tilting his head to look at Keith. “You did what?”

“Ooookay, you guys are really something. I didn’t hurt him, alright? Everything’s fine.”

“As if Shiro’s family didn’t have enough to worry about and you toss a fight into the mix. They’re probably crying their eyes out right now. For shame.”

Any mention of his family and Shiro pales, looking sick. Keith tosses a dirty look at Lance. He disengages himself from Hunk’s hold as he reaches for his crutches. “I’ve got to start walking to my next class. I don’t want to be late.”

“Aww, come on, buddy,” Lance croons, “we didn’t mean it. Don’t leave!”

Keith ignores him.

“See you, Keith,” Hunk says.

“Mmhmm.”

“Bye, buddy!” Lance calls, waving.

Keith flips him off and is on his way.

Shiro gets up, following behind.

As Keith and Shiro make their way through the empty hallways, passing by the trees in the middle of the quad filled with soft white petals, Keith lets out a long sigh. He hits a stray rock with his crutch and it goes flying into the wall of lockers with a loud **clang**. “Lance is so **irritating** sometimes. You can see why he couldn’t possibly be a suspect. He’s so transparent.”

Shiro hums, but his tone is automatic. Dim.

Keith looks up. Light pours down through the center of the quad from up above. Being as tall as he is, the light catches Shiro first, bathing his form with a soft glow. His eyes are faraway, dull and distant. He’s not paying attention at all.

As wind gently weaves its way through the halls, the delicate petals disengage from the trees and fall, twisting through the air. They fall right through Shiro. His eyes follow them, hands going up palm first as if he’s trying to catch them, but they just slip right through. It’s like he’s not even there. In this place where he used to be king, he is a ghost, invisible even to the trees that have watched him grow all these years.

Slowly, brow furrowing, he clenches his open palms shut and lets them fall to his sides.

“...You okay?” Keith murmurs lowly.

His eyes go wide, as if he had forgotten Keith was even with him. “Hm? O-oh, yeah. Fine. Everything’s fine.”

“...I’m sorry. It was a lot, wasn’t it? I should’ve asked around by myself.”

“No, I just... I’m worried about Ryou. About my parents... I can’t even imagine what they might be doing... How they must be feeling. Ryou didn’t even come to school today; he’s always been so uptight about perfect attendance... He’s never missed a day before. It’s just... All this upset at
school and I know it must be so much worse at home... I wonder what they’re up to...”

“...Yeah.”

Shiro shifts, turning his wide eyes on Keith. They’re almost pleading. “I know you’re eager to question Lotor and I’m not arguing, but...but one hour won’t hurt, will it? Just one? I think I should check on them.”

“Your family?” Keith asks in surprise, his eyebrows rising. “Of course, Shiro. You don’t have to ask. Of course you can.”

He’s quiet for awhile as the wind blows through the quad, making the leaves shiver, upturning the soft petals on the floor. “…I...I don’t want to go alone...” He doesn’t look at Keith as he says softly, “There’s a park really closeby. If you wanted, I mean... I’ll try to be quick.”

“Oh, the park by the Holts’ place?!”

“Yeah! Yeah, exactly. They’re a few houses down.”

“I don’t mind waiting. Lotor doesn’t look like he’s going to run off or anything...”

“Yes. And I’m already dead, right? So what’s the rush?”

Already dead. It rings wrong through Keith’s head, but he doesn’t say anything. The light in Shiro’s eyes is jagged with that consuming fear again. Keith’s afraid any word at all is going to spook him.

Keith continues walking uneasily. Somehow, in his chest, he feels this pressure telling him to hurry. Like maybe, at the end of this, he can save Shiro. But he can’t tell Shiro his family will have to wait. This might be the only time he has.

Tomorrow’s only been two days since Shiro first woke up as a ghost. Keith will just have to cross his fingers and pray.

After school, Keith follows Shiro down that road. He’s not alone, not really, but if there were someone waiting in the bushes to ambush Keith, Shiro wouldn’t be able to do anything. The thought creates a giant knot of apprehension in Keith’s stomach as he follows in Shiro’s footsteps.

It’s darker than the road Keith takes - more treecover, less movement. The whole forest is completely still and hushed, like the trees and shrubbery witnessed what happened here, and they’re either too scared to move or they’re in mourning, paying their respects. Either way, it makes Keith feel on edge. One loud noise and he’s afraid he’ll scream.

Where it happened, half the road is completely blocked off. Keith doesn’t think he sees the blood anymore, but his memory is quick to provide the brutal comparison. Shiro keeps his face carefully composed.

But nothing happens. No kidnappers. No bodies. No foxes. It’s just a long quiet road with light at the end of the tunnel.

“My house is around the corner,” Shiro says when they finally reach the residential area and stop by the park. “If you need me...uh...”
“I’ll be here. I won’t move.”

“I’ll be quick,” Shiro promises, patting his hands on his legs nervously. “...Thanks, Keith.”

“Yeah. ...Good luck, Shiro,” Keith murmurs softly.

Shiro’s eyes crinkle with one last nervous smile before he turns and heads down the street. Keith watches him disappear...and then he’s alone.

Keith stays in the swing, slowly rocking himself forward and backward. His parents used to bring them out here a lot when he was younger, for BBQs and birthday parties. Everyone knows everyone in this small town. Family, some might call it. And Keith can see that, sometimes.

He’d run across the grass field with Pidge and they’d both try to sneak away to climb the bigger trees in the forest. His parents always caught them before they ran off too far.

“I apologize for Keith,” Krolia would sigh to Mr. Holt. “He’s a bad influence for Katie. She’s so sweet and Keith is just -”

But Mr. Holt would just laugh. “If you weren’t you, Krolia, I’m not sure we’d ever seen him again. He’d just run off and never stop, not until he reaches the ends of the earth.”

Krolia would just heave an exhausted breath, trying to wrangle Keith back into her grip who would do nothing but squirm. “And then he’d somehow still have the energy to keep running even after that. I’m exhausted.”

Keith had just grinned toothily back then, planning his next departure. He had wanted to fly.

The trees had seemed lush and alive back then, telling of adventure. What would he find out there? He couldn’t wait to get his hands on them; the world was ripe with possibilities. Now the trees loom with their dried crooked branches, menacing and foreboding as they hang there in static. Is it the forest that changed or him? He thinks he can smell the blood from here. The decay of soggy plantlife...and maybe something else. Someone else. Shiro.

He just swings, staring up at the grey stagnant sky at first, and then down, at the mud beneath his shoes.

He busies himself by tapping away listlessly at his phone, chatting with Pidge and Hunk until he finally sees a pair of feet slowly come into his vision.

Shiro walks like he’s dragging his body. His eyes are puffy. But he smiles as soon as he sees Keith.

“Sorry it took so long,” Shiro says, his voice loud against the silence. Forced. Falsely cheerful.

Softly, hesitantly, Keith asks, “how’d it go?”

Shiro just nods, rubbing his hand subconsciously at his face as he looks out over the road. “Well. Everything went well. They couldn’t see me obviously, but I mean, as well as a ghost can feel spying on his family, I guess. They look...different. Older somehow,” he laughs, talking fast, eyes frazzled and wired. His hand presses subconsciously over the bloodied spot on his shirt. “My mom cries a lot on a normal day - pressure gets to her - but this is different. She looks so weak and fragile. And my dad... Like bones. His face is dark... Like, not figuratively, but it really actually looks like there are shadows there. And Ryou, well, Ryou’s not really one to cry but...he was crying. And the house is just so so different. Will it always be like this from now on? Will they
be able to heal? Can I really do nothing? Just stand there and watch them useless and pitiful and presenceless ... I...” He seems to realize himself, pulling his posture up. “I’m fine. We can go to Lotor’s now. He’s in Northside; if we leave now, we can probably make it before night falls and we can question him like you want. I know he’s kind of difficult, but he means well, so maybe if you... If you...” Shiro trails off quietly. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Shiro looks like shit. The shadows he mentioned on his father’s face are there on his as well. His normal tall proud stature is sunken and weak. There’s something jittery and sharp in his eyes. He’s seconds from caving, breaking apart into little pieces, scattering into the wind. And he’s trying so hard to hold it together...

Keith gives him a weak smile. “...Like you said earlier, Lotor’s not going anywhere... One night of rest... How about that?”

Shiro’s breathing hard, pressing his hands into his forehead as he wheezes, “but the forty-eight hours. It’s already passed. You wanted to see Lotor and I’m slowing you down.”

“I’ll turn the t.v. on for you and go out myself. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You can’t -”

“I want to.”

Shiro takes in a deep big breath, trying to collect himself. He stand there, shoulders tight, face in a tense cringe. “...No. No, I want us to be together. ...You’re right. I’m not...I’m not thinking clearly right now. Tomorrow. We’ll go out tomorrow. It’s late now, anyway...”

Keith hesitates. He’s fine to go alone. What’s right?

His stomach growls and he sees Shiro’s indecisiveness seal itself away. “That’s it. Come on,” he says, gesturing Keith up. “Eat. Rest. Tomorrow, we’ll both be sharper. We’re both no good like this now.”

“But...”

“Come on.”

Keith would never admit it, but he’s tired by the time he gets home. He grabs some leftovers from the counter and munches on it as he goes upstairs and closes the door behind him.

What Shiro saw of his family hangs heavily in the air between them, but neither mention it. Keith doesn’t have to ask about how painful it was, he can see the pain still there, on Shiro’s face. It’s sharp and bitter.

But he looks up when he realizes Keith is hesitating and somehow manages another weary smile. They’re getting weaker as the night goes on. “I’ll be alright here. Go. Take a shower.”

“You sure you don’t mind?”

Shiro nods, going back to looking outside at the moon.

Keith reaches for his pajama drawer. God, the sound of warm water sounds too good to be true. It feels like it’s been ages since he got to take a shower even though it probably hasn’t even been twenty-four hours. He thinks about how grungy and exhausted he feels and they haven’t even done anything yet.
Keith slows. Shiro has it so much worse. Keith finds himself looking over at the window seat. Shiro looks so lonely up there, the night swallowing him whole. He’s set against a sky filled with so much darkness it’s like he’s unattached from this earth, like he might just float away.

“Hey,” Keith hears himself saying. He walks over to close the curtains and Shiro turns, looking up at him with his wide lost eyes. “...So, I was eavesdropping the other month and remember you mentioning to Lotor in Chem class how you wanted to play a certain game.” He reaches over to his art desk, tosses some papers aside and raises a game case. “This the one?”

Shiro raises his muted eyes up, mouth parting slightly. His chuckle is quiet. “...You have it.”

Keith shifts it to his other hand as he leans into his desk to support his weight. “What do you think? Are you up for it?

“Really?” Shiro hums. He just stares at Keith’s hands. “Haven’t you already played it by now?”

Keith shrugs. “Sure, but you haven’t.”

Keith has never really had anyone to take care of before, it’s always been him that’s been taken care of. And now, it feels like it’s his chance.

He tries to get himself in a state of mind where he can be positive but not so much it clashes. Where he can support, but not stifle. He wants to rub away some of the sorrow from Shiro’s face, no matter how little. “I know it’s not the same as playing it yourself, but I can play it for you.” He holds his hands up in front of him and wiggles his fingertips. “Just tell me where you’d like to go. I can be your hands.”

Shiro gazes past the daze in his eyes and really looks at Keith. Taking in his face with quiet care. His eyes go so soft. Even though Shiro’s irises are made from the color of steel, they become so warm looking at Keith. Keith feels like he’s melting.

“...I’d like that,” Shiro says quietly, daring to let a small smile touch his lips. Genuine. Not bright and wired and all-wrong.

“Mmkay,” Keith hums as he gets everything ready and hobbles over to the bed. He leans against his pillow and then pats the empty space at his side. “You can sit here. You can’t see at the window very well.”

Shiro hesitates, his eyes flicking down to the blood on his shirt. He opens his mouth, like maybe he’ll mention it, but then stops. He takes a deep controlled breath.

“...You don’t mind?” He asks instead, his eyes asking the rest for him. Hesitant. Sad.

“I haven’t showered in like three days, so if you don’t mind that, then we’re good.”

A small smile grows on Shiro’s lips. “You do smell a little strange.”

Keith laughs. “Tomorrow morning, I promise I’ll take a shower. But right now, adventure calls.”

Shiro settles onto Keith’s bed cautiously. He chooses the very edge of the very end and makes himself as small as possible, back rigid, arms and legs contained. Keith’s so used to seeing Pidge sprawl out wherever the heck she wants; this looks so painful. But Keith gets it. If the situation were reversed, Keith would probably sit anywhere else besides Shiro’s bed. There’s something personal about it.
Keith kicks off the game, resisting his natural inclination to blaze through all the cutscenes. He lets Shiro enjoy them and hopes that it’ll melt some of the day off of him.

“The colors are beautiful,” Shiro murmurs.

“The music is what gets me,” Keith sighs lovingly. “It’s like some sort of therapy. But like, not the shitty painful kind. A good sort of therapy.”

Shiro leans back a little, closing his eyes and listening, faint smile on his face. “...Yeah. It’s really nice.”

Keith has never been the type to watch others play video games; he likes to be in control. Luckily, Shiro doesn’t seem to mind that he has to relay his actions through Keith. He seems to genuinely enjoy it. And the best part is that it actually appears to take Shiro’s mind off things - Shiro’s eyes clearing of thoughts and pain - just like Keith wanted.

“God,” Keith hums happily. “I love this character. He’s the best in this game.”

“Him?” Shiro points. “The fish?”

“Yeah, but so? He’s supportive and kind. He’s genuinely trying his best even if everything looks hopeless. And look at his little waist.”

“His waist?” Shiro asks, confused but amused smile twisting his face. “But he’s a fish.”

Keith laughs. “It’s the inside that ultimately counts, isn’t it? He’s got a good heart.”

Shiro’s form shudders a bit and Keith realizes, delayed, that Shiro’s frame is wracked with silent laughter. “I’m concerned for you,” Shiro chuckles between a big breath. “Like genuinely completely concerned.”

“What? I just said he was a good character. Is that so wrong?”

“Mm,” Shiro laughs into his hand, tossing an amused look at Keith. “It was the way you said it. And the look on your face.”

“What look?” Keith laughs, pressing an embarrassed hand to his face. “There is no look.”

“Uh. I can see it right now. You like him, don’t you? You like a fish.”

“I do not!”

Shiro laughs helplessly, hands on his stomach.

“Okay!” Keith says, turning the character around to run the other way and out of there. He leaps off a cliff and emergency-parachutes out of there. “Pidge’s the one who likes him, not me.”

“Pidge?” Shiro laughs. “You’re such a liar. There’s no way.”

“Ask her yourself! I swear it’s true,” Keith says between laughs and then stops. Of course Shiro can’t ask her himself.

Shiro stops too as he comprehends what Keith said...and then he bursts into even louder laughter. “I’ll just come back from the dead to ask her that one last very important question. Give it up. I know it’s you.”
“Okay!” Keith covers his face in shame. “But it’s not just me! Did you see the response online? There’s so much fanart. I’m sure you’ve seen some.”

“Keith. Oh my god. Stop. You’re only making it worse. Now I know what you’re always doing on that phone of yours.”

Keith sputters. “I don’t draw fanart of him!” But he protests too quickly, which makes Shiro burst into laughter even harder.

“Shiro!” Keith agonizes.

Shiro wipes away a tear. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s beautiful art. It’s the waist.”

Keith nods vehemently, red-faced and flustered. “A good waist is hard to come by, okay?” Nevermind the fact that Shiro’s waist is exceptional. Keith keeps this to himself though, already humiliated enough for one night.

Keith’s tired which makes everything seem extremely funny and amazing. His eyes are burning and sore and his hands are stiff from arthritis - the curse of an artist. But he grins when Shiro gasps in real surprise as a dragon pops up over the side of the cliff in all its majesty. His eyes glimmer with stars. Or when Shiro leans forward subconsciously as he listens intently to the cutscenes. They laugh together at Keith’s dumb comments and Keith almost can’t believe it - someone who actually understands his shitty sense of humor.

It’s almost four in the morning before Shiro even thinks about the time, and when he does, he jerks bodily to check the clock, face freezing in horror. “Oh, god, I completely forgot. I’ve kept you up! I’m so sorry.”

Keith blinks sluggishly from the screen. “Mm, I’m fine. I can keep going.”

Shiro chuckles as he takes in Keith’s sleepy expression. “No, no, no, go to sleep. Get some rest. You’ve done enough for me today.”

“I’ve done literally nothing,” Keith mumbles softly, but he saves and turns the game off. The room dims into darkness.

“...Thanks for playing this for me, Keith,” Shiro says softly. “I know what you were trying to do and it really helped. It means a lot to me. Thank you.”

Keith turns the t.v. back on and gestures for Shiro to choose a program. “…Let me know if I can do anything more, Shiro. Really. I want to help.”

“Yeah...?” Shiro breathes out. “...You know, I don’t know if this is really appropriate to say, but it’s kind of funny. Everyone always told me how you’re this rough angry ball of fire... You don’t seem so rough to me.”

Keith closes his eyes with a tired, but amused, laugh. “Who said that? How would they know? I never talk to anyone.”

Shiro’s voice softens further. “They obviously didn’t know what they were talking about. ...Goodnight, Keith. Sleep well. And thanks...”

Chapter End Notes
This is actually just the first half of a chapter that became way too long...oops. I had to
split it into two. I'll post the next sometime this weekend. I was going to do it today
but forgot I had a quiz and some homework to do...ugh... D:

I want to say thank you so much to everyone who has been reading and commenting
so far!! And if you haven't seen it already, Project Ava did an absolutely stunning
piece for this...I am in awe every time I look at it. LINK TO PURE BEAUTY!
THANK YOU SO MUCH. ˘reu ˘reu

Chat with me on Twitter? <3
Chapter 4

Keith wakes to the sound of a cat screaming and a tornado going over his legs.

“Jesus!” Keith jerks up, tossing his sheets from him, startled.

It’s just Red. She’s a flying streak across the room and then she’s gone.

“Sorry,” Shiro mutters lowly, features down. “...She was coming in slowly. I thought maybe if I took it carefully she’d let me touch her.”

Keith’s still blinking away sleep. “You think you could touch her?”

“Well. She can see me, so maybe?”

“I can see you, too,” Keith says, scratching blearily at his stomach. But he thinks about it. “I can grab her for you if you want.”

“We don’t need you all scratched up,” Shiro says softly, leaning back into the window corner. “How’d you sleep?”

“Stiff,” Keith grunts. He yawns widely as he reaches for his pills on the dresser.

Keith watches on, dark look crossing his face as Keith tilts his head back and swallows them dry. He does take a lot, but that's just how it is. Shiro doesn’t say anything and Keith doesn’t bat an eyelash.

It’s quiet in the house. It’s afternoon and his family is gone for the day. “My mom turned the t.v. off again, didn’t she? ...I dunno how she can always hear it through the door. How are you feeling?”

“Mm.” Shiro’s eyes are back to being dull, even as he pulls off a convincing smile. “I’ll manage. God, but I just...” He holds his hands out in front of him and stares down at them, so lost and confused. “They really do look like my hands, but whenever I go to touch something, it’s just this bitter reminder...” He sighs. “Everything feels so cold.”

Keith doesn’t even know what to say. “...I’m sorry, Shiro.”

Shiro waves the thought away, pressing another weary smile to his face. Part of it reaches his eyes as he turns his gaze to Keith. “You promised you’d take a shower. You smell like dead leaves. It’s almost unbearable.”

Keith chuckles. “You sure you want me to get rid of this smell? It’s very earthy. All natural, people are into that these days.”

Shiro snorts. “I’m positive.”

Keith chuckles a little, but stops as he slowly remembers himself, remembers the night before, the way Shiro had looked haunted. He doesn’t want to leave Shiro.

“I’ll be okay,” Shiro says softly, nudging him forward. “Take your time.”

The world can’t stop. “...‘Kay.” Keith slips off the bed, groaning softly as he lands on his leg. It hurts like a bitch. He hops on one leg over to the dresser and pulls out some clean clothes.
Coming out of the warmth of his bed and into the warmth of the shower sounds so comfortingly enticing, but he’s halfway through undressing in the bathroom when he remembers his manners. He doesn’t want to just leave Shiro with nothing to do, left alone to his thoughts. Keith knows how dangerous that can be.

He turns back and goes down the hallway to ask if Shiro wants the t.v. turned on again when he stops at his bedroom doorway. Shiro has his head bowed and his hands are pressed firmly to his face. That light is always there behind Shiro, bleached out and grey as it streams in all around him, tossed over him like a blanket.

He’s crying.

It’s soft and broken. He’s trying to dampen the sound of his sobs by pressing his hand over his mouth tightly. He’s pressing so hard Keith can see the indents in his cheeks beneath his fingers.

It looks so painful. Twisted up and writhing out of him. All this sorrow.

Keith stands there for a moment, seeing Shiro’s stark shadows cut out against the soft light of afternoon.

Keith is the only one who can hear him, and still, Shiro’s trying this hard to keep it a secret from him.

...It hurts to even see.

Keith wishes he could take the pain, but he realizes his presence at this point would only hurt.

Every stupid joke, every kind word, every action that Keith has taken these past few days to try to bring Shiro comfort seems naive and ridiculous. He’s got to stop fucking around. It does nothing.

He turns and walks quietly back to the bathroom.

So. Shiro’s suffering this much. It’s hard to deal with being so helpless. There’s nothing Keith can say to make him feel better. Shiro has to mourn himself...mourn his future, his friends, his family. Everything he thought he’d have is scattered in the dust. He can’t even feel warmth anymore.

Keith tries to find gratitude for this shower.

The warmth of the water loosens up his muscles and he finds himself melting into its comfort. It’s something Shiro cannot do anymore.

But still, he’s tired. He slept well, but not enough and so he grabs onto the railing they had to have installed in, much to his aggravation. He’s not useless. He doesn’t need things like this. But right now, he does. Even with it, he’s trembling, trying to hold himself up.

It’s a challenge, but he scrubs the grime off his body and lathers soap up in his hair until he can feel it soften beneath his touch, and then he rinses himself all off, letting all the mess swirl down the drain. He watches it, bubbles and dark dirt twist and turn into each other until they just disappear together, completely gone from sight.

He sighs, turns the faucet off, and tugs the shower curtain back.

There’s a figure in the room with him.
He lets out a strangled yell, jerking backward. He almost slips but manages to grip the railing just in time.

“Shiro,” he says like a curse, jamming the curtain back halfway to cover his body. “I don’t know where you come from, but barging into someone’s shower is not an acceptable thing to do in this household. Jesus.”

“I’m sorry,” Shiro says, hand covering his eyes. “I didn’t see anything. ...I just didn’t want to be alone.”

Keith inspects him. Shiro's posture is still tense and uncomfortable; maybe he's just upset. Keith heaves a sigh, stepping carefully over the side of the tub. He knows he can’t possibly understand what it’s like to be in Shiro’s spot, but sneaking into the bathroom? Really?

“Turn around then,” Keith grumbles, snatching the towel up and bringing it back with him behind the shower curtain. Now that he knows of his presence, he can see Shiro’s shadow behind the curtain, barely there. “I can’t believe you’d abuse your ghost powers like this.”

Shiro lets out a long exhale. “...There are crows out there.”

Keith freezes. With one hand, he pulls the curtain back. “Huh?”

“I looked out the window and there were just...hundreds, just sitting there, staring at me. They’re an omen of death, did you know that? I...” He clutches his hand to his chest and closes his eyes. His throat bobs as he swallows. “They’re an omen of death.”

“Oh,” Keith says quietly. “Yeah, they do that sometimes. It freaks me out too.”

“Oh,” he breathes, sounding a bit relieved. “That’s good.”

“They think they own the place or something,” Keith says, trying to keep his voice even, trying to pretend it doesn’t bother him. He shoves his boxers on and opens the door to let the steam out. As he’s scrubbing his hair dry with his towel, he hears a loud thunk coming from his room. He stops in his tracks, hold going slack on the towel.

“What was that?” Shiro breathes, going still behind Keith.

Keith sets the towel on the counter and peers out of the doorway and toward his room. He doesn't think he wants to know. He hates how he’s home alone. He can’t call for help if he needs it.

Stepping carefully, he forces himself out of the warmth of the bathroom and into the cold of the hallway. The sound doesn’t stop - there’s another and another. This strange dull thudding.

Light from Keith's room cuts through the hallway's darkness, brightening the wall and floor, one solid box before him. There’s a weird tint to it. Red, like stained glass.

Keith doesn’t want to step into it, but he forces himself to. He turns to look through his doorway.

There’s blood on the window.

A large violent splatter where impact occurred and then a fluid smear of red trickling down. In the glass, there's a small crack that’s branching out.

Keith lets out a shaky exhale as he takes a rigid step back.

Another crow from the tree swoops in, flying full-force into the window and hitting the delicate
glass surface with a loud crack! The window protests beneath the force.

“They’re killing themselves,” Shiro whispers in horror, taking a jagged step back into the safety of the hall. “Oh, god. Keith.”

“It’s okay,” Keith hears himself saying. He walks slowly toward the window, ignoring Shiro’s pleas to wait - god, the blood is so messy - and tugs the curtains firmly over them.

The darkness swallows them. Keith's eyes haven't adjusted; it’s like he turned the lights out on himself in a critical moment. “Maybe if we just...ignore them, they'll stop.”

Shiro walks carefully beside Keith, looking at him, mouth pulled down, head tilted slightly, listening.

The next thud sends Keith jolting back. Shiro's hands go out to catch him, but of course he can’t.

The glass is splintering. The window won't take much more.

Keith bites his lip and then walks over to his crutches, snatches one up, and uses it to go down the stairs.

“What’re you doing?” Shiro asks, following him down quickly. “There are a ton of them out there! You can’t just throw something at them; they’re crazy! They’re killing themselves on your window!”

Keith goes into the kitchen, reaches into the cabinet, and grabs his father’s rifle. “Stay in here.”

Shiro stares blankly. “You can’t just do that.”

“Watch me.”

“Keith,” Shiro says, reaching out to grab Keith by the arm.

Contact.

It tugs Keith backward, catching him by surprise, and he stumbles into the wall hard. His crutch hits the ground.

Shiro gasps, letting go immediately, staring in shock. “S-sorry! Are you okay?!”

Keith blinks up at him, gun still in one hand, other held up in surprise. A small smile breaks across his face. “You did it.”

“I...” He reaches forward, hands shaking as he tries to press against Keith’s shoulder. It goes right through. He looks back down at his hand in awe, eyes sparkling as if he just gained a new superpower. “Was that really me?”

“Well,” Keith says, shaking his head and grinning wider. “Now we know it’s possible.”

“Yeah,” Shiro breathes, still smiling like it’s the biggest victory he could've ever dreamed of. “I’ll keep trying.”

“Good. But, for now, stay inside.” He leaves his crutch on the ground.

Shiro blinks. “Keith.”
Keith bursts out the front door, cocking the gun.

“Jesus,” Shiro wheezes from the door. “What the hell?”

He steps out into their lawn, aims, and pulls the trigger.

The sound cracks throughout the neighborhood, bouncing off trees and garage doors.

The birds scream, all jumping up to take flight like they had a few days before. They just rise into the sky and scatter. Red darts out and sprints through the lawn, chasing after them, yowling like mad.

Shiro watches them with real fear in his eyes. He doesn’t breathe as he keeps his sight locked on them; they twist and writhe up into the sky.

The both of them stand there beneath the cloud cover for a while, waiting, but the crows don’t come back.

“They’re gone,” Shiro finally whispers when he’s sure.

They’re only birds. Small, black birds, but the relief is breathtaking.

Keith turns to respond when his eyes catch sight of his neighbor, glaring at him over the hedge that separates their houses, eyes wide with scandal like he’s a lunatic.

Ah, damn. He forgot pants. And a shirt.

“Hello, Mrs. M,” he waves tiredly. He gestures to the gun. “Bird problem. Have you been having an issue with crows lately?”

She draws herself up, ruffling her feathers like he just insulted her firstborn, and then scurries inside.

Keith chuckles under his breath and then drags himself tiredly through his own door.

He doesn’t know how he’ll explain the blood to his parents. He doesn’t want to go collecting bird corpses either. A problem for another time. Maybe it was overkill, but he doesn’t want them to come back.

They’ve wasted enough time already. Keith feels like he needs to go to Lotor’s now. Like if they solve this, then maybe Shiro will be okay, somehow.

Can ghosts come back?

“Lotor’s then?” He asks.

Shiro just breathes, bouncing his head in what looks like half a nod, half a shake. He’s winded when he speaks. “Did you learn that in Boy Scouts too?”

Keith laughs over a groan as he climbs up the stairs. “You’re funny. No, my mom’s into knives, my dad’s into guns. I’ve learned a little bit of both.”

“Oh, of course,” Shiro says, voice a little high.

“I prefer knives honestly. There’s more of an art to it. When I was younger, I used to do karate. That was fun. Obviously, I can’t do it anymore.”
Shiro watches Keith dig through his dresser for clothes, but his eyes keep flicking up to the window that still looks like red stained glass. “We’re just not going to talk about the birds?”

“Well, it’s not that I’m avoiding the topic, but I don’t know much more than you do. The last time it happened to me was before anyone even knew you were missing, they were just watching me. That’s it.”

“...So they’re not connected to me...?” Shiro looks doubtfully at the bloodied window.

“Maybe you and I are connected for all we know,” Keith mutters, jamming a shirt over his head and leaning over to pull his hoodie off his desk.

He stops when he sees how wide Shiro’s eyes are, like he’s having some sort of epiphany.

“What?” Keith asks.

“Connected...? How?”

Keith lets out a tired laugh and waves the thought away. “No, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just running my mouth,” Keith mutters. “I don’t know, Shiro. I know as much as you. We need to focus on what we can find out about, which is Lotor. Are you with me? I’ll need your help.”

Shiro’s still turned to the window, frowning. “...Yeah, of course.”

Keith stares at him for a moment longer before sighing and pulling himself to his feet. “Let’s go then.”

Keith grabs a few more pain meds before they leave. He tries to be discreet about it, but he can tell from the way Shiro takes in a slow steady breath that he’s been caught. But he has to. Even with the medication flowing through his veins, Keith can feel the way his leg is twinging and pulling at random. He shifts more of his weight to his arms and just doesn’t tell Shiro.

And they go.

Keith hates the open silence in the forest. The skies are starting to clear, columns of light making their way through whatever patches the trees allow, but the place still feels empty. Cold.

Keith clears his throat and shakes his head to shush a bug out of his face before asking, “so...do you do anything besides football?”

“Oh, me? ...I liked to read. Ryou was super into horses. It was nice going riding with him. There’s that trail out behind our school that overlooks the lake. It’s really nice in the spring. I wish I could bring you.”

“Oooh. A mountain hick, then?”

Shiro smiles crookedly. “Uh, excuse me? You were the one just shooting birds out of your tree. I’ve never seen anyone go out with such purpose; you looked like you came right out of a movie. You needed a cowboy hat or something.”

Keith laughs. “We might have one in the attic. My dad’s from Texas.”

“Oooohhh, you suddenly make a lot more sense now.”
“It’s the corny jokes, isn’t it?”

“Probably more the plaid.”

Keith laughs again. “Plaid is in now.”

Shiro presses his lips together to hold in a smile. “Mmm...no, its not.”

Keith has to shake himself to stop laughing. “Stop it, we need to focus. Okay, tell me how to manipulate Lotor into spilling the beans.”

Shiro hums thoughtfully. “I guess if I had to say one way...” he shrugs. “Lotor is Lotor. Cater to his ego, I guess.”

"Right," Keith sighs, wishing he could rub the sweat of his palms off onto his pants. He's feeling nervous suddenly. "Easy."

Shiro smiles down at him with real warmth. "You'll do fine." He says it in a way Keith feels he has to believe.

After a few shortcuts through the forest, completely avoiding any roads, they make it to Lotor’s large fancy gate. Keith’s never been to Lotor’s before and he tilts his head back, gazing up, stunned by the sheer height of the gate. It's intimidating, encircling his entire property, reaching up to the sky like they think they can actually touch the clouds.

There’s a speaker box and a passcode perched right outside, staked into the grass. Keith bites his lip as he looks at it. He considers just whacking it with his crutch.

“Six, one, two, eight, nine, three, two, five,” Shiro says easily.

“Huh?"

He gestures toward the box. “The passcode. Type it in.”

“Oh...wow, are they paranoid much? So many damn numbers...” Keith types it in and the gates beeps once, swinging open.

Pathway cleared. He stares inside, nose wrinkling. There are bushes clipped into the shapes of animals on either side of the driveway. “Why the hell would you choose to live out here if you have this much money? It makes no sense.”

Shiro shrugs. “This is their home. It’s the town his mother chose.”

Keith raises his eyebrows. “It’s...a lot.”

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Shiro hums.

The driveway is long, so Keith begins his journey, his eyes falling on the carefully landscaped yard, all lush and too clean. It’s so weird, like some cult-y suburb from a 70’s movie. Keith’s uncomfortable immediately; it's like the animal topiaries are watching him. “...Why are you friends with him, anyway?”

“Lotor?”

“Yeah. He’s like the school villain and you seem...normal. So, why?”
Shiro smiles patiently like he’s heard the question a million times. “I get it,” he says, “But Lotor’s not a bad guy. He pretends to be worse than he is just because he has a hard time relating to anyone. He was just raised unlike you or me. His dad never really showed him the affection that kids need growing up, so he just makes do with what he has.”

Keith doesn’t really get it, but Shiro’s kindness and acceptance of shitty people is kind of inspiring, so he lets it go.

As they finally arrive at the main door that’s three times the height of any actual giant, Shiro falls behind Keith, pausing.

Keith looks over his shoulder and slows. Shiro still doesn’t look over. “You alright?” Keith asks.

Shiro wrinkles his nose. He looks distracted, eyes thoughtful and unhappy. “...Yeah.”

Keith waits, trying to scope out his expression, but Shiro shakes himself. “I’m fine. Let’s go.”

“...You sure?” Keith says.

“I’m fine. Completely. I think I’m just hungry. Tired. ...A ghost.” He sighs, bringing himself back up to full height and rubbing at his forehead. “Don’t worry about me. Come on, let’s get this over with.”

With one last long look, Keith turns back toward the door and knocks.

He waits, looking down at the fancy mat he’s standing on until a maid opens the door, a frown on her face by default. “May I help you?”

“I’m here to see Lotor. It’s about Shiro.”

She stares for a moment, looking like she might turn him away. But then she holds up a finger. “I’ll go collect him.”

“Remember,” Keith says to Shiro softly. “Look around for clues, okay? Whether you believe it or not.”

“I will. I want to just check this off our list as quickly as we can.”

“Good. Me too.”

The door opens with a swift swing and Lotor stands there, glaring down angrily, bag over his shoulder.

“A runt. I don’t know you. What are you doing here at my house? How’d you even get through the gates?”

“I just had some questions. May I come in?”

Lotor leans against the door frame, looking down his nose. “You want to question me? Who says I’ll allow it?”

Pompous ass. Pidge was right all along. Keith feels his anger flaring. He wanted to keep an open mind, but he can’t believe this is Shiro’s best friend. “I do. You’re going to let me because you’re curious about what I have to say.”

Lotor’s arms are crossed as he stares Keith down. Keith stares right the fuck back. He thinks at
any moment, Lotor will turn on his foot, hair fluttering through the wind, as he closes the door right in his face.

But he doesn’t. Slowly, he unfolds his arms and presses the door open, a sharp smile developing. “I like your spunk. What did you say your name was again?”

Before Keith can answer, Lotor is tossing a jacket over his shoulders and grabbing his keys from the wall. “I’m meeting some friends. You’re welcome to come.” He struts out haughtily.

“Wait,” Keith grunts. “I need to speak with you. It’s important.”

“And you can,” Lotor says flippantly, turning behind to grin. “Unless you don’t feel safe driving with me. If that’s the case, then I guess whatever you wanted to tell me wasn’t that important after all.”

“Keith,” Shiro says, looking after Lotor. “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“I thought you said you trusted him,” Keith mutters lowly, looking up at Shiro through his eyelashes.

“Around me. But...sometimes he’s not nice to others. I’m usually the one having to tell him ‘no’ and if I’m not there...” Shiro hesitates. “He seems like he’s in a bad mood.”

“It’s just a drive,” Keith says lowly.

“You and I both know that’s probably not true.”

Lotor leans over the top of his car, waiting by the driver’s side. He smirks over at Keith with a clear challenge in his eyes. “Too afraid?”

Keith doesn’t like to back down from challenges. Hasn’t he been forced to do that enough in his life?

“Well,” Keith says to Shiro quietly. “Good thing I have my guardian angel with me,” he laughs softly. “Guardian ghost.”

He pushes his crutches forward.

“I’m coming,” he calls out to Lotor.

“Keith...” Shiro breathes out, shaking his head, but he follows after him.

Keith takes the passenger seat. The interior is nice. Everything is soft but sleek and has that crisp smell of newness. Keith’s afraid to touch the seat belt in case it does something like buckle him in by itself.

Lotor taps the tip of his finger to his bottom lips as he thinks. “Ah, wait, I do know you. You’re Acea’s little brother, aren’t you?”

Keith bites back a soul weary sigh. Little. “That’s me.”

Lotor snaps his fingers as he thinks. “...Keith. The art boy. You’re in our Chem class. You sit in front of Shiro.”

“Yeah. I wanted to ask you - ”
“- One moment. I need to make a call.”

Keith clears his throat and presses his fingers into his temple.

The speaker in his car starts ringing and Keith sighs as he hears one of Acxa’s friends answer on the other end.

Lotor says, “Hello, Ezor. We’re meeting at the cell tower tonight. I’m bringing a new friend.” Keith doesn’t like the way his voice sounds predatory.

“Ooh, a new friend? Who?”

“Acxa’s little brother.”

And Keith can hear in the background, a loud indignant squawk, “what?”

It’s Acxa.

As if this situation can get any worse.

“Give me the phone,” he can hear her say. “Lotor,” her voice is loud and sharp. “What are you doing with my brother?”

“He came to me, my dear Acxa. He’s here by his own choice, isn’t that right?”

Keith sighs and says grudgingly, “Hey, Acxa.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Mom and Dad are going to kill you.” And then the phone goes dead.

“Family drama,” Lotor mutters, turning the connection off. “I’d know all about that…”

“I’m not here to hang out with you and relate,” Keith says. “This is a waste of time. I’m trying to find the person who murdered Shiro. I think you can help me.”

Lotor’s face pinches into a snarl. His voice rolls dangerously. “And what makes you think that?”

“I didn’t say you were a suspect, but you sure are quick to get defensive.”

“Well, everyone else has me pinned as their number one suspect. Why would I need to hear you say it? I already know you’re thinking it; why else would you be here?”

“Look. I just think -” He breaks off as he sees the blur of trees outside. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Shiro asks urgently, leaning forward.

Lotor smiles softly. “What is it?”

“You can’t go one hundred and twenty miles per hour on these roads. There are animals all over the place!”

“I don’t see any.”

“If you hit an animal we’re dead. All it takes is one.”

The speedometer goes up.

“Do you have no regard for other life?” Keith demands.
Lotor laughs. “I’m afraid not. Think of it this way: the faster we go, the quicker we’ll reach our destination and the sooner your feet will touch solid ground. ...Or foot,” he raises an eyebrow, nodding to Keith’s leg.

Keith stares, hands clenching into his seat.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. We’re nearly there. We’ll make it before the others; it’ll give us time to chat.”

Keith opens his mouth to retort angrily when he feels Shiro lean forward through the seat beside him.

“Keith, just stay calm,” Shiro murmurs lowly close to his ear. “Like I said, he enjoys pretending he’s certain things in order to get a reaction. And you just gave it to him. The more you react the more he’ll want to push you.”

Keith leans his elbow on the door and presses his fingers into his eyes so he can’t see the blur of trees pull by or know what the speedometer is at now. He can feel it though. These roads are not straightaways. They wind and they slither. They’re dangerous. The speed limit it set at thirty for a reason and the forests are thriving with animal life that’s clueless about roads and cars. He’s known people who have flipped their vehicles several times hitting a deer at the dang speed limit, not even half these numbers.

But this sort of speed...

Lotor is such an idiot. Keith feels like an even bigger idiot for putting himself in this situation.

“I’m sorry,” Shiro says softly. “He’s an asshole.”

Lotor says, voice calm and low like velvet, “If Shiro’s dead anyway, what’s the point in catching the murderer? There’s no magic spell to bring him to life. Shiro’s not coming back.”

“What if he’s not dead?”

“Now that’s one I haven’t heard yet.”

“Everyone’s so quick to assume the worst. What if I find him? What if we can have him back?”

Keith can hear the car slowing. “... What?”

“...Keith,” Shiro whispers.

“Just because he’s missing doesn’t mean he’s dead.”

Lotor tsks loudly, a near growl deep in his throat. “You saw the blood. Everyone saw the blood.”

“What if he’s somewhere, waiting?” Keith breathes. “...I want to be sure.”

The car jerks to a stop. They’re at the base of a hill, a pathway winding upward to the cell tower looming above. The fence that’s supposed to bar people from coming in is cut and just barely hanging on.

Lotor’s silent for a moment, his eyes dark and filled with a bitter sharpness. The vein in his head is bulging and Keith thinks he might start yelling at any moment, but when he speaks, his voice is almost soft.
“Let’s go,” he tries to command into the darkness, pushing the door open roughly and slamming it behind him. Keith can’t tell if he’s imagining a slight tremble in his tone.

He watches Lotor stalk through the pathway, shoulders hunched and fists jammed into his pockets. Keith takes a moment to catch his breath.

“Well,” Keith breathes, hands still stuck to the seat. “We made it.”

Shiro hums lowly.

“That was weird,” Keith says softly to Shiro.

“...Yeah,” Shiro allows, looking after Lotor’s retreating figure and then down to Keith, eyes softening with concern. “...You okay?”

“Still in one piece,” Keith hums, rubbing at the tension in his shoulders. “Jesus, I’m going to have to convince Acxa to give me a ride back home though. I never want to ride with Lotor again. You rode with him like this?”

Shiro laughs softly as Keith gets out of the car, slowly following behind Lotor. “His old car could never get to those speeds.”

“God,” Keith huffs out again.

“Have you ever been here before, Keith, the boy from Chem?” Lotor calls back to him, pointing out the tower in one wide gesture. “You can see the whole town from the top.”

Keith frowns up at it - the tall tower on the hill that swallows his entire vision - and he thinks he knows why Lotor brought him here. He can feel his stomach sinking. “You’d die if you fell.”

“Acxa’s done it before,” Lotor says. He side glances Keith, a small smile on his lips. “Shiro has.”

“Maybe under peer pressure,” Keith mutters bitterly.

Shiro laughs lowly. “We probably shouldn’t have...but Keith, it’s different for me. You can’t.”

Lotor says, already grabbing onto the bottom rail, “You want to talk to me? Then follow.”

Keith tsks as he peers up. “I can hardly walk,” he says to Lotor. “Much less climb a hundred-foot cell phone tower.”

“You’ll never do it with that attitude,” Lotor calls as he turns, hair flitting back as he looks down on Keith. “Besides, it’s closer to two hundred feet.”

Lotor makes it look easy. The way the tower is set up with all its metal bars crossing and climbing upward, just like a ladder. It looks sturdy. That’s not the problem. Keith hasn’t climbed anything in years.

But he has his arms. He has his one leg. He needs this info. Shiro needs this info. He looks back at the tower, that blinking beacon at the top, flaring light in the darkness.

Lotor makes it seem like child’s play.

Shiro’s voice is quiet as he watches Keith’s face closely, concern on his brow. “You’re not really thinking of climbing it...are you?”
Keith doesn’t take his eyes from Lotor’s form. He’s agile and quick. Keith used to be that agile and quick too...maybe even moreso. He used to be able to climb anything he wanted; it was no challenge for him.

“Keith, come on, let’s go,” Shiro says urgently, getting in his face. “It’s not worth it.”

“Oh, come now! No need to be afraid. There’s a bog down below,” Lotor nods to it. “People used to climb the tower to jump into it. It’s like landing in a pillow.”

“He’s lying, Keith. You’d die if you jumped. This is ridiculous. Let’s just forget it, okay? Call Matt and tell him what’s going on. He’ll pick you up. He’s always hated this thing. Lotor always does it just to be an asshole to newcomers. He’s baiting you.”

“Come on!” Lotor calls. “You’re going to let your one little injury hold you back?”

Keith has never liked to back down from a challenge. And Shiro needs this.


He’s tired of feeling like this. The one always left behind. Just a few years before this, he could’ve done this. Easily. He wouldn’t have even hesitated. He’s still the same Keith, isn’t he? Isn’t he?

“I’m not useless,” Keith whispers harshly in his throat, tossing his crutches down and grabbing onto the bottom ring.

“No. I didn’t mean useless! But Keith, your leg. If you fall, I can’t catch you!” Shiro says on the edge of panic. He reaches forward, but his hands just go right through Keith. Shiro slips right through him, nearly plummeting into the ground face-first.

“Then I just won’t fall.” Keith grabs onto the bottom ring and heaves himself up. He can do this. He's tired of hearing the words 'no'.


Keith’s already several feet up and it’s not as bad as he initially thought it might be. He just avoids his leg and shifts the work onto his other limbs; how’s that any different from how it always is? And Lotor’s right - there’s a bog down below and it looks soft in case he slips.

"God, Keith."

Lotor laughs from up above, his hair tossing in the wind as he looks down at Keith. “There we go. We won’t even climb halfway to the top, how about that? But the town from here looks amazing. Especially on clear nights like this. And in the winter, during the Christmas market, it’s lit up like a storybook. That was Shiro’s favorite time to come up here. Did you know that?”

Keith can still hear Shiro cursing down below, hand over his mouth as he watches Keith anxiously.

Keith smiles crookedly down at him. “It’s not that hard,” he breathes, hefting himself up another ring, letting his leg balance gently against the metal.

It takes him awhile, but he makes it to Lotor, who smiles at him in amusement, eyebrow raised. Lotor has his arms crossed over his chest as he leans back with casual ease. He looks as if he were on his throne, right where he belongs, and not hanging off a few pieces of metal.

“So you can climb after all.”
Keith turns, sitting himself down carefully on a bar. In his fit of stubbornness, he had forgotten his own fear of heights, and as he looks down to where Shiro is, a small dot on the ground, a wave of vertigo catches him. The colors in his vision go noxious and bright, his heart starts to pound. He forces his eyes up, at the horizon line where he can dimly make out the last remnants of day clinging to life. “...Seems so.”

Lotor looks back out over the treetops, down at their town as it sleeps. “The fog is absent for once... It seems as if today’s your lucky day. Sometimes it swallows this place whole, making it look like there's nothing left.”

Lotor’s voice is low as he says, voice filling with disdain, “Look at our little town. The sun won’t reach us here, it won’t even look at us. It’s like it’s afraid to touch this place, like it’s some impossible feat. ...We were all going to escape this hellhole next year. Shiro. Me. But somewhere in the land below us, Shiro was killed. If he hadn’t been, it would’ve been him here with me, not you. He was the fastest. The smartest. The kindest. The best. ...Always. In every single way. ...Something like this - him just gone in a poof of smoke - it was never even a thought for him. He assumed the whole world was his. ...But which of us doesn’t?”

Keith is quiet. The wind is sharp and cold up here, but it’s fresh too. There’s a certain energy about it that makes him feel alive. He has to admit it is breathtaking up here. He’s never seen something like it. It’s one thing to look at a picture, it’s another thing to be here, miles up into the hills, looking down at their little snow globe. It makes him feel very small, like an ant. Vulnerable. At the mercy of things he doesn’t understand.

To see out and around and realize this is a pocket of the world that’s always been here; a world he’s never seen with his eyes....never felt... And this is only one place in this small town; there’s an entire world out there.

A world Shiro will never get the chance to see.

“I heard you had an altercation with Ryou.”

“We had a bit of a misunderstanding, but everything’s fine.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” he says in a flippant tone. “Everything's fine. Just another missing person. Just another drop in the bucket. Shiro’s murder is nothing to worry about.”

“Is that what I said? I’m trying to help. You were the last one to see Shiro, right? What was he doing?”

Lotor raises his eyebrows. “The last I saw of him was right after school and he was leaving to go home to get ready for the game, like he always does. Everything was completely normal. He wasn’t behaving differently at all. He was just as Shiro as he ever was. Only he never showed up for the game, something he's never done before.”

“Okay. About five minutes after school ended, on the northbound road, there was a loud sound. What do you think it was?”

Lotor laughs lowly, leaning forward and casting his eyes down as he sees another car pull up. “Is this an interrogation?”

“I just want to find Shiro...” Keith says honestly.

Keith prays he can lie properly just once in his life. “You haven’t? No one in school around you has mentioned it to you? Not at all? That seems strange. That’s all I heard about when I went to school.”

Lotor isn’t paying him much attention anyway, looking down at his friends who have arrived, as they begin their climb, laughing and hollering. “People don’t mention him around me, okay? He was my best friend. Maybe I want to keep my mind off of it.”

“Or maybe you’re lying.”

“Or maybe I don’t have to answer a single thing you’re asking. I didn’t have to respond to you at all, and yet, in honor of Shiro, I’ve allowed it. And all you do is accuse me. I should’ve guessed.” He tsks, looking away. “I tire of you. Leave.”

“I’m not leaving,” Keith says firmly.

“Then I’m not answering another question.”

Keith can’t remember the names of the two people who climb up with them. He curses internally. He can see Lotor feeling more in his element as his friends gather around him. Keith feels more like prey.

“Who’s this?” A guy Keith vaguely recognizes nods to him, friendly easy grin on his face. He has long hair that gets in his eyes and he looks like a real tool. His girlfriend hangs on his arm, giggling. Keith doesn’t smile back at them.

“He was leaving,” Lotor says.

“No, I’m not,” Keith says back.

“I swear to god, Kogane, if I have to toss you off this tower, I will. I’m done playing your game.”

“Then, okay,” Keith says, staring out in the sky, “even though you just threatened to toss me off a tower, say you’re harmless. Say you didn’t do it. Say you have no idea what happened. Why not just answer my questions then? Maybe I can find him. You’re going to let your stubbornness get in the way of me finding your friend? Is your pride worth more to you than Shiro is?”

“You? Find Shiro? Please, you can’t even walk right. Who says you’re going to find him? The police are already on it.”

“The police don’t know what I know.”

Lotor cuts his glance over to Keith’s face, narrowing his eyes on Keith’s expression. “…Yes, it looks like you believe what you’re saying. …Well, fine. Let’s keep things interesting. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll answer whatever you want. But first? I want you to jump.” He makes a grand gesture downward.

“Excuse me?”

“Into the bog. I’m bored. It’s not going to do any major damage. You get what you want, I get what I want. An even trade. We’ve all done it, even your precious Shiro. It’s a small thing to ask, isn’t it? If you really want to find his killer. Maybe I have info on him that’ll help you find him. All it takes is a small, little jump.”

Keith narrows his eyes. “That’s suicide.”
“Are these your true colors?” Lotor laughs, his friends joining him. “Onto solid ground, sure, but this is more water than anything else.”

Shiro’s warning rings in Keith’s ears, “he’s lying.”

Lotor’s smile widens as he catches Keith looking down, assessing the bog. “You know, my father used to talk about you. The Keith Kogane. He was always saying how I should get into running and all that. He said you were quite good, once upon a time. That you could’ve gone far.”

Keith holds onto the metal bar tightly. The light from up ahead flashes and bleaches out their features every time it passes, bathing Lotor in red.

“Looking at you now, I’d never guess. There’s a reason it took so long for me to remember your face. Each time I see you, you have your head down and your mouth zipped. The teachers give you special treatment because you can’t even get to class on time, let alone do anything worthwhile. A real shining star. And my own father used to say you’d go places... Wow. Pathetic how far people can fall...”

The wind howls all around them. It’s a fight to get control of his anger. He can hear Lotor’s friends’ laughter ringing in his ears.

Lotor leans in. “You want info about Shiro so badly? Jump. I promise I’ll tell you everything if you do. Just one small thing for the info you so desperately crave. Or are you too much of a coward?”

Keith looks down into darkness. He can hardly make Shiro out down there, where he stares with concern, too far to hear.

Lotor’s friends are still laughing. “Jump,” they chant together, leaning forward, mouths stretching into wide grins, teeth glinting, sharp with malice. “Jump, jump, jump, jump...”

Keith could jump. The jumping would be the easy part. But the falling. That’s one of his greatest fears. He had been such an energetic kid, brave and fearless, and it was like, suddenly, one day, he started to have nightmares about it. It began to happen so often the doctors gave him medication to snuff out his dreams.

But the falling is only one part of it. Because after is the inevitable crash. Body against water. Maybe body against ground. The breaking of bones. The twisting of flesh. The months of rehab. The future, twisting and warping because of injury and newly gained, forever burdened physical limitations.

Keith could jump. But it feels like he’s already done it before.

He knows how it will end.

Lotor chuckles softly, watching Keith stare down below. “I knew it. You don’t have the gall. I guess finding Shiro isn’t that important to you, Hero.”

They all turn into each other, snickering lowly.

“Say whatever you want about me...” Keith whispers harshly. “Trash talk whoever you want, but while you do that, you are wasting time. You think I give a shit what your father thinks? I couldn’t care less about him... But Shiro. Shiro, on the other hand, he’s good. You know that. And if you care about him, you’ll stop being yourself for five seconds and talk to me. Each second we spend here, talking about this useless trash, is a second that Shiro could be taking one of
his last breaths. Or being tormented. Waiting for help. He’s lost an arm. I’ve seen it. What else will he lose? If there’s any chance, any chance at all, I’ll take it. So please... Please. Don’t leave Shiro out there alone... He doesn’t deserve that. You know that.”

Lotor’s staring at him through complicated dark eyes. That same light above blinks and fades. Blinks and fades. He just stares at Keith.

Keith whispers, “I’m just trying to figure this out... I know if my best friend suddenly went missing, leaving behind bucketfuls of blood, I wouldn’t be trying to pretend it didn’t happen. I wouldn’t be climbing towers with my shithole friends looking over at the night sky, laughing like everything’s okay. Down there in that forest, yes, it might’ve already happened - he might already be dead. Or maybe he’s still breathing. If it were my best friend I’d be driven as hell to find her. And I’m going to do the same for Shiro, whether you tell me the truth or not.”


“He’s important to me.”

Lotor lets out a bitter laugh. “Important? To you? And who the hell are you? He didn’t know you.”

“He does. Shiro does know me. He felt like he couldn’t tell you.”

“Tell me? I was his best friend. He told me everything.”

“No. Not everything,” Keith says lowly, staring him down.

"What do you - ?" Something seems to click into place for Lotor and his eyes widen slightly. “Keith Kogane... The boy from Chem." He shakes his head. "You were there...that day on the field...for him?" Lotor laughs, voice high and confused. “No. You’re lying. He wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Yeah? How about when he got the scholarship? He kept that from you, didn’t he? He didn’t want you to know.”

“What...?” Lotor whispers. “How would you know that?”

“I just told you. He told me. About how he was worried how you’d take it. How he felt guilty for stealing it from you. Trust me, Lotor, you didn’t know everything about his life. There’s a part of himself he kept from you. You know that. Of course you do.”

Lotor’s shaking his head, staring out in the distance, eyes sharp and wired. “No. No. He and I were best friends.”

“And that’s why. He knew you. And he was always the good one, wasn’t he? He felt you couldn’t take the truth. He pitied you...because you were always trying to catch up to him, but never could. You were always just Lotor, trailing behind on his coattails, taking whatever scraps he didn’t need anymore. Every opportunity you got, he gave to you willingly.”

“How dare you!” Lotor shakes with rage. His friends scoot back slightly, smiles wiped from their faces.

“Then he got this scholarship that could’ve been yours instead. And he knew you wanted it so badly... He couldn’t give it up to you, but he had nothing else to give you. And that was it. He was going to your dream school, getting praised for it, and you couldn’t go even if you tried. It
was then, you knew, deep down, you knew you’d never be as good as him and it drove you mad. You were so jealous of him it made you sick.”

“No!” Lotor pushes off the bars, making them clang and buckle in protest. His eyes are fierce steel as he gets in Keith’s face. Keith can hear Shiro shouting in alarm down below. “Why would I be? I was the better one! I was the better player! Me! No one else could see it!”

Keith holds steady, narrowing his eyes. “Is that why Shiro was the captain of the football team on a team that your own father created, why Shiro was the one everyone loved, everyone praised? You know it deep down: Shiro was just better than you. That’s why Shiro was the one who got the scholarship, not you. It was never you, not as long as Shiro existed! Shiro was always stealing your glory, your hard-earned glory. If only he was out of the way.”

“No!” Lotor cries, hands clasping his head. “He was my friend!”

“You hated him! You loathed him so much you couldn’t stand the sight of him. Perfect Shiro, with the perfect family, the perfect life, the perfect future. Even your father loved him more than he loved you. You have nothing! That’s why you killed him.”

“No!” Lotor screams. “No! I would never do that to him. Yes, I hated him! I hated him so much! Everything he could ever want was just handed to him. He didn't even have to work for it. But I wouldn’t kill him. He was the only one who ever cared about me, the real me. No one else. I wouldn’t ever hurt him. Please, please believe me.”

He’s bent over on himself, eyes wide with mania, arms wrapped around himself tightly. Broken. Shivering. His friends move in carefully, like they’re about to comfort a lion.

Their glares are sharp as they flick them up over Lotor’s head and straight into Keith.

Keith sighs. He turns away from Lotor and looks out at the stars twinkling over the lush forest. It’s lonely out here.

“Believe me,” Lotor whispers, looking up at Keith, eyes wide. “He’s my friend. I cared about him more than I cared about anyone. I can’t stand this. I can’t stand what's happened.”

“I believe you,” Keith mutters lowly, running his hand over his face.

He looks down to Shiro, who hasn't moved and is still staring up at them anxiously, practically on the tips of his toes, looking like he’s trying to hover his way up.

Keith positions his hands back on the bars and shifts forward.

“The police suspect me,” Lotor says quietly. “They told me not to leave town. ...Shiro deserved better. So much better.”

“I’m going to find out who did it,” Keith says, turning to Lotor. “I won’t give up on him.”

Lotor just breathes from his spot, eyes wide and complicated.

As he carefully makes his way down and finally reaches the bottom, Shiro breathes out a long sigh of relief. “Jesus, Keith. Jesus. I can’t believe you did that. Are you okay?”

Keith lets out a confused chuckle, shrugging. He keeps his hand on the metal as he tries to regain his bearings. He feels kind of sick. “I’m afraid of heights.”
“...God.” Shiro turns his vision back out, eyes wide and overwhelmed.  

“I don’t think it was him,” Keith says, his voice almost heavy with regret. “He was jealous of you...but you were his best friend. He admired you.”  

Shiro’s quiet. He nods slowly.  

“You already knew that though,” Keith says lowly.  

“...Yeah.”  

“Shiro, I’m sorry -”  

“No, it’s okay. Now you know too.”  

“Now what, though?” Keith breathes out, closing his eyes. The town had seemed so small only a few moments before, but now, hunting through it, the scope seems too big suddenly.  

It’s not a moment too soon that Acxa and her friend pull up, headlights blaring straight at Keith. She’s halfway between a glare and concern as she pops her head out of the car.  

“What are you doing hanging around Lotor?” She demands.  

He sighs, disgruntled. He picks up his crutches. “I just had some questions for him. I didn’t mean to end up here.”  

With a loud drawn out groan, she gestures to the car. “You’re hopeless. Come on. Get in, I guess. I don’t want you driving with him again... He’s a lunatic.”  

“Wow,” Keith murmurs in surprise as he and Shiro make their way over. “A ride from Acxa. My lucky day.”  

“Don’t push it or I’ll make you walk home. And you’re paying for gas.”  

“I don’t have any money.”  

She groans and rolls her eyes. She says bye to her friend and then slips into the car, putting it into gear and backing up.  

“Thanks, Acxa,” Keith says as he scoots in. “I was seriously just going to walk home in the dark if the only other option was having to drive with Lotor again.”  

“Whatever. It’s fine. I was tired anyway. I told you to stay away from him. Tell me you didn’t fall for it and climb up that tower with him? With your leg, you’d fall and break your neck.”  

“I didn’t do anything,” Keith mutters, too tired for an argument.  

“Yeah?” She mutters doubtfully, eyes flickering to his face. “So you just stayed at the foot of the tower by yourself while everyone else climbed it? What’d you do? Pick weeds? Make a flower crown? Color me impressed that you had that much restraint.”  

Keith sighs.  

“Keith,” she says, frowning into the small beam of light ahead of her as she drives a decent speed. “What were you doing here? Why were you with Lotor? Does it have to do with Shiro?”
“I didn’t know Shiro, remember?”

She’s quiet for awhile. Keith doesn’t like where this conversation is headed; Acxa being serious with him is the last thing he wants.

He looks down at the radio’s soft green glow and starts fiddling with the dial. She slaps his hand and twists the dial back to her station.

“Look,” she says. “...Whatever it is you’re doing...I really think you should stop. You’re going to get yourself hurt, worse than you already are. And last time was already...” She hesitates. “I’m afraid you’re not going to be able to bounce back if there’s a next time.”

“Duly noted,” he rolls his eyes. “Worry about your car. I think I stepped in mud.”

“Ugh!” She growls. “I hope you know you’re cleaning it if you messed it up.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he sighs, leaning his head back and closing his eyes. Acxa’s annoying, but at least she doesn’t drive one hundred and twenty miles per hour. It’s the little things. He suddenly appreciates her a whole lot more.

They make it home in one piece. She parks in their driveway and waits for Keith to get out. He’s about to close the door when he realizes her car’s still idling, so he pokes his head back in. “You going somewhere?”

“Yeah, actually, I’m not as tired as I thought. I might head back. I dunno. The night is young.”

“Yeah? Okay, then. Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem. See you, Keith. Think about what I said.”

She backs out and drives away.

“Well, that was nice of her. Only when Mom’s not watching, of course. She’s totally going back to climb that tower,” Keith murmurs, looking up to Shiro.

He has a little smile on his face that he tries to hide.

Keith looks closer at his expression. “She’s done it before, hasn’t she? God, my parents would kill her. Literally kill her.”

“I’m staying out of it,” Shiro hums, nodding Keith into the house. The windows are a warm orange from out here in the dark and nothing sounds more enticing.

Keith’s ready to just stew in some warm bath water for awhile...but then he opens the front door.

His dad is waiting, arms crossed tightly over his chest, angry.

“Keith. Where the hell have you been?”

“Uh...” He tries to think of somewhere that would actually make sense. “I went to Pidge’s.”

“You did, did you?”

“Yeah. What’s it to you?” He frowns, walking around him.

“Pidge just called. She was looking for you.”
Keith bites back a groan, slowly turning around. “...I went to Lotor’s.”

“Who is Lotor?”

Kroliya stands from the couch and walks beside his father. She has her hands on her hips - a butt-kicking pose - and watches Keith suspiciously like he’s just done something horrible. Together, his parents loom over him.

“Lotor is...someone from school. I didn't want to tell you because he lives in Northside. I needed help on a Chem problem and he’s in my Chem class. It's a really important assignment, so I had to go over there.”

“Why not ask Pidge?”

“She’s in a different class with a different teacher,” Keith defends. "The homework’s not the same.”

“Okay,” his dad says, reaching behind the kitchen table to pull out the gun. “Care to explain this?”

Keith freezes. He can feel the prickling of fear crawling up the back of his neck. Trapped. "...What about it?” His voice is very soft.

"Don't play coy. We know you used it.”

Keith swallows, trying his best to seem casual. “Oh. The gun. Yeah. There were birds.”

“Mrs. M called me at work,” Kroliya says sharply. “You’re shooting birds, Keith? Why would you do that?”

“No, not shooting them. I was shooting at them. So they’d go away. Haven't you seen them collecting in our trees lately? Whole hordes of them. They’re starting to freak me out.” They're staring bullets at him. Keith protests, “I didn't kill any of them.”

Keith’s dad is blunt. “Are you on drugs, Keith?”

His mom’s eyes bore into him, seeking out the truth in his reaction.

Keith chokes. “What?”

“Is Lotor the one giving you drugs? Your drug dealer?”

“No. What on earth? There are no drugs involved. Give me a damn drug test, I don’t care. Why would you even think that?”

“You used to unload my guns and throw out the bullets you were so against them and now you’re shooting things? Why? What changed?”

“The - the fucking birds outside! I just said. They were ramming themselves into my window! There’s blood all over it! Go check for yourself. They were freaking me out!”

“Hitting themselves against your window?” Kroliya asks, shaking her head. “What do you mean?”

“They were like suicide birds, I dunno! Maybe trying to get to me. Maybe they were just trying to get to their reflection, who knows! They just kept flying into the window one after the other, there was blood all over. The noise was driving me insane, their little skulls just...god. I couldn’t take it anymore. Here! Here, let me show you.”
He rushes outside, the sound of his crutches loud and squeaking against the floor. He tosses his hand out toward the dead birds in their garden, but...they’re gone. The blood isn’t even there anymore. The rain must’ve washed it away. Did it rain today? Keith can’t remember.

Keith can feel the confusion on his face.

His parents exchange looks and then turn to him.

“R-Red must’ve eaten them or something... There were a whole bunch... She chased them off.”

“The dead birds?” Krolia raises her eyebrows.

“Obviously not the dead ones. The lives ones.” Keith pinches the bridge of his nose as he shakes his head, trying to salvage this. He pushes past them and back into the house. “Look. I’m exhausted. I’m in pain. I just spent an hour with Lotor who is impossible. I don’t want to talk about this. Especially when you’re being like this.”

“Keith, we’re not trying to -”

“You can’t even trust your own son! But don't worry, I'm used to it. You never have!” He stomps up the stairs as hard as he dares. The medication is wearing off.

“Keith,” his mother calls in a strange tone of voice that makes him stop. He can’t turn around, but he can feel her hesitance, her fear, sharp as a knife against his vulnerable neck. “Why were you asking about your aunt the other day?”

His brain freezes up. He forgets how to talk for a moment. “...Why are you asking that?” He breathes.

“Answer the question, Keith,” his father says.

His mom’s voice is low. “Are you seeing things? Your dad says you were talking to yourself earlier?”

His voice shakes. “No. No. I’m not going crazy. Someone just died for Christ’s sake. I think I’m allowed to be a little upset. Shiro’s my friend.”

“...You talk to him, Keith?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Keith!” Shiro grits out urgently.

Keith turns to him. Sees his wide horrified eyes.

“Honey,” his mother whispers. “Pidge and I talked today. She said you never even knew him.”

His heart stops. He knows he fucked up.

“Just leave me the fuck alone,” he whispers. He hurries up to his room, waits for Shiro to follow him, and then slams the door shut.
Chapter 5

Keith lets his head fall back against the door with a hard thunk. He’s starting to get a migraine; it’s clenching at the muscles in the base of his neck. He squeezes his eyes shut and bites at his lip until he tastes blood.

Shiro’s voice is gentle. Close. “Keith...”

“No -” His voice catches, so he clears his throat and tries again. “No.”

He blinks his eyes open slowly. The curtain is still pulled over the window. He knows he should probably check to see if the window is splintering; for all he knows, the glass has fallen apart and the faint breeze he feels isn’t just a benign draft. But he doesn’t want to know right now. That’d mean he’d have to deal with it. That’d mean going back downstairs.

And somehow, his room becoming a birdcage doesn’t seem half as bad as leaving it to face his parents again.

Keith pushes his weary body to the bed, collapsing onto his back and letting his neck stretch over his pillow with a small groan. God, he’s tired.

His phone juts into his hip so he shifts to the side to grab it. He has to scroll for several seconds to look through all the irritated texts that quickly grow concerned - most from Pidge, a few irritated ones from Lance. Not to mention the missed calls. He knows it’s irrational, but he feels like Pidge sold him out to his parents. There’s a knot at the base of his stomach that he knows means danger. He doesn’t want to say something to Pidge he’ll regret. He texts a quick: *I’m fine, just exhausted. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. I’m going to bed -* and then, tosses his phone away.

“I’ve wasted so much time...” Keith says, rubbing at his face. “I’m sorry, Shiro. You were right about Lotor. At least now we can cross him off the list. But now what? Do we go after that girl Lance mentioned? Cowgirl or something? What’s her name?”

“Keith, about what your parents said -”

“It’s nothing, Shiro. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“I just think -”

“I *really* don’t want to talk about it,” Keith says, tone sharper than he had intended. He takes in a deep breath. “...Sorry. I just. I’d really like things to be normal for just like... *one hour* would be nice. One hour.”

Keith can still see Shiro hesitating. His thoughts still there, swirling on his face.

“Shiro,” he says firmly. “Please.” With a sigh, Keith pushes himself up, rubbing at his leg in dismay. He murmurs lowly to himself, “Did I take my pills today already?”

He had only been thinking aloud, but Shiro nods. “This morning and right before we left.”

“Oh...” Figures that Shiro would be keeping track; Keith forgets on purpose. It seems like ages ago since he last took them and by the way his leg is throbbing harder than his migraine, it’s clear they aren’t doing anything anymore. Keith bites at his lip, trying to think of when he can best sneak some without Shiro seeing. He doesn’t want Shiro worrying over him. Maybe when he gets
ready for bed; there’s a bottle in the bathroom.

Shiro watches him thinking for a moment, his own thoughts plaguing his eyes. He knows.

Keith takes a deep breath. “So...that girl who gave you the cow heart...”

Shiro sighs. “You need rest, Keith.”

“I’m laying down, aren’t I? We’ve got to keep moving. What was her name? Is she in the yearbook?” Keith leans down to fish it from beneath his bed.

“Keith.” Shiro stops him, holding up one finger. “An hour of normalcy. Your one hour. How about it?” He’s quiet for a moment as they stare each other down. “...You need it, Keith. You’re not a machine.”

Keith frowns a little, but he leans over to the nightstand to grab the remote instead. “Fine. You’re right. Let me turn something on for you. But after that hour’s up...”

“Thanks, Keith,” Shiro sighs. He gets up from the window and takes a seat at the base of his bed.

Keith watches Shiro sit. He didn’t even have to prompt Shiro to move closer this time and somehow it feels like the best victory all day. It’s a gesture so small and it’s kind of silly, but it’s enough to ease a bit of the knot in Keith’s chest. Maybe there isn’t as much space between them anymore. Maybe Shiro trusts him a bit more. Maybe it means he’s a little bit less scared. Warmth floods Keith’s chest at the thought. He’s so glad.

“What are you in the mood for today?” Keith asks, leaning his head back again, slouching into his bed as he flips through the stations. He groans in irritation. “There’s never anything on.”

“You’re going through them so quickly; how can you possibly tell?”

Keith snorts. “Oh, my god. Sorry.” He switches over to an excruciatingly slow pace.

“Thank you,” Shiro hums in satisfaction, assessing the possibilities as they flip by. Keith’s eyes slip from the t.v.

He never really cared to look when Shiro was alive. Shiro was just some other football player who probably had his head stuck way too far up his ass. Keith wasn’t interested in people like that. Only, Shiro isn’t. Probably never has been. Yeah, he likes football. Yeah, he’s tall and bulky and self-assured and probably has never taken art seriously for one day in his life. How could they possibly relate? But they do. He’s interested when Keith starts talking about something that makes no sense to him. He has the same crummy sense of humor Keith has. He has a good kind heart. Keith thinks he could talk with Shiro all day and never tire of him. All of Keith’s avoidance was for nothing.

Keith allows himself to look. Because Shiro really is something nice to look at; he finally can admit it to himself. Not many people are modeled after Shiro’s shape. He’s broad in all the places that get Keith. He curves in at his waist, his elbows, his knees. He’s the very definition of strong and sturdy, but he’s also elegant in a surprising sort of way. He’s beautiful - a walking piece of artwork. Keith’s already thinking of the first line he wants to press into paper. He wants to draw him. What a beautiful piece that’d be...

“Hey,” Shiro says, turning to him with an eyebrow raised. “Done hunting?”
Keith’s eyes flick up to Shiro’s curious ones. Caught red-handed. “What?”

Shiro tilts his head as he stares back at Keith. “It’s alright if you’re tired. You can turn it off.”

“Turn what off?”

“The t.v....?”

Keith looks down at the remote in his hand, his hold having gone slack, and blushes as he remembers himself. “Oh... Uh... No. I just forgot. You’re right - I must be tired.”

Shiro laughs, face brightening with warmth as he gives Keith one last amused look before returning his attention to the screen. “This is fine.”

“It? You don’t seem like an It kind of guy.”

He shrugs, laughing lowly. “And what does an It kind of guy look like? Have you ever seen it? It’s a pretty good movie.”

“No, it looks really stupid. Is the clown even supposed to be scary? I honestly want to know.”

Shiro laughs. “You know, some people are afraid of clowns. But it’s not even really about the clown. Like, it is, but it’s more than that. I’ve only seen the new one, but it’s nice... You know, small town, close knit friends all solving some mystery. It’s kinda like us. I like it. Just give it a chance.”

“Whatever you say,” he hums, shoving the remote away. He goes back to looking at Shiro again, less obvious this time, and purses his lips. He can feel it burning in his chest - this boiling need to create. Charcoal. No, acrylic. No, maybe just pencil... Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to ask... Would it be weird?

Keith cringes and goes for it. “Hey, Shiro?”

“Hey, what?”

“This is kinda weird, but I like to draw things, you know? Like...documenting the things that happen around me. A diary, if you will, in the form of pictures.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen you drawing around campus. I think it’s amazing.”

“Yeah, like that... Memories fade, but...put it on paper and you can capture a moment in time forever. And I mean, I... This time, right now...between you and me... Um...” He looks down at his hands and says lowly, “What I mean to ask is: how would you feel if I...drew you?”

Shiro twists in surprise, eyebrows high as he meets Keith’s eyes. “You draw me? Like a portrait?”

Keith blinks at the swift reaction. “Exactly. You won’t have to do anything. You can just keep watching t.v., but you just look like you’d be fun to draw. You can say no. I know some people are uncomfortable with it; I know I’d be.”

Shiro’s smile is brilliant. “No, it’s totally fine. Go for it. I’ll try not to move.”

“Really?” Keith’s heart jumps in his throat and he wets his lips, nervous suddenly. “Okay...”

“Wooow,” Shiro chuckles deep in his throat, the sound low and purring. Keith thinks he can feel it through the bed, but of course he can’t. It’s not Shiro’s body he’s seeing, not really, it’s not his
laughter that he’s feeling traveling through the springs. “A real artist drawing my portrait. I feel famous or something.”

Keith laughs as he reaches beneath his bed and feels around for a specific sketchbook.

“How do you draw Pidge a lot?”

“Pidge?” Keith eyes the charcoal on his desk and decides against the trip; his leg is throbbing and he doesn’t feel like dealing with the inevitable mess. “Not often, no. Like...once. I can’t really draw people without a reference and she can’t sit still for very long when she knows I’m staring at her. Makes her uncomfortable. I drew a picture of her from a photograph for her mom once but it kind of loses something when you do that. I mean, they already have the photo, so what’s the point?”

“I would love a picture from a photo. No one else could draw it but you.”

“Would you really? I’ll make you one then. Choose whatever and I’m there.”

Shiro laughs softly, but there’s a quiet moment that follows in which a thought claims him. The light dims from his eyes for a moment. Keith can see as he swallows down whatever thought he had and lets his eyes fall back on the television.

Shiro is not awkward at all. When Keith had to model for his figure drawing class one day, he swore he was going to die the entire time. He knew his face was red and his posture was stiff and there was nothing he could do to force himself to loosen up.

But Shiro is the perfect picture of content ease. If Keith hadn’t been sure that he’d told him he was going to draw him, he’d think Shiro wasn’t even aware.

“You were born for this,” Keith laughs after awhile of comfortable drawing. Shiro smiles slightly at the praise. “You know, our school pays the models pretty well.”

“The nude models?”

“No,” Keith laughs. “Most students in high school are still minors. Clothes are, unfortunately, required.”

Shiro laughs too, shifting slightly. “Unfortunately.” He takes in a deep breath and says softly, “I probably wouldn’t be their ideal model though. You’d be the only one who could see me. Not that I’d mind, but...”

“...Ah. I could see how that might be a bit problematic for the others.” Keith feels himself cringe guiltily and he says, “sorry, Shiro. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, Keith,” Shiro says in a soft genuine voice.

Keith continues to draw but he can see the thought swirling in Shiro’s eyes, bringing him away. The way the light glints off of his face, but he’s not actually seeing what’s in front of him...

“I’m glad it’s you,” Shiro says softly after a moment. “Of all people. You’ve been unendingly supportive throughout this whole thing, more than I can even ask, more than I could ever deserve. ...And at least, with even just one person able to see and talk to me, it means I’m still somewhat human.”

There’s screaming going on in the television, filled with terror and the hair-raising sounds of gore.
Keith’s not sure who's more uncomfortable by it. He thinks it might be him by the way he can’t stop squirming and tensing at the sound and the way that Shiro just watches it, shoulders loose and resigned.

But it’s Shiro who addresses it first. Hesitantly. Eyes down. “What does it mean to be human? Do you just need a set of morals? Is it the thoughts we think? Or do you need a body...? A beating heart...? Do you need to be alive? Keith, I’ve been thinking,” Shiro asks gently, looking back up at the t.v. with strife in his eyes, “am I like them?”

Keith’s pencil stops on the paper. He draws it away, turning his attention up to Shiro, who’s not looking at him. His eyes have fallen from the screen as they stare, dark and somber, into the muted corners of the room.

Keith can feel the vulnerability in the air, pushing against the boundaries of the walls around them, full to the brim and ready to pop. Shiro’s finally letting him in. Keith’s never been the best with words; he’s nervous.

“...Like whom?” Keith asks carefully.

“In all these horror movies, the undead are things to fear. They’re cold and terrible. They’re just a burden on the living, dwelling on a plane that isn’t theirs, in this place they don’t belong. ...Aren’t I like them? Blood all over my clothes. Stealing time here that wasn’t ever meant to be mine. Taking from your life like some sort of parasitic leech? You could’ve been seriously hurt today, Keith. That would’ve been entirely my fault.”

“No, it wouldn’t have. And look at me. I’m fine.”

Shiro just shakes his head. “Maybe I was supposed to have moved on by now. ...I shouldn’t be here.”

“Shiro, it’s a horror movie, not real life. Of course the clown’s evil, they’re targeting an audience that wants to be scared. You’re not a murderous clown.”

“But I’m not living either. I’m not really here. I’m just some thing.”

“You’re Shiro... Your heart’s the same. You’re caring and sweet. I don’t know about permissions and whatnot - hell, I don’t know where I’m supposed to be - but I know I like you here. ...I want you here.”

Shiro’s quiet for awhile. “I wish it didn’t happen like this. I wish, if it were my time to die, I could’ve just disappeared in a puff of smoke. And my family would’ve just forgotten about me, not mourned me, not wondered where my body was, forever discontent. I wish you didn’t have to be shoved into this mess like this. You could still be at peace, drawing, never having to deal with all this. Your leg wouldn’t be hurting you this much. Your parents wouldn’t be questioning you. You’d never have to know me. I’m like a curse.”

Keith bites his lip. There’s an entire other world inside of Shiro that’s hurt and crying, the side that he clings so desperately to in order to hide.

It’s pure unadulterated fear. How many times has Pidge asked Keith if he’s alright just for him to shrug and dismiss the matter? It takes so much courage to admit to it - the pain inside of your heart. Keith knows how brave Shiro’s being. How honest.

Keith whispers, “…Want to know something funny?”
Shiro looks over, his eyes tight as if ‘funny’ is something he can definitely not comprehend.

“You know I love Pidge like a sister. She’s always there for me even when I don’t deserve it. I’m lucky to have her in my life. …But sometimes, despite that, I dunno, I just feel so lonely all the time. It’s just like, this piece wedged inside my heart that surfaces sometimes and nothing can soothe it. She’ll want to hang out and I’ll decline. I’ll isolate myself from her, from everyone, and just stew in these shitty feelings by myself. It’s like…I don’t want anyone around, but at the same time, I just feel such unbearable loneliness crushing me down. Like no one actually cares about me even though I know it’s not true. And I’ve never really understood it.”

Keith presses his lips together. Takes a deep breath. “…God, I know we basically only just met and this is going to sound ridiculous, but it—it’s true somehow…I haven’t felt it once since you’ve been here. It’s like you’re filling some hole in my heart that no one else could. It’s like,” he swallows hard, afraid to reveal too much and scare Shiro away. “It’s like…our stories are already written and I was always meant to find you. And now I’m complete. Does that make sense? Maybe you don’t have a body I can touch right now. Maybe you’re a ghost… But I do know that you’re supposed to be here. I feel it. I wouldn’t want anyone else with me right now…

“N-not that I want you hurt or anything. If you could be home with your family right now, no damage done, obviously I’d choose that for you, but…I mean… Not once have I thought you were some sort of evil spirit or something. You’re nothing like a horror movie, Shiro. You belong here. You’re amazing and it’s been my pleasure getting to know you. Really.”

Shiro is still sitting there, he hasn’t moved an inch, reflecting on everything Keith has said, but he’s softened somehow. The worry is fading from his face. There’s a faint smile on his cheeks. “…Keith.”

“I wish I had known you…” Keith says. “All these years we could’ve been friends, but I would just pass you by in the hallways. What an idiot I’ve been…”

Shiro says softly on a small breath that sounds a bit like a laugh, “We had a lot of chances. During lectures in Chem, everyday, you were just a foot ahead of me.”

“Unless I was ditching.”

Shiro chuckles lowly. “Unless then. You were just right in front of me. …I remember thinking you have nice hair.”

Keith laughs, pushing his hands over his bangs. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“I mean it. I always wondered what you were drawing, but I was a little afraid of you. You looked fierce.”

“Fierce? I have crutches.”

“What’s that have to do with it? Have you seen your face before? I have a feeling you could kick my ass.”

“How? You’re a tank and I’m like a kitten in comparison. Not even an agile one. Like a newly born one that can’t fully open its eyes and is wobbling all over the place. I can barely make it to the bathroom most days.”

Shiro laughs, nodding. “I’m telling you. You don’t know what you’re capable of. You’d go for the eyes first. Or maybe the jugular. I wouldn’t know, you’re the fierce one.”
Keith just shakes his head, rolling his eyes in exasperation, but he can’t stop laughing with Shiro. “You’re crazy.”

“Oh, what? You can have feelings about things but I can’t? You’ll surprise yourself one of these days, you’ll see. And I’ll be there, smiling.”

Keith hums under his breath. “Is that so...? Sure, I guess. But I mean it, Shiro,” Keith says softly. “You’re important to me.”

Shiro blinks in surprise and Keith stops, realizing the weight of everything he had just said. He was just speaking the truth, laying out everything he’s felt in his heart, but it was a lot. Keith puts a hand to his mouth awkwardly and bites at the inside of his cheek.

“Um...” Swallowing hard and aiming for distraction, Keith puts his pencil to the side and flips his sketchbook, showing the drawing to Shiro. “I’m pretty much done, so here it is.”

Shiro blinks once, leaning forward in awe, face drawn to the paper as if by a magnet. “Holy crap. Keith. That’s me!”

Keith smiles. He has to admit one of his favorite parts about art is seeing reactions like this. Shiro’s face is bursting with excitement and astonishment. It’s sweet. Keith lets his eyes wander Shiro’s face, taking in his features, the angles of them, the brightness in his eyes, the stretch of his happy grin, and he files it all away for later. He wants to draw it. He wants it to be an even bigger surprise for Shiro. He’s already sketching it all out in his head. He can’t wait to show him.

“What an amazing talent,” Shiro mutters, still entranced by the piece. “Are you going to college to be an artist?”

“Me? Oh, I don’t know. I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t like to think about it.”

“It’s coming up...” Shiro makes a small noise of sympathy. “Best to be prepared.”

“Yeah. I don’t know. You heard Pidge’s dad say I used to want to be a police officer, but you can see that’ll never work... I’m kind of useless by myself.”

Shiro’s frowning at him and Keith can see the lecture fully there, already developed, all ready to be laid out on Keith. He’s heard it all before, the same words his parents have grilled into him so many times already, thinking that maybe he doesn’t already know all this shit. He does. It doesn’t help.

Shiro purses his lips and says, softly, inevitably, “One day, you’re going to surprise yourself.”

Keith blinks - it wasn’t what he had expected to hear. He had already had the grumble of denial built on his lips, ready to shake his head and sigh at the advice pushed upon him yet again. But it all melts away. Figures Shiro could be so encouraging with one sentence. Keith smiles, wry and twisted. “...What a miraculous day that’ll be.”

“You’ll see,” Shiro whispers, smiling at Keith gently. He pretends to tap the drawing that Keith has settled back into his lap. “What else do you have in there?”

“Nothing good,” Keith confesses, flipping through the pages without much interest. “I keep hoping the more I draw, the better I’ll become, but it doesn’t seem to be happening.”

“You’re so hard on yourself,” he chuckles, frowning a bit as his eyes absorb all that Keith shows him. “Wow... I see why your mother entered your work into that contest for you. You should do
more of that. Seriously. This is amazing.”

Keith snorts. “Oh, hell, no. I’d rather do just about anything else.” Keith flips through the pages quickly. He thinks maybe the faster he is, the less Shiro will be able to call out the bullshit that is his art.

“Wait, wait,” Shiro laughs more than once. “Slow down, I want to see.”

When Keith makes it to a blank page, he settles it on his lap again, getting his pencil at the ready. “What should I draw next?”

“You’re asking me? You’re the artist. I couldn’t draw a stick figure if I tried.”

Keith shrugs. “Inspire me.”

“I don’t...” Shiro begins to say but then stops. A flicker of light ignites in his eyes: an idea. He’s silent for a moment, pressing his fingers to his mouth. “Maybe... This is going to sound weird, but have you ever done like...guided drawing?”

“What’s that?”

“Like, me describing something to you and you...draw it. It’s going to be stupid, but...what do you think?”

Keith grins, readying the pencil. “Sounds fun. Hit me.”


He closes his eyes and tilts his head back, lips parted softly as he thinks. The moment hangs for a while. He just sits there, quiet. “There’s a triangle in the center,” Shiro begins softly. “Low and long. Pure white. All around is darkness. Suffocating black darkness. There are edges around the triangle though, a softer light, darker than grey. Nearly black.

“In the center, horizontally, is one thick line - this is in black too. Coming down from the top vertically, are two, thinner black lines.”

He opens his eyes carefully, looking down at what Keith has down so far.

“Looks like an ugly window,” Keith hums.

Shiro leans forward, tracing his fingers over it slowly as Keith watches, divot in his brow. He’s troubled; thoughts tangled.

Gently, Keith asks, “...What is this, Shiro?”

His finger stops in the center. He’s just...staring at it. He parts his lips. “This changes from white to black. I can see it, even now, when I close my eyes.” He takes in a slow deep breath and whispers, voice faint, “...I think this is where I am.”

Keith freezes in shock. His breath catches in his throat. Slowly, with shaking hands, he reaches his own fingers beside Shiro’s as if that can bridge the space between them. “...This is where you are?”

“I...I think. I’m not sure. I keep seeing it. But it’s...it’s hazy. Like a dream I can’t quite get a grip on. But it’s there, always in the back of my mind.”
Keith scoots in closer to him. It’s hardly anything to go on. “A window, then? Some place with a window. Where are you in the room?”


“Like an attic maybe? Maybe a room in someone’s house? How long have you been seeing this?”

“I don’t know. ...Awhile. I couldn’t really make sense of it. It just looks like a white triangle. At first, I thought it was a symbol or something. Something you see after death? I don’t know. But it’s slowly becoming clearer.”

“Jesus, why didn’t you say anything?”

Shiro takes a long deep breath. He looks lost again. “Keith, it’s hardly anything to go on. How many places have windows?”

“A triangle window? I don’t know. Not a lot?”

“Can you think of a place with a triangle window?”

Keith frowns at him. Where’s his hope? This is something to go on. Something legit. “Well...well, doesn’t this mean...you’re alive?” Keith breathes, leaning forward, closer to Shiro’s face. “That you’re laying somewhere, waiting?”

“I wouldn’t know. How does death work? Maybe I’m still somewhat tethered to my body.” He shrugs, shaking his head, looking more lost and sick by the second. “Keith, I don’t know. Let’s just...not get our hopes up. It’s info. That’s all. Not an answered prayer.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers, but he looks down at the drawing with new eyes. “Any other details? There’s got to be something else. When it gets light, is there anything else inside. Tell me everything. I’m on your side. Any random weird bit, let me know.”

“Squeaking...”

“What?”

“An uncomfortable sound, like nails on a chalkboard. Or...maybe a branch against a rain gutter?”

“Rain gutter. Trees. Check.” He looks down at the drawing intently. There’s really not much to it, but it’s something. He feels like they’ve just taken a substantial step forward.

“I want to check your neighborhood tomorrow,” Keith says breathlessly. “For any weird windows... Rain gutters.”

Shiro leans forward onto his knees with a tired sigh. “Are there houses without rain gutters?”

“If there are, they’ll be scratched off the list,” Keith raises his eyebrows at him. “And if there’s a house without trees, we can cross that off too.”

Shiro laughs deep in his throat, his face tiredly amused. “Okay. We’ll do that. Tomorrow. God, you have so much energy... You’re like a little fireball.”

Keith snorts and Shiro smiles crookedly at him. Shiro says, “I haven’t gotten the chance to mention: what you did today...for me... Thank you. Lotor’s a little unhinged right now. It was very brave, you facing off with him.”
Keith grins crookedly. “Oh, yeah?”

“Lotor’s glare would’ve killed a lesser man, I promise you.”

Keith chuckles. “…I just wish he had said something that got us closer to the truth though.”

Shiro’s silent for a while, his smile fading from his face. “…It’s okay, Keith. Even if we don’t find anything. I’m grateful for this time with you.”

Keith blinks in surprise. The way Shiro looks at him, whether he’s smiling or frowning, is softer than anyone’s ever looked at him before. It’s new. It draws Keith in. “…I’m glad too. To get a chance to know you. But we’re going to find you.”

Shiro takes a deep breath and then looks over at the clock. “Get some rest. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Mmmeh, you’re probably right,” Keith hums, realizing how tired he actually is. He turns off the light and scoots beneath his covers, tossing his head back on his pillows. He lets his eyes turn up to the glowing stars he still has stuck to the ceiling from his youth. His mind is still wired and buzzing from everything; he looks at the ceiling of his house but he can see their town in his mind, the twinkling of the stars up above, the quietness of their forest.

Keith says, “…That cell tower had quite the sight though. I’ve never even thought to climb it and look across town like that…”

“Yeah, because you actually have a brain.”

Keith laughs. “All those stars though… That sight was worth it.”

“It was one of my favorite things to do. …I wish I could see it one last time.” He takes an audible breath in. “Maybe if I can just…” He sighs. “I don’t know.”

“I’m going to work hard for you, Shiro. I’m not going to give up on you.”

“Keith… I know everything happened to turn out alright tonight, but it could’ve gone so wrong. And now, with your parents… I’m worried for you. I’m kind of wondering… maybe… -”

"Are you trying to say what I think you're trying to say?" Keith says in disbelief.

"It's just you still have -"

“- I’m not giving up on you,” Keith says again simply.

Shiro hesitates, his eyes tangled up with a feeling he can’t quite convey.

"I'm in this. I'm not going to quit on you. You need help. That's that."

Shiro stares for a long moment. With a small sigh, he finally turns to the t.v. This time, he stays across the bottom of Keith’s bed, sighing in relief as he stretches his body out. He basically purrs.

He blinks up at Keith for a moment, a little sadness and a little gratefulness in his eyes. It looks like he might say something; they hang on the edge of a moment.

Finally, his lips tug up into a smile and he says simply, “Spongebob?”

Keith laughs. “You got it.”
Keith texts Pidge first thing in the morning, frowning into his phone as he runs a thoughtful finger over his lip.

“What is it?” Shiro asks, looking over his shoulder.

Keith holds the phone out for him to see. “Oh... Pidge is just... getting antsy. I’m not usually doing anything, so I text her right away, but lately, I haven’t been checking my phone every second. She picks up on things like that, thinks about them too much. You know how she worries about me, like I’m her damn child or something. Only, this time, she’s right... I don’t want to lie. I don’t know what to say...”

Shiro’s face is filled with concern. “I’m sorry, Keith. This shouldn’t interfere with your life. How about we skip today? Take a break.”

“No,” Keith says, shoving his phone into his pocket with one sure movement. “Are you crazy? Every moment counts. What if you’re alive?” The idea makes him giddy. He’s sure there are sparkles in his eyes as he turns them to Shiro, leaning forward. “What if, instead of just finding your killer, we could actually find you and help you?”

Shiro hums, looking down. “...It’s already been so long. You heard what Pidge said about the first forty-eight hours.”

He waves his hands excitedly. “I know, but... but what if? She also said each case is unique... and besides, Pidge doesn’t know everything.”

Shiro sighs. “I think we should just be practical. We can’t get our hopes up.”

“Let’s keep searching though. Your neighborhood first. I was kind of thinking we should look at the teachers’ homes too.”

“Teachers’?” Shiro frowns.

"If that noise in the forest was something happening to you, it was right after school. I’m just thinking... it’d be dumb to assume teachers aren’t capable of murder. Your neighborhood first though.”

Keith prints a map off the internet, grabs a pen and shoves it into his backpack.

His mom is waiting in the living room, glasses on, face shoved into her newspaper. When he steps out, she looks up. He’s so focused on Shiro that he forgets at first about the night before. And then he sees the way she assesses him and he feels himself tense, ready for a fight.

“Stay calm, Keith,” Shiro murmurs gently. “Remember, I’m not here.”

Keith forces himself to take a deep steadying breath as Krolia says, “Keith. I need to talk with you.”

“...I can’t. Not right now. I’ve got to go to school.”

She narrows her eyes. “...You’re going to school late.”

“...Yeah, I, uh... My alarm didn't go off.”

She stares right at him, dead in the eye, as if she can see right through him. “...Is that so?”
“The thing’s old. I need a new one.”

“Use your phone then. Keith, about last night - ”

“- I’ve got to get going. I’m late and all that...”

“Keith, wait,” she says, sighing heavily. She presses her fingers into her eyes. “I heard there’s a school dance coming up. Are you going?”

Keith lets out a short laugh. Not what he had expected to hear from her. “Ugh, no. In what world honestly?”

“I think it might be good for you to get out. Socialize a bit. It’s not good staying in your room by yourself all day. Anyone would get stir crazy like that.”

Ah, so that’s how she’s rationalizing it. *But I'm not alone,* he wants to say. He shrugs instead. “I text Pidge. Is that all? I’ve got to go.”

She shakes her head, leaning off the seat and walking over to him. Keith bites back a groan; he can see her preparing for a fight, for a lecture.

Shiro, not paying attention and looking over at the food on the counter longingly, doesn’t move out of the way as she walks over. She goes right through him.

Shiro shivers and grunts in discomfort.

Krolia stops in her tracks.

She turns her head just slightly, as if trying to comprehend. And then she turns to Keith. “Did you feel that?” She stops, looking confused.

Keith blinks, staring at her. “...Mom?”

She licks her lips, eyes going up, seeking out the spot where Shiro is, but her eyes never fall on him completely.

“Can you see me?” Shiro whispers.

She turns her head, as if she can hear him talking on the edge of the wind. But she doesn’t respond back.

“...It’s nothing,” she mutters, but she’s still looking around.

Red’s yowls moodily from the hearth.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asks again when Krolia ignores him.

She tsks, still distracted. “Oh...I don’t know. I just felt -” She shakes herself out, standing taller. “You know when you feel someone staring at you...that flood of intuition that you’re sure of, even though you can’t hear or see them?”

“Yeah.”

She presses her fingers to her mouth thoughtfully, frowning. “It was like that.”

“...Like someone’s watching you?” Keith tries to look confused and amused all at once.
She shakes her head again and narrows her eyes at him as she catches the look he's giving her. “Okay, I know how it sounds. I must just be tired.”

“Yeah, sure, that’s what it is. Maybe this house is just making us all crazy, hm?” Keith mouths off to her.

She rolls her eyes and points out the door. “Go. To school. March.”

He laughs as he steps out, closing the door behind him. He walks the direction for school and then, when he’s out of view from his house, heads into the forest.

“Looks like she’s not mad at you...” Shiro says in relief.

“I’m sure when my dad gets home they’ll gang up on me and speak their minds; that’s how they always do it... But that was weird. I almost thought she’d see you.”

“Other people have walked through me before,” Shiro says. “But no one’s sensed me like that. Maybe it really is genetic...”

“Like I’m from a family of witches?” Keith hums. “Well, my aunt used to swear she was a witch. She used to draw these marking things and be all like, ‘bam, the power of Christ compels you’ and all that.”

“What?” Shiro laughs.

“I dunno. Exorcism stuff? Like, I honestly kind of think she was partly insane. But it would’ve been nice to at least have someone to ask. Too late to know for sure now... But I’ve never seen any other ghost before. It’s just been you.”

“Strange...” Shiro hums, crossing his arms as he walks. “I never believed in any of this stuff. A part of me still wants to say I don’t, but...” He moves to put his hand on Keith’s shoulder before remembering himself. “Oh, turn this way. There’s a line of forest behind our homes. Some of the houses are fenced off, but a majority of them have their yards open.”

“Of course the terrain has to be so damn bumpy.”

“No one really comes back here...” He turns looking at the road. “Technically, we could look through the front, but I’d worry someone would catch you snooping and wonder. And you being a suspect is the absolute last thing we can afford.”

“Pidge will have to prove my innocence.”

“Let’s not even joke about that... Did you remember to call her this morning?”

“I texted. You saw.”

Keith catches the discontent look on Shiro’s face. Keith snorts. “Don’t worry; you’re not ruining any Keith and Pidge traditions or anything. There are some days we don’t talk, believe it or not. But if it makes you feel better I’ll call her later.”

“Did you at least remember to bring the binoculars like I asked?”

“Yeah, right here.” Keith kneels beside a tree and peers through the binoculars. He tsks as he scans the houses. “Small windows, but all rectangles... No weird shapes...”

“Ryou and I used to play through this part of the forest and I can’t remember any triangle windows.
I don’t think it’s here.”

Keith sighs, pushing himself up. “You were right last time so I guess I should take your word for it. We can go through them quickly. It’s not a big neighborhood.”

“Not a big town.”

“We can obviously mark your house off the list,” Keith murmurs, reaching down for a pen to cross it off. “Let’s see your neighbor’s house...” He goes back to looking through the binoculars. “These are cute houses. I like all the backyards.”

Shiro hums. “That yellow one there used to be Lotor’s house. He lived right next to us. We’d always play together at the park. Him, Ryou, and me.”

“Wow, Lotor living in a normal house. How did he survive without his animal bushes?”

“Yeah. It’s what they had. When his mother died, they got a lot of money. ...She was nice. I liked her.”

“Pidge lives just down the way,” Keith says, checking off another house. “Is that how you met Matt?”

“Sort of, yeah. I think their mom always encouraged them out, but Lotor and I sort of... I don’t know. Matt didn’t really get along with us back then.”

That doesn’t sound like Matt, always following Shiro around like a puppy dog. Keith doesn’t say so.

Instead, he mutters, “Matt used to intimidate me when I was little. He was in the Boy Scouts. You should’ve seen all the badges he had. During the ceremonies, it was just like...only his name being called the entire time.”

“Yeah...I know.”

Keith crosses off another house, picks himself up and drags himself over to another vantage point.

Shiro hesitates and then says, “We sort of...made fun of the Boy Scouts thing back then.”

Keith looks up at Shiro’s guilty face. He’s squirming, staring over at the dirt beneath Keith’s shoes.

“I’ve just been thinking a lot as you sleep...about all the things I wish I had or hadn't done in life. I keep thinking about it. How we didn’t ever really let Matt join us... We called him names. I don’t even know why. I regret that,” Shiro murmurs. “So much. I know Pidge hates us and I can't blame her. I kind of hate me too sometimes.”

Keith bites at his lip. “...Everyone has regrets from their youth, Shiro.”

When Shiro gives a little shrug that lacks enthusiasm, Keith says again firmly, “everyone. Me too. Obviously Matt got over it; he cares about you. He’s only ever had good things to say about you.”

That only seems to make Shiro feel worse. “God... Yeah, that’s Matt for you.” He looks over at Matt’s house and just stays there, staring.

Keith taps the end of the pen on his lip and then lifts it, pointing out to the left. “Did you know the kid that used to live there? I forget his fucking name. He was such a prick.”
“Oh...I...I think so? I dunno. My memory's kind of hazy.”

“It's okay. He moved away years ago. He was Acxa’s first crush. We were like six. Acxa and I used to tell each other everything, do everything together. We had the same toys, the same books, the same friends. But then Acxa started wanting some distance. Liking people; I didn’t get it. She wanted to hang out with her friends and her crushes and...I was a little shit. I got jealous. Her crush came over one day and was swinging on that tire hanging from our tree laughing away loudly; it was driving me nuts. That was my tire that my dad put up for me and he was sitting there being pushed by my sister. It was so stupid. I felt like he was stealing my life or something.”

Keith sighs, scratching at the back of his head with his pen, “So I went out there and threw a fit and we got into a fight. Somewhere along the lines he called me a shrimp which I was, and told me Acxa wanted me to leave, which she did. But I didn’t see that. So I tossed him off the swing and started wailing on him. My parents had to pull me off of him. He had the worst bloody nose in the world. His parents screamed at my parents. He never spoke to Acxa again. I got into so much trouble. And Acxa... I think that was the first time she was ever truly afraid of me. I still remember her face.”

“...You were six, Keith.”

“I knew. To this day, I still remember quite clearly thinking about it and choosing to do it anyway. All those rumors about me in school; they’re true. It used to really bother me. It’s hard to let go of the shit you did as a kid, but... I had to do it. Because if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have learned. And now that I have, I can choose to not be that person anymore. ...At least, that’s what I want to believe. I still have problems with my anger. I still get jealous. But we have our choices now. I don’t want to hurt anyone. ...And I know you don’t either. Matt loves the hell out of you. His loyalty is obvious. He sees something in you that you can’t see. I see it too. Trust me when I say he understands. He knows you didn’t mean it.”

Shiro smiles faintly. “...Yeah. I think maybe you're right.”

When they get to the Holt’s house, Keith crosses them right off the list. He thinks of the goodness of Matt, of the goodness of Pidge. He thinks of how he hasn’t talked to Pidge properly in awhile and feels guilt churn in his stomach. He could skid down this hill and pop into the back of her house right now. She could help them. ...But he’s scared she won’t give him a pass this time if she doesn’t believe him.

They’re through each of the houses within an hour with no luck. All the houses are perfectly plainly rectangular or square. Keith ends up just crumpling the map in his hand.

“This is a good thing,” he tries to convince himself as they leave the forest cover and walk along the road again. “It means we’re closer to finding the actual house.”

“...Yeah.”

“We’ll find it,” he says, stepping in front of Shiro and saying it as firmly as he can so that his belief bleeds through in his words. “And maybe we’ll be in time...”

“In time for what?” Someone shouts behind them, startling them both.

It’s Ryou. They’re by the playground again. He’s sitting on the swing, posture slouched, bottle of alcohol in his hand. There’s a blush high in his cheeks.

“...It’s like ten in the morning,” Keith says. “Are you drinking?”
“Ha. What’s time have to do with anything? And what are you doing walking on our street? You’re talking to yourself...”

Keith shuffles anxiously, trying to keep his face guilt-free. “My friend lives around here. We were going to go visit her.”

Shiro groans, tossing his head back. “Keith.”

Keith looks up in confusion.

“‘We’?” Ryou questions. “Who else is with you?”

“O-Oh. No one. I just meant...myself.”

Ryou narrows his eyes and glares Keith down. “…I already saw her leave for school hours ago. Liar. Why are you lying...?” He sings, words loose on his lips as he laughs, swinging the bottle around in his hand, watching the last thin layer of alcohol swirl. “…You know...it’s really suspicious. Mud on your boots. Crumpled up paper in your hand... Why? What are they for? Did you go to bury my brother? Mark his location on the map? X marks the spot?”

Keith goes white. The casual way he says it is horrifying. Keith shakes his head slowly. “…Ryou. I’d never.”

Ryou just stares at him without blinking, alcohol still tilting in his grip. “…Let me see the map.”

“No... I-It’s not a map. This is ridiculous. I didn’t hurt your brother. ...Have a good day, Ryou.” Keith begins to turn.

“I know you know something!” Ryou growls fiercely, tossing himself forward off of the swing. He’s unsteady on his feet as he stumbles forward, eyes dead focused on Keith. He nearly falls on his face, only managing to catch himself at the last moment. “Did you do it? Did you kill my brother? You coward, answer me.”

“No,” Keith says firmly despite the tremble he feels shaking him to the core. “I promise you.”

“Oh,” Ryou laughs. “You promise. Lotor called me last night... He and I had a very interesting conversation. He says you knew a strange amount about my brother... He thinks you and Shiro had a secret thing. But I know better. You can’t lie to me like that. Shiro? With you? No. I know he didn’t... So...how? How did you know those things about Shiro?”

Keith tries to be patient. It takes a lot out of him, but god, he tries. “I know how much it must hurt right now, but you can’t just blame someone randomly. I didn’t do anything.”

“I’m not blaming someone randomly. You’ve been weird. You’ve always been weird. Lotor says you were watching my brother on the bleachers hours before he disappeared. And I’ve been doing some of my own investigating. You weren’t with your friends after school at the time Shiro probably disappeared. All your friends were all together, but you weren’t. ...You left the same time Shiro did.”

“No. No, the bleachers - I was drawing the field. I was there before he even was. And I walk home from school every day. That means nothing.”

“Then explain the conversation you had with Lotor! Explain it to me! Why are you here? I just saw you leave the forest behind our house! I saw you. What else do you want from Shiro? What else could you possibly want when you already took his life?”
Shiro breathes in sharply. “Keith, we should go. This conversation is trouble.”

“I...didn’t do it. I only want to help,” Keith says lowly.

Ryou laughs loudly. “How are you going to do anything? You can’t even walk.”

“I can walk,” Keith whispers.

“You think you can help my brother? Shiro was... Shiro was stronger than anyone I know. He’s smarter. Faster. He’s... He...was... ...You can’t even walk,” he says again, pointing to his leg, breathless. “I barely pushed you the other day and you went sprawling out worse than a toddler, it was pathetic. You’re pathetic. Your friends are always waiting for you... You have them carry you around like a baby who shits all over itself and expects everyone else to clean it all up. You can’t do anything for yourself. Aren’t you sickened with yourself? I know I’d be. Especially next to someone like Shiro. My brother was everything. Who didn’t know that? And you saw him. And you were so...hurt... You couldn’t take it.”

The beer bottle slips and falls from Ryou’s hands, thudding against his foot. Keith is silent for a moment as he stares at it. He clears his throat. Tries to talk. ...But he finds he can’t. His throat is tight with emotion. His head is starting to spin.

He clears his throat again. Forces out a whisper. “My leg has nothing to do with Shiro.” He’s starting to feel sick. Shiro’s right. He’s got to go. “...Bye, Ryou.”

“You’re a murderer. How could you do it to him?! He was a good person! He was a good person and you just killed him! You cold, evil, useless, pathetic, horrible.”

“Keith, let’s go,” Shiro says softly as Keith slows. Shiro looks back to Ryou, his eyes glimmering in pain. “This is just hurting both of you.”

“Did he finally tell you?!” Ryou screams. “Did he? Is that why you did it?” Keith looks to Shiro, who looks confused, and then back over to Ryou, whose chest is heaving.

“...Tell me...what?”

“Were you the last person he saw before he died?” Ryou whispers. Tears build up and pour over his cheeks; he slides to the ground. “His last words. Tell me. Please. Tell me, what did he say? How did you do it? Did he feel pain...? Did it take long for him to die? Where is he? I just want to see him one last time. I won’t tell anyone you did it; I just want to see him. Please...please let me... God... Shiro... Shiro.”

Keith just stares, mouth parted.

“Keith, come on,” Shiro says gently, standing between him and Ryou. “He’s drunk and he’s hurting. He’s not making sense.”

"But..."

"Keith, let's go,"

Ryou grabs the beer bottle and with a strangled cry, hurls it at Keith with all his weight behind the throw. It shatters on the pavement with a loud splintering crash, pieces flinging everywhere. Keith flinches away at the last second, arm going up to cover his face.
He wasn't ready. One crutch falls from his grip and he's unsteady. He loses his balance and falls into the mess of glass.

"Keith," Shiro grits through his teeth, hands reaching out for him. He falls to his hands and knees beside Keith, eyes wide.

Keith stares down at the mess on the floor around him. He slowly pulls his hands up and off the glass-ridden ground, feeling as some bits cling and tug at his skin and others fall away, softly tinkling to the floor. The glass stuck in his hands catches the light that's peeking through the clouds. It stings, but that's all.

He looks back up at Ryō, who's gritting his teeth, red-faced as he pours all his hatred at Keith in his look. A wounded sob tears from the depths of Ryō's heart.

"Keith, come on," Shiro whispers, standing, trying to grab him by the arm, but he doesn't make contact. "Keith."

But Ryō is just as defeated as Keith, collapsed to the ground and boneless. "You bastard," he breathes like a winded animal. "You bastard..."

Keith stares. He's never been one with words, but he can't stand seeing someone who looks like Shiro, who sounds like Shiro, who cares for Shiro like this...all this hurt and pain on his face...Keith can't take it. It hurts him too.

He whispers gently to Ryō. "I didn't kill Shiro, Ryō. Shiro's a good person. He's one of the best people of this town. I don't know who did it. Or why. It's not fair. Not for any of you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Ryō growls, slipping his chest to the ground in a boneless puddle, letting out a strangled noise in the back of his throat that sounds primal.

Keith whispers, swallowing hard. "He wouldn't want to see you like this. He'd want you to be happy. ...You know that."

"Why?" Ryō shakes his head, rubbing at his face. "Why him? Why?"

Keith dusts the glass off his hand and grabs his crutches, pulling himself up to his feet. He steps forward hesitantly, but Ryō screams, "leave me alone! I hate this. I hate you! I hate everyone. Just leave me the fuck alone..." So, with one last silent pause, Keith turns back around and leaves.

He's quiet the entire walk. Shiro also. They make their way slowly through the forest, thoughts clogging their minds and dragging them down. The walk should only take a few minutes, but it feels like they've been going on forever.

Keith's so tired. His usual fucking useless leg hurts him and now his hands sting and burn. It probably would be fine if his weight wasn't pressing into his hands, but it is. He hasn't mentioned it; it'd be cruel to do so in front of Shiro, but it's killing him.

"Shiro," he finally grits out. They're not home yet, but he can't take another second of this sharp stabbing pain. "I've got to take a moment."

"Okay," Shiro says, turning to watch Keith cast his eyes about for a good place to sit.
There’s an old giant sycamore tree in a patch of rare light and Keith hauls himself over, pulling himself onto an open part on the trunk and collapsing into it with a groan.

“...You alright?” Shiro whispers, staring down at his leg and then letting his eyes scan over him for injury. They stop at his hands.

“Yeah, I -” His voice catches. He holds up a finger. Collects himself. He leans forward for a second just to breathe. “I'm fine. I just...I think I got hit by some of the glass. A splinter or something. I've got to take it out.”

Shiro kneels on the ground, watching as Keith carefully rolls his sleeve, exposing a thin trail of blood.

“Oh, Keith,” Shiro whispers gently, pressing his fingers to his mouth.

It’s a big chunk of amber glass. It’s lodged in pretty deeply. He hadn't even felt it go in. Keith tries to grab onto it and tug it out gently with one hand, but he hisses as pain shoots through his arm.

“Dammit... Good aim.”

“It’s nothing to joke about. Matt and Pidge are closeby, maybe if you can call -”

“- No.”

The sharpness of Keith’s rejection draws Shiro up in surprise. Shiro hesitates and says, “...you can’t just take it out here. If you do, you’ll bleed more than you already are.”

“It’s not that bad,” Keith says, repositioning his hand around the piece to try to pull it out again from a different angle.

“Keith, don’t do that. You need help.”

“No!” The words just burst out of him, loud and angry. His voice echoes around the forest, bouncing back to them. The tone is harsh. It surprises him too. He flicks his eyes up to Shiro’s, who blinks back at him. And then he averts them, flooded with shame. “...I’m sorry,” he mutters. “I just... I don’t need help all the time. I can do some things on my own too...”

“Oh,” Shiro says gently as he understands. “No, I didn’t mean it like that...”

“I know... I didn’t mean to yell.”

Before Shiro can protest any more, Keith gets a good grip around the shard of glass and pulls it out with one sharp tug.

Shiro lets out a strangled sound in the back of his throat.

Blood gushes. He had heard Shiro’s warning, but it’s honestly more blood than he thought. He uncrumplles the map quickly and tries to use that to clean it up, but paper’s less absorbent than Keith would like. He shoves it away and pulls his hoodie off, pressing it to the wound.

“Dammit,” Keith breathes again. His hands sting, his arm hurts, his leg hurts, his migraine's back and pounding. What a fucking mess.

“God. Keith...” The way Shiro says his name, like he’s this little innocent flower. Like he’s a naive lamb that can’t look after himself.
“I’m fine, Shiro,” he says, but his voice sounds grey.

“You’re not fine. This is all my fault.”

“Stop,” Keith mutters miserably.

Stupid. He’s been so stupid. If he had just grit his teeth through the pain, Shiro wouldn’t have had to see this. He wouldn’t have had to feel the blame and guilt of this. Home is only minutes away. Keith feels like a total asshole.

Shiro’s sitting on the ground, shoulders sagging, face dark with the weight of everything. And Keith just added to it.

...And now, how will he get home? Walking sounds like hell right now. He wishes he had been smart and brought his bottle of pills, but he hadn’t.

Shiro’s right. Pidge is just around the corner. If he were to call, she’d come running. She and Matt would literally carry him home if they had to.

But isn’t that just what Pidge has to do for Keith all the time already? He’s always having her carry his shit - his art boards, his crutches, his backpack, anything that should be easy, simple things. Any of it...it’s handed over to her. She always has his back. But he doesn’t even have his own back.

Ryou was right. Ryou was right about everything and it kills Keith coming to terms with it.

He’s a burden. He’s Shiro’s last chance and he can’t even walk five minutes through a forest to get home. He hasn’t found anything yet. He’s not any closer to finding any murderer, any body, any anything. Shiro’s as lost as he ever was.

It’s so fucking frustrating. Keith wants to throw his fist into something hard. He wants to hit something and feel it hit back, but he can’t because he’s injured and hurting and weak. He can’t do anything. And he’s absolutely horrified with himself when he feels a sharp sob take ahold of him.

Oh, god.

No.

He sees Shiro look up in surprise, eyes widening. Keith grabs at his face with both hands to hide himself, but it’s too late. Shiro’s already seen.

His stupid traitorous lungs are rebelling, jerking air in clumsy clunky soft sobs.

He hates himself.

“...Keith...” Shiro whispers gently. Keith can hear him close, feel the strange cold hollow feeling of Shiro trying to make contact with him, but slipping through. “Keith, what’s wrong? Is it the pain?”

Keith shakes his head, trying desperately to press his lips together to hold it in.

“Can you not walk? Can I...? What is it, Keith...?” When Keith doesn’t respond, Shiro whispers, voice small, pleading, “please tell me.”

Keith grits his teeth. He pulls his hands away and looks over at Shiro’s face. It’s open and earnest,
ready to help in any way he can. Shiro’s so warm, so kind, but he can’t help Keith. Not with this.

He closes his eyes. “It’s everything. It’s everything...” He takes a slow long breath of air. "...I’m useless,” he says quietly.

“...You’re not useless, Keith... Think of all we’ve accomplished so far.”

“Which is what?”

“My arm. You successfully questioned Lotor. ...You’ve helped me keep it together. I think you’re amazing.”

When Keith doesn't respond, Shiro shifts and tries again. “Look. I love Ryou; he’s my brother, but even when he’s sober and thinking logically, he can be wrong a lot. Especially when it comes to me. He’s always been so overprotective. None of what he said today was true. He was just trying his best to hurt you because he’s hurting and he doesn’t know how to lessen it.”

“It’s not just Ryou... I want to help you, Shiro. I’m doing nothing but causing you pain.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is.”

“No, you’re -”

“-Look at you! You're still a ghost! You can't go home, you can't be with your family! I’m trying, Shiro, I am, but it’s not enough. It’ll never be enough. You're still suffering.”

“What are you talking about? We already crossed off one neighborhood, that’s an accomplishment, right?”

“An accomplishment? We didn’t find out anything.”

“You’ve been trying really hard. That means something.”

Keith groans loudly, tossing his head back and glaring into the sky. “It feels like my whole life I’ve been having people look after me. I just want to help you. I just want you to be okay, but I can’t.”

“I don’t know how many times I’ll have to say it until you believe me, but I’ll keep saying it until you do: you are helping me. You’ve given me so much already. All this hardship you’ve been wading through, and you’ve just kept going. You’ve been constantly maimed because of me -”

“-I haven’t been constantly maimed,” Keith grumbles.

“I’m so grateful for all you’ve done. This is enough, Keith. I'm happy with this.”

Keith shakes his head and presses his fingers into his eyes. “I’m not giving up. I’m not. So don’t...don’t do that. Don’t say that.”

“I just think that maybe -”

“Don’t.” Keith heaves a long sigh and rubs his fingers across his face, scrubbing off the remnants of tears. “I’m just frustrated with myself. You’re suffering so much. And then hearing Ryou... God. And your family. All your friends... They're in so much pain. Ryou’s face... I... I'm sorry. I’m so sorry. I couldn't do anything. I can't do anything.”
Shiro leans closer. “It’s not your burden to bear, Keith.”

“I want to help you,” Keith whispers.

He lets his head fall back, resigning himself to the day thus far. He stares up into the tree’s leaves, watches how they dance in the faint breeze. The chill in the air isn’t bad, it just tickles. There are little balls of fluff floating lazily past and it almost feels like a different forest they’re in. Softer. Warmer.

But there’s a storm inside Keith. He wants to stamp it out. He needs a distraction. He grabs the crumpled bloodied piece of paper and smooths it out against his leg. He takes out the pen from his pocket and looks up into the tree’s winding intricate arms above, all different paths to take. All from the same origin.

He settles back into the nook of the tree, sets pen to paper and starts to sketch it out.

Shiro tilts his head back and peers up into the columns of sun. His smile is gentle. “You see beauty in everything, don’t you?”

“How about you?” Keith whispers, taking another look skyward, eyelashes catching the light.

Shiro takes a moment to breathe their surroundings in, to feel the softness in the floating orbs of fluff, the earthy scent that’s rich and full of life. He looks down at Keith, who is starting to soften as he sketches, and says, “I can see it through you.”

Keith huffs out a small laugh. “...The Takashi Shirogane. Your name - up in the gym, decorated with gold, listing off all the records you’ve broken. You have your own fan club. Friends always swarming you. You always held your head up so high, like nothing could touch you. ...Who knew you’d be so soft?”

Shiro snorts, leaning his head back against the tree as he gazes out. “All that stuff...it’s all just a charade. You know it. Everyone knows it. I've had fun sometimes, and even when we didn't, we'd still play the game. All of us. It was hard to ever get close to anyone though. I liked them all, don’t get me wrong, but with some people it’s just...different. It’s like they all wanted me to be their Shiro and I couldn't ever just be myself.”

Keith is quiet for a moment. “Do you feel that way with me?”

Shiro snorts and rolls his eyes. “Well, seeing as I was bawling my eyes out before I’d even introduced myself to you, I don’t think I ever had the chance to seem cool to you. That ship sailed right about then.”

A faint smile twists Keith’s mouth. “Mm, no. I think it was before that, when you thanked me for helping me pick up my own pencil.”

Shiro bleeds red and makes a noise like a strangled bird. “God, you remember that?”

Keith’s grin grows as he goes back to hunching over his drawing.

Shiro groans out a laugh. “But see? That’s what I mean. I make such a dumb error and you’re so quick to forgive. With anyone else, they'd probably throw up in their mouths. With Matt it was different. ...With you. Sort of restores my faith in humanity, you know?”

Keith looks up from his drawing again and offers Shiro a small smile. “...The world doesn’t deserve you, Shiro.”
Shiro stands, dusting himself off even though there’s no need. He leans against the tree as they watch each other. “You know in that game you played last night? The little guardian who breathes life into the main character when he falls? ...You remind me of her. She’s like you.”

Keith takes a deep breath. “...No, she’s not.”

“She is. She’s quiet, like you, but fierce when she needs to be, also like you. She fights to protect her friends...kind of like how you do for me.”

Keith frowns down at his hands. They rest on the paper smeared with his own blood, sketched over with messy ink. “...Shiro,” he whispers. “I wish I could do what she does...”

“Haven’t you? You saw me back at the school, when I first realized what was happening... I probably would’ve just gone insane there, honestly. Nothing to ground me. No one to talk me down. Maybe, without you, I would’ve just howled and raged like a ghoul, becoming just like what you see in those horror movies. What everyone expects of a ghost, but you’re my anchor.”

Keith lets out a shaky breath. “You could never be like that, Shiro.”

“I don’t know. You didn’t feel what was going on inside of me. I...I never thought I could feel that scared before... And then you showed up. And I’m still here, as Shiro as I can still be, because of you.” Shiro smiles down at him, genuine warmth in his eyes.

“Maybe,” Keith whispers.

He keeps sketching, but the strokes are easing. No longer stressed and tense.

“So does that mean you have a crush on your younger brother?”

Keith’s mind is still only full of Shiro. “...Huh?”

Shiro smiles crookedly. “If you’re the guardian in the game. Her brother. With the waist. Your fish.”

Keith frowns for a moment longer before he gets it. He groans. “Shiro. It’s a game. There are plenty of other cool characters in that game too, you know. ...I want to be the main one. All the adventures I’d have...”

Shiro laughs. “And then you’d get to marry your fish boyfriend.”

Keith tsks, but he finds himself smiling grudgingly.

“I’m only teasing, you know. I think it’s cool how you find other worlds in games. In pieces of paper. In just looking up at a tree from down below. Your eyes always twinkle with this light when you find something you want to draw.”

Keith smiles warmly down at him.

“Like that,” Shiro hums warmly, tilting his head back to look at Keith fondly. “Your face says all the things you don’t say. I always used to think you never smiled, but you do... It’s just quiet most times. But it’s there.”

“I smile,” he defends, trying to press the one on his face down.

“...I think I could count on my one hand how many times I saw you smile at school.”
“You didn’t even know me at school,” Keith rolls his eyes, snuggling into the trees cradle. “I smile sometimes.”

“It’s just nice to see...” Shiro says softly. After a moment - that hesitating moment he always does, as if he’s wondering if he should or shouldn’t say it - he murmurs softly, “You always look nice though...”

The silence settles around them, both of them suddenly awkward at his boldness.

Shiro clears his throat and adds clumsily, “Even when you’re scowling 95% of the time.”

Keith chuckles, grabbing a stray leaf off of his shoulder and tossing it at Shiro. It goes right through him, of course, but Shiro laughs with him anyway. “Thanks a lot, you big jerk.”

“Pfft. Alright, alright. No need to get violent.”

Maybe Keith’s a little tired and he doesn’t quite know what he’s doing. Maybe he just feels their bond has strengthened just by hanging out, doing normal things together. Maybe it’s this pressure on him, whispering in his ear and telling him if he doesn’t do this now, he’ll never get another chance again. But Keith reaches his hand out for Shiro, his pale skin glowing warmly as the sun catches it, lighting it up. He just holds it there, outstretched, waiting.

Shiro leans forward, slowly lifting his fingertips up to Keith’s.

They slip right through and it feels kind of strange. Like falling through a hole, or dipping into a shadow. They keep their hands there, hovering over the other’s. There are no clouds. No darkness. Just the soft serenity of the trees and only them around. It’s like they’re the last two people left on earth.

“You too,” Keith murmurs.

Shiro lifts his eyes from their hands to meet Keith’s gaze. He’s always beautiful, but it feels like something special, something quietly private, to see him leaning this close, the light of the sun bathing down on them. The corner of Shiro’s lip pulls up and he whispers, “what?”

“...You look nice when you smile too.”

Shiro tries to press it down, but the smile grows even wider until he laughs, low and warm and rich in his chest. “...Keith,” the sound rumbles fondly. “Are you going to finish your drawing or what?”

They stare at each other for a moment longer, both smiling in a standoff until Keith relents. He pulls his hand back and scoots himself tenderly to the side. He pats the space beside him.

“Me? Are you sure? It feels weird when I touch you, doesn’t it?”

“You’ll be my muse. I want to draw you in here anyway; I want to see how you choose to sit.”

“Oh, Shiro says, bringing himself up beside Keith. There’s not much space for the two of them. His elbow goes right through Keith’s midsection and Keith pulls a face. “I’m sorry,” Shiro laughs sympathetically. “If you want me to move, tell me.”

“No, stay. It’s just a weird feeling, not painful or anything.”

“Mmkay. Suit yourself.” Shiro leans back onto the tree’s embrace, closing his eyes, content. “I’m
glad I can sit on things still. Instead of like...slipping through the dirt in the ground or going right through the second story of your house. I don’t understand how it works. I touched you that one time too. Maybe I have to believe it subconsciously...” He tries again, running his hands through Keith’s arm.

“Stop,” Keith laughs after a second. “It feels weird.”

Shiro draws back with a smile. “You’ve been in a drawing mood lately.”

“Muse, like I said.”

Shiro chuckles. “What an honor.”

They sit like that for awhile until the light starts getting dark and Keith feels recuperated enough to finish their trip home. But he doesn’t want to go home. It’s nice here, just the two of them, nestled in this little cove, tucked away from the rest of the world.

“That’s beautiful, Keith,” Shiro murmurs, still watching Keith.

He holds the drawing out to inspect it from a distance. “Thanks. I almost don’t want to leave.” He thinks about the earlier bit of the day, yesterday, the day before. He sighs. “It’s dreary out there.”

“We can just stay here. You and me. We don’t have to go back. Not right now.”

“I wish,” Keith says. It’s getting cloudy again. Their break is over.

Shiro is still leaning back against the tree, watching him with a serene look on his face. “If you want to stay here, I’ll stay here. If you want to go, I’ll go. ...Wherever you’ll be, I’ll be there too, watching over you.”

Keith looks over. He can feel his eyes widen with growing emotion. He doesn’t get this feeling inside his chest, bursting inside of him. It’s freeing somehow. Like he’s been holding his breath and waiting all this time, and now it’s here.

He smiles softly. If only things were different, this would be perfect. If only they could reach out, make contact as they pleased. It’s like they’ve grown around each other all these years, two pieces of a puzzle, but have never been able to touch.

But Keith is right here, so close to Shiro that if he reached out, it’d look like they were touching. Like it's actually possible. And that'll have to be enough for now.

“How... Who will watch over you?” Keith whispers, reaching his hand out for him again.

Shiro places his hand gently over Keith’s and hums. “You’ll be right here.”

Keith smiles. “Yeah. Right here.”
Keith bypasses the front door and sneaks around the side of the house to the backyard, treading very slowly, very carefully. He can’t see well in this darkness but he can’t risk his phone’s light blaring through their windows and alerting his parents, so he reaches out blindly for the back door’s handle, feeling spider webs and the fluttering of bugs. He shakes out his hand and, very quietly, he presses the handle down.

He pokes his head inside. No one’s around. The light in the hallway is off and the kitchen’s light is dimmed down to barely anything. His parents are settled in for the night then. Keith slips in and holds the door open for Shiro, who literally steps through it instead, grinning crookedly back. Keith just shakes his head and rolls his eyes.

He very carefully makes his way down the dark hall, toward the living room’s light. The t.v. is droning quietly in the background - a good sign. He slowly peeks around the corner.

Both of his parents are home and sitting on the couch together. He can see the tops of their heads, bundled close, leaning against each other. They’re unusually quiet, unusually close. There’s a certain stifling atmosphere that Keith would normally ask about - it’s like someone in the family died or something - but he can’t afford to ask tonight.

They’re distracted. Good. That’s all he can hope for.

Keith gently presses the rubber of his crutches down into the floor and slips behind his parents as quietly as he can, looking up to Shiro who waits for him at the base of the stairs. Both hold their breath, but they worry for nothing; his parents are lost in their own heads. They don’t hear him at all.

After hobbling up the stairs, he thinks he’s home free when he hears Krolia murmuring softly to his dad, “Did Acxa tell you...? He’s still doing it. She heard him last night when she got back home.”

Keith knows what they say about eavesdroppers. He knows what his parents think about him. He knows he should just leave it and go to his room, just like he knew hearing everything Ryou said at the playground would hurt him, which it did. But he takes a small step back behind the wall and stays there, hidden, listening.

Krolia’s voice is low. “And Sam said he was muttering to himself the other night when he snuck out... Apparently all the Holts are worried about him.”

“We keep forgetting to talk with him about that... Work’s been so busy lately. Did you get to talk to him earlier?”

She heaves a regretful sigh. “No, I didn’t get the chance. He’s always sneaking around everywhere. I almost got him, but he said he was going to school. What was I supposed to say?”

“We can do it tomorrow. Maybe he’ll argue less if we talk to him together. Where is he, anyway?”

Krolia mutters. “I texted him when he didn’t come home from school and he said he’s at Hunk’s,
“but it sure has been awhile...”

“Should I call Hunk’s parents to see if he’s actually there?”

Krolia’s comes up short in surprise. “Should we? Are we at that point where we suspect him that much?”

“I don’t know, Krolia...are we?”

“I...I don’t know... We can call Keith’s phone too. Maybe he’ll answer.”

His dad sighs. “If he’s not even answering Katie’s calls... It’s all so unlike him. Usually they’re stuck at the hip. I’m worried...”

“God... So am I.” They’re quiet for awhile, just the t.v. still going on and on, canned laughter in the background. Keith can’t relate. It feels cold and uneasy in their house. He looks up at Shiro and meets his worried eyes. They shine like moons, catching the little bit of light from the nightlight in the bathroom.

“What do we do? ...I was hoping so badly it’d skip their generation... After everything that happened with Aiphos.”

“We couldn’t have known.”

“But we did. We should’ve prepared for this. Tried to prevent it. Like counseling since they were young. Having them go out more.”

“He used to. He loved going outside, but that sort of thing isn’t practical in his state now. You can see how it hurts him.”

“We could’ve done something else then. Went for more camping trips. Had weekend picnics at the lake. Got him a dog. A wheelchair -”

“- He wouldn’t have let us do that.”

“Something. Not just let him sit in his head like this. It’s warping him.”

“Warping.”

“I thought that’s what Red was for.”

“Red hates it outside...” Krolia sniffs and says lowly, “Of course, of all things, he has to be an artist.”

“He loves his art, Krolia. We can’t take it from him.”

“No, that’s not what I meant. He can make beautiful things with it, it’s just...artists are so sensitive. And me? I can’t begin to understand where he’s coming from. Acxa I get. Acxa I can talk to. But Keith...? It’s like he always has the weight on his shoulders and I can’t understand why. He’s so sensitive.”

His dad sighs. “I don’t know, Krolia. I’m at as much of a loss as you are, as I think he is, too.”

They’re silent for awhile. The pause is heavy. “He’s a good boy,” Krolia says softly. “He has a good heart... It’s our fault. We messed up with him. And now...” Her voice trails off, tied up with hopelessness and clipped with the unspoken fear of the future.
“Keith’s dad’s voice is gentle. “Krolia... This isn’t a death sentence. So he’s talking to a dead person? Maybe it’s his way of coping. It’s harmless, isn’t it?”

“When was the last time you spoke to a dead person? He’s not a three-year-old with a big imagination. He’s not just sending prayers and wishes, he’s communicating. He really thinks he’s talking with someone. Katie says...” Her voice catches.

It’s quiet for awhile. When she speaks again, her tone is lower, almost a whisper. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not professionals; let’s find someone who is. I’ll call around tomorrow. First thing.”

“Yeah, I agree,” his dad says tiredly. Keith can imagine him wiping a weary hand over his face. “You remember last time, though. He put a hole through the bathroom wall with his fist. I only just got around to fixing it up...”

“I’ll fix it this time,” Krolia offers with a sigh.

“And then he didn’t talk to us for weeks afterward. He barely eats with us as it is. This is going to be hell. You know how he likes to fight.”

“I wouldn’t expect anything less. He fights his physical therapy appointments, he fights his doctors appointments, he fights school, he fights me, he fights himself... That’s Keith for you, isn’t it? What’s one more?”

“I can tell him if you want, Krolia...”

“No. Let me be the bad guy. It’s easier this way.”

Another silence follows, and then, tentatively: “...What if therapy doesn’t work? What if it gets worse? I don’t want it to get like Aiphos, but what are our options if it does?”

“We’ll get there when we get there.”

When, not if.

Keith thinks of his aunt, locked away, forgotten until her body gave up and death became her only ally. And then he thinks of himself in her place, trapped in one white lonely room until the day he dies. He presses his hands to his face, takes in a long deep breath, and sighs it all out again as quietly and contained as he can.

He escapes to his room and sits on the edge of his bed. He wants to just shove his face into his pillow, pull the covers over his head, and never think about another thing again. But his mind is buzzing.

Back then, after he lost the use of his leg, they had forced him to take anger management classes, on top of seeing his therapist, on top of the physical therapy, on top of everything else going on in his life; it all felt like too much. He had needed an outlet that wasn’t a fist through the wall or screaming at his family and Pidge, the people he loved. They tried to teach him, they really did, but all the meditation in the world wasn’t enough for him. Still isn’t.

He tries anyway. He closes his eyes and pulls his focus to his breath, but he can hear his parents’ disappointed tones pulsing through his head with the beating of his heart. He can feel their fear as they blame themselves because of how he turned out. Like he’s a hopeless case at the end of the road. Like once upon a time, he had potential, but now he’s a piece of crumpled paper ready for the waste bin and no amount of unwrinkling and smoothing out that paper will return it to its
original state.

He’s failed them.

He wants to just say “fuck it” and ignore them. They can’t possibly comprehend what he’s going through. They haven’t seen Shiro or heard him; if they had then they’d believe.

But Keith is an empathetic creature. He can close his eyes and experience all-to-real how it feels to be on the other side of this. See what his parents see. And they just see him, crazy and pathetic, losing his mind, the only thing he really has left.

“An artist”, like it's a bad thing. It’s the one thing that brings Keith peace anymore.

It hurts.

Anger wells up to his defense, trying to drown out the sorrow and he lashes out at the junk on his nightstand. Whatever he can reach, whatever he can break - that’s his target.

It’s his art - his pencil case, sketchbook, and box of drawings. It goes everywhere. He sees the tin case crack open and his pencils and pens scatter across the ground in a jumbled mess. His sketchbook lands on its soft pliable pages and they bend beneath the weight. Papers explode out as the box flings open, flying across the room on loopy wind. They sink through the air until they find stillness in their resting places on the floor.

Keith will have to scrounge around the floor later, trying to avoid his leg as best as possible. He'll need to seek out all the pencils, sort them by color, and flatten the pages of his book. But right now, he just shoves his hands over his face and groans, the sound strained and stuffed deep inside his heart. Really, he just wants to scream.

“Keith...” Shiro says gently, getting up and kneeling besides the damage. His hand just passes through everything and he grimaces. “I’m sorry. This is -”

“No,” Keith says quickly. “No, it’s not your fault. It was my mistake. I need to be more careful.”

Keith’s hands sting and protest as he presses them into his face; he still needs to take care of them in case there’s still glass lodged into his skin, but he’s just - so -

Shiro sighs softly. “...You probably don’t want to hear it, but there are good psychologists in the area. My mom’s friend is one and she’s one of the nicest people I’ve met. Maybe you can suggest her.”


“You won’t ever have to talk about anything you don’t want to. You can just chat about art or movies or... It doesn’t have to be like you see in all the dramatic t.v. shows.”

“I know. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.” Keith bites his lip hard and shoots bullets at the ceiling with his eyes as he drags his hands down and away, digging his fingers across his cheeks. He makes a visible effort to loosen up his shoulders. Breathe in deeply. Unloosen the knot in his mind and stomach. He sees the worry on Shiro’s face and he tries to force himself to pull it together even faster.

“...I know,” Keith says softly after a moment. “I’m sorry. I’m just... It’s been a day. I’m sure you feel it too.”
“Yeah,” Shiro says, finally settling into a seat beside Keith.

“I’ve always been the bad twin. I’ve always known it. It still sucks to hear though.”

“That can’t be true. Every child is different and parents love each of them all the same. It’s a parenting rule.”

“...That sounds like something the most loved child would say. If only the entire world were that ideal.”

Keith truly believes it. He’s felt it in his heart since forever. Acxa’s just through this wall, a few feet away, under the same roof. Their parents aren’t talking shit about her. They’re not worried for her. Perfect Acxa. Normal Acxa.

He doesn’t want to move from his spot, but he knows leaving the exposed wounds on his hands out in the open might bring even more regrets. He pulls himself up and washes them off in the bathroom, picking the remnants of glass from his fingers. It sucks and it stings, but it’s nothing that won’t heal fairly quickly. No lasting damage. Shiro follows him, watching mutely, something in his eyes that’s just as sharp as the glass shards that cut Keith. Keith wishes he could say something to soothe the worry away, but he can’t think of anything, so he just picks and grimaces.

Then they drag themselves back onto Keith’s bed and just sit there, unhappy.

Keith sees Shiro looking down at their legs together; he looks too. Sitting, Keith looks almost normal. Sitting, he doesn’t need crutches or to ask people to slow down. Sitting, he’s safe.

Laying down, too. He tosses himself back and looks up at the ceiling. Shiro follows him down and they lay side-by-side, staring up at the weird plastic glow-in-the-dark stars.

“I’m so fucking tired,” Keith sighs. He looks over at Shiro, who’s starting to develop dark circles under his eyes. They’re faint, but they’re definitely there, and Keith resists the urge to try to run his fingers over them. “...Are you okay?”

Shiro gives him a brief smile. “I’m fine. ...Worried about you. This isn’t fair to you, Keith. Everything that’s happening...”

“Don’t start,” Keith sighs again.

“...Okay,” he whispers, turning his face back up.

They’re quiet for awhile, sitting in the dark somber moment, staring up at the fake stars.

“You need to sleep,” Shiro says eventually.

Keith gives a little shrug and a sigh. His mind is in knots. There’s no way that’s happening.

Night always brings the worst of things. What warmth and comfort being with Shiro in the forest brought feels distant. What he sees in his mind’s eye is Ryou’s shoulders, heaving as he sobs; Keith’s parents, leaning together for comfort because of him; Pidge is in her bed probably, maybe staring at her quiet phone, hurt; and Shiro’s body. Who knows where he is? Waiting. Cold. Alone. The window they know that’s here somewhere in this god forsaken town is hanging high above Shiro. Somewhere, somewhere... Light being blotted out by darkness through the glass, light Shiro can’t reach. It’s the same darkness that’s finding Keith.
Is Shiro’s heart still beating? Fluttering weakly - the faint flickering pulse in the soft exposed skin of his neck? Or maybe everything in his body and veins is silent and still. Shiro’s grey eyes dull and lifeless. The blood stagnant in his heart, just hanging there, waiting to decay.

“How about a bedtime story?” Shiro asks.

Keith hums lowly. It takes him a moment to pull himself out of his head. “I dunno,” he murmurs, rubbing at his face again. He looks to Shiro’s hopeful face and finds it within himself to ask quietly, “Will there be princesses and dragons?”

“Whatsoever you want; your wish is my command.”

Keith chuckles through the weariness. “Okay,” he whispers. He drags himself across his bed and settles into his pillow, reaching over to turn off the light. When he’s comfortable and his eyes have adjusted to the moon’s faint glow that peeks through his curtains, he smiles up at Shiro.

Shiro smiles down, leaning over him with one arm, watching his face with a gentle tenderness that’s so Shiro. Keith lets out a long breath, feeling himself soften. When was the last time anyone thought to tell him a bedtime story? He can’t even remember.

“Once upon a time,” Shiro begins, “there was a princess. She lived in a beautiful tower at the top of the world. She had everything she could ever want, that’s what she thought. She had nothing else she could ask for. She was happy. She was safe. She wanted for nothing. But what she didn’t realize was that she was locked up there. And, one day, a dragon came to the tower and demanded her head. She didn’t know what to do. There was nowhere to go. And so, it ate her -”

“God, Shiro.”

He smiles, holding up a finger. “The dragon ate her. And the kingdom, seeing that window up in the tower empty, went into mourning. What would they do? She was always there. They’d grown used to her presence. It hurt to come to terms that they’d have to mourn her when they had expected her to be there forever. And then she was just...gone. A cloud fell over the kingdom, it felt like things would never be the same. ...But then, right when all hope was lost, a knight, clad in the most brilliant shining armor, burst through the darkness wielding a gleaming sword. No one had been brave enough to fight against the dragon, they’d resigned to their disappointing fates. But not the knight. No. There was fire in his heart. And bravery. He was fair and just and he wouldn’t give up just because things looked hopeless. So he charged forward on his noble steed, swinging his sword. And if you could believe it, with one powerful strike, he cut the dragon clean in half.”

Keith is grinning, lacing his hands together and placing them on his belly as he watches. “Wow.”

Shiro’s animated as he speaks; bright and smiling, his arms waving in grand gestures. He’s clearly done this before. “I know. There was blood everywhere. It made a huge mess. Everyone hoped it’d rain to wash it all away. But guess what? Out of the dragon’s decapitated neck, against all odds, crawled the princess. She was alive somehow. She got a second chance at life. And though she wasn’t the same, she was happy. It was all thanks to her brave knight.

“After that day, things were different. She was no longer confined to her one tower, up in the sky. The knight who had saved her held out his hand and brought her around, showing her her own kingdom. She thought she had known it from her perch in her tower, but it was different somehow the way he showed it. And it was like she was seeing the world anew. Like there was more to this world than she ever could’ve imagined. Yes, there was sadness. Yes, there was death and horror and pain. But there was hope too. There was kindness, and selflessness, and strangers looking out
for other strangers. The world was good.

“Maybe she’d been eaten by a dragon, but she didn’t regret it. She’d learned something invaluable: that the world was a beautiful place. That, without this experience, she might’ve just lived up in that tower all her life, locked away, overlooking lands that were hers, lands she didn’t understand and never would. Not that way.”

Keith’s quiet for awhile. “...I’m glad...”

“Me too,” Shiro whispers.

“What happened next?”

“After that?” Shiro breathes, tilting his head back to look at the stars on the roof. “They lived happily ever after, of course.”

“That dragon had to have been huge. They couldn’t just leave it all over the town. How did they dispose of something like that?”

Shiro rolls his eyes. “They chopped it up into little pieces and fed it to their crocodiles in their moat.”

“Oh...” Keith hums thoughtfully. “That’s a good idea.”

“I’m a natural storyteller obviously.”

“Eh. You left out a part.”

Shiro chuckles, leaning back so that his face catches the sliver of moonlight pouring through the window. It bends strangely across him. Not quite reaching, but not just going through him. He almost glows. “I did? It was my original story.”

“Well, the knight. It wasn’t just the princess who learned something, he did too.”

Shiro smiles knowingly. “Did he? What did he learn?”

“Well, he always thought the princess was a huge bitch -” Shiro laughs “- And, at first, the knight just thought to save her for the reward, of course.”

“Of course.”

“The reward was a lot of money and he needed it for the down payment he spent on all that shiny armor.”

“And you were complaining about my storytelling?”

“But, when he met her, she was different than he expected. Her heart was pure. He didn’t need the money after that. He discovered something even better.”

“He found out how to barbecue the dragon bits?”

Keith grins and laughs from his belly. “How did you know that was exactly what I was going to say? Yeah, he found the nearest barbecue grill. I’d bet dragon was delicious.”

“Lifetime supply if you saved it right. He’d never have to eat a soggy tomato again.”
Keith snorts. “Soggy tomato? What? Are you referring to me? Because I don’t eat soggy tomatoes. That’s disgusting.”

“I saw you the other day. You picked it up without even noticing. I don’t know how you did it. It’s like you don’t even taste what you eat.”

“Well, because it’s not dragon. And I’m not a knight.”

“Well, I’m not a princess either.”

Keith chuckles, lifting himself higher onto his pillow. “You kind of are.”

“Ugh. Yeah.” Shiro’s quiet for a long moment. He looks down at Keith’s hand and reaches out for them, gesturing for Keith to flip them.

Keith does. Because how could he ever ignore a request from Shiro? The glass is gone. His hands no longer shine, catching light. They’re just full of angry little red cuts; it’ll all heal without treatment. The wound on his forearm just needed a big bandage. That’s all. Keith has had worse tripping in the mud and landing in bushes full of thorns, which he used to do all the time, as a child. This is nothing.

But Shiro’s looking at them heavily, sharp hurt in his eyes, like he has his hands around Keith’s neck and he’s slowly choking the life from him. “...Can I add to the story?”

“If it’s as fun as the previous bit.”

“Ha, well, I just... About the princess. There was a time when she was afraid...more than for her own life. You see, she...she thought her knight was maybe giving too much of himself. That he wasn’t watching out for his own wellbeing, too focused on hers. And she saw how much it was hurting him, even when he didn’t...and she wanted him to stop. But she didn’t know how to get him to do that without making him upset. ...What would the knight say to that?”

Keith sighs. “The knight knows his limits.”

“What if he doesn’t?” Shiro whispers, looking down at Keith, torment in his eyes. “What if he can’t see how hurt he’s really getting? How dangerous it really is? What if he’s so focused on helping the princess that he’s blind to everything else, sinking deeper and deeper? And he just gets more and more hurt until there’s nothing left? Soon, there’ll be no turning back. What if the princess was meant to be eaten by that dragon all along, but in the end, it’s the knight who’s a beaten broken doll?”

“The princess never deserved it. The knight’s going to save her whether he lives or dies and that’s all that matters.”

Shiro closes his eyes tightly. When he speaks, his voice is tight with emotion. “No, Keith. ...No.”

It wasn’t the right answer, but Keith doesn’t have one to give. He only has the truth.

Keith scoots over again, nodding to the space beside him. “Lay with me.”

Shiro takes a few moments to gather himself, head bowed, as if in mourning. He shifts and lays back, turning his troubled eyes to Keith.

“Don’t worry,” Keith whispers, reaching up hesitantly, as if he could feel Shiro’s temple. “You’re only thinking in negatives, but everything’s going to be okay... I believe there is a happy ending for
us, Shiro. If we don’t give up, we can find it. But only then.”

Shiro’s eyes slip away and down. “I care about you too, Keith, and I want to help you. ...But you keep getting hurt because of me. Not just physically, but emotionally as well. That’s not a friend. It’s not right of me. Not on any level.”

Keith watches as Shiro bites the bottom of his lip, thinking hard. There are a lot of things Keith wants to say, but it feels like he’s already said them all before. And besides, it doesn’t make sense not to keep going forward. It’s so clear in Keith’s mind, surely Shiro can see it too. Is there even a need to argue the point?

Keith’s so tired. He’s drifting. He tries to stay awake for Shiro, but he can feel everything in him growing heavy as the day reminds him of the toll he needs to pay. He pinches at his brow and blinks his eyes.

“...Let me think about it.” Shiro finally says. “I need to think about it. About what’s right for you.”

“There’s nothing to think about. We’ll find you, Shiro. Tomorrow, we’ll go to Northside.”

“Your leg... Your hands... Your parents.”

“Just a scratch,” Keith hums into the pillow. He wants to say something else to Shiro, something to reassure him, but he feels light and soft from Shiro’s presence so close tonight, his bedtime story.

“Sleep, Keith,” Shiro whispers, turning on his side to face him. “I’ll be here.”

He’s asleep before he can respond. Shiro somehow always knows just what to say. Why can’t Keith ever find the words too?

Keith sleeps well that night, and, for once, he has a dream that doesn’t torment him.

It’s one of those weird half-dreams though, where he’s asleep, he’s definitely asleep, but he’s also aware of where he is, safe at home, in the comfort of his own bed, content on his back.

He dreams something weird.

Something he’s a bit unsure of. Should he stop it? Should he not?

He dreams Shiro’s in between his legs, beneath the covers, mouth slowly kissing up the inside of his thigh.

He dreams Shiro’s breath, hot and heavy, is brushing against the sensitive hardness between his legs.

He dreams of Shiro kissing inward, his soft gentle hands taking extra care of the leg that gives Keith so much grief. Treating him like he’s something precious.

There is no hurt in this dimension. Everything is lit up with light, golden at all the edges of his mind. Keith presses his head back against the softness of his pillow and parts his lips. He gasps in, a small shivering sound, and exhales out a shudder. “Shiro.”

It feels so good. Shiro’s so warm. So soft. So comforting. It feels as if they’re both of the same
mind, the same heartbeat. Shiro knows where to kiss Keith, where to hold him, when to move, how much pressure. He knows the quickest way to dismantle Keith and just how slow to go to keep him right where he wants him. Shiro’s perfect.

While most of his world is filled with pain, this dream is the absolute exception. Like angels are finally redeeming him for all his pain and suffering, whispering in his ear, “this is what it could be like. Soon. Just keep going. You have to keep going.”

And Keith believes it. God, he really does. He's never felt this way for anyone before, never thought he could. He wants to fight for Shiro until the ends of the earth.

He breathes the words out on a whisper, his mouth forming over Shiro’s name in a prayer. Everything rides up in him like a wave. It’s _too much_. It feels so good. He’s never - he’s never thought -

_Shiro._

He wakes up with a small little gasp.

It’s morning. His eyes are still closed. He can hear the finches outside his window, chirping happily. He still feels the faint phantom traces of Shiro’s hands on his thighs, his mouth on him. Shiro’s touch. The both of them connected.

He knows there’s a mess in his boxers and he’s embarrassed immediately. Did Shiro see? _Hear?_ Pidge always used to say he talked in his sleep. What will Shiro say? What does he think?

He gathers his courage and opens his eyes.

Keith’s laying on his back on the side of the bed, right where he fell asleep, but the space beside him is empty. He sits up to search, but does so too quickly, forgetting that his body is always working against him. Keith chokes on a surprised groan; pain reaches up to catch him. His leg is painful and stiff. This is reality, not a dream anymore... Unfortunately.

Shiro turns sharply, startled. He hadn’t even been paying attention. He’s standing across the room, framed by the window. He had been staring outside through the small crack but for how long, Keith doesn’t know.

When Shiro finds Keith, his eyes are wide. Confused. Like he doesn’t know where he is or who Keith is...and it scares him.

Keith slows, golden edges of his dream fading. “...Shiro?” He asks.

He looks spooked. The whites of his eyes are more pronounced. The dark bags beneath them are deeper, stark.

“Shiro?” Keith asks again.

Shiro’s staring right at him, but he’s far away. And then he blinks to himself. It’s like he had vacated his body, but he’s here again in one sudden moment. The shine of his eyes comes back and he locks his gaze on Keith.

Keith just stares. “...Are you...okay?”

“...Keith,” he says slowly. “I...” He runs a hand through his hair. “...Yeah. Sorry. I, um...” He shakes his head. “Oh, I...I thought I saw those birds outside again. It’s got me kind of freaked
Keith pushes his sheets off of himself and goes to sit up, but Shiro holds his hand up. “No. Please, your leg. There’s nothing there. I just...” He takes a deep breath and pushes his hair back again. “The birds. I thought I saw them. Guess I’m a little jumpy.”

Keith pulls the covers back over himself slowly, but watches Shiro’s face. He’s hunched over. Tense, like he expects at any moment for something horrible to happen. The crack of the glass maybe. A blood-curdling scream. But nothing does.

Keith jumps when he hears steps across the wooden flooring, but it’s just Red, slipping out of his room. He hadn’t even seen her.

“How’d you sleep?” Shiro asks, settling back down into the window seat and rubbing at his brow. He turns his gaze back outside.

Oh, yeah... Keith remembers. He still feels a bit raw deep in his gut, but in a good way. He needs to go clean up the mess in his boxers still and he’s not sure how to sneak a clean pair out from his drawer without having to explain it to Shiro.

His heart is still full of Shiro...

He licks his lips and tries to keep his tone casual. “It was fine.”

“Hm... That’s good,” Shiro murmurs, looking down at his hands as he fiddles with them.

Keith watches him.

He looks different now, after the dream, and Keith doesn’t know how to take that. His hair’s the same, his face, his clothes. But he just...looks different to Keith. Like he’s changed somehow. But maybe it’s Keith who’s changed.

He likes Shiro, he realizes, and the thought is almost embarrassing. When he was human, Keith couldn’t have cared less about him. But now? When there’s nothing to be done? Of course Keith’s heart would choose this. It’s not like Keith can tell it no. ...Or that he’d even want to.

He’s never once thought that someone could look this beautiful before, simply by just being themselves.

He feels awkward. Like he suddenly doesn’t have permission to talk to Shiro. Like if he does, he’ll immediately make a fool out of himself and regret it. Silence just hangs over them.

There are more important things to deal with. Of course there are. Keith clears his throat, shifting uncomfortably in his boxers, biding his time.

He rubs at his face, trying to knead out the blush in his cheeks and the thoughts of Shiro still whirling in his mind. He needs to focus.

He gets his phone out so he can check the map of the next neighborhood they need to look through.

He’s met with a wall of angry texts from Pidge. They’re big chunks of text, not simple sentences. Not just one or two. He has to scroll. He knows he’s in trouble. He sighs and presses a hand to his face.

“What is it?” Shiro asks.
“You know how kittens look really cute and harmless, but when they’re pissed, they could probably kill you?”

“I guess.”

“Pidge is upset.”

Shiro stays quiet.

“It’s fine,” Keith hums, ignoring them for the time being. “I’ll call her tonight or something. Maybe I’ll finally paint her that damn robot she keeps asking for. Make her cookies. Buy her something. I dunno. Anyway, let’s focus. Northside’s going to be a bitch to navigate with all their spear-whoever-tries-to-climb-us kind of fences…”

“Mm.”

Keith looks up at Shiro’s lack of reaction. “...Maybe I can bring one of my dad’s work blankets and toss it over the top. And then, later, I want to find out more about this cow girl. What do you think?”

Shiro hesitates, still not looking up from his hands. He’s quiet. Too quiet. There’s no light in his eyes.

Keith can feel his stomach slowly sinking like sludge. “...What’s up?”

“I was just thinking...I had fun playing that game with you the other day. Maybe we can just hang out here today.”

Keith almost laughs. “What?” His smile quickly fades as he realizes Shiro’s not joking. “...Are you serious?”

Shiro just breathes in one long low breath.

“No,” Keith says. “No, we’re going out.”

“I’ve thought about it. I’ve been thinking about it. You need rest.”

“Shiro. I appreciate the sentiment and all, but there’s no time. If we get your body back then we can spend as much time together like this as long as you want.”

“But...if we don’t get my body back... If these are our last few days together...” He bites his lip. “I don’t want my last few days to just be about revenge. You heard what Pidge said about forty-eight hours and it’s been way more than that. If the police haven’t found anything, then...I just... I have fun with you, Keith. Wouldn’t that be how you’d want to spend your last few moments? Being warm and happy?”

“But giving up? It’s still so soon in the game. Northside is just right there.”

Keith stares. Every moment counts. Every moment counts. It’s like a mantra beating inside Keith with ever thump of his heart. Why can’t Shiro hear it too?

“A day of rest doesn’t have to be a surrender. Having the extra healing time will help.”

Keith bites his lip, looking out the window desperately one last time like he might see something out there to give him an excuse to fight.
“It’s my body, Keith,” Shiro says softly, finally looking up from his fingers to meet Keith’s gaze. The curtains are still closed and hardly any light is getting in, but the light that does crosses over Shiro, glinting off of his eyes, making them look like they’re burning with white fire. He looks inhuman. Faraway. “I know what I’m risking. One of the things I wish I had done when I was alive was get to know you. Now is like my second chance.”

Keith puts his hands on his hips and looks outside as he thinks. He bites his lip. Slowly, he shakes his head. “I won’t force you to come with me. But I’m going. My mom leaves in a half hour and I’m going then. Come or don’t.”

Shiro sighs softly and looks back out the window.

Keith slips from his bed and grimaces as his leg wracks him with pain. On second thought, he rolls back onto his bed, grabs his pills, takes a mouthful, and then goes to his dresser to pull out a new set of clothes.

He takes a moment to himself in the bathroom, sighing as he cleans himself up. God. He doesn’t know what’s right. His mind’s a mess. On one hand, what if they find the body? But on the other...what if they don’t? What if Keith is just leading them on a foolish goose chase, tiring Shiro out more and more, depriving him of the last few moments in his life he can relax and do as he pleases?

Shiro’s asking him to stay. ...And Keith’s been wrong before...

But...

He tosses his dirtied clothes away and sighs, turning to glare at himself in the mirror as he leans forward onto the counter. He’s being foolish. Dreaming about Shiro like that’s something he can afford. Pining after him. Keith’s stupid, stupid heart.

There’s still that soft vulnerable tug he feels in his gut as he thinks of Shiro, but he tries to shove it away. This is no time for high school crushes. No time for moping or regrets.

He goes back to his room, sits on the bed, and grabs his bottle of pills.

Shiro’s head snaps over. He looks like he's going to jump up and smack the bottle from Keith's hands. “You just took a bunch.”

Keith just shakes his head. “It won’t be enough. I can already tell.”

“You’re going to destroy your liver and kidneys. You’ll wreck your body.”

Keith just sighs and takes another.

Shiro’s head snaps over. He looks like he's going to jump up and smack the bottle from Keith's hands. “You just took a bunch.”

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“You’re going to destroy your liver and kidneys. You’ll wreck your body.”

Keith just sighs and takes another.

It’s just one more, but Shiro tsk angrily. He looks back out the window, shoulders tight with tension.

He frowns down at the sketchbook and pencils strewn all about in a mess from last night. He’d like to just leave it, but the pencils are dangerous. If he steps on one and slips, he’s in no mood to call upon his reflexes to catch himself.

With one last heavy sigh, Keith slips off his bed. He goes to the window and leans over Shiro to pull the curtains back for him to see.

There’s nothing out there. No birds. No blood. There’s a crack through his window, but it
doesn’t look as bad as it had when the crows had attacked it. He runs a hand over it, confused.

“There was more damage,” Shiro says softly, watching Keith’s fingers follow the crack across glass. “I know there was more.”

“...I thought so too.”

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” Shiro whispers, looking down at Keith’s yard again, eyes scanning around, afraid.

“It’ll be okay, Shiro,” Keith whispers, but Shiro disregards him, so he just sighs and sits on the floor. Grudgingly, he begins to pick up each paper.

They had gone everywhere and Keith means everywhere. He’s got to find a better way to store things. Or a better way to deal with his temper.

“What a fucking mess,” Keith groans.

They’re sketches he’s been doing of the town. Before all this, he liked to sit and just watch people go by, watch the clouds, watch the day turn to night, see as the warm lights flood the street. Then he’d capture it into a drawing and hide it away in this box. His ‘protection of a loved one’ drawing is there too, sitting in front of Shiro as he kneels before it. He tries to pick it up again, to no avail.

Shiro looks down at them all. “These are different than the ones I’ve seen.”

“Yeah. I was trying to draw all my favorite places around town. I have one sketchbook I use to take out and another one for portraits. Sometimes I shove my projects in here.”

“Just as gorgeous as your portraits... A school project?”

“No...just my own. Just because.”

Shiro smiles softly at that, reaching forward to lean his face into one. “The football field.”

Keith grabs it, scooting toward Shiro so they sit face to face. They’re close and Keith feels a bright kind of nervousness trickling up his neck.

He smiles up at Shiro tentatively. It always feels like stepping off the edge of something showing his art to someone else. But he trusts Shiro. “I’m not done yet.”

Shiro smiles slightly as he leans forward, looking. He lightly traces his finger over the bottom of the field, the only part left undone. “Oh,” he says after a moment. “This was just the other day, wasn’t it? I saw you there.” He wrinkles his nose as he realizes. “...We got in your way.”

“...Ha, well, you didn’t not get in the way. If I had known you, maybe I would’ve drawn you in. But no, I thought you were just like the rest of them.”

“Maybe the rest of them aren’t as bad as you think,” Shiro says, raising his eyebrows just slightly as Keith looks up.

Keith thinks about it. Thinks of Shiro, how he had seemed so shallow and typical only the other day - the bitter anger Keith had felt when Shiro had scooped up the pencil for him, just trying to be helpful - and now, look. And Lotor, who Keith has learned actually does have a heart, feels fear, loneliness. “Yeah, maybe.”

“It’s funny. How many times do you think I accidentally bumped you in the hallways? Or stood
in front of you in line...or...anything. Anything at all. This town is so small. And we never talked, never communicated. And now it feels like I’ve known you forever.”

Keith smiles warmly. He’s glad he’s not the only sap in the room who thinks that. “Yeah. And I don’t usually get along with anyone. Hence, my one friend, Pidge.”

Shiro laughs quietly. “I see you with others too.”

“Lance and Hunk? Yeah. It feels different with you though,” Keith whispers, looking down and away. “...Like... Like -” He struggles for a word that isn’t fate or meant to be. He laughs softly. Like this is the time to say such things. “I don’t know. I just... ...Forget I said that...”

Keith coughs into his hand awkwardly and pulls himself up. He shoves his drawings onto the desk before pulling a drawer back and reaching for an older sketchbook.

He hesitates as his hands go around the old worn pages. They’re so broken in and used that they curl at the edges, none of the pages lining up anymore. Keith doesn’t even know why he’s doing this. His artwork is private, especially his older stuff. But there’s just something about Shiro that makes Keith feel like he can actually be himself. Without shame. Without the need to hide. It feels like unlocking a door of his own personal cage and setting himself free.

He swallows hard and says casually. “You asked about whether or not I drew Pidge before. I have, I just...am kind of embarrassed. They’re old.”

“Ah, your secret art,” Shiro says, sitting forward.

“Yeah... I usually pretend it doesn’t exist, but...well, you’re you, so. Here.” Keith scoots over, sitting beside Shiro. Their knees would bump and touch if Shiro were human still. Keith feels that odd swoop as he goes through Shiro and he secretly is starting to grow fond of it.

Keith angles the sketchbook on his lap so they both can see easily. “I didn’t really start drawing seriously until recently. These are some of my first sketches.”

Shiro leans forward and a bit of the wear in his eyes rubs away, making way for light. “When was this?”

“Middle school,” Keith laughs. “You don’t have to be polite. They’re shit, I know. I knew it then too. Everyone’s got to start somewhere.”

Shiro smiles, tracing his fingers centimeters over the drawings. “They're not shit. ...But look how far you’ve come.”

No, they really are bad. Keith tosses the page aside. As he flips through the years, Shiro’s face grows quieter. “...Dark,” he whispers.

“My leg. Art quickly became my way of coping. It’s not so bad anymore.”

“No?”

“Nope.” Keith grabs his newer sketchbook and switches it out for his old one. They’re the portraits of Shiro, all peaceful. Serene. Soft. “I like these ones,” Keith says gently, placing a hand on them. “I like drawing you.”

Shiro’s quiet for awhile. “They’re beautiful, Keith.”
And they are. They’re the only pieces of Keith’s work that he can admit it to himself. He loves them. It’s not because of his own skill, it’s because of Shiro.

Keith tilts his head to look up at him. Shiro is tired and quiet today, but he still softens as he meets Keith’s gaze, his mouth pulling up into a gentle smile.

“I -” Keith says, but his voice sounds wrong. Too loud. Too high. He clears his throat and averts his eyes as tries to stop the blush on his cheeks. “I know we’re kind of fighting about it right now, but I think you’ve really been handling everything well. More than I ever would’ve guessed. You’ve just been tossed in this impossible situation and you keep your head high. You’re patient still. You’re kind. ...I think you’re really amazing, Shiro,” Keith breathes. He blinks quickly and gathers courage, looking up at Shiro’s face.

He’s still.

“I think...” Keith’s voice dips low and he feels his traitorous heart going there again, thinking of Shiro, welling up with yearning. “I think...we really get along...”

They’re close. Only a few inches away. Keith knows it’s not possible, but he thinks he can feel the warmth rolling from Shiro. Can feel his presence close to him, soothing, a comfort in this cold house.

It’s like they both slow as this moment hangs around them and they realize that the other is thinking the same thing.

If Keith were to lean only a little bit higher, he could kiss Shiro. He could follow that feeling that welled up in his gut in that dream where everything was safe. Everything was right with the world.

He could press his lips to Shiro’s and pray for contact. If they met each other halfway, if skin touched skin, Keith would crawl up into Shiro’s lap, grab Shiro’s face between his hands, and kiss him senseless. Warmth would bleed into warmth. And they could forget this world. They could grab at Shiro’s second chance at life, do what teenagers do. Let themselves fall in love...

Only. He can’t. Because Shiro is not alive. They can’t even touch each other.

And in one deliberate, full-bodied shift, Shiro moves away. He turns from Keith completely, swallowing hard. His whole body is fraught with tension.

“Keith,” he says lowly, and it’s hard and it’s almost cold and...it's a reprimand.

Everything in Keith tumbles out of his control.

“I-I’m sorry,” Keith stumbles, immediately stuttering out of the moment. He shuts his sketchbook quickly and tosses it beneath his bed. He scatters, pushing himself up and away. He wants to run, but can’t. He retreats to his art desk, leaning over it, cringing at himself. He knew not to do it. He knew, but he just couldn’t pull away. Shiro had been so close...he’s like gravity...and it had felt so good. But it was like touching the sun, and now Keith has been burned. He’s melting. “I didn’t mean... I wasn’t - Jesus. Shiro. I’m sorry.”

Shiro’s quiet for a moment. “No, it’s...fine. I just. We can’t. It’s impossible.”

Keith closes his eyes and nods sharply. God. He’s made such a mess. He thinks he might be sick. His stomach churns. “I know. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, Shiro.”

Shiro’s quiet for a long time. So long that Keith begins to feel that sticky sharp sensation of panic...
filling his body. He wishes he could take it back. Just rewind the day. Rejection claws at his insides guiltily. He feels so much shame and hurt. He thought...

He doesn’t know what he thought.

Eventually, Shiro says, voice low, “Somehow, it feels like we’ve known each other for much longer. But we haven’t. It’s only been a little while. ...I keep forgetting that.”

“Y-yeah, that’s true...” Keith whispers, letting his eyes fall back down to the drawing he had placed on the desk. The football field. That blank spot where Shiro should’ve been, that he chose not to draw.

“...How did you hurt your leg?” Shiro whispers.

Keith looks up at Shiro sharply, mouth parting. “...What?”

“I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to talk about it. But I can feel it, even in the short amount of time I’ve known you, like a dark knot of your past that you’re fighting and fighting against and it’s just...it’s hurting you. There are so many things that are hurting you.”

“Shiro,” Keith breathes, shifting uncomfortably. “...I don’t... This isn’t really - I don’t like talking about it.”

“Okay,” Shiro says softly. He’s staring at Keith’s hands, but his eyes are distant. “That’s fine. I just...”

Shiro cups his hands over his mouth and nose. He breathes into his hands slowly. “From the beginning, you’ve just been in pain. So much pain. And now...” Shiro shakes his head and closes his eyes heavily. “God, Keith...” He whispers, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “I don’t want to add to your suffering.”

“You’re not,” Keith says sharply, looking directly at Shiro. “I have fun with you too. I like being around you. And you didn’t ask for this. You’re the one suffering the most -”

“-I don’t think I am.”

Keith sputters in disbelief as he sits down on the floor again beside him, pushing himself into Shiro’s space to get him to understand. “What? You’re a ghost. You can’t eat, drink, sleep, touch things. Shiro. I want to help you. I want to do this. I know we’ve only just met, but even in that small amount of time...you mean a lot to me.”

Shiro’s breath quivers as he exhales. There’s a little divot of shadow between his brow as he thinks too hard. Keith wants to reach over and poke it off his skin.

Shiro trembles. “Keith.”

It’s so frustrating. Keith doesn’t know what to say. Shiro’s so torn up about this. Keith just wants him to feel better. He says what’s in his heart: “I-I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t say such things, but I just...I want to do this...for you. I care about you, Shiro, more than I probably should...”

It’s the wrong thing to say.

Shiro goes grey as ash. He looks sick. He closes his eyes and exhales, breath unsteady as he presses his lips together tightly.
“Keith...?” Shiro’s voice is as soft as the stillness in the air, golden bits of dust floating past the beams of light falling from the window. He shakes his head. “I think we should stop this.”

Keith freezes. He thinks maybe he heard it wrong, but then he sees it written all over Shiro’s face. “...What?”

“I think we should leave it to the police. Pidge comes from a very intelligent family, the sheriff won’t just let the murderer go and continue to kill people. He’s going to solve the case.”

“No,” Keith mutters, shaking his head quickly in denial. “No, I can do this. I’m going to help you figure out who hurt you like this. I promised you.”

“Keith, it’s hurting you now. Not just physically, it’s hurting all your relationships with your family, your friends. And now... We’re getting too close,” he says lowly. “What you feel... What I feel,” he whispers, throat tightening with pain. It’s not right. None of this is right! I’m already a ghost. I won’t be coming back. We’re just going to get closer and closer and then I’m going to disappear. That will kill you, Keith! I’m only hurting you. In every single way, I’m only hurting. I don’t want that!”

“You don’t know you’re not coming back. Maybe we can be together-”

“-Keith, no-”

“You don’t know! How could you know? You’re just going to give up on yourself? Like you’re something that can be thrown away?! Well, I’m not. Even if you don’t believe, I do. I’m not giving up on you! You’re still out there and I’m going to find you if it’s the last thing I do. We just found an arm. That’s it. You can live without an arm.”

Shiro shakes his head, his eyes wide in distress. “No. This is just what I mean. I’m so sorry, Keith! I didn’t understand what I was doing by accepting your help. I was ignorant. I was so clueless. I didn’t think. I never would’ve guessed that I could ever feel...” His breath catches in his throat and he turns his face from Keith again, pressing a hand to it. “God, Keith. You don’t get it! You just don’t understand? I’d rather die than let you continue this. In the beginning, I thought...” His voice catches again and he lets out a wounded laugh. He shrugs, staring back at Keith, his eyes bleeding out with pain. “In these few days with you, I’ve learned something about myself. I’m not going to let you continue this.”

Keith shakes his head. He feels distant, detached from his body. “Why? It’s my choice. Why can’t you see you’re worth fighting for?”

“Look at me, Keith,” Shiro says. He stands tall, walking around so he’s square in front of Keith. He slaps a hand to his chest, where the blood still hangs. “Look. You can’t touch me!” He waves a hand through Keith’s chest, who flinches. “I can’t touch you or anything else! I’m a ghost, Keith. A ghost! I can’t help you. I’m just sending you out there each day, wrecking your leg more and more for what? You’re so worried about me and my family, but what about yourself? What about your parents? They’re worried, Pidge is worried. And you and me, we’re - “ He presses his face into his hands and groans. “Even if we find my body... Vengeance and justice - it’s meaningless, Keith. Satisfying my curiosity in exchange for your wellbeing? No, Keith, no. I could never want that.”

He settles back onto the ground beside Keith, looking miserable. He leans forward to place his hand over Keith’s, who looks up at Shiro, lost and hurt. “Here’s what I want you do,” Shiro whispers. “I want you to go to school again. I want you to get back into the cycle of
things. Draw. Find out who you are. I want you to grow up, get old, find someone you love. And then get married to them. I want you to start a family, treat them with all the love and respect you treat me with...and go on to live a full life like you’re meant to. Forget about me. I’m gone. I was never meant to be here. This is all just...borrowed time. Live a full life for yourself. Live the way you were meant to live.”

“Shiro, I can do this. If this is about my leg, then save it. I’ve heard enough about the damn thing. Everyone’s telling me I need to stop letting it get in my way and then the second I try to do something, everyone’s demanding I sit down. I’ve had enough.”

“It’s not about your leg. I don’t doubt you, Keith. I just... I’ve been thinking about it. What it means to die. All these things in my future that I’ve lost... I’ll never actually have them. God, it kills me. Simple things. Like...like waking up with the person you love to get ready for the day. Making coffee for them as they sleep a little longer in the bed you share together... Getting a shitty job you hate. Coming back home to see their face. Or maybe even getting married by the flowers my grandfather used to love... I never realized how much I wanted these things. Now I won’t get the chance... But you, Keith,” Shiro whispers. His eyes are shining, pained. “You can still have them all. If we stop this. Right now. I’m not taking them from you, Keith. Not for my sake. We can’t go down together.”

“No one said anything about dying,” Keith whispers earnestly, leaning forward. “What if I find you today? Just give me one more day. I can do it. Please, Shiro.”

He’s already shaking his head. His face is set. He’s made up his mind. “No. No, I’m done.”

“Shiro. No! I want to find you! I need to find out who did this.”

“And when you do? Then what? What if they find you first? You heard Pidge, there are rumors going around school that you’re looking for my killer. What do you think they’re going to do when that rumors comes around to them?”

“I don’t know? Come to me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I can catch them!”

“Or they can catch you.”

Keith lets out a winded breath. He realizes immediately that Shiro is right. Shiro was a tank. Shiro had a scholarship for being one of the best physically. He worked out, he was tall, he was strong, he was not going to go down easily.

Keith has to be real about this. He has his knife, but he also has his leg. Because of it, his one go-to advantage - his agility - is shot. If someone bigger, quicker, stronger than Shiro were to come after him, truth be told...he would not survive. Even Keith cannot deny it.

“I can do it,” Keith whispers anyway. His nose is burning as he shakes his head. “Let me try. Please. I can save you.”

“I’m already dead, Keith,” Shiro whispers softly. “There’s nothing left to save.”

“You don’t know that. What if you’re just hurt somewhere, astral projecting? I’ve heard stories.”

“Like I’m sleeping somewhere? Waiting?”
“Yes.”

“...Then why don’t you astral project when you sleep? Why is it just me? Right now? Keith. Ghosts are only ghosts when they’re dead.”

Keith shakes his head. “No. I don’t believe that.”

“Keith...” Shiro brings his hand up to Keith’s face, resting it on his cheek. It doesn’t connect. They’re right here, so close they’re almost touching, but they can’t. They just can’t. There’s this divide between them, all around them. They can never cross that bridge. Everything feels so impossible. He lets his hand hover over Keith’s face, looking at it through wistful eyes. “Keith. If I ask you...to please stop... Will you listen...? Will you do as I ask?”

Keith just keeps shaking his head. “Shiro... I can't... I have to -”

"Then I have to leave." The words are heavy with weight. Firm. Unyielding. "I can't help you hurt yourself any longer."

Keith blinks up, eyes flying wide. "...What?"

But Shiro sags under the weight of Keith's gaze. His brow furrows. He bites his lip. "Damnit, Keith... I just wanted...” He gives his head a sharp shake, bitter smile on his face. “...Thank you. Thank you for trying this far for someone you didn’t even know. You have a kind heart, Keith Kogane. You’re so brave. You’re so good.”

Keith feels his hands buzzing. He feels panic rising in his heart like sickness. He thinks he might throw up. “You’re leaving now? You’re just going to leave me?”

“You deserve a peaceful life. I can’t keep hurting you like this.”

“You think leaving me is going to help? You think that won’t hurt me too? Don’t just leave. Just this one last person. That one restraining order girl. Just this one and then you can do whatever you want. Shiro, please. Please. I’m begging you.”

“I’ve already let this go on for way longer than I should’ve... And I knew it. I knew. But I just...I’ve had fun with you and I selfishly didn’t want to let that go. I got too close to you. I’m so sorry... I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Stay, Shiro. I don’t want you to leave! I’ve had fun too!”

Shiro positions himself in front of Keith, leaning down into his face, trying to cup his cheeks. He waits until Keith looks at him before he says firmly, “Listen to me, Keith. This is important. No one else can hear me anymore. No one else can see me. You’re the last one. The absolute last one. You’ll hear my last words, my last wishes. So please. Listen.

“I know what you want, Keith. I’ve been listening and I’ve thought about it a lot. I really have. But please, this is all I have left. My final wish -”

“No,” Keith shakes his head, face crumpling. He tries to hold his tears back, but they pour over anyway. “No.”

“Listen,” Shiro whispers softly. “...My final wish. I want you to find happiness...and in order to do that, I need you to stop this. Please. No more hunting for these windows. No more looking for my body. No more hunting down my killer. I want you to live a normal life. Do you understand?”
Keith shakes his head. He just lets the tears flow. “Shiro.”

“Consider it my last dying wish. Please, Keith.” With one last brave smile that doesn’t touch near his eyes, he whispers, “Please just forget me.”

He gets to his feet.

Shiro backs up, two small steps, as he stares at Keith’s open hurt face.

“Don’t,” Keith breathes, reaching his hand out.

“Thank you for everything, Keith. I hope you find happiness that someone as special as you deserves...”

“Shiro!” Keith begs, shoving himself to his feet. His leg cannot fail him now. Not now. Now when Shiro is leaving out the door and he may never be able to see him again.

He runs after Shiro, but it’s no use. His foot tweaks underneath his weight and he’s down faster than it took him to get up. He crashes into the floor with the entirety of his weight.

It’s not fair. It’s not fucking fair. He slams his fist into the ground as hard as he can with an angry shout. And then into his leg, pounding on it, cursing it.

He hates it, he hates it, he hates it.

It’s all his fault. This is all his fault.

“Shiro!” He calls, voice cracking, but Shiro doesn’t answer.
Chapter 7

Shiro.

For the rest of the day, Keith lays in his bed, stares up at those stars on his ceiling, and thinks of Shiro. Time ticks away, one second, two seconds, three, four, an hour, two, more... And then it’s evening and the sky is blood red with the setting sun and he hasn’t eaten all day but still, Keith doesn’t move. His mind is stuck, looping over and over, in and out of itself.

...Shiro.

He’s seeing and hearing everything playing in his head and there’s nothing he can do to turn it off. He’s stuck here, on his bed, helpless to change a thing.

Shiro’s laughter, the softness of his smile, the way he had eased in Keith’s presence the more they got to know each other. The way he had started at that window and gradually gotten closer, finally laying out casually on Keith’s bed, face full of bright happiness.

He can’t be dead. Not when Keith finally just got to know him. He can’t.

Keith turns his head toward the window, desperate and praying with all his heart that this is just a dream, that he’s crazy and Shiro is still here, sitting at the seat, watching him through those grey eyes.

Instead, he sees a black bird fly by, wings catching the sky’s red light. A crow. He closes his eyes and grits his teeth. Waits. But there’s nothing. Not even Shiro.

So he just...sleeps.

And sleeps. He doesn’t want to be conscious enough to realize he’s a raging disappointment anymore. He let Shiro down. He let himself down. He let everyone down. If only he didn’t have this fucking leg, then things would’ve been okay.

...That’s...it’s what he wants to believe.

He’s livid and disgusted with himself. Every bit of himself. If only he had tried something else...

If only he had just...kept his mouth shut...

Sleep doesn’t turn off his thoughts; they’re with him still, barbed deep into his flesh. Wounds worsen as his mood plummets. Pain is like a contaminant. His leg, that’s been hanging in there, suddenly feels like it’s pinned together with daggers and they’re sinking out of place, twisting inside of him, jamming in and up into his core. And his hands that didn’t hurt him much before suddenly feel like they’re burning. He’s burning. Everything’s wrong and too raw and he hates it and it hurts and his nightmares are back and he’s falling, falling, falling, and -

“Keith?”

He breathes in sharply. There’s a knock on his door.

He lays there for a moment, face pressed into his pillow, hoping that they’ll just go away. He can see the clock on his nightstand reading almost nine at night. He doesn’t have the energy or will for this.
He can hear his mom calling through the door again, voice muffled, “Keith. We want to talk to you.”

“I can’t,” he chews out. The pain is almost unbearable. He can hardly handle it by itself, he can’t have one more thing. He’ll crumble beneath it all. He can hear the way his throat tears and minces his words. “I’m in a lot of pain right now. I can’t talk.”

There’s a pause and he can hear his parents murmuring to each other. Of course, they can’t just give him peace - the door opens.

“Keith -” Krolia says.


“...What were you doing yesterday?” She asks.

He doesn’t move. “I was at Hunk’s.”

A stony silence. Then, “Were you?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, that’s funny. We called Hunk’s mom yesterday. She said you weren’t there. Let’s try again: where were you?”

He inhales. Exhales. “I can’t right now. Come back later. I can’t.”

“Why are you walking around on your leg? Where are you going? Keith, you know how dangerous that is for you. What if you wreck your leg to a point where you can’t walk at all? You’re going to be content in a wheelchair the rest of your life? Because that’s what we’ll have to do, Keith.”

“No -”

“You are going past the point of no return. What are you thinking?”

“I’m aware,” he groans, reaching his hand up to dig through his face.

“Is there a reason you’re not looking at me?”

“I’m in pain. Is it so hard to understand? Leave me alone.”

“Keith.”

“God,” he hisses, heaving himself up. He cringes and groans as he shifts his body so his parents will be able to see his face. Since that’s so important, especially when they’re the ones bitching about him hurting his leg.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and he can see in her eyes the way her resolve wavers as she takes in the sight of him. He wonders what she sees on his face that shakes her, impervious Krolia. She turns to his dad and they share a look. Keith just hangs there, feeling dead inside, trying to bear through the pain.

She pulls herself back together. “...I’m only going to ask one more time: where were you?”

Keith’s breathing heavily still, sagging on his pillows, mind wrapped up in his leg. “I don’t...”
Yesterday? Shiro. Shiro had been there. The day before...? “It was... I went to Pidge’s.”

“You already tried that one. You told me you were going to school.”

“I...I thought maybe she wouldn’t have gone.”

“Keep lying, Keith,” Krolia says. He can hear the frustration building in his voice. “I’ll give you one more chance to tell us.”

He shakes his head and presses his fingers into his eyes. “No. I was there. I was at the park. That’s where I was. I swear.”

There’s another pause in which Keith knows his parents are silently asking the other for help.

Krolia says, finally, “Fine. You’re grounded.”

Keith grits his teeth. “Fine.” It’s not like Shiro’s here anyway.

She walks over to his art desk and unplugs his gaming system. “You won’t get this back until you can start telling us the truth.”

He shrugs. “Fine.”

“No more sneaking around. You get to go to school and that’s it. Otherwise, you’re housebound. And no t.v. until you learn to tell the truth.”

He growls. “Fine.”

“Fine!” She hisses, snatching his controller from his bedside table. “God, I can’t believe you sometimes,” she murmurs lowly under her breath. She stumps back to his dad, who’s watching the both of them wearily, but stops on her trip there. Her shoulders are tight as she takes a full second in an attempt to control herself and she grits out, “Okay. We can do it this way, or you could tell us what’s going on. Right now. At this very minute. Your choice.”

“Could I? Like you’d believe me anyway. Since you never believe anything I say. Not when it really matters...”

Krolia finally snaps despite her best efforts; one arm still wrapped around his gaming system, she hits her other hand on his dresser with a loud smack. “This again. If you’d just let us in, Keith...”

“What for?! What can you do?! You can’t help me! Leave me the hell alone! Go away.”

“Keith!” She rounds on him, anger slicing through her eyes.

But Keith’s dad steps in between them, placing his hands on Krolia’s shoulders. “Krolia,” he says softly. “...It’s okay. He's just tired. Let’s go.”

She’s staring at Keith, teeth bared, posture tense. Slowly, under his dad’s touch, she relaxes enough to not scream. “...Fine,” she whispers, bringing herself up. “Fine. Don’t tell us.” She shakes her head, disappointed. “Fight alone then.”

She storms out and Keith’s dad follows her. At the doorway, he pauses, looking back. “You know she doesn’t mean it... If you need us, we’re here for you. Do you need anything...?”

Keith presses his hands to his face and shakes his head. “No,” he whispers.
And then his dad closes the door, darkness falling over him again.

It’s funny; he doesn’t feel any more or less angry and miserable than he did before they came in. He guesses he’s just already there. Can’t get much worse, can it?

He rolls into his side and tries to return to sleep, but he’s just static, all the way from the deepest part of his mind to the tips of his toes and fingers.

He doesn’t have the strength to move when the door cracks open quietly a few hours later and he hears his mom walk in. He can always tell it’s her, ever since he was younger; she always walks with purpose, even when she’s trying to be quiet.

She stands there for awhile, in the silence of his room, right at his bedside, looking over him. He thinks she might say something. Thinks she might start trying to peck, to pull whatever secrets he’s clinging to out of his heart, but she doesn’t. She just stands there.

“I’m so sorry, Keith,” she whispers, but it doesn’t sound like she’s actually talking to him. She’s talking to the space around him, to herself. Keith almost startles when he feels a gentle hand soothe the hair on his head. It’s such a soft whisper of a touch that he almost doesn’t believe it’s Krolia really doing it.

She sets something on his nightstand and leaves.

When the door is shut, he turns on his side, looking over his shoulder.

Two big pills on a napkin and a glass of water. The heavy duty pills. His parents haven’t let him have those since...god. He can’t remember. They can be dangerous, the doctors had said. And he gets it. He agrees.

If he takes them, he won’t feel this pain anymore. He probably won’t feel much at all. But somehow, the parallel of the pain in his leg to the pain in his head feels right. Let him suffer. He deserves it.

Keith rolls back onto his side, staring at the empty spot at the window...and just lays there.

He doesn’t remember when it happened, but he does manage to find sleep again.

He dreams that Shiro’s standing over him in the early morning sun, watching him quietly, not saying a word. Keith dreams that Shiro takes a seat on his bed and leans over Keith carefully, reaching out to brush the hair from his face. Gentle, like he is with everything. Careful, just as he is with his thoughts. Always as he is with Keith.

Keith struggles against sleep. He wants to reach Shiro. He’s right here. If he can just fight it. If he can wake up, he can get to him. He needs to -

“All Keith,” someone says in his ear. Like a rubber band springing free in his mind, he’s released from his chains of sleep. He darts up, gasping, and his head collides forcefully against something hard.

“Ow, what the hell?” He hears someone shout as they stumble away.

He cringes for a second as he tries to recover. He’s disorientated and confused; he feels like just half a person.
He blinks around himself. He’s in his room, beneath the covers, his jeans pulled off his legs somehow and he wonders, briefly, who did it. He sees the note from one of his parents on the dresser...and then the figure hunching over by his bedside, hands pressed to their cheek, glaring at him.

The light coming in through the curtains behind them is so bright that it bleaches the figure out, coating their features in darkness.

For one wild elated moment, he thinks it might be Shiro. His heart floods with relief. All his worries wash out of him. He changed his mind, he’s back. But then Keith’s eyes adjust...and it isn’t him.

His mind can’t make sense of who it is immediately. It’s weird because it’s Pidge. For a moment, he does feel like he’s going crazy. Everything about her seems really unfamiliar, like she’s painted on a different canvas than he’s used to, made of different paint.

And he asks anyways, because it doesn’t make sense that Shiro’s gone. He should be here, in this room. It was supposed to be Shiro leaning over Keith. Keith had felt it. It was supposed to be him.

Keith breathes out, dazed, “...Shiro?”

Pidge goes still for a moment, letting her eyes peer up through her glasses. Tentatively, she mutters, “…Keith...? Are you...awake?”

He takes a moment, trying to understand things. “I...”

Pidge is cautious. “…Keith.”

“Yeah.” It sounds like a question. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He pushes his sheets away and pulls himself up, staring blankly into the floor.

Pidge... Right. It’s Pidge. He knows Pidge. But it feels like a lifetime ago. He’s heartsick, wrapped up in so much of his pain, he has to weed through everything to find some shred of sense.

And then, slowly, he starts to remember.

Shiro started hesitating after his parents started doubting him. After Pidge started getting upset. And she was the one who told his parents on him.

It’s backwards, some bit of him knows it, but suddenly this all seems like her fault. If Pidge hadn't said anything, would Shiro still be here? If she had just kept her mouth shut would Keith still have him?

But she didn't.

She couldn't.

She just had to call his parents.

She just had to ruin this for him.

His mind grasps desperately for anything to blame. Anything. So maybe he can release some of his pain that’s drowning him.

“Get out,” he demands, voice trembling. He jabs his finger sharply at the door. “Get the hell out.”
“Keith?” She blinks in surprise, thrown off her game. Her hands that have been poking tenderly at her jaw sink to her sides. Her brow furrows angrily. “What? Why are you mad at me?! I came here to be mad at you!”

“Why did you tell my parents on me?! Why did you do that?”

“Wha - ? I - What are you talking about?”

“You and my mom were talking the other day. Your dad and her were talking the other day. She used it against me! Why?”

“Keith, calm down.”

“I’m tired of everyone telling me that! You were going behind my back and trash talking me to my mom, weren’t you?”

“Keith,” she breaths in disbelief. “Look. The other day, you weren’t answering your cell so I got worried and called your house to check on you. I wasn’t plotting anything. Your mom answered. You weren’t home, so she started asking me all these weird questions about your aunt and if you’d talked to your uncle and who you’ve been hanging out with lately. If you’ve been doing drugs. I don’t know. I just told her the truth, it’s not like you’ve done anything wrong - it’s the lesser evil of what she was thinking - I thought it was fine.”

His voice tears in his throat. “It’s not fine! You should’ve asked me first!” He’s more mad than he knows he should be, especially at Pidge, but he’s scared and he doesn’t know where Shiro is or if he’ll come back or what will happen to him. Will Shiro wander this world for eternity, never finding peace? That’s on him. That's all on him.

“Keith... She’s just worried about you; we all are. You’ve been so weird lately. ...Ignoring me for days...you’ve never done that before. Never. I don’t even know what I did wrong and you won’t even give me the chance to ask you. Some of the things you’re saying, some of the ways you’re reacting. How you’re snapping at everything...like right now. You’ve been different lately. Just cool it; we’re all on your side.”

Keith bites in a bitter remark. He wants so badly to just be angry. To yell out his frustrations. His hurt is finally bleeding out.

But he shouldn’t drown her with it too... Keith hates what he’s doing. ...Shiro would hate what he’s doing.

He closes his eyes, tries to hold it in. Breathes. Breathes.

“They think I’m crazy now, Pidge.” He whispers harshly, clenching his fists together tightly.

“They wouldn’t think -”

“Yes, they do. Everything that’s been happening... Everything. It’s so much. And then, I heard them talking about how I’m a disappointment. How I’ve fucked up everything. My mom’s calling around for a therapist.”

“Keith,” Pidge says gently. “That doesn’t mean you’re a fuckup... Jeez. A therapist might be a good idea. Matt sees one. Heck, I’ve been thinking I want one lately. I’ll go with you if you want.”

“They’re going to put me away,” Keith mutters. “They’re going to lock me up and forget about
me. I’ll just be alone... Everyone will have left me. Everyone. It’s like how they just shoved my aunt off into a corner and forgot about her. For how many years did she sit in that room by herself, forsaken? She died in there. We visited her like once and she didn’t even live that far away. Her own husband -"

“-Keith. Jesus. What are you talking about? Your aunt was dangerous. I was there with you, remember?”

He tries to think back. It was so long ago. All he can conjure up are memories plagued and twisted by fear.

“...You always forget the details,” Pidge rolls her eyes. “She had all those drawings pinned to her wall that had ‘mystical powers’ and could ‘bend will’ that she tried to use on your mom. She wanted to feed your blood to the plants outside to help them thrive. When she first saw me, she thought I was a space princess that could help scoop out your guts with a spoon. I don’t blame your parents for avoiding her; she was a danger to you. She was terrifying. Like, she was actually completely insane. You’re just going through a hard time.”

“It’s not just a hard time,” Keith whispers.

“Well, no spoons yet,” Pidge says in a falsely chipper tone. She shifts, sighing softly. “Sorry. It’s not funny. But seriously, Keith, no one’s going to abandon you, okay? Even if you want to feed me to some plant outside. That’s fine. There are worse things, you know? We’re not trying to trap you or frustrate you or anything. We just want to make sure you’re alright and help you in any way you need help. You get it, right?”

He heaves out a sigh, rubbing at his eyes. “Yeah, I get it.”

She sighs too, plopping herself down at the window seat and raising her eyebrows at him. She swings her feet as she purses her lips. “I’m supposed to be mad at you, you know. I was really going to come in here, guns blazing. You kind of stole my thunder. Now I don’t know where to begin.”

Keith nods tiredly, wiping a hand over his face. “I know. I got your messages.”

“No. That was just the tip of the iceberg. I had a whole entire speech planned for you about disrespect and shitting on your best friend. It was really good, you know. You were going to be really repentant.”

“...I’m sorry, Pidge. I’ve been a shitty friend; I know. You haven’t done anything wrong. I’ve just...” He takes in a deep breath. “Sorry. I’m listening.”

She sighs as she watches him. “...Well, it was different ten minutes ago. And then I came in here and saw the state of your hair. That says so much. I can get you a mirror and you’ll see what I mean. Want me to grab one?”

He closes his eyes wearily and grunts.

“She doesn’t even hesitate before blurting out, fingers pointing. “That cookie recipe of yours. The one you made for my dad’s birthday.”
He smiles a bit. “Done.”

“Sweet, then we’re even.” She bites her lip. “But really...are you okay? Before I came, I kind of guessed you might be a mess, but you... You look bad, Keith.”

He just shrugs. “I’m alive. ...It’s more than others can say in this god forsaken town.”

She frowns and crosses her arms. “Not going to school today, I assume?”

“No,” he shakes his head, pressing his fingers into his temples. “No, I’m just... I’m done with this week. I just want to be alone.”

She’s quiet for awhile, watching him. “...Mind if I stay with you? I miss you.”

He takes a moment to think. He’s so tired and so dark and he just wants to sleep this all off for as long as it takes. But her voice sounds strange. Hurt. Scared.

He sighs softly. “Okay,” he agrees. “But I’ll probably just be sleeping all day long.”

“Yeah?” she says, a small smile growing on her face. “Thanks, Keith. Sleep sounds nice; I’ll join you. Want to watch something?”

“Sure.”

She sets her bag down in the middle of his floor and digs through the papers on his desk for the remote. He’s still kind of out of it, so he just watches her for awhile as she frowns into his mess before he realizes the remote is right beside him.

“Ah. Pidge.” He holds it up.

“Oh, thanks. ...You just let me hunt for it that whole time,” she grumbles as she kicks off her shoes.

She waits for him to say something. When he doesn’t, she steps around the bed and stands in front of him, leaning in. She bites her lip as she watches him. “You okay...? You look...upset.”

“I’m fine.”

“Yeah...?”

“Why?” He asks gently, looking up at her face. “You’ve looked scared this whole time. What do you see?”


“My leg’s fine.”

“Not that sort of pain, Keith...”

“...Oh.” He presses his lips together, thinking for a moment, before he scoots back in bed and pats the space beside him.

“...What’s wrong, Keith?” She asks, not moving.

He just shakes his head, patting the spot more insistently as he tries to brush his hair back with the other. He knows he looks like a mess. If it wasn’t Pidge, he’d probably be embarrassed. He can’t
even remember the previous day; he thinks he slept it all away, but he’s not sure yet. He shakes himself again. “I’ll be okay. I’m just...I dunno. Tired.”

She’s still frowning at him with more concern than makes him comfortable.

“I dunno. I’m not sick or anything,” he continues. “Everything’s just getting to me. I heard my parents talking shit about me the other night and I just... Thinking about Shiro and the life that was taken from him... How fragile everything is... Hard to get my brain up to speed right now...”

“Need a soundboard? I can help with that.”

“I don’t think I have enough energy for that. Let’s just watch a movie together. What do you want to see?”

“Oh! It. It was Cinemax’s premiere movie this week.”

Keith groans. “Pidge, no. What’s with everyone and that movie? I need something gentler, something I can stomach right now.”

“You promised me you’d see it with me back when it was in the theaters,” she grumbles.

He turns the t.v. on, ignoring the ghost of Shiro, who is not here. The foot of his bed is empty and Keith doesn’t look, tries not to register it, but he is painfully aware of the wide open space. He makes the mistake of flipping to the news - a station he’s been actively avoiding. An image of Shiro’s bright high school portrait flickers before Keith can think to turn it and his heart plunges into his stomach. There's so much unsuspecting innocence in his eyes. So much hope and faith in the world. It's like a knife to Keith's gut.

Pidge crawls onto the covers and cuddles up next to Keith. “Your mom told me you didn’t eat dinner last night. She said to tell you that she put leftovers in the fridge for you. Want me to get some for you?”

“...Oh. Um, maybe in a bit,” he hums, trying to get the afterimage of Shiro's face out of his head. “I haven’t really been hungry lately.”

She pokes his gut. “You need to eat. You’re so skinny; soon you’re just going to disappear.”

“I know. I will. Just not right now.”

She’s small, the opposite of Shiro, and she fits against his side well, bringing him comfort. She’s always been clingy, always since she was younger, and Keith secretly likes it, likes being someone she can count on. It used to be easier when he wasn’t injured and he could literally carry her around on his back, but now, she's his strength too. He leans into her touch and closes his eyes, trying to use her warmth to help him forget everything else.

The remote slips from his loose grip as she takes it, and he can distantly register her clicking through the channels. The t.v. drones on in the background and Keith’s not sure how much time passes by. Maybe it’s only a few minutes, maybe a few hours, but he thinks of Shiro.

Maybe if Shiro had stayed behind at school that one fateful day, just a minute longer. Maybe if he had waited for Lotor to see if they could hang out.

Maybe if Keith had turned around in Chem class that day as he listened to Shiro’s laughter. When he grabbed the pencil back from him. Instead of disregarding him, if Keith had introduced himself.
Maybe if he could’ve hurried through town, leg not dragging him. Maybe if he didn’t have these feelings...

Maybe it would’ve changed something.

But now, Shiro’s dead. He won’t be going to his Ivy League school. All he worked for is gone, water beneath a bridge. All his efforts were for nothing.

Deep in Keith’s heart, he feels as if he could’ve stopped it. He feels like Shiro did have a future, even as a ghost.

But then again, he always thinks that he can run too, but the second he gets on his leg, reality rises up and crashes over him, cruel and harsh.

Shiro is gone. Shiro is dead. Keith tries to get it through his mind, what Shiro wants him to believe. A ghost is a ghost, not a person. Shiro has been dead for a long time. There’s nothing left to save. Keith never actually knew him.

“Pidge?” Keith murmurs.

“Hm?” Her voice is soft as she reaches her hand up and brushes his hair from his face.

He opens his eyes softly, watching her face. She’s more maternal than she even knows. Kind. Loving. She’s always been family.

“Do you think Shiro’s dead?”

She just watches him, still running her fingers through his hair. She says the words gently. “...At this point...I’d put my bet on that.”

He takes a deep shuddering breath and shifts slightly so he can stare up at the ceiling. He’s quiet for a long time. “...Do you think we could’ve saved him?”

“Keith...why are you twisting yourself up in knots about this?” She asks, tone gentle. “We didn’t know him and we still don’t even know what happened. There was nothing we could’ve done.”

He reaches a hand up to press his fingers into his eyes. There was, there was - Shiro had stood in front of him on that football field, begging him for help, and Keith could’ve, he should’ve, but he blew it.

“Keith, look at me... You’re family. You know that. I hate to see you hurting... I’m sure Shiro was a good guy. He wouldn’t want you to suffer over him.”

“God,” Keith whispers, gasping in air. “I fucked up.”

“...Fucked up...?” She asks, confused. “How...?”

He wants to tell her everything. He wants to spill his guts out to her and just cry out his failures. The backs of his eyes are burning. He’s so close to just letting it all go.

He turns his face back toward her, looking at her sharp brown eyes. Through that sharpness, he can see her heart, worried. Her logic, waiting.

If she doesn’t believe him, she’ll only worry more. He won’t be able to handle that, on top of everything. The risk is too great, especially now.
He’s so tired.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. “I heard that weird noise on the road that day. I should’ve gone back. There are so many times lately I’ve just been thinking, if only I could’ve done this. But my fucking leg. I’m so sick of it. I’m sick of being useless. I can’t do anything right.”

“Keith. Think of how far you’ve come.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t thought it... Hunk had to carry me across the field the other day like I was a toddler and still I could barely manage that. I can hardly walk on it. It hurts like hell even if I don’t. I slow everyone down, especially when things matter. I’m a liability. It’s all just...bullshit.”

He covers his face with his hands. Breathe. Just tries to breathe. It’s so hard.

“Keith, what happened to your leg was not your fault. No one thinks that. You got dealt a bad hand...but you’ve always tried your best. I think that’s very brave. I thought you were finally okay with it...”

“I thought so too. Until now. Now I just... I fucking - Ugh. ” He sits there for a moment, feeling miserable. He doesn’t know what to do. He feels he might pop. “‘Bad hand’, he mutters lowly. “...Can you get me my sketchbook?”

She slips off the bed and picks it up from the dresser. “Here.”

“Thanks.” He flips to an open page and starts sketching. He vents through it; it’s dark and it’s twisted - all the shadows that have been plaguing him lately - and somehow he feels a little better, letting it seep out of his being, through his fingers, and watch it become trapped onto paper.

“Can I look?” Pidge asks.

“You know I don’t mind if it’s you.”

“I dunno, you always get all snippy whenever I want to see your porn sketchbook.”

“It’s not a porn sketchbook, for the last time.”

“What else is in a ‘private’ sketchbook?” She laughs.

He flicks her nose before settling back into his art.

She leans on his shoulder, watching him draw, pencil darting over paper. “I think...maybe staying home isn’t doing you any favors. They have grief counselors at school. They won’t even tell your parents if you don’t want.”

He grabs a red pen and watches it bleed into the page, stark and bold against the black. “I’ll go to school on Monday.”

“Really?” She says in surprise. “Wow, and here I was thinking it’d be a struggle to convince you.”

“I don’t want to be home. I’m waiting for when my parents bring in guys in nurse uniforms to cart me kicking and screaming out the door into their loony bin van.”

“Keith, they wouldn’t do that.”
“Would you visit me at least?”

She sighs, exasperated. She flops back down onto the bed, hitting her head against his pillow to try to get it comfortable. “Only if they have good lunch.”

“So good that my aunt used to toss it at her orderlies everyday.”

“God,” Pidge snorts. “I can see you doing that. Promise not to get it on my phone if you do that.”

“It’s water resistant anyway, it’ll be fine.”

She presses a smile down, staring at him with an amused glint in her eyes. “You’re so weird lately. It’s probably because you hide in this room like a hermit even when the sun’s out. Can you believe it’s not raining right now? Not that you’d know. You need some sunshine. Some air. I know what we can do -”

“-Pidge, wait -” Keith says as she hops off the bed and goes toward the window.

She rips the curtain back and stops. He had gotten wooden boards and nailed them over the window, afraid that the cracked glass wouldn’t be enough next time the crows decide to come. He had almost thought it was a dream.

He had done it angrily, and it’s sloppy, nailed in a hurry, cracks of light breaking through.

It looks bad. He knows it. Over-the-edge kind of bad.

He can see Pidge’s back expand and release. In one sharp motion, she closes the curtains and turns again. “I guess we won’t be doing that,” she says, hopping back onto the bed and laying out beside him like nothing had happened.

But she avoids his eyes.

He feels like there’s no point in even trying to explain.

He lays back in his bed, checking the door on reflex, hoping to catch sight of Shiro and his blood splattered shirt at least once more. The seat by his window remains empty.

It’s Sunday, a day his parents usually have off, but they both got caught up in work somehow and Acxa went to a friend’s house, so it’s just him and Red. It’s weird being alone. Completely alone. No Shiro to talk with. How quickly he’d gotten used to it...

It’s lonely by himself. He feels small and like a kid again.

He doesn’t have the energy to move, but his mind just keeps churning, expending whatever life he has left in him and he’s exhausted. He wants to keep going; even if Shiro’s left and abandoned this mission, it doesn’t mean he has to as well. He wants justice for Shiro. Shiro deserves at least that much.

But Shiro’s dying wish... His last wish. Keith should honor that, shouldn’t he? And he gets where Shiro’s coming from. Finding Shiro’s murderer won’t bring him back... And Keith will be alone from here on out. Shiro’s help is gone. Even if he decided to push forward, can he really do it on his own with his shitty leg?

Or they can catch you. Shiro’s warning still rings true in his ears. What would Keith do if he did
find them...?

He sees Red walking through the hallway from the corner of his eye. He rolls on his side, letting his hand hang over the edge. “Red,” he calls gently. “Hey, Red, come here.”

She gives him a hesitant look, peering around the door with her sharp inquisitive eyes. When she doesn’t see Shiro, she walks in carefully, rolling her back beneath Keith’s hands as he runs his fingers through her hair.

She looks right up into his face and meows.

“You’ve been distant lately, haven’t you?” He hums as she stares straight into him, eyes intense orbs. “Shiro’s nice,” he tells her. “You didn’t have to be so careful. ...Too late now though.”

He wonders what it is about cats and ghosts. Shiro looked normal to him. Did she see some part of his connection with this world severed? He wonders what else she can see. It’s fascinating.

She meows again, sharp and insistent.

“What are you trying to tell me, hm?” He rolls onto his back and pats his stomach. With one easy leap, she lands there, curling in a ball on him, still staring.

“What?” He asks, petting her gently.

She meows at him again.

“Okay,” he whispers, letting his head fall back, staring up at the ceiling, keeping his hand on her back. She stays there with him, eventually lowering her head to his chest and contenting herself to watch him that way.

He sniffs softly. It’s lonely without Shiro. “...What should I do, Red? I don’t know what to do.”

She rubs her cheek against him as she settles in and he collects the soft fur behind her ears, rubbing it gently.

“If you had given him a chance, you would’ve liked him, you know. I think you hurt his feelings a little bit.”

She meows, unrepentant.

He falls asleep with her on his stomach still. It’s nice to sleep for awhile, give his tired mind a rest. He sleeps all morning; seeping into dreams that make his joints ache and his chest feel heavy. It isn’t until afternoon that he finally wakes up, disoriented and frowning. Red’s gone tense on him, eyes wide in alarm and upset. She leaps off, skittering around the doorway and down the hall.

“Bye,” he mumbles lowly, slapping his hand over his face and letting himself fall back to sleep. Or he tries, at least.

The peace that settled over their house all morning is gone with the afternoon. He hears Acxa stomping up the stairs and he groans. “Do you always have to walk like a gorilla?”

She stomps louder, slamming her door shut.

Keith shakes his head, pinching his nose for a moment before turning on his side and trying to get comfortable for sleep again. But then Acxa starts banging around in her room and it’s driving him nuts.
He slams his fist on the wall between their rooms loudly and yells, “Acxa! What the hell are you doing? Cut it out!”

She stops for only a moment before starting up again.

Red comes running back in, tiny paws hitting the ground quickly as she jumps back on his stomach, eyes darting around, frazzled.

“I know,” he grunts, heaving himself up. He keeps Red in his arms, who meows antsily. “She’s so fucking annoying... You and I definitely agree there.”

He hobbles through his room, forgoing his crutches, and climbs the stairs to her room. He knocks on her door. “Acxa!”

She ignores him.

“Acxa!” He groans. God. He grabs the handle and tosses the door open. “Can you shut the fuck up?”

The noise stops all at once.

Only -

There’s no one inside.

There’s nothing out of place. Her closet door is closed. Her bed is made. Light is shining through the curtains, warm and golden. There isn’t junk tossed around the room like he thought.

Keith stops, completely still, staring inside.

Nothing moves. Sound is absent.

He shifts, taking a hesitant step back, away from her room.

“...Acxa...?” He whispers. He looks down the hallway, then up, toward their parent’s room. He’s all alone. “Mom?” He calls. “Dad?”

He’s met by silence. Red tenses in his arms and she starts hissing, nails coming out. She crawls up his chest and digs into his back.

“Ow, ow, Red. Stop.” He hunches over, tossing his head around, hands trying to hold Red up.

“Acxa!” He calls again, voice fluttering like his heart. “This isn’t fucking funny! Where the hell are you?”

The door shuts right in his face, slamming into his nose.

“Ugh!” He grunts, stumbling backwards and hitting the wall behind him. He presses a hand to his nose as he feels warmth blossom and drizzle down his face. It comes back red with blood.

Red is craning her neck toward Acxa’s room, hissing angrily, out of control. She finally leaps off his shoulder, but she doesn’t run off. She grabs at Keith’s leg, clawing him.

There’s one single loud thump on the first floor, in the kitchen. It echoes and fills the entire house, pressing out the silence.
He turns, looking down the stairs and into the small area of the living room that’s in view. There are no shadows. No disturbances that he can see. Closely, he watches the wooden flooring of the hallway, the carpet of the living room.

“...Mom?” He tries to say in a strong voice, but it trembles. He tastes the salt of his own blood. He wipes it with the back of his sleeve.

When there’s no response, he says, voice even fainter, “...Dad?”

Nothing.

Red yowls loudly again, fidgeting in his arms.

“Stop,” he spits at Red around blood, scooping her up into his arms. He doesn’t want to go down there. He turns back to Acxa’s room, then looks back into his room. He’s not sure where to go.

Acxa’s door handle shifts and then, slowly, the door creaks open.

Keith freezes.

There’s nothing to see, but he can feel it, in his heart. Like intuition, his mother had said before. Like there are eyes on him, creeping up out of the cracks of the house and all turning directly on him. He can’t see it. He can’t hear it. He just knows.

It’s the way the shadows seem heavy and full. The sharp static-y texture of the air. Things that shouldn’t make sense but somehow do. Keith feels them all around him. Looking doesn’t help.

There is the soft sound of something walking on wood. Red shrieks and Keith startles, booking it downstairs.

He tosses a quick look to his right. To his left. He scopes out anyone, anything.

There’s nothing.

“God,” he whispers, turning back to look upstairs. He can’t see anything. “Shiro?! Shiro, is that you? If it’s you...if it’s you, please stop...” He’s breathing hard, hands shaking as he clings to Red. “...Shiro...?”

He can hear the grandfather clock ticking softly, like the beating of a heart. The wind is making the trees shiver outside. There’s no answer.

It’s not Shiro. Shiro doesn’t feel like this. But if it’s not him, then...

Keith swallows hard. “...I can’t see you,” he breathes. “...Whoever you are...”

Tick, tick, tick.

He forces himself to take a few steps back, toward the front door, keeping his eyes on the staircase, his ears straining for noise. He reaches behind him blindly to feel for the doorknob, turning it, desperate to escape.

It’s stuck.

“Wha-?” Keith breathes, whipping around to it. The door’s unlocked and there’s nothing jamming it, but he can’t open it. Outside is just right there.
Red’s tensing again, clawing over Keith’s shoulder to stare at something with her wide eyes right behind Keith’s back.

Keith grabs the handle more firmly and tries to force it, trying to throw his weight against it. It groans and creaks beneath the force but doesn’t relent.

Red digs her claws into his neck, insistent, afraid.

His heart is beating out of his chest. His hands can’t get a proper grip on the door handle. He doesn’t know where to go. He doesn’t want to go back.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he hisses, turning around.

The doors upstairs all slam shut loudly. He thinks he hears his window shattering and he stumbles, tripping against the light in the corner. It teeters, then falls, striking the window’s glass.

The window.

Cringing against his protesting leg, he climbs on the couch, shoves the window open, tosses Red out, and heaves himself out.

He lands hard on his elbows, the impact jostling his bones in a way that’s going to hurt later. But he’s out. He picks himself up and stumbles across their lawn.

He doesn’t know where to go. Red is yowling, upset, and he scoops her up into his arms again to hold her close. He looks down the road, hoping to see, just in the nick of time, his mother or his father’s car, but there’s no one down this lonely road. There are no neighbors he likes or trusts. It’s just him.

And in that second of loneliness, he feels that pull in his gut again, that intuition, telling him something’s behind him. But it’s different this time.

He whirls, looking frantically. “Shiro?” He calls. “Shiro!”

No answer.

Of course there’s no answer.

He thinks he might just collapse on the grass when Red leaps wildly out of his hands, yowling like fire as she charges, tearing around the side of the house and zeroing in on the tree.

Keith makes a strangled screech as a puff of crows all take flight in a black cloud of cawing and feathers, scattering frantically.

“Red!” He cries, pulling his leg to try to catch up to her, afraid they’ll go after her - he doesn’t have the gun - but as he rounds the corner, she’s already on her way back to him, face fierce as a lion as she plants herself firmly at his side.

The birds scatter again. The sight is familiar, but he still feels sick in his chest as he witnesses it again. By the time they’re gone, he’s still breathing hard. Pushing his hair up out of his face. Antsy. He waits, casting his eyes around, sure that, at any moment, the silence around them will be disturbed. Any second now, the door will burst open and he’ll be flooded with something he doesn’t understand, overwhelmed. But nothing comes.

Whatever presence he felt is gone.
When he loosens up enough, he looks down at Red. “Why would you do that?” He asks her.
“You could’ve gotten hurt.”

She presses herself against him. He just sits down on the lawn, staring blankly. Red steps into his lap and nudges her head beneath his hands, cozing up into his lap. She relaxes, wary looks tapering down to a minimum. Keith allows himself to ease as well.

What the fuck? What the fuck? Whatever was in his house wasn’t Shiro. He knew it in his heart. It felt different. He wishes he had his phone. He doesn’t want to be alone.

He pushes himself up, forcing himself over to his neighbor’s. With every step, his leg stabs up into his core but he grimaces through it. He knocks on the door.

It takes a moment. When he sees her peering through a crack in her curtains and immediately releasing it back down, he’s sure she’ll just ignore him. But finally, hesitantly, she parts the door a crack, lips pressed together tightly. The chained lock on top is still intact. Her eyes look over him suspiciously, pausing at the cat in his arms and then stopping at the blood on his nose. Her eyes widen and she just stares.

He shifts off of his bad leg. “Can I borrow your phone? I got locked out and my cell’s inside.”

She narrows her eyes at him like he’s trying to play a prank on her. Deliberates. “Wait here,” she says, closing the door in his face.

He sighs, shoving his face into Red’s coat. He’s trying to keep himself from shivering like a weakling, but he can’t.

“Here,” she says as she opens the door and shoves it at him. “Give it back when you’re done.” She closes the door again. He can hear the locks go back in place.

Keith sinks down to the steps, dialing in Acxa’s number.

She answers on the fourth ring. “Mrs. M?” Her voice is all sweet.

“No. Acxa, it’s me. Were you just at the house?”

“Oh,” her voice drops and she tsks. But then she seems to think twice and asks in total confusion, “Keith? Where’s your phone? Why are you calling from her number?”

“Just answer the question,” he rubs his face.

“No. I’m at Ezor’s house. I already told Mom. Why? Do you need a ride home somewhere or something? Because we’re in the middle of something and I don’t -”

“No... I just... I thought I heard you come in.”

“...Well, I didn’t. Why?”

He shakes his head, pressing his lips together tightly, trying to keep it together. He feels his throat tightening. He knew it wasn’t her, he knew it, but the confirmation still shakes him to his core. He’s at a total loss for what to do and the realization is overwhelming. But he doesn’t want to cry in front of Acxa. “I don’t know,” he whispers.

She’s quiet for a long while. When she speaks again, her voice is low, quiet. “...Are you okay, Keith? Do I need to come home?”
“I...” He doesn’t know. He doesn’t want them going in that house again. He doesn’t know what that was.

“Keith...?”

He clears his throat. “I’m fine. I’m sorry. Maybe...maybe Mom got home early.”

“...Okay... Where’s your phone?”

“It’s fine, Acxa. I’m going to call Dad. Bye.”

“...Keith...?”

He turns the phone off for a moment, staring off into the forest ahead. It’s quiet out here. No banging noises. Nothing out of the ordinary. He dials in his dad’s number and waits, and waits.

He doesn’t answer. When Keith tries again, he’s met with the same result. His dad is already busy.

Keith sighs. How will his mom react to him calling her at work when she already thinks he’s just being a brat? He holds the phone for a moment, thinking. He sighs and calls her.

She answers briskly. “Mrs. M? Is it an emergency? I’m in the middle of a meeting.”

He presses his lips together tightly. Bad timing. Of course it is. Why did he even bother?

“No,” he says, but it’s strained.

He hears her shift the phone. “...Keith. Honey, what’s wrong?”

“When do you get off work?”

“...In an hour. Your dad in two. Why?”

He shakes his head, pressing his fingers into his mouth. He doesn’t know what to say. “It’s nothing,” he decides eventually. “Everything’s fine. I was just...thinking you could pick a movie up on your way here, but it’s fine. Bye.”

“Nuh-uh, I don’t think so. Don’t hang up the phone, Mister.”

“What?”

“You don’t call just for nothing. Tell me what’s up.”

“No, everything’s okay. You have work. See you in a bit.”

“Don’t hang up. Work’s important, but you’re more important. Tell me, Keith. What’s wrong?”

“No, I just... I don’t know.” He presses his fingers into his eyes until he sees spots. It’s the worst kind of confession, but it slips from him anyway, small and scared, “...I don’t want to be alone right now.”

“Okay,” she says simply. He can hear her walking. “The meeting can wait. I’m coming home right now.”

“Mom...you don’t have to.”
“I know. But I’m doing it anyway. See you in ten minutes. Will you be alright until then? Want me to stay on the phone?”

“...I’ll be okay,” he whispers, tears finally building in his eyes. He wipes them away, sniffling. “Thanks, Mom.”

“...I love you, Keith.”

“Love you too.” He rubs at his face roughly, looking down at Red’s curious eyes that are still trained on his face. “It’s okay,” he tells her, kissing her little nose. She turns her head.

He gives the phone back to Mrs. M and limps back over to their front yard, going to that white tree and taking a seat on the tire swing. The tree creaks beneath his weight.

He hasn’t sat here in years. He used to swing on it all the time, as high as he could go, screaming loudly. He wouldn’t dare do that now. Even if the tree promised to hold his weight, there are just too many risks. Too many ways to hurt his leg even worse, to render him even more useless.

He never used to have these fears.

Is he crazy...? Was Shiro all a dream...? These noises he hears, maybe it’s some sort of sickness. It does run in the family. Maybe he really does need to be locked away...

His mom promised to see him in ten minutes. She’s there in five, zipping up the driveway with perfect precision and coming to a quick halt. His dad wouldn’t be happy if he saw she was driving like that again. She promised him ages ago she’d drive like a normal, careful person. But her face is hard with worry as she hurries up the steps.

“Mom,” Keith calls, swinging softly on the tire swing, Red in his lap. “I’m right here.”

She steps off the side of the sidewalk and into the grass, her face softening as she takes in the sight of him, the stress falling away. “Keith,” she says in relief, rubbing out the tension in her forehead. “Hey... You okay?”

“Yeah... I thought... I heard some things in the house. I didn’t really want to be in there.”

“Like an intruder?” She looks back toward the door like she’s going to go in, guns blazing. She’s two seconds from kicking the door down.

“No. I don’t know. Just... a bad feeling. And Red was acting up. I just woke up. Maybe it was a dream. I don’t know.”

“Ah,” she says softly, walking across the lawn to get to him. She puts a hand on the thick rope holding the tire up, looking up at the branch. “Looks like it’s going to hold you.”

“Looks like it.”

She rubs him on the back once, encouragingly, and then steps back behind the swing, pushing him gently.

He hums, lifting his feet slightly so they don’t scrape against the ground.

“When was the last time we even used this swing?” She chuckles. “I kept meaning to get rid of it, but I always forget.”

“Maybe if Acxa has children, they can use it.”
“Yeah. Or maybe even you.”

He snorts darkly, his mouth twisting. “Who says I even can?”

“...What?”

“Everything else about me is fucked up. Why not one more thing?”

She stops pushing him and waits for the swing to slow before she walks around, in front of his face, hand coming to his chin. “...What makes you think you’re ‘fucked up’?”

He tries to turn his face - he can feel it twisting and it’s ugly and private - but her grip tightens and she holds him still. “Why would you say that?” She whispers.

“Stop,” he tries to push out, but even his voice is convoluted. He squirms, pulling from her grip. “Stop.”

She lets him go, sighing, her hand going gently to his shoulder. “Keith... Your father and I have never once thought that.”

“I heard you the other night. When you and dad were talking together in the living room, I came in late. I heard you.”

“Oh...” She whispers softly, the sound wounded and breathless. “Oh, Keith, no. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I’ve just been so worried, I was taking out my frustrations... I get carried away complaining to your father. Sometimes I just wish... I wish I could be a better mother to you and whenever I see you in pain I think of all the things I could’ve done that would’ve put a smile on your face instead. ...It kills me I didn’t do them.”

He presses his lips together, looking down at the grass, away from her eyes as she stares at his face, taking every part of him in.

“Keith,” she murmurs. “Can you look at me, please...?”

“I don’t...-”

“Keith.”

He takes in a breath, turning his eyes to her, eyebrows raised. “Happy?”

She places a hand on his cheek and smiles gently. “I love you, Keith. Your father loves you. You are so important to us. We know you’ve been going through a hard time lately and I’ll admit I’ve...I’ve let my fear get the best of me and I didn’t ask you what you need.” She grabs his hands in hers, holding them tightly. “...If I were to ask, could you tell me?”

His gaze flickers away again and he lets out a shaky breath. He’s never had an easy time talking to his parents. He feels like he’s full of holes, full of failures that his parents must turn a blind eye from to even look at him. But he watches her hands, tightly holding onto his, and he thinks maybe he’s wrong about some things. Maybe he can say something.

“...I don’t really know,” he whispers. “And I think that’s what scares me. ...Shiro was... I mean - I didn’t know him in school, but he sat behind me and we did talk a few times and I just... Now, knowing the seat’s empty... Who would just kill someone? What’s going through their mind as they do it? People always say to live your best life. Be kind. Work hard and it'll all pay off one day. But that’s not the case for him. He was just such a nice guy and he deserved so many things,
but he never got them, and now his life is over. Where's his justice? Why did this happen to him? It feels like there’s something we can do to restore the balance but no one’s doing it and I just... It’s driving me nuts all this pretending that this didn’t happen. Like school and work are important. He’s dead. A person is dead. And we’re just supposed to forget? I just don’t understand.”

Krolia sighs out slowly, squeezing his hands as she brings him closer. “Shiro’s life isn’t just gone. As long as we remember him and honor him -”

“-Don’t give me that shit. No one believes it.”

She just fixes him with a steady gaze. “I do though, Keith. Maybe he’s died, but he’s left behind beautiful memories with his family, his friends. He’s made an impact on this earth and now he’s moved on, just like we all will someday. Me. You. ...But that doesn’t have to be a bad thing. I wouldn’t have brought you into this world if I thought it’d mean terrible things for you. I think, even after death, there’s something great waiting for us. And we’ll know it when we get there, living day by day, like we have to even now.”

He frowns. “…What if he hasn’t moved on? What if he’s stuck? Hurting? Alone? How can I help him?”

“Keith,” she murmurs softly, rubbing her thumb against his cheek. “My sweet boy. Always trying to save everyone... Who says it’s your job?”

“I never said it was a job. I just... I want...” He struggles, shaking his head. “It’s not fair. Someone just decided to take his life and it’s not fair. I want it back.”

“No,” Krolia says softly. “It’s not fair. Sometimes this world deals bad hands. If we can, we have to roll with it. And if it means that it’s the end for us, there’s no one who’s going to be able stop it, no matter how much you may want to.”

Keith hates that.

She chuckles quietly at the sight of his sour face. “You’ve always been a fighter. Fight, fight, fight, even the rules of the living. When it’s your time, I bet you’ll fight then too.”

He laughs lowly, “Death doesn’t scare you, does it?”

She shrugs. “Should it? I’m leading the life I want to lead right now. I’m doing the things I want to do, living with the people I love. I’ll have no regrets. It’ll happen to us all one day, some sooner than others and there’s just no way of knowing. Why worry about it?”

“What happens after? That doesn’t worry you at all?”

“I try to take things moment by moment,” she hums, shrugging again. “I’m not The Thinker, like you. Always pondering about everything from five thousand different angles. Your mind knows no rest.”

“God, I wish I didn’t have to think about anything,” he grunts. Red is curled up on his lap and she stretches out as she sleeps, rubbing the back of her head against Keith’s stomach.

She laughs softly, leaning her chin on their hands, looking up at him. “You probably already know...I’ve been worried about you, Keith. I want to do what’s right for you. Your father and I have both agreed that you should see a therapist. Just talk to them. See what they say.”
He’s quiet as he thinks. “...It didn’t help last time. It just made things worse.”

“Well, we won’t go to him anymore. But our insurance is giving us some problems finding a new one. Since our town’s so small, we don’t have a lot of options. They’re telling us the best thing to do right now is to move temporarily to the next city for a few months until they can get something sorted out closer.”

Keith blinks. “Are you serious? I don’t want to do that. I have school. Acxa has school. Your work.”

“I know. I don’t want to do it either, but we will, if you need it. ...In the meantime, we’re on a waiting list that might be months out, weeks out, if we’re lucky. ...So I have a proposition for you.”

Keith groans softly.

“If you try to return to your normal schedule, we think that could be healthy for you. If you start to get better, then that will really put our minds at ease. But we have to see some effort. There has to be improvement. Got it?”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

“I don’t know what this is, Keith,” she says gently. “I just want you to be okay. I don’t know what the best answer is, but if you can help us, talk to us, let us in a little...that’ll make a difference. I know it. We have to communicate.”

He nods vigorously. “I can do it.”

“Yeah? Sound fair?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

“Hm,” she tilts her head and watches him fondly. “Good. I am sorry for how I handled the other day. ...I want you to be able to trust us; it wasn’t right what I said. You can talk to us,” she says earnestly.

“I know. I’m sorry too. I was in a lot of pain and I wasn’t thinking right. I shouldn’t have yelled.”

“Me neither, Keith. Okay,” she whispers. “Well,” she says, patting his knee. “Here’s an idea: that winter formal is coming up. I was thinking maybe if you were to go, that might be a nice positive step.”

Keith goes back to groaning. “Of all the things...”

“You’ve never gone to a dance, how do you know you’ll hate it? Your dad and I loved dancing together. Isn’t there someone you like? Can’t you ask them?”

“No, I can’t,” Keith rubs at his face.

“I’m sure Pidge will go with you. Why don’t you ask her?”

He gives his mom a look and she raises her eyebrows, holding his gaze like a pro, amusement on her face.

She pats his leg. “Hey. You mentioned a movie. How about I drive us over to that rental place you like and you can choose something for us to watch tonight?”
“Really? You hate movies.”

“I’m feeling like it today.” She reaches up to run her finger against the bottom of his nose. “Bloody nose?”

“Mom. Keep your hands to yourself.”

She laughs lowly, watching his face in amusement, before patting his legs again. “Want to go? You can bring Red.”

“Okay,” he says.

“Let me go call your dad and get your crutches,” she says, standing up.

“Wait - I... I’m fine without the crutches.”

She swallows hard. He can see the protest in her eyes, and the way her mouth parts to tell him no. But she draws it back in. Thinks. Says, “...Alright. If you think you don’t need them...”

Really, he just doesn’t want to go in the house right now, but he just smiles. “I want to work up to this. And I can text Dad.”

She nods slowly. “...Okay.”

She turns but he stops her really quickly. “Wait,” he breathes.

He can feel the gates closing again, the ones that had opened between them during this conversation. He’s got to ask now, before his chance escapes.

“...Wait.” He swallows hard. Even though he has her full undivided attention, it’s still hard to get the words out. “...Did you still love Aunt Aiphos? Even after you put her away?”

Hurt stabs across her face and she takes a small sharp breath in. “What...? ...You think I don’t love her anymore?”

“Well, you just... Everyone kind of turned their backs on her. We never visited her again, not since I was little. She was alone all the time.”

She’s quiet for awhile. “...I did visit her.”

“What? But...when? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“...You were young, you probably don’t remember, but whenever you came near her, she’d lose it. I don’t know why, but your father and I both agreed that it wasn’t safe for you to be around her. And whenever I’d mention her name, all you wanted to do was come. And you really knew how to throw a tantrum back then...not that things have changed.” She smiles crookedly. “...But I’d go on a weekday, when you were at school. It was just easier that way... Keith, she was my sister. Of course I still loved her. She became more and more difficult to talk to, but she was always family.”

“...I didn’t know that,” Keith says. He feels slightly better. “...I thought we just left her there to die...”

“Keith...” She says softly. “...Is that what you thought we meant when we said we wanted to get you help?”

He looks down. “...I don’t know. Kind of.”
“...No. No, never. It was different with Aiphos. She was completely gone upstairs. She wouldn’t eat or drink at home. Refusing help, attacking your uncle. We weren’t locking her away, we were trying to get her into a place where she could be taken care of properly. ...I didn’t realize you thought this all this time.”

“Do you think she would’ve been okay if people just...believed her?”

He can see the amusement building on her face that she tries to pack away in exchange for a kind motherly face. It only half works. “...You’re thinking you’re like her?”

“Well...maybe. Sort of.”

“Keith, if you remembered her properly, you wouldn’t think that. You’re fine. This is something completely different. Got it?”

He nods softly, but he’s not sure he entirely believes her. It’s alright. He feels mostly better now. Like a little boy, six again, but better.

He hops in the car after her, Red still clinging to him protectively.

“What is up with that cat today...?” Krolia mutters, arching an eyebrow at her as Red stares back, but Krolia doesn’t protest, even though she’s always been a stickler about the interior of her car.

“What were you thinking of getting?”

“Mm.” He almost chuckles. He can’t believe his mom is spoiling him this much. He settles into his seat, warmth spreading throughout him. “I’m good with anything. You can choose whatever you want.”

“Oh, there was that one your dad wanted to see. I forget what it was called. It had a dark cover and golden words?”

Keith shrugs, blinking sleepily.

She laughs under her breath. “I can always go in while you wait in the car, if you want. It’ll just be a sec.”

He yawns. “Okay.”

It’s warm in the car, where Krolia actually uses the heater for once. It’s nice to sit, safe and confined in a small space, curled up with his cat and staring out into the dark blue forests. The sun is setting, not that it ever really shines for long here, but it seems to bring about an energy during the day that recedes at night, leaving way for silence.

Keith leans his head against the door and stares out, letting his eyes droop and his mind sink. He’s asleep before they even make it into town. He only awakens when Krolia shakes him awake.

“Mm,” he groans softly, battling his eyelids.

“We’re home,” she hums beside him, the car door open. “Want me to carry you?”

She could. He somehow got the small gene in the family and he’s smaller than everyone, even Acxa. But he shakes his head, shifting slightly. Red hops off his lap and runs back up to the door, looking back at him.

Looks like whatever bothered her is gone now... Keith lets out a sigh of relief, pulling himself to
His dad is already inside, finishing up dinner. Apparently he did not have problems opening the front door. He smiles back at them when they come in. “Find a good movie?” He asks.

“Yep,” Krolia smiles as she walks in and kicks her shoes off. She travels into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around his dad from behind and kissing him softly on the mouth. She pulls back with a content hum and smiles at the food on the stove. “Looks good.”

Red is making the rounds around the house, neck craned, scoping things out. Keith follows warily. He stops as Red travels up the stairs. He stares up into the hallway light, afraid to move forward.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Krolia asks. “Want me to get your crutches?”

“No,” he says, looking back at her. “No, it’s fine.”

He climbs the stairs. Red waits for him at the top, his little guardian, and she seems content enough. Curious, but not worried.

There’s nothing. No strange noises, no crooked picture frames. When he pushes the door open to his room, he almost expects catastrophe, tears through his sheets, the boards torn from his windows and bloodied feathers everywhere.

But no. Everything’s the same, the window seat is as empty as ever. The only thing out of place is the paper he left on his desk. It probably fell off in his rush to get out of his room.

It’s the drawing he did the day Shiro disappeared. The protection of a loved one sitting, lonely, on the floor. He shifts and bends over, scooping it up into his hands.

It feels different. He feels along the edges of the paper. They’re soft and worn somehow, like the paper’s old. The graphite he had used looks darker...almost...burnt. He runs his finger over the lines.

Krolia knocks on the door behind him and he jumps. When he turns, she’s smiling crookedly, head tilted. “That looks nice. Did you draw it?”

“Oh. Yeah...”

“Dinner’s ready. Eat first, then movie?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” he says, putting the drawing back down on his desk.

Maybe he’s thinking too hard. Maybe the drawing’s just crumpled from traveling in his pocket that one day at school. Sleeping on it. Everything else is fine. Like he was dreaming.

After dinner, he cuddles up in between his mom and dad on the couch, scooting his legs up to his chest and leaning his head on his mom’s shoulder.

When was the last time he felt this protected? He doesn’t know. When he was younger, he was out to prove to everyone how mature and independent he could be. He’d wriggle his way out of situations like this no matter the cost. Now, he doesn’t want to leave the safety of their warmth. He’s content here.

This is something Shiro can never have again. This is the life that Shiro wants for Keith.

Acxa comes home, squawking at the betrayal that they started the movie without her. She drops
her bags at the door, makes some popcorn, then hops onto the couch beside their dad and they’re just there, all bundled in front of the t.v. all piled onto the same couch, enjoying the same movie.

It’s so comforting that Keith falls asleep. Through dreams, he hears them whispering, “...Is he alright, Mom?”

Hands rake through his hair gently, pushing stray strands from his face, weaving the hair behind his ear tenderly. “...I think so. I think he’s just scared. We all are.”

“He called me earlier. He called me. Keith did. He sounded like he was about to cry. I didn’t even know what to say...”

“He’s so empathetic... He wants to save the world. It crushes him when he realizes he can’t.”

Keith’s dad murmurs, “What are we going to do...?”

“I don’t know...” Krolia whispers, still brushing back his hair with tender loving hands. “I don’t know.”

He could stay here like this. He doesn’t have to keep fighting. He’s always fighting, his mom says, all the time, even Shiro complained about it. He could just...move on with his life, like Shiro wants. Shiro’s final wish. He could just stay here, in this warmth. Like a gift from Shiro. His last wish for Keith.

...And that sounds kind of nice.

Shiro doesn’t come back that day. Or the next. When Keith opens his eyes, hoping to see him sitting on that seat by the window, watching him calmly like he did those days they were together, there’s nothing there. No Shiro. No sounds of crows. Just the weird slant of light not quite making it past those crooked boards. The rain that hasn’t relented since the beginning of this shitty incident has washed any sign of the blood away. It’s like Shiro never existed in this space. Keith wouldn’t even need his gaming console even if he had it.

Maybe it’s time to try.

When Matt pulls up onto his driveway, Keith acts like a normal person and heads off to school.


“Wonderful. I can’t wait to see how much homework I have to make up.”

She snorts. “Probably nothing. We haven’t been getting much done lately.”

“Not like I have the brainpower to do any of it anyway.”

“I think that’s what everyone else is thinking too. I’m glad you’re back. It’s been boring without you. Seriously.”

And school is boring in comparison to how life’s been lately. He sits in his seats, blankly watching the board, chewing on the end of his pencil wondering why the hell he’s there. ...Was it always like this? He can’t sit still. It’s like there’s something waiting right outside the door. Not any sort of entity, not this time, but something he needs to do.

But Shiro wanted this. He wanted him to just...be.
So he keeps trying. Tries to focus on his teacher’s voices talking about things like grammar and numbers and he just can’t find himself caring.

They still haven’t found Shiro’s body. Without a body there’s no sure way of knowing he’s dead. Maybe he’s still breathing. Maybe he needs Keith right now, but he’s sitting on his ass learning business math.

His leg is bouncing non-stop throughout all his classes so much that people beside him are shooting him dirty looks. He keeps checking the door. The window. Like maybe, just maybe, he’ll see someone there... Sometimes he thinks he feels him there, but then there’s just...nothing.

When he slowly makes his way through the hallways, he keeps his eyes up, peering through the crowds for a sight of that red splattered shirt.

But no.

Has he moved on? Gone onto the next world? What happens to ghosts? Or is Shiro literally just hiding behind doors and slipping underneath bushes?

Keith needs to know. Shiro’s still got to be around here, somewhere. Where?

“Here,” Pidge says during English, placing a paper down on his desk in front of him. “We have a presentation today. I did your part.”

“Oh...” Keith murmurs, looking down into the page. “...Pidge... You didn’t have to do that.”

“It’s okay. It took like two minutes. Come on. We’re up.”

Pointless. It all feels pointless.

He heaves himself to his feet, leaning on his crutches as he follows Pidge to the front of the room. Everyone’s watching him. But it feels like more than just students’ eyes. He turns his glance outside, wondering if the bird that just fluttered by was just a finch...or something else.

Pidge is finished with her part before he knows it. She has to elbow him to get his attention.

He blinks down at her and she nods to the class. “Your turn.”

“Oh...” He shifts, bringing the paper up to his face and staring into it. “Um...”

It’s not like he’s forgotten how to read; as he looks down into the paper, he sees the words. He thinks he sees them, but they’re all just...shapes. They’re all slipping across the paper and he’s here, he’s in class, he’s faking it for Shiro, but his mind hasn’t caught up. He’s not where he needs to be. This is all just bullshit. Useless. He can’t bring himself into the moment.

“...Keith?” Pidge whispers. “Keith.”

...He can feel him through the breeze on the air. This is where he woke up, after all. He can hear him in the silence of this place. In the concern and confusion on everyone’s brow.

“I’m sorry,” Pidge walks over to the teacher and leans down, murmuring lowly so the class doesn’t hear: “He’s been going through a hard time. With everything going on...”

“It’s alright,” the teacher says kindly. “Do you need to go to the nurse’s?”

Keith can still feel him...even though he’s not here.
“Keith,” Pidge says again.

“N-no,” Keith breathes out, blinking to himself. He looks down at the paper in his hands, shaking with the current running through him. There’s nothing outside. There’s nothing anywhere. “No, I just...need a moment to sit. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” the teacher says again, voice soft. “Everyone understands.”

But they don’t.

Keith’s in a bad mood by lunch, tangled into knots he wasn’t prepared for. He and Pidge sit with Hunk and Lance, but he doesn’t join in their conversation. He’s focused on the border of trees outside the school gates, where Shiro used to walk, where his blood had been, where his arm had been.

Maybe there’s a place he could check that the police had missed. Maybe if he doesn’t follow the road, but searches even deeper...

Pidge snaps her fingers in front of Keith’s face and he blinks.

“Anyone home?” Pidge asks, eyebrows raised.

He gives her a look and forcibly relaxes into his seat, tearing his eyes away from the road. “I’m fine, okay? I’m sorry about English. I was just...having a moment.”

“We’ve all been there.”

He shifts and rubs at his nose. Have they? There’s no point arguing. “I don’t get how you guys can just pretend nothing happened. It was right here, right in this vicinity. The killer could be any one of us.”

“Well, it wasn’t any of us,” Lance says, pointing them all out. “Shiro would’ve demolished us. Well, Hunk might’ve had a chance, but he wants to bake, not kill.”

“I don’t want to kill either,” Pidge defends.

“Not you either. You’re like a kitten. Keith though. I could see Keith killing.”

"Really fucking funny, Dipshit.” Keith growls around his hand.

“Lance,” Pidge sighs, pressing her glasses up and shooting Lance a perturbed expression that reads a lot like we talked about this.

Lance cringes on a half-laugh, raising his hands in surrender. “I didn’t mean you did. I just mean like...if you had to, you could. I think if we ever got into a bad situation, none of us would have the guts to. We’d just roll over and die.” He taps his temple. “Makes you wonder what Shiro did before he died... He had the build to fight, but the heart?”

The thoughtlessness. Keith’s two seconds from slamming his fists on the table. He tries to take in a deep breath. “Who says he’s dead?”

“Guys,” Pidge says, shaking her head. “Let’s not talk about this. We really don’t need to talk about it. Anything else. Literally.”
“Yeah, yeah, I’m tired of talking about this anyway,” Lance says. “It’s done. It’s over. I mean, it’d be one thing if the trail was still alive, you know? Like, new things coming up. A blood trail. Shiro sightings. Or little bread crumbs left behind to fake us out: tying a fake shirt to a post. Finding Shiro’s car in a mysterious place. A fake body. That’d mean he was alive, right? Like the murderer was trying to throw us off his scent?”

“I’m not a detective, Lance,” Pidge frowns when he looks over to her for confirmation.

“But it’d be suspicious, wouldn’t it?”

“There’s none of that, okay? Just leave it.”

“But if there was -”

She tsks. “But if there was, then yeah, that’d be weird and suspicious. Happy? Now let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay, okay, I’m just trying to drill in a point here into Keith’s thick head. If there was, then that’s when you could worry. That’s when things are suspicious. But there’s none of that. Everything’s quiet. Everything’s good. It’s like it happened, it’s over, it’s done. And now, we should all move on.”

Seeing Keith’s thunderous expression, Pidge says firmly, “I think what Lance is trying to say is that it might be a good thing to try to keep our mind off things. Try to find some sense of normalcy for our health. ...But it’s not done. My dad’s at the school today as part of the investigation. He’s interviewing the teachers and the students again, for the second time, trying to pressure some answers out of them. He’s really putting his all into this, okay? He believes someone in this town knows something too. He was fond of Shiro. He won’t just give up, Keith,” she says to him. “Let’s trust in him. Think we can do that?”

Keith pinches the bridge of his nose and clenches his eyes. “Yes,” he says tightly. “Yeah.” He grabs his water bottle and sips it for a distraction.

Lance sighs dramatically in relief. “Finally. I am so ready to talk about anything else. This entire past week has just been Shiro-this, Shiro-that. Even you, who doesn’t care about anyone but Pidge and your damn sketchbook, is all emo over Shiro. I mean, not that I wanted it to happen or anything, but it’s been ages already, can’t we all just get over it already?”

Keith was already at his breaking point. He tries to hold it together. He tries.

“I mean, I don't get it. You didn’t even know him!” Lance shrugs, clueless to the storm inside Keith.

That’s it. Keith nearly chokes on his drink at the insensitivity he’s hearing. “Because he was a living being, you idiot. Get over it? Don’t you think Shiro wishes he could just ‘get over it’ too?”

“Uh -”

“He’s gone. Gone! All you have to do is hear some shit in the six hours you’re at school. He might not be able to hear anything at all! He might be dead! Do you not understand that?”

Lance actually has the tenacity to look surprised at Keith’s outburst. “Whoa. I didn’t mean it like that. I just think we didn’t know the guy, so why keep thinking and suffering over it, you know? We have to keep moving on with our lives. The world doesn’t just stop.”
“I think you’re probably suffering least out of all of us. ‘Shiro-this? Shiro-that?’ Shiro’s probably dead in a ditch! You think you’ve suffered? What about Shiro? What about him?! All that blood... All his hopes, all his dreams -!” His breath is ragged. “…What about him?”

“Keith,” Pidge says softly.

Lance’s face is slack. He’s pale. “Man, I... I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry. I was just wondering why... I’m an idiot.”

Keith groans into his hand. Lance is Lance. Yeah, he’s an idiot, but he doesn’t mean to be cruel. Keith’s known that for a long time. He knows. “No. ...I know... I just…” Miss him is what he wants to say, but can’t. He takes a deep breath to try to regain control. “We’re just all sitting here on our asses complaining about it, but we can be doing something instead.”

“Well, I mean, what can we do? Each take a part of the forest?”

“Oh, no. No way. I’m not getting eaten by wolves,” Hunk says.

“Shiro could be out there,” Keith growls. “What if he doesn’t want to get eaten by wolves either?”

“I thought you just said he was dead in a ditch,” Lance says.

Keith flashes a glare at him. “One more word out of you. One more fucking word and I swear to god - You are so fucking stupid sometimes,” he hisses. “He probably is dead, but what if he isn’t?”

“Keith, come on,” Pidge says softly, tugging on his sleeve. “This is not doing anyone any good. Let’s drop this.”

“Why? Why though? What if there’s something we haven’t thought of? Something right in front of us? You don’t know if he’s dead. None of us know. He could be anywhere! It’s not over until we have a body. No one’s trying anything.”

No one.

Not even him.

“Keith,” they’re all saying softly. There’s so much pity in their eyes.

He knew it would be hard to come back to school, to try what Shiro wanted for him, to pretend things were normal. Keith’s never been good at pretend. He feels like he’s bleeding out.

“Don’t,” he mutters, pushing himself up warily. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry... I thought I had a handle on myself, but it seems I don’t... I’m going to use the restroom...”

“Hey. Buddy,” Lance leans forward, guilt on his face. “I’m sorry, man. I took it way too far. I won’t mention him again, I swear. Did you want me to go with you?”

“No.” He manages to say nicely.

Keith almost grabs his backpack, but then he thinks better of it, because then Pidge will know he’s actually fleeing and she’ll just hunt him down sooner rather than later. He leaves it with her and grabs his crutches, making his way to the bathroom.

Calm. Calm. If Shiro could be calm most of the time as a ghost in who knows how much pain, then Keith can too. He’s got to do this for Shiro. It’s the last thing Shiro ever asked anyone. The
very last thing.

He swallows hard, turning into the bathroom when the door on the other side of the wall opens and someone exits. Keith almost ignores her until she makes a small noise of recognition in the back of her throat and comes forward. She places a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“You’re Keith...aren’t you?”

He slows, turning and lifting his head to look at her.

His stomach immediately twists. Shiro’s friend. Whatever conversation that’s building on her face is one he’s not ready for.

He’s about to shake his head, deny it, and go into the bathroom to puke, when her face breaks out into a smile. She’s looking at him strangely, like he means a lot to her even though they’ve never spoken.

“I - I’m sorry; we’ve never been properly introduced before. I know this must seem out of the blue, but my name’s Allura. Shiro was one of my good friends,” she says softly. “He meant a lot to me and we were quite close...but he was always so private about certain parts of his life. And I just... I’m really glad that...” She clears her throat and looks away, cupping a hand over her neck and rubbing at it nervously before saying lowly, “Lotor told me what you meant to Shiro.”

Keith bites his lip and shakes his head. No, he wants to say. God, no, it wasn’t like that. Is he being punished somehow? Is this what he gets for lying? This is too cruel. Keith had wanted that, he had, but Shiro had turned away. The words he wants to say to Allura are jammed in his throat: you're wrong. You couldn't be more wrong.

But her eyes are glittering with tears as she looks at him, like he’s the last bit of Shiro she has left. “I’m sure you both had your reasons why you kept it a secret...and I want you to know that it’s okay. Shiro wouldn’t just pick anyone. He cares with his entire heart. I’m glad, at the end of his days, he had someone -”

“- Stop,” Keith finally manages to choke out, shaking his head. His voice cracks. His shoulders tremble. He whispers softly, “No... Please, just stop...”

“Of course,” she says softly, head bowed. “I just wanted to tell you I’m so sorry for your loss, Keith. He’ll always be in our hearts.”

No. No. No, no, no, no. He can’t take it.

He pushes around her and, as fast as his crutches will allow him, he runs. He flees down the outdoor corridors and into the dim hallways of the agriculture building. No students are allowed during this time of day, but the door is broken and the lock comes free if you shift it. Everyone knows that.

The glass trophy case lines the walls here. He forgot it even existed and the sight seems cruel. He balks at the sight. Shiro's trophies sparkle in gold, proud and tall. Keith's are there too.

He pushes past and goes up to the opposite wall and just falls into it, letting his head push back against the wall’s support. His body is trembling. He feels like he’s abandoning Shiro by being here. Like every little thing that’s happened today is trying to remind him that he’s failed. That he’s leaving Shiro to die, like he doesn’t care or something, but that couldn’t be further from the truth.
If he didn’t have his leg.
If he was normal.
If he had tried harder.
If his emotions were in check.
If he could just... If he just...

Emotion wells up inside of him. He can’t control it. In one sudden movement, he whirls, whipping around to the wall and - with one horrible smack - he kicks the wall as hard as he can. He uses his damaged leg. Pain shocks his entire body and he can’t hold back the strangled cry that tears out of his chest. He clenches his eyes shut. The trophies loom behind him, both his and Shiro’s. He doesn’t know what he feels beyond the pain. It hurts so badly.

So he does it again. With as much ferocity as he can put into it.

And again.

He throws all of himself into each kick and grits his teeth against the garbled curse words that press their way out of him. There’s almost relief in the action. He can punish himself as he deserves.

Fuck his leg, fuck him, fuck this school, fuck everyone here.

He hates himself. He hates being here. He hates how he failed. He hates trying to pretend like he doesn’t know Shiro anymore because he does. He does and he can’t just forget him.

Keith keeps hitting his knee against the wall in the dark empty hallways. The sound strikes through the darkness, lonely and cold. The only light that streams in is too bright through the glass door. He hits it until he’s sobbing, his knee bloodied. And he hits it even then.

When his muscles become too stiff that they no longer obey, Keith finally allows himself to sag against the wall. He slides down it, spent, and just sits there, broken. His head hangs and he cries.

Whether Shiro wanted him or not, Keith can’t stop what he feels. He wants him right on the same plane with the rest of them. Shiro shouldn’t be lost, on his own, his place is here.

He stays there in that darkness for god knows how long. He barely even registers the door being fiddled with and shoved open. Or the footsteps striking the linoleum floors, hurrying through the hallway. But he sees the small shoes that come into the peripheral of his vision and the familiar backpack that drops to the floor.

It’s Pidge. She stops when she gets close to him. She stands there for a moment, not saying anything as she quietly slips down onto the wall beside him, moving his backpack out of the way and reaching up both arms to hold him. He shoves his face into her shoulder and just lets himself go. A new wave of tears catches him and he just lets it out into her jacket, clinging to her. She holds him tightly.

They stay there in the dark for as long as Keith needs, past the bell, without saying a single word. And, when Keith’s ready, she helps him up and brings him home.
Keith takes a handful of pills and attends the next day of school, and the next, and the next... His mom takes him to the doctor’s to check out his leg. He has to see the doctor stare at it in shock and ask him what happened to it, why those bruises are there, why the skin is torn. I fell, he says, and the doctor does what she can to fix it, but you can’t glue together a disintegrated rock. They give him more pills, a wider variety, not just for pain anymore. He takes them.

And he keeps going.

It’s what Shiro wanted, he tries to remind himself. And he wants to do what Shiro asked of him. Each day just more painfully monotonous than the last. This isn’t right. He needs to be doing something. But Shiro’s wish...

So he tries. He does. It kills him slowly, but he does.

He keeps feeling things. Intuition. Like someone’s there, but they’re not. Is it Shiro? It doesn’t feel like Shiro. But sometimes it does. Maybe it is, maybe he’s there.

Maybe he isn’t...

It’s always on his mind. Shiro’s always on his mind.

And the days just pass. Keith chooses to just let them pass. And as the month slips by, Keith feels it, looming over him. His choices, each day a weight falling on top of his head. Each one his decision. Each one his betrayal.

But as Matt drives them home, he can see houses in his peripheral, he can see shapes. He checks them.

When people mention Shiro, he’s quiet, listening.

When Pidge bites her lip, frowning into the distance, Keith wonders... Is she keeping anything from him?

Shiro.

One day, like every other shitty day, after school, Keith wearily drags himself to the parking lot, like he’s been doing. It’s a cycle he’s still trying to get into. One monotonous cycle. When he sees Pidge and Matt talking in hushed voices, he’s still stuck in automatic and doesn’t notice. Pidge’s phone is gripped tightly in her hand. He doesn’t register that either.

When she sees Keith, she jumps back from Matt, wiping the air of intensity off her face. “Ready to go?”

He stares. “Yeah. You?”

“Yep. ...Your leg looks kinda swollen, Keith.”

“Probably.”

“Here. I’ll sit in front so you can stretch out in the back.”

“Thanks, Pidge.” He says, kicking his shoes off and laying out.

Matt pulls out of the parking lot and Keith leans his head back tiredly. He closes his eyes and
breathes.

“Katie -” Matt starts.

“Matt.” Pidge shuts him down quickly.

Matt frowns, pressing his lips together tightly while gripping onto the wheel. His eyes flick over to Keith’s and Keith immediately locks on.

Something tingles in his gut. A spark. Hope.

“What?” He asks, looking to Pidge.

“Nothing,” she says grudgingly.

“What?”

“Katie, he’s going to find out...” Matt says.

“No.”

“You know it’ll be all over the school tomorrow. Wouldn’t you rather him hear it from you?”

Time slows as he realizes her hesitance. Sees the bleakness in her eyes. His hope is snuffed out like a flame pinched into darkness. He looks between the two of them. “Hear...what? ...Guys?”

He thinks back to the way she had looked at him back at school, phone clenched tightly in her hand, trying to hide away pity.

His whole body freezes over. Everything clicks into place. He gets it.

“No,” he hears himself saying. He can see her eyes, wary and cautious, and Matt’s pained expression. “No.”

He grits his teeth. This can’t be happening. “They found him. ...They found his body,” he whispers.

She turns in her seat so she can see Keith and shakes her head quickly, holding her hands up.

“Stop. Breathe. They got a call in a bit ago about a body. They’re there now. Nothing’s been confirmed yet, but I just want you to prepare yourself because...well, how many bodies do we find around here?”

“It could be a hiker,” Matt says. “A lot of hikers think it’s a good idea to come here around this time of year.”

“It is right by that trail,” Pidge allows. “In the lake. It was...they found it in the reeds. It was rotting.”

Keith’s stomach drops. “And they didn’t have any other info? Did it look like him? Was it wearing his clothes? Did they call his parents?”

“I don’t know. That’s all Dad said. They’re there now, so I’m sure we’ll know soon.”

“We should go too,” Keith says, pulling himself up on the seats and shoving his face between the two of them. “Matt, you know him. We know him. We can identify the body.”
Pidge turns to him incredulously. “Keith, that is not -”

Matt’s nodding. He whispers, “I think so too.”

“Matt,” Pidge yells.

“Pidge, he’s my best friend. If it were the other way around...”

“But -” She says, turning bodily to stare at Keith.

She and Matt share another look. The car crackles with disapproving energy from both sides.

Pidge is the first to relent. She closes her eyes and crosses her arms tightly. “Fine, you’re both basically adults; I don’t need to babysit you. But mark my words, this is a bad idea. However this ends, it’s not going to be good for either of you.”

“If it’s Shiro...” Matt whispers.

He makes a u-turn and turns from the main road onto a small dirt trail. It bumps and dips as he chugs slowly along. It’s more forest than accessible pathway and it’s bad on Keith’s leg, on the damage he did to it the other day, but he holds firm on his decision.

He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he sees it.

He’s already imagining it: Shiro’s warm eyes with the color stripped from them, stare blank. His arm, torn off his body. His clothes, once soaked through with blood, but now washed off with drudgy lake water.

Shiro, dead.

His Shiro. The one he’s come to know over these past few weeks. He doesn’t know what he’ll do. His fingertips are already buzzing. He thinks he might throw up.

He knows Pidge is watching him, waiting for any excuse to turn around, so he keeps his face straight, as stony as he can get it.

“Keith, I really think you should stay inside.”

Keith takes a deep breath in.

“I’m worried about you...”

“I have to know, Pidge...” He whispers. “I need to see.”

The trees part, and there are shitty little spaces cleared away from a few cars to park. There are several police cars in each space. Matt just parks behind them and gets out. His hand shakes on the hood of the car.

They all wait for each other. Pidge walks around the car and loops her arm through Keith’s, squeezing his hand with her other hand. Matt stays by her other side, whole body tense.

And they walk together. Carefully, like there are monsters lurking in the trees. Truths they can’t handle. Each step brings them closer to the water’s edge. Police tape is blaring across the trees and Matt lifts it for them grimly.

The air is thick with moisture, prickling at his brow, making it hard for Keith to breathe. It smells
strange, like rot. Plantlife? Something else? Each breath is like a knife to his lungs.

It’s a secluded lake, grey and quiet. Maybe people used to come here decades ago, but no one comes here to swim anymore, it’s too overgrown with plantlife and sludge. The water smells thick and heady. There are probably leeches.

There’s fog in the air, pressing out in the distance as far as the eye can see, coating their land in static, swallowing the trees whole.

The police are all gathered by the water’s edge, some knee-deep in the shore, huddled together. There’s a tarp on the ground. They’re parting the reeds, reaching their hands through them with slow care, like they’re handling something delicate, something sacred.

There’s a figure in their arms, in the middle of them. Everything about it looks heavy, body splayed out like it’s full of weights, being dragged back down into the lake. A head lolls back onto its shoulders, neck stretching back in a long arch.

Keith stops breathing. It’s a male with dark hair. They pull him out, water gushing from him like a sponge. They’re scraping his body along the shore. An awful slow, sound. They drag him like a procession, shoulders heavy with weight, faces grim, burdened.

Slowly, they lower him down onto the tarp and pull back. Old men standing around the body of someone not even quite into adulthood, looking down.

A child, basically.

He hears Pidge’s dad whisper, closing his eyes with regret. “We were too late.”


Shiro. Everyone knows what he looked like, especially Keith. Shiro’s still there, smiling, in his sketchbook back at home.

Tall. Wide shoulders. Small waist. The hair. The arms.

The body is the same build, the same height. Though the face is too melted off and bloated to clearly determine features, the hair is black, like Shiro’s. It’s short...like Shiro’s...

Keith thinks he might be sick.


Keith keeps walking forward.

This is not how things were supposed to end.

He feels strange inside, incomplete. He thought maybe this would hit him like a train. Like the end of a journey, bitter and cold.

But his chest feels like a gaping open hole still, waiting, unsatisfied with this.

The body is bloated. The skin is transparent, but the sheen of it is more purple than pink. It’s so waterlogged. It’s almost impossible to tell.

Pidge is saying something to him, pleading, tugging him back. Keith can’t hear her. He can feel
other hands on him. Someone taller, stronger. But no. They mean nothing. They try to get in his way, but he looks around.

All he can see is the body. All he can think about is Shiro.

Shiro, smiling warmly at him as Keith makes some idiotic joke. Shiro, reaching out for Keith’s hands, looking down into them, worrying about his simple little cuts. Shiro, sitting on that seat by the window with the sun streaming in behind him, head tilted and eyes fond as he meets Keith’s eyes. Shiro, leaving so Keith could continue to live his life.

All Keith can see is the body.

That’s all he can see.

Hands and feet chopped off like some sort of grotesque movie.

The skin’s melting off at the ends, fraying. It looks unreal.

His arms are like putty.

There are holes where his eyes should be.

It smells worse than anything he’s smelled before. Decay. Death. Wrong.

It’s like his skin is falling off, waterlogged and bloated and -

Keith stops.

Wait...

Wait.

His eyes flick back down. And shock strikes through him like lightning.

Two arms.

Two. Arms.

“That’s not Shiro,” he breathes, pushing the hands off of him so he can look closer.

“What?” Matt rounds on him, still hunched over from vomiting. He tosses his hand at the body. “How many people are his size? The bangs -”

“It’s not him.” Keith presses a hand to his mouth. “It’s not him! The arms. I told you he was missing one. He has a scar here, on his forearm. I’ve seen it. It’s missing on this body.”

“Keith,” Pidge’s dad is saying. He’s standing by his side, using a gentle slow tone. “Keith, look. This ring fell out of his pocket when we were dragging him out. It’s his, just as his parents described it.”

Keith looks at it but doesn’t see. He remembers it, clearly, in the forest that day, on that arm, still clinging to Shiro’s finger.

“That’s not his. Everyone on the football team had one. It means nothing.”

“...Keith... No one else is missing one but him.”
“This is different. *I know it.* Look at him. *Look at him.*”

Matt looks over, eyes stuck on the body, frozen, mind changing.

“And his hair is a matted mess. But...but the texture... It’s too thick. His hair is... It’s not him. It’s not...not like Shiro.”

He takes a few winded steps back into the reeds that brush against his back, offering him support. He tilts his head up to the sky. And he can feel it. He can feel it in his heart. It’s as clear as day to him.


He closes his eyes. It begins to sprinkle, little drops falling on his face.

Someone’s trying to fake them out. Someone planted a body. And why would they do that if they weren’t hiding his? Why not just toss his body away instead? ...Unless he’s not dead yet.

Relief. He feels so relieved. Shiro’s still out there, somewhere, waiting. He *knows it.* He can feel it. He's felt it all along.

It starts to pour, pounding against the lake. The rain mixes with the tears on Keith’s face and he sobs with relief, pressing his hands into his face. It drenches all of them there on that soggy lake, through their clothes and into their bones. But it’s okay. Nothing’s ever been more okay.

The body isn’t his. There’s still a chance.

Shiro’s alive.

Shiro’s alive.

*Shiro’s alive.*
Shiro had only wanted Keith to have a chance at life. A normal, warm, white-picket fence kind of life. And Keith felt that chance, was tempted by it as he remembered the love of his family. But he has to reject Shiro’s wish. There’s still a chance. Alone, or not, Keith is going to find Shiro.

He just wishes he had better ideas...

He sits on his bed, propping his leg up on a pillow, and texts Acxa.

You have friends at Northside, right? Can you drive me there? He asks.

He can hear her groaning on the other side of the wall. “Can’t. I’m busy.”

He sighs and then raises his voice so she can hear. “I didn’t even tell you when.”

“I’m always busy,” she shouts.

“You can’t just help me? Mom and Dad got you a car.”

“Exactly. Me, not you.”

Their mom yells from downstairs. “Stop yelling, you two, we’re not savages.”

Keith sighs again, going back to his phone. It’s important.

“Drive yourself.”

“I can’t,” he growls.

“Get mom and dad to get you a modifier thing! You’re not helpless. God. I have to do everything for you around here!”

“You literally do nothing!”

“Acxa!” Krolia shouts. “If I have to come up there, you’re both going to regret it. I’m very busy today and I don’t need to hear you both shouting.”

“Always blaming me!” Acxa moans. “Thanks, Keith!”

He lets his head fall back on his pillow and stares at the light on his ceiling until it burns a spot in his vision. Then he calls Pidge.

“Hey, Keith,” she answers. “It’s unlike you to call. What’s up?”

He hums uncertainly. “Would you be up for an adventure?”

“...What?”

“...Are you in Matt’s good graces today?”

He can hear her frown from here. She grunts out a flat, “...Why”.
“...Do you think he’d be up for driving us to Northside?”

She grunts, choking on a drink. “Uh, why?”

“...It’s... If I asked you to just go along with it, would you?”

She groans and he backpedals. He says, “Windows. I’m looking for a specific kind of window on a house. Attic, basement, shed. Something like that.”

“Window?” She says, tone flat in disbelief. “Uh...not to keep repeating myself, but why?”

He cringes. “Maybe I have a thing for windows?”

“...Right.”

“I’m sorry to keep asking you shit. I asked Acxa but she’s being a royal bitch, as always. Pidge, please, can you ask him? You’re the only one with a decent sibling around here.”

She heaves a sigh. “Why have you been so shady lately...?” He hears her shuffling around, the sound of footsteps, and then the squeaking of a door and the blaring of music. “Matt,” he can hear her call. “Matt!”

The music quiets.

“Are you busy in an hour or so?”

“No.”

“Do you want to do me a favor?”

“Hmm...what’ll you do for me?”

“Uh. I’ll tell you what’s wrong with the way you’re putting that together.”

“There’s nothing wrong with it.”

Pidge laughs. “Uh...”

A groan. “What do you want?”

“Can you drive Keith and me to Northside?”

Matt groans even louder. “Northside. When will he learn to drive? Isn’t he old enough now?”

“He can’t. Leg and all that.”

“When will you learn to drive?”

“I’ll watch and learn from my wonderful kind professional brother as you drive us.”

“Is that him on the phone? Tell him to watch too.”

“He can’t. His leg.”

“He can get like...the hand mod things. You know. I’ll make him one. It’ll save me time in the long run.”
“Not if you put it together wrong like this. See? Look. Right here. What is that?”

“...Oh,” Keith can hear Matt say, disheartened.

“Okay,” Pidge says into the phone, voice bright with triumph. “Did you hear that? You owe me one.”

“I owe you five hundred favors now.”

“You really do. I don’t know what you’d do without me honestly. Matt needs to shower because he smells -” Keith hears a ‘hey!’ in the background “- and then we’ll be right over.”

“Thank you, Pidge. You’re the best, Pidge.”


Keith hangs up and bites his lip.

Okay. He’s going to do this. He’s going to keep doing things and keep doing them on and onward until he figures out where Shiro is and that’s final. He’ll keep going. Until the days turn to weeks and the weeks turn to years. Until the life fades from his bones. He’ll find him.

He twists, looking behind him again, staring back at the window spot as he bites his lip, frown in his brow.

It’s empty now, but Keith won’t stop.

He’ll find him.

When the doorbell rings, he hurries down the steps and into the living room.

“Keith? Where are you off to...?” His mother frowns over her glasses, looking up from her paperwork.

“Just a second!” He calls through the door before addressing his mom. “Matt, Pidge, and I are going to go shopping.”

She blinks at him and sets her pen down slowly, taken aback. “Keith... What the doctor said about your leg...”

Shit. He was hoping she’d be too distracted to fight. He tries to play it off, casually digging through the kitchen cabinets for a granola bar. He uses a light tone. “It’s always fucked up. I’m used to it.”

“Honey, I know, but...” She watches him with concern, glancing down at the paperwork in her lap and then back at Keith. “...Watch your language, by the way...” She mutters wearily as she shakes her head. “I just feel like walking on it right now is a horrible idea. If you don’t start learning to take care of yourself, Keith -”

“We just saw that body,” Keith whispers. “You can’t understand what it’s like. I just... The way his skin was just... melting. I keep seeing it replaying in my head and if I keep sitting up there...”

“Keith,” she sighs. “What about another movie? I can take a break for a bit -”
“- I’d like that, I would, but maybe tonight? Pidge is already here and I think it’d be nice to get some fresh air.” He watches her worried face. She’s right, of course she’s right. His leg is screaming at him to sit now, but he holds steady beneath her gaze.

“I’ll be with Pidge,” he says softly. “And Matt’s coming with us too. You know how careful he is. If anything happens, they’ll be there for me. You know that... We just all want to get our minds off things.”

She looks down, biting her lip.

“I’m trying,” he whispers. “You asked me to try.”

His mother watches him with a worried frown. Finally, she sighs. “Maybe you can look for an outfit for the winter formal.”

He smiles. They didn’t actually fight. It’s a miracle. “It’s not like we’re going dress shopping or something, Mom. That’s an Acxa thing. Pidge and Matt will probably want to look at robots or those weird retro junk shops. God knows. I’ll take breaks. I’ll be careful.”

The worry doesn’t leave her face. She watches him like he’s walking out to his doom. “...Just make sure your phone’s on. ...And please, Keith, if you need anything, call us.”

“Right. I will. Bye.”

She gives him a long look. It’s hard to keep his own gaze steady beneath her sharpness. “...Be careful, Keith.”

Pidge is there as he opens the door, kicking rocks with her feet. She looks up when he opens the door. “All good? You look eager. Hi, Mrs. Kogane.”

“Hi, Katie,” Krolia says, coming to the door to help Keith out. “Keith’s leg is more of a mess than usual. I want you guys to have fun, but look after him for me, will you?”

“Mom,” Keith sighs, exasperated.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Kogane,” Pidge says brightly, weaving her arm through Keith’s and patting his cheek with the other. “I will look after him like he’s one of my own.”

“Thank you, Katie,” Krolia says softly. She gives Keith one more smile through her worry before turning and closing the door.

“I thought she was going to try to come with us,” Pidge laughs under breath. She smiles up at him. “You look good today, Keith.”

“I feel a lot better.”

As they walk, she mutters under her breath, “Shopping though? That was the best lie you could come up with? Man... Are you going to tell me what’s really going on? Windows, Keith? You’re a window connoisseur now?”

He bites his lip. “Can you just trust me?”

She watches him for awhile, sliding into the car after him. “God,” she grumbles. “Well, at least you’re being shady with us this time. You’re always missing somewhere and I never know where you are. I’m about ready to lock you up and put a tracker on you.”
“Kinky.”

“KEITH.”


Matt pulls out his earbuds and looks up from his phone.  “Hey again.  You might as well just live with us at this point; it would save me the trouble of having to come pick you up.  You can live in the den.  We’ve got a t.v.  I hear you were grounded from yours.”

Keith chuckles.  “I’ll make it up to you somehow, I swear.”

Keith knows he owes the Holts after this, he always does and he thinks about what he might be able to do in return for them the entire way there.  Finding Shiro would be nice.

Matt turns from the dirt road and onto smooth pavement, “You’re still looking for Shiro...aren’t you?”

“Windows, Matt,” Pidge rolls her eyes.  “He’s a window connoisseur.”

Matt pokes his glasses up his nose.  “You know...they’re saying that body was his.  Officially.  His family ID’d it.”

Keith sighs, “I know.  I know what it sounds like, but you saw it too.”

“I don’t know what I saw,” Matt mutters lowly.

“Aren’t there DNA tests they can run?  They have proof right in their hands.”

“I’m sure my dad’s working on it.  ...What’s left of it...  These things take time, though.  It’s not like we have a forensics lab here in town.”

“We don’t have time.  Look, if his family needs to believe it’s him to give them some sort of peace of mind, that’s fine...but I’m not going to give up on him.”

Pidge presses her fingers to her temples, but she doesn’t look surprised.  She just sighs once, long and unhappy, and then says, “Well, windows it is.  I don’t imagine you’ll tell me why?”

“It’s a triangle.  There are probably trees outside it.  Branches.  A rain gutter.”

“...That could be anywhere.”

“I’ve already checked your neighborhood and the marketplace.  I looked through mine yesterday, so we have it narrowed down,” Keith murmurs, pulling out a map of Northside’s properties.  He ignores the looks that Pidge and Matt shoot each other.

Matt says, “Right, well, there’s a coffee shop right around there on the corner.  I think I’ll just drop you guys off there.  Driving into that place with this piece of junk will only attract attention.  And I feel like we’re doing something suspicious right now.  Keith, are you staying for dinner?  I think I’ll grab something to make too.”

Keith blinks, doing a double take out the window.  He swears he saw a crow, but there’s nothing there.  ...He feels that tiny trickle of apprehension up his neck.  Is he going crazy?  Did he actually see it?

“Keith?  Hello?  Dinner?”
“Oh, uh, yeah, sure. If you don’t mind.”

“Why would we mind? My dad loves you. Katie loves you.” He shrugs. “I must be sort of fond of you too, otherwise why would I be wasting my time driving you around to go hunting for windows?”

Keith takes a deep breath and chuckles softly, leaning forward to elbow him on the arm. “Thanks, Matt. I’m fond of all of you too.”

He pulls into the parking lot of the coffee shop and they all get out. Keith steps out of the car and checks around the trees for birds. And there are some, there are. But nothing out of the ordinary.

He sniffs dryly, eyes still scanning, before catching a concerned look from Pidge. He lets his eyes drop.

Matt squints around for the grocery store before turning back to them. “Don’t get caught in someone’s yard, please. Dad’ll be pissed at me that I enabled you guys like this.”

“I’ll keep him in check,” Pidge says, looping her arm through Keith’s. “Onward!”

“Thank you, Pidge.” Keith says again as they walk across the street and toward Northside’s gates. He really couldn’t be here without them. “You guys put up with so much of my shit.”

“Nah, it’s a good thing, I think. Matt’s been down. He hasn’t come out from his room since we found the body. He just keeps tinkering on things. Did you see his hands? They’re all bloody.” She sighs. “I don’t know how I feel about you hunting down a body of someone who’s supposedly already been found, but...you’ll tell me if you’re ever...not okay, right?” She looks up at him for a second and then looks away. “I’m here for you, Keith... I just...” Pidge breaks off and then pokes her fingers with her glasses sharply. With one rough tug, she takes the map from his hands and frowns into it. “Okay. So you said Lotor is out, right?”

“I still want to check.”

“Of course you do.”

As they walk through the tall private gates declaring in bold fancy letters, “Northside”, Pidge frowns around them. Most of the houses are gated. Even the gates border the house from so far away, it’s almost impossible to see the windows.

Pidge says, “This would be easier with binoculars.”

Keith stops, shrugging his backpack from his back and taking out his pair. He hands it over and she grins.

“Wow, almost like a real detective.” She puts them over her eyes and frowns in dismay. “It doesn’t help my height issue. ...You too, though. Maybe Matt should’ve come with us.”

“I don’t have a height issue,” he grumbles. “Let’s go up the hill. We’ll be able to see in most everyone’s yards there.”

The hill is at the end of the street and it’s quite the distance to walk. Keith is slow, slower than usual, even he can see that. Pidge doesn’t say anything about it or give him side glances, but she’s keeping pace. She’s got to know.

He thinks he should stop but his weaknesses are what made Shiro leave in the first place. So he
can’t. The pain is eating away at him from the inside, but he’s got to keep going. Everything’s telling him to stop but he -

“Hey,” Pidge says sharply, stepping in front of him and grabbing him by the shoulders. She’s looking him straight in the eyes, face grim. “Keith... Don’t push yourself.”

“But I -”

“We’ll make it,” she says, gesturing toward the hill. “We will. Slow and steady wins the race, right?”

He swallows hard. “This is my fault.” He’s the one who crushed his leg against that wall. It had seemed necessary at the moment but he regrets it now. Of course he does.

Pidge probably knows what he did, but she doesn’t mention it. “Come on,” she says. “Slowly. If I return you damaged, your mom will destroy me.”

He grimaces and forces himself to listen. But it takes forever.

When they finally get there, Keith takes a seat on the bench, rubbing out the muscle in his leg. He’s not sure if it helps or worsens it. He closes his eyes for awhile and just breathes, keeping the motion up. He knows Pidge is watching him, but she picks up the binoculars eventually. “If you find this triangle window, what’ll you do?”

“Go there,” Keith says.

She heaves a sigh. “What a perfect plan. I hope you have more you’re just not telling me. Look at all these fences... You won’t even be able to climb over them.”

“I used to be able to.”

She makes a little sound in her throat that she tries to extinguish. “...Yeah...but...you can’t do that sort of thing anymore, Keith.”

He breathes out sharply, reaching for the binoculars with a frown. “Let me see.”

She hands them over with a sigh, taking the map from him again. “It looks like this lot doesn’t have your window. Or this one or this.”

“Yeah... Or these three here.” He runs his finger along a line and Pidge crosses them out.

“We need another vantage point over on the other side,” Keith grunts, looking around. There are only trees. “Maybe I can climb -”

“- Keith. You can not climb anything right now. I am putting my foot down. It’s not a good idea for you.”

“For me? What? You think I can’t do it?”

She presses her eyes closed. “Keith. Come on. There’s a bit more danger involved for you.”

“Well, what do you suggest?”

“Look, I know how you need this, so just...let me do it. I’ll climb your damn trees and look.”

“Pidge, you hate climbing trees -”
“-Let me-,” she says, taking the binoculars out of his hands. “If we finish this, we get to go back, right? Stay here.”

“No, I’m at least going with you.”

“Keith, come on. I know you’re hurt. Rest for two seconds.”

“Pidge.”

She heaves a sigh, rubbing at her eyes with a long groan.

“Hey,” she says eventually. “Remember when you used to carry me through those fields of wheat on your back and just run? Right behind the school.”

Keith breathes out a soft chuckle. “...Yeah. I loved that.”

“The field behind us kind of reminds me of that. How many hours do you think I spent clinging to your back?”

He hums. He misses that. “...I don’t know.”

“I bet I could carry you now.”

He snorts and looks over to meet her cheeky grin. “Yeah, right. You’re like half my size.”

“No, I’m not!” She says with an indignant squawk, hopping to her feet. She gestures to herself. “Exaggerate much? It’s only like a foot difference. And besides, I’m strong. Try me.”

He rolls his eyes, looking down at her small back. “We’re going to fall and roll down this hill and it will kill us both.”

She laughs. “Have a little faith, Keith.”

“This is a horrible idea. Piggybacking hurts my leg almost as much as walking, you know.”

“Yeah, but not as much. And I want to try it out. Humor me.”

“God,” he hums, giving in. He grabs his crutches and wraps his arms around her neck, trying to keep them from hitting her. “This is so awkward. If anyone from school sees us, please actually just hurl me off your back and let me die.”

She laughs again, grunting as she lifts them both, standing tall. “See?” She chokes breathlessly. “No problem.”

He chuckles, seriously concerned for their lives as she starts to climb down the hill. “Right.” He thinks about it. “You know...you’re so small it doesn’t really hurt my leg that much. Maybe I’ll have you carry me around everywhere.”

“Oh,” she grunts. “Yeah, since I’m totally offering this service all the time.”

He snorts. “You can let me down, Pidge.”

“Nope. I said I’d do this...and I can. We just...need that...tree...”

He laughs and she lets out a little garbled grunt that he supposes might be a laugh too.
When they finally make it, he slips off her back and she breathes again.

“You okay?” He asks in concern. Her face is all splotchy and red from overexertion.

She snorts, shoving her hands to her hips. “Did you see that? I did it.”

He watches her with tired amusement. “...You did. Thanks, Pidge.”

She pats his shoulder, looking down at his leg that’s hanging in there. Then she turns her head up to the large tree, her next hurdle.

Keith looks with her. “Pidge, you don’t have to. If I’m being honest, you always kind of sucked at climbing trees.”

“Shush,” she says, taking a deep breath and then reaching up to grab her first branch. “Learn to accept help. This will be as much of a challenge for you as it will be for me. I’ve got this.”

Keith looks up as she struggles up it, her short limbs working against her. “Here, just -” He bites his lip. “Don’t use that branch. Use the other one.”

“Stop backseat climbing,” she gripes. “I’ve climbed a tree before.”

“Yeah, but - the one on your right. That’s the better branch.”

“Better branch,” she mutters, using the one on the left anyway and shrieking as it breaks. She clings to the branch she’s sitting on, rubbing at her forehead as she goes pink with embarrassment. “Okay. Okay. Better branch.”

“I told you. Be careful, Pidge.”

“Can’t get what you want without a few falls along the way, hm?”

“I’d rather you not fall from a tree, actually.”

“Here,” she grunts, pulling herself up clumsily and hugging onto a branch. “I can see from here.” She grins down at him, slightly breathless.

He can barely see her face because of how far up she is. If she were to fall, she’d seriously hurt herself. Keith fidgets from down below, ready to try to catch her if he has to.

She pulls the binoculars from her pocket and looks around. “Okay. Triangles... Check off houses three and four. It’s not them.”

“Mkay.”

“And six.”

“Six. Got it.”

“Seven... Hm...”

“That’s Lotor’s house.”

Keith can see her posture change. “Lotor’s?” She pauses, squinting closer.

“What? What is it?”
“Just...is that a glass house? Rich people. I’d be so uncomfortable... Your entire household contents up for display. What’s with that? But wow, look at that t.v. I wish I were rich. In money at least,” she grumbles the last part. “Too bad everyone else actually hates him.”

“Shiro likes him,” Keith hums.

“Psh. Okay, well, the other houses we already saw. I don’t see anything, Keith. Can I come down now?”

“No. You’ve got to stay up there. I want to see how long you can keep a hold when it starts raining.”

“That’s an interesting thought actually.” She angles the lens up to the sky and says, “won’t be long. Maybe I should just wait here. Teach you to be careful what you wish for.”

He’s about to respond when the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He turns quickly, peering into the forest, eyes scoping out every spot he can find. Searching.

He breathes out, quietly, “…Shiro...?”

The sound of beating wings. A tiny bird flutters onto a branch. Everything else is still.

It’s a soft sort of quiet and Keith finds himself filling with peace - relief - as he watches the stillness of the forest.

“Shiro...” he murmurs. He misses him so much. He takes a step into the feeling, closer to the warmth hanging in the air, heart filled with yearning.

He’s here. Keith knows he’s here. He wonders what Shiro’s thinking, watching Keith out here even after his final wish.

But Keith’s made his choice. Just as Shiro has to keep away...

Pidge is still talking, “I’d bet I can climb to the top and see when lightning strikes. I just hope it won’t strike my head.”

“Wow,” Keith hums and, with one last look into the stillness of the forest, turns back up to her. “You’re funny. Come on. I’ll help you bake cookies today.”

“Will you really?” She says excitedly, shoving the binoculars back into her pocket and carefully climbing down. “You make the best cookies. Well, besides Hunk, but he’s not human. I dunno how you do it. I’ve even tried your recipe. I did everything right - I’m sure of it - and still, they were so puffy.”

He snorts. “I add love to them.”

“Right. Well, I’m going to record you tonight so I can absorb your secret.”

He laughs, walking forward to help her as she hops from the bottom branch and lands on her feet. She holds her arms up in the air like she just did a fancy gymnast move. “Impressed?”

“Very. Thank you, Pidge.”

“So. No window here. You sure it was Northside?”

“No. I’m checking off neighborhoods. Three down...only...who knows how many more to go...”
They start walking back. Slow and steady wins the race, just like she said. Keith’s looking forward to laying down and never moving his leg again. At least until the next neighborhood they check. Maybe he can squeeze that in tonight.

“I feel like there’s got to be an easier way.”

“...Maybe. If you have any better ideas, let me know.”

“...Why a window, Keith? I don’t understand. What’s that have to do with anything? Maybe I can help you if you tell me.”

He purses his lips, looking down at her. He hesitates. “...I... It’s hard to explain. I want to tell you, I do, but I'm just worried what you'll think... I wouldn’t even know how to say it if I tried. I just -”

“Hey!” Matt calls from the driver’s seat window as they approach. “Took you guys long enough. Find anything?”

“Yell it out to the whole neighborhood, why don’t you?” Pidge grumbles. She checks to see if Keith will continue, but she knows that the moment is gone. She sighs. “No. We didn’t find anything. But Keith promised me he’d make cookies for us tonight.”

Matt smiles at that. “Good, I’m tired of your sad attempts. Hop in. It’s cold. I’m rolling the window up.”

“Ask your friends if they have any triangle windows,” Keith says when they get back to the house. Keith sits at their dining room table and watches as Matt starts frying vegetables.

“...What a great topic opener,” Matt mutters. “Sure to get me a lot of friends.”

Pidge snorts from the other side of the table. “And when they, inevitably, ask why?”

“My dad’s a construction worker and a client wanted a triangle window but he doesn’t know where to get one.”

“You could’ve fed me that lie,” Pidge says.

“You wouldn’t have believed it,” Keith sighs. “But the rest of the school will be fine.”

“I wouldn’t let the others know at school why you’re really looking,” Matt says softly. “...His family’s still really bad off.”

“...Yeah,” Keith mutters, thinking of the last time he had seen Ryou. He wonders if Shiro’s visited him, what Ryou’s like now.

“Are you going with your family to the funeral?” He asks. “You know you’re always welcome to come with us.”

Ice floods Keith’s body and he stammers out in shock, “F-funeral?”

“Well, yeah,” Matt says, turning back, caught by the surprise in Keith’s voice. “...I mean, they have the body.”

“Yeah, but -” Not the right body. Keith shakes himself, feeling the weight of Matt and Pidge’s eyes on him. He knows it, he guesses. A funeral makes sense. But...But Shiro’s funeral. Like he’s dead. Gone for good.
He knows it, but still, hearing it...

“A funeral,” he forces out.

“I’m sorry, Keith,” Pidge murmurs. “I was supposed to tell you. I’ve been waiting... I didn’t want to.”

“No, I... I dunno why I didn’t even think of it. I just...” He blows out a breath and pushes back his bangs from his face. “Yeah. Yeah, a funeral. ...Yeah. I’ll go. I dunno if my parents are going or not. I’ll text you later.”

“No big deal. We’ll see you there in any case. I hear the school’s switching the winter formal to a Shiro remembrance sort of thing too. They got a bunch of his photos and are going to show it on a projector. ...I dunno how I feel about it. It’s going to be hard to see.”

Keith bites at his nails, humming in an attempt to look normal. “...Right. Photos.”

“We don’t have to go, Keith,” Pidge says. “I’m sure if you talk to your mom, she’ll get it.”

He groans. “...No, she’s so excited. She already is talking about my dad’s formal wear she still has that she wants me to try. And I... It’s good. People remembering Shiro. He deserves that.”

“He does,” Matt says. He turns as the front door unlocks and opens. “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, guys,” he says fondly even as his voice drags down in weariness. He looks over with a smile on his face and then he stops when he sees Keith. “Heya, Keith. Nice to see you. How’s it going?”

“Good. I hope you don’t mind, I pretty much just invited myself over today.”

“We went to the store for dinner,” Matt says. “Keith promises cookies.”

“All that?” He wishes I had known that earlier and then I would’ve had something to look forward to. What’s for dinner?” He says, looking over Matt’s shoulder.

Pidge looks over Keith and says softly behind her hand. “My dad’s a good resource too, you know. For your window search.”

Mr. Holt comes over to sit down in between them with a big tired oomph. He closes his eyes and rubs his face, looking stretched thin. “So nice to be away from work for once.”

Keith shoots Pidge a look and she shrugs.

“That bad, hm?” Keith mutters sympathetically.

“It’s just nice to have a bit of time to yourself, that’s all. I’d like to take a nice weekend and go for a nice walk off in the mountains. Keith, you’ll come with me one of these times, won’t you? Matt and Katie only care about the indoors.”

Keith laughs behind his knuckles as he leans his face on them. “These are supposed to be the sport model crutches.”

“See? Perfect.”

“Okay!” Matt calls. “Dinner’s ready!”
Everyone grabs a plate and fills it. Matt’s a decent cook. He can make a meal at the very least. He’s had some practice lately having to try to fill the void for Pidge. To try to take care where their mom had left a wide gap open. But that’s another story.

While they’re eating, Keith has a thought. “You walk a lot, don’t you, Mr. Holt? Have you ever found any cabins out in the woods? Shacks? I was reading about the geography of this place earlier and saw a bit about abandoned homes.”

Mr. Holt nods. “There’s a few of those, sure. They used to teach more about it when we were younger, but now there are all those government regulations and stuff. Geometry and the like takes priority, you know how it goes. We’ve got to keep your knowledge to a certain standard.”

Matt and Pidge start giggling and exchanging looks.

Keith ignores them. “*Your* generation. So my parents might know. Your guys’ friends?”

“Sure. Ask them. They probably know of some cool places near you that you could visit. I know there are a lot of old wells and bases of houses and things like that; but that was probably...gosh, centuries ago.”

“That sounds interesting.” He looks to Matt and Pidge. “We should go sometime.”

They give him a knowing crooked smile. “Okay, Keith.”

“So where are those cookies,” Pidge taps the table antsily. “I’m ready for them.”

“You barely finished your meal!” Matt gripes.

“*Cookies, Matt.*”

“You need your vegetables!”

“Keith’s offering up the secrets of the universe, Matt!”

Keith makes them cookies while Pidge records, hovering behind him the entire time ("That's *exactly how I did it!*" she insists). Pidge and Keith eat almost the entire batch in a cookie eating competition that makes him so full he doesn’t want to move ever again. Pidge punches her fists in the air in victory before offering him something for his stomach.

“Stay the night,” Pidge says.

It’s late and her dad’s already in bed, asleep. Matt’s on the sofa in the living room, head in his phone, frowning groggily against the light of the screen and Keith really is tired. He doesn’t want to have to go home, especially where that empty window seat waits and the way the sky is quaking and pouring, so he nods his head. “Sure.”

He texts his mom to let her know and then follows Pidge to her room. She kicks her closet open and pulls out the blankets she has waiting there. “Remember when you’d come over here like every night? Your mom would call my parents at midnight all mad at you, asking where you went.”

“Where else would I go?” He chuckles. “But yeah. Those were the days. I’d just climb through your window and you’d just give me that *look.*”

“What look?”

“That look,” he laughs, pointing at her face. He checks the dog bed in the corner that’s currently empty. "Where’s Rover? I want to pet him."

"Mm, I dunno. Probably sleeping with Matt today. I’ve been letting Matt borrow him. He lets Rover sleep in his bed with him.” She yawns as she crawls onto her bed. “You know you can sleep up here.”

“I’m fine down here. I’d hate to upset your future boyfriend.”

She snorts. “What future boyfriend? It’s up to me and I know you. Well, whatever. The offer stands.”

“Mkay. Thanks, Pidge.”

“Night, Keith. I’d love to stay up and chat with you like old times, but I really am tired. It’s all those damn cookies. Sleepy.”

“Pfft. Well, you did win.”

“I sure did. ...You big baby.”

“Goodnight, Pidge.”

“...Mm.” And she’s gone.

He turns off the light for her and then settles back into his mound of blankets on the floor. He pulls his phone out and investigates the forests around them. A cave maybe. It’d be worth looking into. The lakes. Any old structures. He doesn’t know, but anything will do. This fucking window thing is starting to really irritate him. It all feels hopeless.

He’s biting his lip, jabbing his fingers into his phone with a frown on his face as he thinks about how he can do this when he feels something.

He pulls his phone down from his face, angling the light away and looking into the darkness.

He thinks he sees a shadow at the door and he darts up, pushing away the blankets.

He takes in a deep breath. “...Matt?” He whispers.

There’s no response. There’s only that stillness. The soft, gentle stillness.

Keith breathes. “...Shiro...?”

Still, in the darkness, he can make out nothing. He pulls himself to his feet and carefully limps across the room, using Pidge’s nightstand for balance, looking out the door. He turns his head both ways to search the hallways, but they’re just as empty as earlier.

But he tries again, his heart tugging painfully. “...Shiro?”

Even if Shiro were there, he wouldn’t respond. Keith’s sure of that. He closes his eyes and leans into the door frame. He just stands there, sitting in Shiro’s presence, the feel of him there on Keith’s skin. He conjures up the image of Shiro, gentle and sturdy. God, he misses him.

Keith says softly into nothingness, “Shiro, if you’re there... I’m not giving up, okay? I’m going to find you. I know it’s not what you wanted, but I... I just can’t leave you alone in this and I’m here for you if you ever need someone...” He takes in a small breath and bites his lip. “...I miss you.”
He swallows and says, even quieter, "I'm sorry".

He presses his lips together. He’d be lying to himself if he were to say he wasn’t hoping for some sort of answer, but none comes.

It’s alright. Keith had mentioned earlier how Shiro was his guardian angel and he feels like he still is. That brings a lot more comfort than he thought it would. He’s not alone in this. He’s not alone.

He drags himself from the hall and back into Pidge’s room, laying out on the soft collection of blankets on the floor. He can hear Pidge’s soft breathing and the pitter patter of the rain on the roof. It really brings him back...

He sleeps well that night and when he wakes, his leg doesn’t even hurt that badly.

The week passes by quickly.

Keith still leaves the t.v. on at night in hopes that it'll coax Shiro back, but each morning he wakes up, the window seat remains empty. Pidge and him have been checking out piles of books from the library - the one from school and the musty ancient one in town, drawing out maps of their town, marking out locations of all the old structures around. Pidge is happy because it gets Keith to stay still on his bed and not drag his leg around town.

Keith isn’t happy. There are so many places to check.

And then it’s the day of the funeral. Keith really doesn’t want to go.

He’s looking down into his sketchbook, thinking deep into his head, trying to conjure up the perfect image of Shiro, but everything is going wrong. He flips back a page to look at Shiro’s face. The thick eyebrows, that straight hairline, the jawline. There’s kindness there, radiating light and confidence and...

Keith grits his teeth, wrinkling his current drawing into a ball between a tight fist and throwing it as hard as he can into the wall in front of him.

It looks nothing like him.

“Whoa,” Axca whistles, hanging on the door.

He frowns. “What is it?”

“Good morning to you too. Mom and Dad said I could drive myself to the funeral if you’re going with the Holts. Are you going with them?”

“No,” he sighs, preparing to hear her whine and complain and bitch about how her entire life is suffering by just being born from the same womb as him.

But she doesn’t. She walks across the room and sits on the end of his bed, looking at him.

“Did you know him before all this?”

“No.”

She crosses her legs, frowning as he discreetly closes the sketchbook and holds it protectively
closer to his heart.

“I’ve heard rumors,” she says lowly. “That maybe you did... That uh...you and him were sort of...together.”

“Yeah,” he whispers harshly, throat tightening. “I’ve heard them too. Allura came up to me and offered her condolences.”

“She told me.”

“Then she probably also told you I ran off basically crying, didn’t she?” He spits. He’s feeling prickly. He doesn’t know what Acxa’s game is.

“No, Keith,” Acxa says gently, which surprises him. “No. Shiro meant a lot to all of us. She wasn’t trying to start anything.”

“...It was my fault,” he rubs at his face roughly, trying to hide the tears that are starting to burn his eyes. “...I was an idiot and implied to Lotor that Shiro and I were together so I could get information out of him. It was stupid. I regret it. ...But it wasn’t true.”

“Ah,” she says. “That makes sense. I was just wondering,” she mutters. “I did know him. He was really nice. One time, we were at this party and I drank way too much,” she laughs and then gives him a sharp look, “Don’t tell Mom. Anyway, I was throwing up like crazy and my hair was getting in it, and he actually held it up out of my face. He didn’t even know me. I’ve only ever heard stories about that,” she laughs. “My boyfriend didn’t even hold my hair for me...”

“Acxa...” Keith closes his eyes and shakes his head. “Get a new boyfriend. He sucks.”

“Yeah, well, I tried. I sort of developed this huge crush on Shiro for awhile after that. I asked him out a few times, did you know that? He always turned me down, but he was really sweet about it. It somehow didn’t ever feel like this huge rejection. And it didn’t get awkward or anything, he still would say hi to me and ask how things were going and all that. ...He was really nice.”

He didn’t know that. Shiro never mentioned it.

“He asked about you once too,” she said, side glancing him. “You were sitting in the quad with Pidge drawing something, totally focused on it. I don’t think he realized we were related. He watched you for a long time... I won’t lie, I was pretty jealous. That was the week I threw your phone in the toilet.”

“You did what?”

"O-oh, right. I never told you..."

"When was this?" He whispers. He doesn’t remember.

“Last year. I’m sorry about the phone, by the way. It was petty.”

He sighs. Shiro never mentioned watching him before. He looks at her cautiously. “Why are you telling this?”

She shrugs, swinging her feet. She’s dressed up nicely. Hair pulled back, makeup done, black tights and a black dress. She says, softly, “It just seemed like you missed him somehow. And all this news about him has just been horror after horror. I can’t believe you were there when they pulled his body from the lake. That’s something you won’t ever forget... So maybe I wanted to
give you some other piece of him to remember. The Shiro he was, not what happened to him.”

He presses his lips together tightly. So much about Shiro he missed out on... “I always thought you and your friends were so dumb,” he laughs softly. “But...I dunno. I guess I was wrong.”

“No, we’re all pretty damn dumb,” she shrugs, getting to her feet and laughing. “But it doesn’t mean you aren’t too.”

Keith rolls his eyes. “You really know how to encourage and empower others.”

“Thanks. It’s a gift. Anyway, you’d better get dressed. It starts soon and you can’t go looking like that. It’s a funeral, not some weird indie rock band concert.”

He huffs a sigh. “I will. It just feels weird. Going to a funeral for him. I didn’t ever expect to go to a funeral for anyone in our school, much less someone like him.”

“Out of everyone, he deserved this the least...” Acxa sighs, tapping her foot on the ground. “Makes you think of what’s precious in life, you know? And...and before I totally lose my nerve, I just want to say you’re not a shitty little brother, okay? You’re actually kind of cool and I’m glad that nothing bad has happened to you.”

“Ha. ‘Little’... For the last time, Acxa, we’re twins.”

She holds up four fingers in his face. “Took you forty minutes longer than me. That’s a long time for twins.”

“Blame Mom, not me.”

She laughs. “I was trying to be nice and you’re ruining it.”

“I know, I know,” he chuckles, looking down, embarrassed suddenly. “I like you too and all that.”

“Uh, wow, don’t go that far. Anyway, get ready. Mom and Dad want to get there actually on time, so get up. Let’s go.”

He dresses as nicely as he can - black slacks and a button up collared shirt - and heads downstairs. His parents and Acxa are waiting, dressed, shoes on, and purses strapped to shoulders.

It’s quiet and awkward on the ride there. It’s like his death is fresh again. Like each of them have a wound that’s visible to the eye but no one can heal it. He doesn’t know what to say. He feels like he should say something. The silence is killing him.

“Acxa,” he says. “What else did you know about him?”

She looks up from her phone, thinking. “Well. I went to his birthday party last year. His house is really cute. They’ve got this whole garden in their front yard and the redwoods behind just sort of frame their home, like it’s looking after it or something. Inside, there are a bunch of photos of them from when they were younger, all smiling with their grandparents and stuff. His brother made him this three-tiered cheesecake with strawberries on top. You should’ve seen his face when they brought it out. They really had the picture-perfect family.

“Hm...what else? They’re from Japan. I guess they used to live there when they were little kids. Shiro still knows some Japanese. He loves macaroni. He used to bring these nasty little containers of dried noodles with bags of cheese with him to school. The teachers would let him use
the microwave because he was Shiro, of course. He had all these special privileges, I don’t even think he realized. The whole classroom just smelled like cheese, but no one had the heart to complain because...well, you know,” she laughs. “He was Shiro. God, it was so gross. And he'd always be like, in this innocent voice, ‘what? What's wrong?’ And everyone would just be dying over the smell.” She laughs again. “God, I can smell it even now. Ugh.” She looks over to Keith and then stops. She sobers as she takes in his expression. “...Are you crying?”

He shakes his head firmly, wiping his hand across his face. His voice is garbled from the tears. “No. I just. Keep going. I want to hear more about him.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “...You are crying.”

Krolia leans back around her seat, face sad as she puts her hand tenderly on his knee. “He was loved, Keith,” she murmurs. "He lived a good life."

He nods vehemently and takes the tissue Krolia offers him. He wipes at his face and blows his nose. “God, I’m not going to make it at the funeral,” he says, voice rough.

“They’re going to have a closed casket. You don’t have to stay. There’s a lake by the house if you want to take a moment. We can leave whenever you want.”

He says lowly, “...It’ll be fine. I’ll figure it out.”

There are a lot of cars in the parking lot. A lot of people. It looks like the entire school decided to show up...and Keith is glad. He hopes Shiro is here, somewhere, seeing how beloved he was. At least he had that much.

He can’t help but keep a lookout in the shadows, through the crowds of people. Searching. He does not see Shiro, but as he looks up and around, he sees crows. Loads of them clinging to the trees, still, waiting.

The trees surround the graveyard, closing them in. Keith feels apprehension bubbling in his gut. But there are people this time. So many people. That brings him some peace of mind.

Pidge finds Keith before he can even fully get out of the car. “Hey,” she says.

“Wow,” he says, clearing his throat roughly and turning around. “You’re actually wearing a dress.”

“I know,” she hums, looking down at it as she plucks it with her fingers. “It was the only thing black I own. I wore it to my mom’s funeral too.”

“Ah. This is what I wore too.”

She smiles sadly, reaching over to pluck Keith’s shirt too. “You look nice like this. You actually brushed your hair.”

“So did you.”

She smiles brightly up at him. “Aw, you noticed.”

“I don’t look like I’ve been crying, do I?” Keith asks.

She hums, eyebrows going in. “Mnn...”

“Dammit, don’t answer that,” he says, wiping at his face again. “Have you looked around the
“Not much to look at unless you’re hunting for gravestones. See for yourself.”

He walks out from the parking lot and onto the grass. It’s true. There’s a lot of grass. A lot. There’s a lush green field with headstones, some simple and to the point, others tall and noble, decorated with statues of angels and intricate crosses. Flowers, both old and new, rest before the headstones. Some have old stuffed animals. Some have candles. Even though there are many people around them and it’s loud from the chatter and sounds of feet against gravel, it still somehow manages to seem quiet. Still. An eternal resting place. It’s beautiful in its own way.

There’s a sliver of a path cutting through the center where a large fountain stands, leading the way downhill to the main house. The house looks like one of those old-time manors that might house a vampire and its bat of a husband. It’s tall and regal with a gothic sort of charm. He can see the second story from where they are here.

“Lance was saying the girl who stalked Shiro lives in the funeral home.”

“Oh, you mean Haggar? Yeah. What a good-feel place to live. Graves all around your house. There are even more in her backyard. No wonder why she’s crazy.” She frowns as a drop of rain hits her nose. “And what a surprise. It looks like it’s going to rain today even though the forecast said sun. I brought an umbrella. Never trust an optimistic forecast.”

“No,” Keith whispers, tilting his head back to look into the sky. It’s so dark today, it almost looks like evening. He closes his eyes.

This funeral feels a lot like admitting Shiro’s gone, putting him to rest. Shiro’s family is in the center of where everyone is congregating up on the hill, holding each other, clinging to tissues. Ryou stands off to the side, alone, face like stone.

Where is Shiro? Keith wonders.

Keith’s greatest fear is that maybe Shiro came back and tried to talk to him again, but Keith could no longer see him. How would he know? Maybe Shiro is here, running between people like that day he did at school, terrified out of his mind about being alone for eternity, only... Keith stares right past him too, unseeing.

He really would be alone.

Maybe it’s that.

Keith takes a deep breath in and begins to walk, Pidge following him.

“Acxa was telling me stories about Shiro,” he tells Pidge. “They were friends. Did you know that?”

“Yeah. Half the reason I assumed he was an asshole.”

“Acxa’s okay when she wants to be.”

“She treats you like shit,” Pidge mutters. “But yeah, sure, she’s great.”

She follows Keith’s stare to the house. “Haggar’s supposed to stay upstairs. It’s blocked off apparently. They’ve invited everyone to gather there afterward for the reception. They’ll have food and stuff.”
“You really think Haggar’s going to stay there? Especially if she’s really as crazy as they say. They expect her to be able to show enough restraint to not get a look at his so-called ‘body’ for the last time?”

“I have no clue. Maybe she’s excited. His body will be buried in her backyard,” she says.

“...Christ.” Keith wants to throw up. He hates that thought.

“Hey,” Matt comes up from behind them, clapping them both on the shoulders. “Are you guys coming?” he says, tone strange and high. He sounds like he’s about to snap; trying to overcompensate for it. “They’re starting the eulogies soon.”

Keith lets out a small exhale as Matt passes them by. His hands were shaking.

“I helped him write his last night,” Pidge mutters. “...I hate funerals.”

Keith watches the people climbing the pathway, an ant trail curling up the hill toward the large rich coffin laid out on top, closest to the sky. A patch of light is peering through the clouds and warming the area, like the angels are watching, blessing him one last time.

Keith knows the body there is not Shiro’s, but the heaviness of the air, the sound of people crying, watching as they press tissues to their faces...it’s getting to him. It’s real to all of them. He feels that; it’s palpable. He has to pull away. He looks back to the house where he can see the crows gliding through the air...like that’s supposed to help. There are so many different tensions everywhere; there’s nowhere to run for relief.

“Come on,” Pidge says, tugging him forward.

And so they follow that trail up, head tilted toward the sky, watching the birds overhead.

Everyone has lined up, placing bouquets of flowers on top of the coffin. There are a lot of roses. A lot of lilacs. Keith just has a drawing. And it’s stupid. And it’s not worthy of Shiro, but it’s all he has. When they reach the coffin, Keith stares down at it. It’s not an open casket, there’s nothing to see but sleek well-crafted wood laced in gold, but it feels hard to breathe anyway. He remembers how the face looked in that lake...and it makes him feel sick.

Pidge reaches forward and carefully lays a rose out on top of the pile. The pile is huge by this time and the line is still long behind him. Keith's not sure they're all going to fit before they topple over onto the floor.

He was so loved.

Keith just stares.

“Hey,” Pidge says gently, giving his arm a little squeeze. “Did you want to give that to him? We should let others have a chance too. We can come back later.”

Part of him wants to just stay here, sit with his hands pressed to the coffin, being as close to Shiro as he can get. The memory, at least. But another part of him is sick, head spinning with everything. He’s cold and his joints are locking up. He needs to get out before it gets worse.

He nods, sliding the drawing beneath the flowers, hiding it under everything. He avoids Ryou’s gaze who’s standing on the other side of the coffin, watching him, posture tense.

Pidge sighs as they find a bench in a secluded area beneath a tree to sit on. “Draining,” she
mutters. She looks up at him. “How are you? How’s your leg?”

“Hurts,” he says lowly, digging his fingers into it. “My stomach is worse. That body... Knowing it’s just beneath the wood. And everyone saying goodbye to him.” He grits his teeth and hangs his head.

“I know,” Pidge hums, rubbing his back in slow gentle circles. “I know.”

When the speeches begin, they mesh into the back of the crowd. He tries not to listen. It’s like hearing Aca talk about Shiro; beneath the surface of the stories, it’s all the things about Shiro he already knew: Shiro was one of the best people he knew. Would ever know.

Keith stares at the coffin again. In a little while, they’ll just...lower the body into the ground. Toss dirt on it. And that’s it. The body will rot.

What if it is Shiro? What if that arm in the forest was just some prop? Just someone else’s arm? What if he’d been dreaming? It was late. Keith has crazy in his blood.

What if what everyone else has been saying is right? And Shiro drowned and his body bloated and that’s the last Keith will see of him. The very last.

What if... What if Shiro is actually dead? And all of this is for nothing?

Matt’s standing in front of the casket, paper in hand, body trembling. Their dad goes up there and Pidge, patting Keith on the back one last time, follows, hugging Matt and rubbing his shoulders as he tries to speak over sobs into the mic.

Everyone thinks it’s Shiro. And Keith’s just...looking for windows. Reaching blindly. He’s not a detective. He could never be. He can’t even walk.

Maybe that’s Shiro in there. Just a board of wood away.

Keith thinks he can see it. The top of the coffin pushed away. Shiro’s eyes gone. His hands, his feet, cut from his body.

Grey. Still. More like a wax doll than a human.

He’s dead. Keith feels it with each beat of his heart. He feels faint.

He’s dead. He’s shaking. All he can hear are people crying. All he can see is that damn coffin.

He’s dead.

“Hey,” someone whispers beside him. It’s an older man he doesn’t recognize. “…It’s alright,” he says to Keith. “Everything will be okay.”

Keith takes a deep breath and pulls his sight from the coffin. He looks at the trees thinking it’ll help, but then he notices the damn crows and can’t take that either. He closes his eyes, trying to conjure up images of Shiro laughing in his room with him, or gasping in awe at the games they played together, getting excited over Keith’s artwork.

Halfway between a speech, Pidge emerges from the crowd and elbows him on the arm.

He looks down at her as she leans up to murmur, “You know how I said I didn’t know if Haggar would be here? Look over there.”
Keith grabs at the distraction.

Ah. Yes, Keith does know her. Who hasn't seen her at school, as strange as she is? She's not disguised well. She has an umbrella over her head and her face down, but she’s the only one with hair that scraggily and unkept and posture that bad.

Keith looks back to the house. He swallows hard. He can’t stay here listening to these damn speeches any longer anyway. “...I guess now’s my chance.”

“What?” Pidge squeaks, eyes flying wide, but then she follows him as he pulls from the crowd. They go down the trail. “But what do you think you’ll find?”

“I don’t know, but Lance and Hunk thought she was suspicious. I just want to look in her room.”

“Her room?”

“I can’t stay here any longer anyway. It’ll be fine if she’s here,” he mutters lowly. There are a few people needing to use the restroom, walking to the funeral home occasionally, so he hopes that’s what this looks like. Everyone’s too busy wrapped in their own sorrow anyway.

“This is a recipe for disaster.” Pidge says, biting at her nails. “She’s the one who gave a cow heart to Shiro. That’s not a sane person.”

“...What if she’s the one who did it?”

“Killed Shiro?”

“Yes. What if? I want to make sure.”

“But breaking and entering.”

“Getting lost isn’t breaking and entering.”

Pidge groans as they walk up the wooden steps to the place. It’s tall and narrow, an awkward building built in a time when everything was small. The age is apparent in the way everything creaks beneath their feet and shifts as Pidge grabs the railing. Right when they open the door, there’s a staircase headed straight up that’s blocked off and says in bold letters ‘DO NOT ENTER’.

Pidge stares at it with the corners of her lips tugged down.

Keith turns to Pidge. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

“And just leave you? No.”

“It’s my deal. I know you don’t like this.”

“Well, I like the idea of you going by yourself even less. Let’s just do this.” She looks nervous though - shoulders high and hands fidgeting. She keeps looking over her back shoulder like something’s going to come after her.

A smile grows on Keith’s face. “Thank you, Pidge. You’re the best.”

She takes a deep breath and pats his arm.

“Hey, Kogane,” a voice comes from behind.
Keith turns, blinking in surprise. It’s Lotor. He looks awful. Worn down and sad. It’s like he becomes more mortal every day.

“Hey...” Keith says lowly. “You alright?”

He gives Keith a small tired eye roll. “Just another day at my best friend’s funeral. ...I’m not alright. I couldn’t take it out there anymore.”

“No... Me neither.”

“Upstairs isn’t for guests,” Lotor nods to the sign. “Can you not read if there are no pictures?”

“Oh, no, I...”

Lotor raises his eyebrows. “...How’s the search coming? They found his body, you know. It’s right outside, I can show it to you.”

Keith watches him for a long moment. “It’s not him.”

Lotor’s face twists. “Oh, please. His family says it’s him. The police said -”

“The police are wrong. I was there when they pulled it out of the lake. I saw the body with my own two eyes, I know it wasn’t him. I’m positive. I know Shiro, okay?”

Pidge side glances him.

Lotor just stares. “...Just how close were you two...?” He asks on a whisper. “He never said a single word.”

Keith just shifts. “Does that matter? I’m not giving up.”

“Look,” Lotor says, leaning forward and speaking in a low voice. “Say the police are wrong. Say they made a critical error like this and put the wrong body in the coffin. ...It’s been weeks. Weeks. No one can survive that long without food or water. Not even Shiro. All you’ll find is a corpse and I don’t think that’s what you’ll want to see. Don’t you think you should just let it go?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Shiro wouldn’t have wanted this.”

Keith laughs. He wonders if Lotor knows just how right he is. “Shiro’s not here right now.”

Lotor tsks, crossing his arms tightly. “You are being a fool.”

“Duly noted.”

Lotor looks off into the grass, face troubled. He lets out a soft sigh, face full of longing. “Look, I get it. I get it. But finding his murderer won’t bring him back.”

“You’ve given up on him so quickly...”

“Because we’re at his funeral, for God’s sakes. He’s dead.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Well then, where is he?”
“That’s what I’m going to find out!”

“Keith,” Pidge says. “Keith, don’t do this here. Come on...”

Lotor leans in. “It’s been ages. Unless our dear friend Haggar has him chained up and is feeding him and taking care of him in the basement, then think about it, Kogane. It’s over. All you’re doing now is twisting the knife and it's hurting us all.”

“You sure seem eager to convince me. Maybe you did it after all.”

Lotor’s face goes white with rage. “If you so much as -”

“Keith. Lotor. Knock it off!” Pidge gets between them and pushes them apart from each other with her small arms. “You’re both hurt over this, okay? This isn’t getting us anywhere. This is a day to celebrate Shiro, to remember him, not fight like this...”

Lotor stands up straight, tugging at his jacket as he stares down at Keith. He swallows hard and pushes his hair back, taking one step back as if he’ll leave, but then he thinks better of it and turns back. “Look,” he says, calmed down. “I’m doing this for him. He was always the good one. Always wanted others to thrive. Not that I knew you personally before, but even I can see it. You look sick. This is the absolute last thing he’d want. If he were in the afterlife, watching us, he wouldn’t want you in pain over him. If I know anything, I know that.”

“Maybe Shiro doesn’t always know what’s best for him and everyone else around him.”

“God, why can’t you just let this go...? Can’t you see it’s killing everyone? This is his funeral. This is the end. You keep trying to drag this on forever and what are you going to do? You can barely walk across the campus without having to take a break. You’re practically useless.”

“Hey!” Pidge yells, getting in his face. She’s half his size, but she blazes with ferocity. Keith puts his hand on her shoulder.

“Lotor,” Keith says, “If it were the other way around, you know he’d be out there for any of us, trying to find us. He wouldn’t give up.”

Lotor stares at him, almost angry. “Fine,” he whispers, words burning in his throat. “Waste your time then, see if I care.”

“Okay, I will,” Keith mutters, turning back to Pidge as Lotor struts off and out of the room. “God, what’s his problem?”

She tsks, shoving herself back onto her heels angrily. “He’s a brat. A huge brat who’s used to getting his way. But...I imagine not having his sidekick around is getting to him. I’d probably be that way too. You’re not useless, Keith. Even Lotor knows that.”

“Thanks, Pidge...” he sniffs. “You know, only a little while ago, I would’ve been really mad at that comment, but, in the scope of things, it’s such a little thing. It didn’t bother me.”

Pidge claps his back once and then they turn, looking back up at the staircase.

Pidge says, “I’m a little nervous honestly.”

“You don’t have to come,” Keith says gently. “Really. I’ll be fine.”

“Can’t let you have all the fun.” Pidge stares directly in his eyes. “It’s you and me this time, okay?"
...You trust me, don’t you, Keith?”

“Of course,” Keith tilts his head. “Have I ever given you a reason to think otherwise?”

She smiles softly, eyes falling down, “...no.”

Keith bends down and slips his crutches through after him. Pidge follows right behind.

“A reminder though: if I die, Keith, you’d better write a really nice eulogy for me. Three pages long. And I want you to cry through at least half of it.”

“Five pages and I sob through the entire thing.”

“Okay, good. All of your undying love for me. Mention how great I am at least four times.”

“And smart and wise and loyal.”

“Oh, good. You’ve already got it down. Now I don’t have to worry.” She takes one look behind them, down the stairs, at the open spacious safe entryway, and then follows him through the door.

He closes it behind them and looks down a long narrow hall. There are more doors than he expected. All closed. All unmarked.

Keith sighs in the face of all the unmarked rooms. He really doesn’t want to find a body. He swears he can smell that sickly stiff scent of formaldehyde.

“Shit,” Pidge curses. “Well...you take the left, I’ll take the right?”

“Okay...” He hopes that Haggar does not have any siblings in the house.

“What do we do if we hear footsteps coming up the stairs?” Pidge asks, slowly putting her hand on a door and cracking it open. Empty broom closet.

“Run out and say you’re looking for the bathroom. Girl emergency.”

“It’s not like explosive diarrhea, Keith. Jeez. The ignorant bliss of men...”

“How am I supposed to know? I’m trying to be helpful. Say you’re part of the journalism club and you wanted to know her thoughts as Shiro’s most loyal fan so you went looking for her and got lost.”

“Yeah,” Pidge shifts onto her other foot. “Yeah. As long as she doesn’t have a knife.”

“Here,” Keith says, reaching into his back pocket. He slips his knife into her hands. “Now you have one too.”

“Keith, why are you carrying this around with you?!”

“I always do when I’m not at home. Sometimes even then.”

“To school?! You can’t bring this to school!”

Keith shrugs. “I’m not going to use it if I don’t need to.”

“That’s not the point!”

“Well, you don’t need to use it either. Just have it, you know, just in case. I’ve always had it for
years now. And you say you know me...” He smiles back at her, eyebrow raised.

“I can’t believe you,” she mutters under her breath. She keeps it held in her hands awkwardly as if that’ll make the idea less horrible to her, but it doesn’t, so she shoves it into her shoe. “I can’t believe you,” she says again. “A knife.”

“And I’ve never needed to use it,” he hums. “Ah, I feel naked without it.”

“Don’t say that in front of me,” she grunts.

In the hallway, it’s freezing. The sort of freezing you’d expect would be needed to preserve dead bodies. Keith doesn’t know if they actually handle the preserving and the cremating and...god knows what else a dead body needs, but he sure has never been here before and he doesn’t want to find out the hard way, sneaking around through random doors and long empty corridors. He hopes Pidge doesn’t get a faceful of it either; he almost wishes she had just stayed behind. But he has to admit he likes her by his side.

The first door is just filled with supplies. The second is a bathroom. The third is a bedroom, but it looks like it might be a guest room. Whoever would want to stay here would clearly be insane.

He closes the door when he’s satisfied there’s nothing out of the ordinary and turns to go to the next door.

Keith runs right into someone.

He doesn’t catch sight of them because they’re so close and when Keith squawks, taking a step back, the person isn’t there at all.

There’s nothing.

“What? What is it?” Pidge asks quickly, turning around to look.

He’s breathing quickly, hands clutching his crutch tightly.

Oh, no. It’s like before.

“What? What is it?” Pidge asks quickly, turning around to look.

He’s breathing quickly, hands clutching his crutch tightly.

Oh, no. It’s like before.

He wants to get Pidge out and if it means lying... But then he can hear, very distantly, the sound of footsteps going up the stairs. “Someone’s coming,” he whispers loudly to her, gesturing madly for her to go to the door.

She rushes over, opening the door and slipping out. He can hear her saying in her fake-friendly voice, “Oh, hi! That’s not the way to the bathroom. Oops!” And then she closes the door.

Shit. He’s got to hurry this up. He turns to the next door and reaches out for it.

The lights screech, flaming ten times too bright, so much so that he has to fling his hands to his eyes to mask them. It becomes so much that they burst, glass going everywhere with a loud ear-shattering crack.

The lights extinguish completely, leaving him in darkness.

Keith takes a step back, turning his head both ways, eyes desperately swinging around the hallway in search of something he can see.

“...Shiro...?” He whispers, but there’s no response. Only nothingness all around him and still, dark air.
It doesn't feel like Shiro. It's that same feeling he had in his house, when Red was going crazy.

Keith’s heart clenches as fear rises up in his throat like bile.

“Hello?” he calls. “I-I’m not here to hurt you.”

There’s nothingness, but somehow that seems like a response. Keith curses, fishing his phone out with clumsy hands and scrambling for the flashlight. He trips over his feet as he hurries. His crutches are making this a huge nuisance, he can hardly do anything with only one hand.

There’s nothing in the hallway. He holds the phone above his head like a magic staff, shining the beam of light both ways. Just empty hallway.

But it just...it feels heavy with presence.

“Hello...?” He breathes. He doesn’t want to hear an answer.

As the moments pass, he gets better hold of himself. Slowly, he takes a few steps away from the door and walks to the next. He pushes it open. Nothing. The next. Nothing.

There are so many rooms left. It’s so dark. He can hear himself breathing hard and heavy as his heart tries to thump out of his chest. He’s not going to last in the darkness like this, presence looming. Already, his entire body is tensed up entirely, screeching at him to run out of there.

He skips the side rooms. He runs for the one at the end. End rooms are good, right? He goes to reach for it, but someone’s already there, blocking the way.

Keith jerks back.

He flashes the phone up - he knows he just saw it there - but there’s nothing. There’s no one.

“Shiro,” he breathes again, but this time it’s a plea instead of a question. He grips the door and goes to open it, but it’s jammed. It doesn’t even feel locked, it's just stuck.

“Fucking hell,” he grits out, fighting with it desperately.

Maybe he should just run. He should definitely just run.

But Shiro.

He shoves his crutches to the side, leans back, and heaves his shoulder into the door. It cracks a bit. He bashes into it again and it gives.

He grabs his crutches back, slips in, and closes the door behind him.

Something feels wrong immediately. Even more wrong than in the hallway. Every part of him wants to retreat, just run. His stomach is tying itself in knots.

Maybe it’s the smell - heady and stale, thick with the scent of something unfamiliar, reminiscent of raw meat. Or maybe it’s the candles placed in a circle on the ground, connected by lines of chalk, reeking of smoke and a feeling.

A pit in Keith’s stomach, gaping wide with fear, opens up and he can just stand there for a moment, feeling like he’s crumbling in on himself.

Keith stares at it, the window’s light illuminating it dully. The candles aren’t lit at the moment, but
their wicks are dark in the center of a pool.

He raises his phone and flashes light around the room.

There’s a bed. Two dressers. A closet.

But the first thing he stops on is a shadowbox frame. It’s hung above the bed like a prize. He takes a step away from the door to see it better.

It’s a jersey. It’s Shiro’s jersey. Framed and protected beneath glass.

Keith stares at it blankly for a moment trying to comprehend. Jesus.

Jesus.

Maybe it’s not his, Keith wants to believe. But who hasn’t seen Shiro strolling around the school wearing it proudly, head held high?

How did she get this?

Keith lets out a small unsteady breath, taking a few steps away, swallowing hard. His mouth is dry. He stumbles to the dresser, leaning against it with his elbow to try to steady himself.

He swears he can hear whispering in the room, feel tiny little eyes everywhere peeking from their places in the walls, laughing at him. Or is it just the wind chime jingling around outside? He casts his eyes about, scoping out the corners, peering into the darkness beneath the bed...

No. No, he’s not here for this. He’s got to move.

He forces in another shaky breath and forces himself to look on the dressers.

On the top is a book. It’s thick and heavy, it’s so ancient that it’s handwritten. On the page it’s opened to, it says on the top, in big words, “Summoning Spirits.”

Okay.

It’s fine.

Keith is fine.

Well. ...Well, that would explain things, Keith thinks, mind blanking.

No wonder Shiro had to file a restraining order, but that somehow doesn’t seem like enough.

Maybe it’s here, Keith thinks for the first time. Shiro’s body.

The closet.

Keith sidesteps the candles in the middle of the floor and rips the door open.

His phone chimes and he doesn’t even register it.

Shaking, he reaches for the switch and flicks the light on. Inside is a shrine. There are hundreds of pictures of Shiro, all from different unassuming angles. She’s been following him. There are pictures of him inside his house, at night, talking on the phone, watching t.v., studying at his desk. He’s not aware in any of them.
Shiro.

Keith stares at it all in horror, feeling completely sick. *Holy fuck.* Was she in the fucking bushes, waiting there all afternoon for him to show up?

Did she ever actually make it into his house?

And, most importantly: did she kill Shiro?

Keith takes a shaky breath, raises his phone and takes a picture. He checks it to make sure it’s not blurry; his hand is shaking so much. He feels like he’s unraveling.

All these pictures of Shiro, who never even knew. It feels so dirty and disgusting. He hates it.

This has to be evidence for...something. He turns and takes a picture of the jersey above the bed too. The book on the dresser.

But where’s the body? He turns to look out the window, at the endless field of graves. Oh, god. He closes his eyes and tries to breathe.

Even if he was close, he could be anywhere.

His phone rings, startling him.

“Pidge,” he whispers harshly, voice tight. He can hardly breathe. “Pidge, I found something. Something big.”

“*Keith! I couldn’t keep her! She’s going back upstairs!*”

He turns just as the room’s door clicks.

There’s no time. He does the only thing he can think to do and runs into the closet, closing the door quickly behind him.

Pure darkness consumes him.

“*Keith?*” Pidge panics from the other end. “*Keith, she’s fucking insane, like actually fucking murder-y insane. It’s not safe! Get back out here!*”

He cancels the call.

He can hear her footsteps, loud and angry clacking against the floor. “Who does she think she is? Asking about *my* Shiro as if she has the *right*? Why would she ask that? What was she doing? We need eyes on her.”

Something thumps loudly on the ground and Keith tenses, closing his eyes, ready for death.

Pages start flipping.

Fuck. Fuck! Keith doesn’t know what to do. There’s no way out from here. It’s either burst through the door and run or wait for her to leave. But seeing as this is her room...

But Keith is a shitty runner. He’s tried that before. He knows how it’ll end.

His phone chimes.
With a spike of panic, he tries to muffle it in his jacket, but it’s no use.

The footsteps stop. There’s only flat silence outside. Keith tries to quiet his breathing, but he can’t force it.

“What?” She says lowly, responding to something he hadn’t heard. “...Is it completely impossible for you to actually be helpful for once? I don’t know what that means.”

There’s no response. Only silence.

And again, she responds, irritated, “How am I supposed to know? I’ve done everything right. I don’t know why it didn’t work. I’ve already told you.” She pauses. “Oh, you know, do you? Care to tell me why? ...Of course not. Brainless idiots. You don’t know anything.”

Insane, probably, Keith would’ve thought only a little while back. But now, he thinks he knows.

Keith cracks the door open, peering through the tiny slit of white.

There’s a window behind where Haggar is standing, enough room to silently slip past. ...But how do you slip past a ghost you can’t see? Close your eyes and hope for the best?

There’s a knock at the door. “Who is it?” She yells.

Pidge is breathless. “Um... I lost my phone somewhere. Did you happen to see it?”

Oh, god, Pidge.

“I just told you not to come here!” Haggar screams, ripping the door open where Pidge stands, small and unprotected. “Get out!”


Keith knows there’s no time to deliberate. He can’t let this chance Pidge gave him go to waste. He pushes the closet door open and hurries to the window while Haggar’s distracted.

He tosses the window open and flings his leg over it.

The sound of a spooked squeak stops him. Haggar has Pidge by the arm, gripping roughly and jerking her forward into the room.

“Hey!” Keith yells, turning back on the window sill. “Don’t touch her!” He grabs the nearest thing he can reach - a heavy candle - and hurls it hard. It flies through the air and hits Haggar on the back of the head. She stumbles forward.

Haggar turns, eyes wide, her hand letting go of Pidge immediately. She stares at Keith with wide crazed eyes as if he’s the one who’s a ghost. “You!” She cries suddenly, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “You’re the one!”

Pidge pushes her from behind, sending Haggar sprawling, and yells, “run, Keith!”

“Pidge, go!” He says, watching her turn and run out of the room before he crawls out and shuts the window hard.

He’s on the roof. It’s raining, large drops that sting as they hit him. There’s a trellis growing up the walls of her house so he throws his crutches off of the roof and he tosses himself over the side, gripping into the trellis. There’s hardly any support with all the rain. He slips on the vines and has
to stop, clinging to them desperately, gasping.

Haggar does not chase after him. She opens the window slowly, peering down at him with a strange calmness. “You’ve ruined everything for me,” she says to Keith. “I don’t know who you are or how... But you’re going to suffer for what you did.”


She just watches him through dark eyes.

“What is he?!” Keith screams. His hands are getting tired. “What did you do with him?!!”

She doesn’t respond. Keith can hear her say into the air, her voice just a small puff, “Get him.”

Shit. He feels it. That tug in his gut, screaming at him. He goes as quickly down the trellis as he can, pushing past vines as they snap and fall away beneath his frantic grip. He doesn’t make it. He’s only a bit more than halfway down before there are claws in his back, dragging him off the trellis and tossing him to the ground.

He hits pavement hard, eyes flying wide as the wind is knocked from him. There are stars in his vision. He knows there’s no time for them. He tries to heave himself up, turn to see what’s there, but there’s nothing. He can’t see anything.

How the fuck do you fight something you can’t see?

It grabs him by the collar, pulling tightly until it chokes him, dragged across the grass. He scrambles to fight, but there’s nothing to grab onto. He kicks in the grass, digging his nails into ground, but the most he manages are nails full of mud.

He can see Haggar up in the window above, watching him calmly, hands placed gently on the window sill.

And then the ground disappears beneath him and the last thing he sees before he dips backward is her sharp smile.

He falls, body hitting something hard and hollow with a loud thump. The hands are off of him. The roar of the mud ripping past him falls to silence. It’s just him.

He’s stunned for a moment from the pain. He just lays there, eyes open, but not seeing.

He’s got to calm down. He’s got to get a grip on himself. But god, his body...

Groaning and whimpering, he forces his mind to come back to himself. He blinks his eyes a few times, slowly realizing the blinding white above him is actually dark clouded sky. There are crows everywhere, out of their spots in the trees and gathered overhead like buzzards waiting for their prey. Their wings are wide as they hover above him, waiting.

What the fuck are they doing? Keith thinks dizzily. Crows don’t gather like that, do they?

He blinks away the raindrops from his eyes as they fall on his face. They’re cold and sharp, piercing into him.

Get up, they seem to say. Get up. He cringes against them, raising his hand to cover his face, but pain shoots through his entire body like lightning. It’s not just his leg anymore.

Slowly, he realizes where he is. His stomach sinks. Pain is the least of his problems.
He’s been tossed into a grave. It’s been dug out, six feet below earth. He’s lying on a wooden coffin. He can see the dirt rising up on every side of him, huge mounds of it. He’s encased. In a grave. There’s mud in piles on the ground above him, and his stomach plunges sickly he sees it shift, small bits falling in.

“W-wait!” He cries, darting up. He groans as his body protests. “...Wait,” he pleads, “I didn’t do anything! You have the wrong person!”

But more dirt falls in over each side, hitting his legs. Filling the spaces around him. Handfuls. Shovelfuls.

They’re trying to bury him alive.

The dirt is soft and wet. It’ll be so easy.

One huge mound is dumped on top of him, a weight that hurts, and he coughs as he gets a lungful of mud.

“Stop!” He tries, scrambling to find his crutch. Where the fuck did he leave it? His mind is blanking. He doesn’t want to be buried, he doesn’t want to be buried, he doesn’t want to be buried. Where the fuck is it?

The mud is coming in too quickly. His hands reach desperately through the resistance, trying to push past it with all his strength, but he’s injured and the mud’s suction pulls at him, weighs him down. He can hardly lift himself. “Tell me what you want!” He screams.

It’s so deep. The walls loom over him. Even if he had his good leg...

“Shit...” Keith breathes. He scrambles against the walls, desperate to get a grip. He claws at them with all his strength, his nails pulling back from his fingers. He digs his feet into the side, reaches, reaches. He puts all his effort into it, reaching up to grab the edge of the grave, but the edge sloughs beneath his hands. It’s too soft. It’s been raining so much lately and the mud is just mud. It slips and caves beneath his hands like wet clay. There’s not enough resistance to hold him.

“Oh, god,” he breathes. There has to be something he can do. Anything. The crows are going crazy overhead, swooping down to claw his hands any time he gets too close to the edge. “Fucking birds,” he chokes, trying to hit them away with his arms as they crowd him, scratching at his skin, pecking at his face. Their fucking wings are everywhere.

An invisible force of a bull hits his chest and whatever weak grip he has slips. He falls on the hard coffin beneath his feet, head slamming hard into the wood. Another shovelful of mud hits him square in the face and he’s down.

It’s too heavy.

He squirms, turning to pull his hands out and pull the mud from his face so he can breathe. He takes the moment to gasp out, “Pidge! Pidge, help -” But he can’t even get out that much before he hits the ground again.

He’s overwhelmed.

He shifts from his core, trying to force himself out, to push his way through - there’s got to be a way - but there’s just more mud. Every second, there’s just more and more. The weight is too much and each shovelful is building on top of him, covering him whole.
He's completely submerged. He's choking. He can't breathe.

His arms give out. His body is giving out. The pressure. He'll be crushed. He can't move anymore. He tries to fight it, but it's not enough.

He can't die like this. He hasn't found Shiro yet. He's the only one who's still searching. He can't leave him.

But he's drowning. Though his body is still, his mind is frantic, his lungs burning. He's going to asphyxiate to death in a graveyard. He can't scream. He can't move. Will they ever even find his body? What will happen to Pidge? What will happen to his family?

What will happen to Shiro?

It's all quiet beneath the dirt, in his grave. The sounds of the mud pouring down on top is done. There's just silence. Just him. Just Keith, alone. He tries to hold onto hope...maybe Pidge will find him...but he can't any longer. And it burns. And he's going to die. And he never found Shiro. He had promised Shiro. And he had failed.

Is this how Shiro felt as a ghost? Completely alone? Hope fading from him as quickly as his life did? Did he feel this much regret?

He just wanted to save Shiro. That's it. He doesn't care about the murderer anymore. They can go free. They can burn down the whole world, Keith doesn't care. He wants Shiro to be saved. He wanted Shiro to have the life Shiro wanted him to have.

He tries to imagine Shiro still here. Hell, if these are the last few moments, he can imagine himself living too. Shiro reaching through the mud, seeking Keith because he never left, not really. Cool and strong, he'd feel Shiro's hands graze against his arm and then track back, clinging tightly. Reaching desperately.

Contact. And Shiro would drag him out, gasping from strain, because god, this mud is like a vacuum.

But he'd do it. He'd pull Keith from this grave and cling to him in his arms, holding him tightly, brushing his hair from his face. He'd call Keith's name, breathless himself, panicked because he cared for Keith too.

Yeah.

It'd be like that.

Shiro's his guardian angel, always here, looking out for Keith.

Everything went to shit, but as Keith drifts, he feels at peace. He got to know Shiro. That's the best part of his entire life.

Keith's vision is going in and out. He can't hold onto consciousness. He sees the dark storm clouds in the sky. The rain pounding down. Those fucking birds, a tunnel up high in the atmosphere, like little specks, far, far away.

He's laid out on his back, a shadow hovering over him. Someone's doing compressions on his chest. Heavy. He feels heavy. It's raining.
He thinks he can see Shiro bent over him, speaking to him rapidly, hands grabbing onto his face, trying to force him to breathe.

He coughs roughly. Shiro? Is it him? Keith tries to push himself up, but all he manages is a weak roll onto his side. He throws up into the ground. Mud. It’s all mud. He chokes it up again, his face smearing in it. And then he throws up more. He feels like part monster. It just keeps coming up and out of him. He groans into it.

He feels a hand on his back, but it’s gentle. It’s calming. He focuses on it as he tries to regain his breath.

“Keith,” the voice is saying. “Keith.”

Nothing’s hurting him. Nothing’s trying to toss him into an open hole in the ground. He coughs again, laying there like sludge until his lungs sound clear. He feels like he’s floating. His vision is going in and out still.

He sees that figure. The shadow in front of him. He reaches out, hand outstretched. Almost...

Thunder shatters through his haze and lightning blazes across the graveyard. It dizzies him. He hears the crows screaming, intensifying again, and this feeling, this feeling -

And then it fades away as the thunder recedes. Slowly, with the last bits of his energy, he pushes himself up and turns his head to look up at the person who helped him...but he’s gone.

“Shiro,” he breathes, blinking fast, panicked, but it comes out rough and choked. “Shiro!” His throat tears. “Come back! Please! I know it was you! I know you saved me.”

But he’s talking to no one. He’s just alone again, in the soggy grass, shivering.

“Where are you?” Keith sobs as he hangs his head. “Don’t just run away from me! I can't take it like this anymore,” he cries, trying to force himself up. “Don’t just...go...” He coughs roughly again, looking down at the brown in his palm.

He shakes his hand out, closing his eyes miserably. “God.”

He turns his sight back up to the window, where he’d last seen Haggar, but the light is off. The room is dark. Everything is still. The grave he was pulled from just collects more water, churning the mud up into a small pond. He’s not sure he’s ever felt so alone, surrounded by the trees that watched him be buried alive, pressed into this grave by the sky hanging low and pitch black overhead. The clouds are angry, rumbling overhead in low rolling tones.

“Shiro, please,” he whispers, turning toward the thick line of trees behind him, looking deep into the forest. The rain mixes with tears and all he tastes is salt and mud. “Shiro. I need you. I need you... Come back. Please. ...Please.”

It’s so cold. He’s tired to his bones. He doesn’t think he can do this anymore. He just wants to lay down and sink into the mud again.

So he does. He sinks back onto his back like a broken doll, staring up into the sky and gritting his teeth. He’s so tired. So tired. He can't do this. Not on his own like this. He really thought he was going to die. He can still feel it, the grip of Death on his shoulders, pulling him down, down, down.
God.  ...God.  He shoves his hands into his face.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he turns to it tiredly, feeling like a tin man without grease.

He brings the phone to his ear and somehow, it still works. He swallows hard, shoving his forehead into the palm of his hand. “Hey,” he breathes, clearing his throat roughly. It sounds like he ate gravel. “Where are you?”

“Me?” She cries. “Where the hell are you?”

Keith sniffs and groans. “I fell in a fucking grave... I don’t know.”

“What?! Where? I checked the back, I didn’t see you!”

“The grave. Is Haggar around?”

“I don’t see her. I’m going to get my dad now.”

Haggar can control ghosts. She could kill Sam so easily. Keith can see it now, Pidge’s dad in his place, buried beneath the mud. Choking to death. Pidge and Matt, orphans.

“Pidge, don’t,” he says quickly, overcome by a violent coughing fit.

“What?” She breathes. “Are you okay?”

“I’m...fine. Don’t bother your dad with this. It was my fault. We shouldn’t have been trampling through her house. I’m sorry, Pidge.”

“I thought you said you got something -”

“I think she’s crazy, but...I don’t...” He thinks of Shiro’s jersey, hanging up on her wall. Of the pictures of him. The proof of it in his phone. It could be her. It could be her...

But then he thinks of the Holts. Of Pidge losing her mom. Of how she cried for days beside Keith and he had felt helpless and lost and hurt. And he can’t be the reason for that now, not again, not with her dad.

Even if he could save Shiro by damming the Holts...no. No. Neither Keith or Shiro would be able to live with themselves. He can’t do that. He just can’t.

Shiro’s already gone...isn't he?

He sobs silently into his hand, trying to block any noise from Pidge. He's abandoning Shiro. He never thought he could.

“...I don’t think she did it,” Keith whispers through clenched teeth, clutching at his chest. He rubs the back of his arm over his nose.

Shiro.

Pidge is quiet for awhile. “...Okay,” she says softly. “Okay. Where are you? I’ll come get you.”

“The back,” he says, hanging up. He shivers. His whole body feels over-sensitive and raw. His lungs ache.

When Pidge comes around the corner and catches sight of him, she runs over, holding the umbrella
over his head. “Jesus, Keith, what the hell happened to you?”

“God.” He shakes his head, trying to keep it together. “I...I fell into a dug out grave. It was muddy and it was like a fucking suction cup. ...I couldn’t get out. ...I couldn't get out.”

“Oh, my god,” she whispers, looking down into his face with horror. “Keith. Are you okay?”

He nods shortly. “I lost my crutches. My parents are going to kill me.”

“Here, use me,” she says, opening her arms and sneaking beneath one of his.

She pulls him to his feet and starts walking. He tries to help, tries not to shove the burden on Pidge, but he feels his consciousness slipping from him. He’s so weary. He wants to sleep for the next month.

He feels as his body gives out, all of his weight shifting onto Pidge.

She grunts, buckling for a moment before holding strong. “Keith! Is it your leg? Should I call your parents?” She hesitates, looking up, “Or -”

She knows how he likes to feel like a normal person, not only half of one, dragged around like a doll.

He used to fight through pain, no matter how bad. He used to be strong and carve his way through things.

*That’s what Keith does, his mom always says, he fights.*

But how much more can he take of this? He lets his eyes fall to the forests again, searching, hoping...

But there’s nothing.

They’re lowering Shiro’s coffin up on that hill. He can see it from where he’s collapsed into Pidge’s side. He sees Shiro’s family huddled together in black, hands pressed to their faces as they cry their hearts out. He sees Lotor by the parking lot, leaning against his car, staring blankly ahead. It’s quiet up on that hill.

The sun is gone.

“Call them,” Keith whispers. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t care anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

My teacher once had this party at his house and his backyard was full of mud. And I made the mistake of stepping in it, and it SNAPPED my SANDAL OFF and sucked it off into the ABYSS. Those were my favorite sandals too. Now, I only have one. I never got it back. I had to walk through his property with ONE SHOE. Mud is horrifying.
Chapter 9

Keith wakes up to screaming.

He jerks up, clutching his chest, gasping hard, eyes darting around his room. He cringes against the darkness. The ghosts could be anywhere.

The door bursts open in an explosion of light. It’s Acxa.

“What’s wrong with you?” She screams. “I could’ve been killed!”

“What?” His heart is pounding. He hardly knows where he is.

“Acxa.” Krolia appears beside her, looking in at Keith who’s still clinging to his blankets with a white-knuckled grip, and then back to Acxa, her face pinched in anger and her hair a huge mess.

“What’s going on?”

“Look at the bathroom floor! Look at it! There’s water everywhere. I slipped and fell on my face. I’m going to get a bruise on my forehead for the formal. There’s already a bump!”

Krolia leans forward, grabbing Acxa by the chin and tilting her head to see. “Oh, honey... Here. Let me get you some ice.”

“I don’t want ice! Keith did it! He should get in trouble! If I did that and he fell you would literally kill me. You always do this. You always favor him because he’s hurt! I’m sick of it!”

“Acxa.” Krolia mutters tiredly. “It’s a little different.”

“Look at my face!”

Krolia sighs again, grabbing Acxa by the shoulders and wheeling her around. “Come on. I’ll talk to him. Yelling at him like this isn’t going to get anyone anywhere.” The last thing Keith sees before his mom shuts the door is Acxa’s indignant face turning murderous eyes on him.

His mom comes back a few minutes later with a cup of tea, a pill, and a thermometer. She turns on the light despite Keith’s grimace and sits on the side of his bed.

“How are you feeling?” She asks gently.

He breathes in slowly, trying to battle a cough, but he loses. His stomach hurts from coughing so much. Each one tears from his lungs, rattling his weary bones along the way. His whole body feels like one big battered bruise from the inside out. “Bad,” he croaks.

She leans forward to press the back of her hand to his forehead. Her brow pulls together.

“Here,” she says, holding out his tea and a pill. “Lemon and honey for your throat and your medicine. Do you remember yesterday? We had a doctor come in. He thinks you have pneumonia.”

“I’m not delirious. I remember,” he grumbles, grabbing the pill and frowning at it. “What is this? This isn’t what I usually take.”
“Amoxicillin. You were delirious, Keith. Do you remember? You were talking to Shiro again. You were pleading with him to stay with you.”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head. God...what else did he say that she’s omitting? “I must’ve been sleep talking.”

She shifts, staying on the side of his bed as she turns from him. She looks around his room, taking in the little pieces of it that make up his being. Keith just hopes she doesn’t notice the crack between the curtains, where the boards are still nailed roughly. Finally, she leans back and pats his leg gently over the blankets. Without any malice, she asks, “...Why is the floor wet, Keith?”

He brings his hands over his face and shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. Why is it wet?”

Ugh, he doesn’t want to fight. He just wants to go back to sleep. “...I just...I feel uncomfortable with the curtain pulled back.”

“So you’re just leaving it open...?”

He can’t tell her about the ghosts. About the shadows behind the curtain he sees as he showers. His trembling hands before he pulls the curtain back...to nothingness. The way it makes his heart stop. The fear that keeps him rooted to the spot, remembering the mud pressing against his face. The way it burned his lungs as it clogged him. It could happen again. It could happen at any time.

Or the dreams of Shiro, watching over him. They won't leave him. He's always there. It’s torturing Keith. He’s right at the edges, always only just out of reach. But he can’t get to him.

Keith says lowly. “I want to be able to see in the room. ...I tried to clean it up... I guess I missed some.”

She takes in a deep breath. “Don’t hurt yourself, Keith, but you need to use the curtain, okay? There’s a reason it’s there. Or use our shower in the back with the glass door if this is a problem, but you can’t just leave water all over the floor. You should’ve told me if you couldn’t clean it yourself. Acxa could’ve gotten seriously hurt.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I felt horrible last night; I wasn’t thinking.”

She gives him a long look. “Let me check your temperature,” she says, grabbing the thermometer and popping it into his mouth. She waits and then frowns into it as she takes it out. “...Well, it’s better than yesterday,” she sighs. “But you’re still running a high fever...”

“I’m so tired.”

“...I know.” She sighs in worry like the weight of the world is on her shoulders. “Drink your tea. I’m going to get you more water.” She looks like she’s about to get up before she pauses. Hesitates. Then asks lowly, “...You didn’t...take a knife from the kitchen, did you?”

He looks up at her, stomach sinking. He tries to plead with her with his eyes. “...I need it.”

Her chest expands as she inhales deeply and exhales just as carefully. She holds out her hand.

He says as convincingly as he can, “I need it.”

“You don’t need a knife lying in bed sick. What happened to the one I gave you years ago? It was
a family heirloom; don’t tell me you lost it.”

“I accidentally left it with Pidge. Mom -”

She shoves her hand closer to his face. “You don’t need a knife. Come on, Keith, give it up.”

“But it’s not safe.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Is that what the boards on the window are about too? What is that? I didn’t give you permission to nail holes into my house.”

“I...” He shakes his head and shoves his hand at the window like it’s obvious. “The birds.”

“Okay. We’re getting rid of them. Knife, please. I’m only going to ask this last time.”

He tsks, reaching for the knife beneath his pillow and carefully handing it back to her.

“Thank you. Stop taking knives and leaving water everywhere. You could’ve really hurt your sister. You’re not a child anymore and you’re not the only one living in this house. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t...” He grumbles.

She stays by his door, watching him, that long worried look still plastered to her face as she twists the knife by the handle in her hands. “...Stay in bed until you feel better. Rest. If you need anything, your dad and I are downstairs. ...You worry us, Keith. You weren’t in a good state after the funeral.”

“I know;” he groans. He remembers. He couldn’t walk at all; his mom had to carry him through the graveyard in her arms, holding him tight like he was a toddler. He was too fucked up at the time then to worry about it, clinging to her and shivering, desperately seeking the security he felt in her arms, but now he’s embarrassed if he thinks about it, and he knows tomorrow, with a clearer head, it’ll be even worse.

But right now, he’s just sick. He’s exhausted. He doesn’t have enough energy to do anything but sleep, but as he sleeps, he dreams in nightmares.

They grip him, crushing his windpipe, twisting his leg over and over and over until it's just one spiral curve.

And all night, he cries out through his dreams, caged and stifled into silence by his nightmares. Locked in torment.

He wakes up more tired than before.

Maybe it’s the sickness. Maybe it’s being tossed into a grave and almost being buried alive. Maybe it’s all the shit that’s happened to him combined into one that he can’t escape from, that he can’t triumph over. Maybe it’s the fact that Shiro’s still gone. Shiro’s been said goodbye to. Everyone else has given up on him. Keith’s all alone.

He can’t involve Pidge anymore. He can’t have the police as backup. It’s just him and his failing body. That’s all Shiro’s got left in his corner.

He can hardly walk. He can hardly even shower properly.

He shivers in his bed, sweating and miserable.


He’s falling down the stairs.

*You tripped,* they say. But he hits the ground and twists, body turning, staring up into the shadow there as it looms, grabbing onto his leg and wringing it out like a towel, twisting it. Crushing it.

He struggles beneath his blankets. He’s been here before. He can’t run from his dreams. Nothing helps.

“Hey,” he hears someone whispering softly. A cool hand gently caresses his forehead. “Hey, it’s alright.”

The light from in between the boards on his window is coming through in nonsensical slants. His vision blurs.

“You’re alright, Keith,” an angel whispers and douses him with an awed sense of healing. He swears he feels soft cool lips pressed to his cheek, the slight press of weight from another body over his. Sturdy arms going around him. He’s being held. He feels loved.

Keith lets out a sigh of relief.

“Shiro,” he whispers back, chest heaving as the burden is released from his mind. He reaches out, trying to grab the figure, but he slips right through. “Shiro.”

“They’re only nightmares,” Shiro hums. “You’re safe. I’m right here.”

He feels like that’s the one absolute truth left. Smiling up at Shiro’s beautiful face, he allows himself to relax into slumber.

It’s so good to see him.

When he wakes up, the window seat is empty. His room is quiet. Keith pulls himself up, looking around blearily. He’s not sure what woke him up until he realizes his phone is buzzing.

He picks it up and coughs into it as he draws in breath. The sound is wet and rattly. “Ugh. Hey, Pidge.”

“Oh, you picked up! Good afternoon, sludge monster. How’s the fever?”

“I feel a lot better today actually,” he says, stretching out his leg carefully. Is it ready for walking? Ready for digging? “I think it’s done.”

“Damn, then I guess there’s no excuse to not go to the formal...?”

He’s still slow like putty, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. “Ugh... I forgot about that... Please tell me I don’t have to go. Like my mom’s not going to send me away anyway after what happened at the funeral.”

“I take it she didn’t respond to the mud so well?”
“Probably got her car dirty,” he sniffs.

Pidge chuckles sympathetically.

“I think she’s more concerned about the fact that she had to carry me for the first time since I was like...three. I passed out in her arms before we even made it to the car.”

“I know. I was there.”

He groans. “I’m humiliated. God, I haven’t even told her about the crutches yet. She thinks you’re keeping them for me. I’ll have to go back to my shitty cheap ones, I guess.”

“Those ones sucked. They gave you bruises. You were always tripping.”

“I know, but the other ones are almost six hundred dollars. Until I can figure out how I’m going to scrounge up that much...”

“Just tell them, Keith. You lost it in the mud. It’s the truth.”

He groans again, pulling his hands across his face. He’d rather just try to dig them up himself than tell Krolia he dropped six hundred dollars in a pit of mud. “…Maybe. Hey, can you bring my knife back for the dance?”

“Just for the dance?”

“Well, not for the dance, but when I see you at the dance.”

She snorts. “Okay. Since dances have such a high crime rate all the time.”

“Honestly, after the fucking funeral and the lake, I’m terrified of even leaving my bed.” He’s only half joking.

“Ahh, yeah. Sorry, I meant to give it back after we got out of Haggar’s, but I forgot with you swooning in your mother’s arms and all that.”

“Stop,” he agonizes.

She chuckles. “Don’t worry. I have your knife right here. It’s safe.”

Red comes sauntering in, hopping up on Keith’s stomach. Keith brushes her hair as he looks at the ceiling. She hisses as the lights flicker. Keith bites his lip, eyes going up. He tries to keep brushing her fur.

“School sucks without you again,” Pidge sighs. “They’re asking everyone to gather pictures of Shiro for the formal. I just hope people have enough sense to keep their party pics out of it. I don’t want to see everyone getting drunk with their boobs all hanging out and their pants down to their knees with their boxers in our faces. Like I need to think less of anyone any more than I already do around here.”

“Hm,” Keith murmurs.

“Sorry. I’m boring you. I know. I’m the complain master, you don’t have to tell me. Matt’s already complained about me complaining today. I’m in a mood apparently.”

There’s a breeze in his room. The window’s closed.
“It’s okay,” he says. “…I don’t mind.”

“Oh,” she says in surprise. “Okay.” She starts talking about what the girl in her computer class did for her presentation. And how no one helped her for their group project. And how Hunk has started kickboxing and can apparently knock a piece of wood in half.

He thinks he can see that white tree outside, painted in black wings and feathers again, but he keeps his gaze carefully pointed toward the ceiling. Red hunches over him defensively, a low rumble in her throat as she waits.

He remembers Haggar, voice twisted in anger as she raged about Pidge, We need eyes on her.

“Hey, Pidge?” He asks when she’s taking a breath between topics.

“Yeah?”

“How’ve you been?”

“Huh?”

“Like, at home and stuff. I mean…after the funeral, I’ve been kind of freaked out. I was just wondering if you’ve been the same…?”

He’s trying to ask if she’s seen anything, heard anything, without actually asking her the question.

She hums. “I dunno. I wasn’t the one who fell into a grave. It’s not exactly all sunshine and daisies, but I’m okay.”

“That’s good,” he murmurs, running a finger over his lip. He’s worried for her. What Haggar said. What Keith knows she’s capable of. …But that was before she had seen Keith. Maybe she’s changed her mind. Does she care about Pidge still? Is Pidge safe?

“Keith?” He hears on the other end.

“Oh. Sorry. What was the question?”

She sighs. “I was wondering if you were going to dress up for the dance.”

He grunts as Red’s tail flickers anxiously, her eyes sharp as cut glass. “Yeah, I -” Something doesn’t feel right in his gut. He closes his eyes and tries to tell himself that’s not true. Everything’s fine. He jumps with a start when his door swings open.

It’s just his dad, who stops when he sees Keith’s white face. “…Hey,” he says, arching an eyebrow. “You okay?”

“…Fine.” He says to Pidge, “it’s just my dad.”

Red resettles grumpily into his lap.

“You look better today. Want to watch Mythbusters with me?” His dad asks. “I haven’t seen an episode in awhile and I know how you used to like them.”

“Ah, yeah. I’ve gotta go, Pidge,” Keith says. “But yeah, my mom’s got an outfit all picked out for me. She probably has an old dress for you to wear too.”

“Honestly, Keith, I’d rather die. Thanks though. Go have fun watching Mythbusters. I don’t
always trust them though.”

“It’s science, Pidge.”

“I trust my science. See ya.”

After curling up in blankets and watching t.v. with his dad for the rest of the day, they eat dinner and then Keith takes a shower in his parents’ bathroom. He can hear the phone ring in his parents’ room and the answering machine pick up.

He turns the shower off and grabs a towel, rubbing it over his hair, when he hears the woman saying, “Hi, this message is regarding Keith Kogane.” And his mother quickly picks it up.

He places his hand on the glass door and leans forward, straining his ears to listen, even though his stomach sinks with dread. She’s a little better at staying quiet since last time he heard her talking shit about him, until he hears her exclaiming, “When?! No. No, we can’t wait that long. I already told you the situation. He needs this.” A pause. “How much?! And insurance won’t cover that? He’s sick. Very sick. There’s... This just can’t be it.”

He stands there for a moment longer, pressing his eyes closed at the desperation in his mom’s voice, before putting the towel back to his head and scrubbing harder. He makes sure to avoid the gouges in his back. They’re sensitive. If nothing else, at least they serve as proof for himself that he’s not crazy.

Keith has his sketchbook in his lap as he runs his pencil over the paper, again trying to conjure up how it felt to draw Shiro, how it felt to be in his warmth. Like seeing the sun after months of cold darkness.

But the results are the same. He just can’t do it anymore. All of his art has felt stale and pointless since Shiro left; he’s miles away from any sort of artistic spirit. He stares at the nonsensical lines and they stare right back up at him.

He hasn’t had many chances to escape from his room without supervision. His family seems to have it down; at least one person is home with Keith at all times. But tonight’s the night - the day of the formal.

Here’s the plan: he’ll be at the dance, hanging out with Pidge when he’ll ask for his knife back. When Pidge gives it to him, he’ll make up some lame excuse that she believes and he will run off to the “bathroom”. But really, he’ll go out the back doors in the locker room and sneak away to Haggar’s, taking the path through the forest that’s quicker. He’ll grab the shovel he saw leaning against the shack in the graveyard, look for the graves that appear just recently dug with their soft dirt and dig there first.

It’ll be easy. Keith just has to hurry.

And maybe if there’s a basement...some sort of outhouse...maybe it wouldn’t be too foolish to check those first either...

Keith still hopes for a rescue, not a recovery.

The only problem is sneaking away from Pidge...

There’s a knock on his door and he looks up, carefully folding a page over what he’s drawing.
It’s Krolia again. She’s been hovering lately; any excuse she can think of to come in to chat with him, she takes. She’s been taking days off from work, doing as much as she can at home, always there if he needs her. Keith appreciates the sentiment, he really does, but it makes it hard to concentrate on anything; she might as well bring the living room couch up here for how much she’s been hanging out.

This time, she’s got a suit in her hands and a big smile across her face. She can hardly contain her enthusiasm and already Keith can feel himself cringing.

“It was your father’s,” she says, holding it out as she stares at it fondly, brushing her hand down the lapel. “He looked so good in it back when we were in high school together. It might be a little big on you, but I bet you’ll look great. I can alter it if we need to.”

“Oh. Mom,” Keith gripes. There are so many layers. It’s way too overkill. There’s a necktie.

“You don’t have nice pants. And besides, formal is in the name.”

“I’m not going with anyone,” he sighs, reaching up to grab it from her.

“Pidge isn’t ‘nobody’. You guys can still have fun together.”

“Pidge is acting like I’m kidnapping her to this thing.”

Krolia chuckles fondly, rubbing his shoulders excitedly before saying, “call me when you try it on”.

He looks down at it and then sits beside it with a sigh, taking out his phone.

Are you wearing a dress? He types to Pidge. My mom says there are rules to a dance.

No. Are you?

You’re funny. Look at this, he types to Pidge, taking a picture.

She laughs for a half hour.

You are going to look great. I can’t wait to take a thousand pictures to remember it forever. Matt says he’ll drive us. He’s going too. Wants to see the Shiro video thing.

A video? I thought it was just pictures?

Yeah, Ryou gave Allura some videos to show from their childhood or something.

Fuck. He rubs at his head. ...Well, okay. He’s definitely had enough practice crying. What’s another day of it?

Don’t forget my knife please. He texts.

Okay, okay, jeez.

When he hears the doorbell, he makes his way down the stairs and is instantly creeped out by his mother slapping a hand over her mouth. She reacts even worse to him wearing the suit than he thought. The intensity of the sparkles in her eyes is too much.

“You look just like your father,” she whispers very quietly. “Look at you... Come here.”
She walks up to him where he stands awkwardly at the end of the stairs, hand still on her mouth. She reaches up to straighten the lines of his vest and collar. “Oh, you get more handsome every day.” She puts her hand on his cheeks and smiles warmly up at him.

“Thanks, Mom,” he mumbles, thoroughly embarrassed.

His dad smiles at him proudly too, nodding his head as he agrees. “Looks much better on you than it did on me,” he says.

“It suits both of you,” Krolia smiles, leaning her head onto Keith’s dad’s shoulder as she smiles in bliss.

Acxa comes down the stairs, stepping around him and ruffling his hair with her hand as she turns in surprise. “Oh, my god. Look at you,” she laughs. She managed to cover up the bruise on her forehead and the swelling is gone, so she’s happy again. “Almost halfway decent. No weird beanie, no slouchy clothes. Like a normal human being.” Her friends are there, giggling as they follow her down the steps, and he feels his face flaming red.

“They’re comfortable,” he grumbles, looking up at Pidge who’s also smiling at the door - Keith’s dad let her in - but it’s wide and mischievous. She’s loving every second of this.

She lifts her phone and starts taking pictures. “You look great, Keith,” she grins.

He sputters. “I am going to grab your phone and toss it in the trash.”

Pidge snorts. “Just a sec before you do that; I’m sending it to everyone I know.”

“Let me get a picture of you both,” Krolia uses her hands to shuffle them into the living room, by the fireplace.

“Oh, Mom,” Keith groans. “It looks like a date or something. It’s weird.”

“Don’t get so embarrassed. You and Katie have thousands of pictures together. What about the ones of you two in the bath together as kids? You’re both buck naked and you don’t mind those.”

“Mom,” he says, horrified, as Acxa’s friends giggle.

“Come on. Just one. I promise I won’t post it.”

He sighs, standing next to a deeply amused Pidge.

“This is killing me slowly,” he says, coughing into his sleeve. “I can’t believe you’re still laughing.”

“Seeing your level of embarrassment is worth my own,” Pidge pats his shoulder with a laugh and then links their arms, grinning brightly. “Besides, we were cute babies.”

He tries to muster up a smile for his mom as she holds her phone out and lines the shot up carefully for what feels like forever.

“You’re grimacing,” Acxa chuckles as she watches, leaning over the couch. “You always do that. I swear it’s impossible to get a good photo of you.”

Keith gurgles.

Krolia says, “And now, Acxa, you hop in there.”
“Another?” Keith groans.

“Let me have this,” Krolia hums as Acxa tosses her arm around Keith's shoulders like they’re best buddies.

He’s shorter than her on any day, and today, she’s wearing heels. Not to mention, he always feels ten times more grungy than her, even with this formal wear. He hears the camera click and can envision, in the years to come, having to see the hideous comparison between the two. Just like the pictures of him and Pidge in the bath together that he has to hunt down and destroy next chance he gets.

He shrugs Acxa off of him when his mom gets a picture but opens her mouth to no doubt request another. “Augh, okay! Matt’s waiting. Bye.”

“Be careful,” Krolia says, going up to him to correct his collar another time. She kisses him on the forehead. “Stay safe. Don’t drink the punch.”

“I’m sure they have it looked over,” Keith sighs, looping his arm through Pidge’s and pulling her along.

“Bye, Mrs. Kogane! Mr. Kogane.” Pidge calls as they get out of there.

“Thank you for taking him, Katie. Thank Matt for us too. And please, whatever you do, don’t let Keith out of your sight.”

Pidge laughs as Krolia buzzes anxiously. Keith’s dad has to put an arm around her and rub her shoulders to calm her. Pidge gives them the thumbs up and waves goodbye as Keith drags her quickly from the house.

Keith’s never been one for dances. He had to go to one once, during their sixth grade science trip. Pidge wasn’t in his class so he sat by the desserts and just ate the entire time. It was okay, but there’s no food this time, only water and punch, like his mom warned him about. There’s nothing to do but sit. And the video. He dreads that.

“You look so weird in that,” Pidge says, elbowing him as they sit on the bleachers together, taking out their phones; only five minutes in and they’re already terribly bored. “Like you’re in your twenties or something. All professional and stuff. You could have any girlfriend or boyfriend your little heart desires basically.”

“Can’t wait. I like how you’re in the same outfit you always are.”

“It felt right when I was at home, but now I feel super underdressed, especially sitting beside you, all handsome and clean-cut today. I’m never going to get over it. I’m going to cherish these pictures for the rest of my life. I feel like I’m sitting next to a model. Wait until I show the others.”

He chuckles; she is underdressed and she’s about the only one, but isn’t that so Pidge?

He looks around at all the people swaying in the crowd. The annoying flashing strobe lights. The horrible music. What are they here for again? He’s getting a migraine. “Did you want to dance?”

“No,” Pidge laughs like he's crazy. She raises an eyebrows at him as she leans back on the seat behind her. “Did you?”

“No. Just thought I’d ask. It seems like everyone else enjoys it and I'd hate to rob you of an
exciting experience because I sure as hell am not coming to another one of these again.”

She laughs. “Tell you what. I’ll dance if you get your picture taken. Look at that set-up over there. Just your thing.”

He snorts as he looks to where she’s pointing. There’s an archway with gaudy gold tassels and night scenery badly painted on the back. Everything he hates in one.

“No deal.”

“Even if I do the robot?”

“Especially then; I don’t want to see that. I’d rather sit here in dead silence for the next three hours.”

“Pfft. I know you brought your sketchbook.”

He laughs. “Did you bring yours?”

She grabs it from her bag with a cat-like grin and shows it to him. He smiles and brings his out. And they draw.

Everyone’s so loud and energetic. He thinks of the school during the day, of people crying over Shiro. Of that thick atmosphere pressing everyone down. They’re all fine now. Posing for pictures in front of the bad backdrop. Laughing. Wearing tiny silly hats and fake mustaches on sticks. He doesn’t feel fine. He hates it.

He draws the streamers, the group of dancers crowding around the stage, the dumb banners. His mother was so excited when he agreed to come here, but he still doesn’t really get it. It’s loud and noisy and just a lot of people hopping up and down to music he doesn’t care for. At least now when his mom pesters him to go, he can use this experience as a reference of all the reasons why not to.

The only reason why Keith would ever want to go would be because...

Well... It’s not like Shiro could ever take Keith to a formal.

He tosses his eyes up through the crowd, seeking signs of Ryou, or maybe even Haggar.

“Who are you looking for?” Pidge asks, looking up.

“...I don’t know... Wondering if Ryou came.”

“No, he was supposed to, but plans went awry. According to Matt, after the funeral, his parents couldn’t take it here anymore, so they all went to Japan to be with family for a few months. He gave the videos to Allura. She’s in charge of everything.”

Keith peers through the crowd for Allura and finds her by the punch bowl, chatting with Lotor. “...Oh,” he hums. She’s smiling like nothing’s wrong and Keith wonders if that’s how he looks now, joking with Pidge, like this weight isn’t always here in his chest.

It’s been long enough here. He needs to sneak over to the graveyard.

“...What are you thinking about?”

I’m listening.”

“I wasn’t saying anything,” she says.

“Oh.” He rubs at the tip of his nose. “Um. You brought my knife, right? Can I have it back, please?”

A pause as she watches him. “I forgot,” she says.

He feels himself tense. Pidge...forget...? Pidge, who can remember word for word what he said ten years ago. Pidge, the smartest one in their entire town, maybe entire state, maybe more. Pidge, whom he reminded twice in as many days to bring his damn knife.

Pidge does not forget. She just doesn’t do that. She’s lying.

He feels a sharp zing of betrayal run through him. She’s keeping his knife from him.

She watches his face, already trying to do damage control, “Keith, it’s not like that. I put it on my bag, but Matt distracted me with his ugly clothing choices. Did you see what he chose? That was the lesser of so many evils. I forgot my other bag too.”

He bites his lip. He doesn’t want to be petty, but he’s frustrated and he really didn’t want to go to Haggar’s in the dark, by himself, knifeless. He mutters out, “funny how you remembered your sketchbook though...”

Another pause. She shifts her sketchbook and pencil beside herself to lean forward, closer to Keith. “Keith. You’re not thinking of going to Haggar’s again, are you?”

“What? How do you get that out of this?”

She narrows her eyes at him as she says lowly, “You found something, Keith. Something that freaked you out... It’s not like you’re one to give up. And suddenly, you’re just not talking about it? Shiro was all you ever talked about and suddenly you don’t care? That’s not how you work...”

She knows him way too well. He runs his tongue over the points of his teeth. “N-no. I just -”

“- Keith, don’t go by yourself. Take me with you. Or better yet, tell me what you found. We can brainstorm together. I can get my dad on it. I know you feel like he let you down with Shiro, but he works hard, Keith. His intentions are good and he’s smart. If there’s something we should know about Haggar, it’s worth him investigating -”

He shakes his head roughly. “No. I’m not mad at your dad. I found nothing. Really. You saw the summoning circle on her floor. That was what I was talking about... It seemed like a big deal at a time. That’s it.”

“Then why do you look so frustrated?” She asks softly, voice almost drowned out by the music around hem.

He clears his throat as it roughens, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’m sick still, okay? My lungs feel like they’re taped together. With shitty tape too, not the good kind. Think Dollar Tree.” He coughs into his hand for good measure.

“Keith.” Pidge sighs. “Just...whatever you do, don’t go there alone. Promise me.”

He hesitates. He hates lying, especially when she’s staring right at him, taking him at his word.
He licks his lips. “...As long as you promise to leave her alone too. And your dad.”

She just stares. “...Why?”

“B—Because she’s none of our business!” He stammers. Dammit. He’s acting way too suspicious. He turns his face from her. At least she won’t see the guilt that’s sure to be there.

Pidge says softly. “What if she killed Shiro, Keith?”

No. It’s one thing compressing it into the depths of his mind, trying to hide from that thought, but when she says it out loud like that, it hurts so much worse. He rocks back, cringing in pain.

She keeps pushing. “What if his body that you are so adamant about still being out there somewhere...what if she has him and there’s a chance he can be okay? Keith, you’d tell me if you had something on her, right?”

“Why are you pressing this?”

“Why are you getting so upset if you’re not lying to me?”

“Pidge. Please. I’m just...I don’t want to think about her fucking house anymore. I almost died in a pit of mud. I...” He clutches his chest. “I don’t want to think about it. She creeps me the fuck out.”

She’s quiet for awhile. “...So you’re done, then?”

He stays still.

“No more window hunting? No more looking for him?”

“You said yourself,” he whispers. “It’s been so long. We had the funeral. It’s done.”

“Why don’t I believe you then?”

“I promise I won’t go to that house,” he says firmly. “Not without you.”

She watches him through those bright eyes of hers, looking him over. Finally, she looks away. She believes him.

“Okay...” she murmurs before leaning back and groaning. “Uggghh, I hate dances. I want to go home. Where’s Matt?”

“They still haven’t shown Shiro’s video.”

“Right,” she sighs, shifting on the bleachers. They’re uncomfortable but dancing seems worse somehow. Keith gets a glimpse of Acxa with her friends bouncing around in the crowd, grinning like they’re having a good time, and he wonders how she does it.

After the next song, the music is turned off and Allura makes her way to the front, stepping onto the stage and standing before the microphone. Everyone goes quiet and looks to her. She has the same sort of charming bold presence that Shiro has, the power to command an audience without even doing anything but just being. She makes her introductions and starts the projector.

As they pull down the screen, Allura says, “Though we have laid a dear friend of ours to rest, may he not be forgotten. Shiro was the kindness in all of our hearts, he gave many of us strength, encouraged us all to be the best that we can be. Let us not forget the gifts he passed on to us; let us
honor him by always doing our best. That’s what he would have wanted.”

Keith closes his sketchbook softly and clips his pen to the cover. He hugs it to his center, staring out. It’s funny how quickly a mood can wash over a crowd. Smiles are gone. Tears are back.

Images of Shiro flicker on. The speakers start playing soft music with an acoustic guitar and violin in the background and Keith is immediately uneasy.

Keith doesn’t want to look, but, like a moth to the flame, he finds himself doing so anyway. He wishes he didn’t have to discover these things about Shiro this way.

Shiro was a pudgy kid. His cheeks were bright and pink in all of his photos and he’s always smiling, always happy and chipper. Half the pictures he has a bug net and a dorky straw hat. The other half he’s swimming in the lake, the ponds, the pools with Ryou. They almost look like twins. He’s a little fish. Keith never knew that.

He had an awkward phase too. But his awkward stage wasn’t bad, of course it wasn’t, it’s Shiro. He was awkward in the most endearing way. Sweet. Keith feels himself falling for him even harder. With his braces that were too big for his thinning face... His cheeks that were red and patchy like he was blushing all the time... And his eyes too - two large silver moons set on his face, bright and excited. Over the years, they grew to be quieter, calmer, somehow even more beautiful.

He used to go water skiing on the back of Lotor’s boat. And he was good at it. Leaning up curves of water to leap through the air, posing with that grin of his in perfect form.

Good at everything. Keith knew that.

But the other things. So many little things about Shiro he never knew.

He’s sure Shiro hadn’t even told him his deepest darkest secrets, but enough longing had bubbled up inside of him that Shiro had let slip he had wanted a family, a future, kids, a life shared.

And it kills Keith that he couldn’t get that back for him. That these pictures are all that’s left of him, that everyone had just thought it was a given he’d obtain all those things in his future, but there was no future in his hands. He will never have a photo album of his wedding, or one of his first child. He won’t grow older in his photos. He’ll stay like this. Stuck.

This is it.

This is all of him. And it’s still so little.

It kills Keith so badly. He doesn’t want to watch the pictures anymore, but he’s transfixed on it. This is all that’s left. This is all that’s left.

Shiro was so full of light. Out of everyone, Shiro deserved all this horror least.

Pidge leans her head on Keith’s shoulder, rubbing his arm gently. He sniffs, leaning his head over hers and letting out a shuddering breath. He tries to endure it, but he feels it - raw and vulnerable in his chest, rising up inside his throat.

He doesn’t want to start sobbing in front of everyone.

“Bathroom,” he mutters, gently pulling away from Pidge. “I’ll be right back.”
“Don’t go alone, Keith. I’ll go with you,” she says, already shifting to stand.

“N-no, I...” He shakes his head roughly and hurries off.

“Keith,” she says softly, watching him go.

He wants privacy; the bathroom in the gym won’t do. He takes the hallway to the left. It stretches out long and lonely, tapering off into a darkness his eyes can’t keep up with. The lights power on as he enters.

He goes to the empty bathroom at the end of the hall, shoves himself into a stall and collapses into the wall.

He shoves his hand over his mouth and lets out a shuddering breath into it. There’s no use. Warmth trickles down his face and over his fingers. He slouches against the bathroom wall, letting it all out by himself in the quiet dirty bathroom.

It’s quiet and cold where he is, gripping onto his shoulders as he crosses his arms tightly over his chest. It’s not enough. He feels so alone and useless and pointless. His whole existence is pointless.

He’s stuck. There are so many graves in the graveyard; he knows it’s a long shot. But if he goes forward and tells Pidge’s dad about Haggar, it could very well kill him. Keith would be shoving Pidge’s dad into a fight he knows he wouldn’t be able to handle. But if the only other option is letting Shiro go...

And no. No, he can’t live with himself if he does that either.

Don’t go to Haggar’s without me, Pidge demands of him. But he can’t bring her. He has to do whatever it takes. He has to lie. He has to do it alone.

The door is pushed open and he inhales sharply, trying not to breathe so that he won’t make any sound.

The sink squeaks on. He relaxes a bit beneath the noise. He rubs at his face and tries to brush the tears away. Let the person do their business and leave.

But they don’t.

The water just runs and runs. And what starts to become an aggravation quickly develops into fear and suspicion that sinks deep into Keith’s gut.

He takes a deep breath, leaning forward to peer through the cracks of the stall toward the bathroom sink. Through the slit he can see the white of the bathroom stall and -

Breathing. He hears someone breathing, pressed against the other side of the stall door, the sound labored and harsh.

Keith jerks back, stumbling away. His eyes dart to the crack beneath the stall door. There’s nothing there.

Not again. Not alone again.

He digs for his phone quickly, but then stops. What is he doing? This is why he’s still here, not searching the graveyard. He can’t bring Pidge. He can’t let her be hurt. He’d rather die.
Maybe he will.

Keith swallows hard as he shoves his phone away. Maybe it’s just his imagination. He prays it’s just that.

“Hello?” He breathes quietly. “Is someone there?”

It’s just the sink, still running. On and on. It must’ve been clogged somehow because water is starting to pour over the edge, crawling toward him on the floor.

“He’s gone. He left. You won’t be able to find him, especially not through me.”

All is still.

Keith walks carefully around the stalls and peers over at the sink.

It’s full of water, slowly dripping over the sides.

Keith jumps as he sees a figure - a shock of black hair against a paper-white face - but it’s just his reflection in the mirror, frazzled and haunted. Everything else remains undisturbed.

He steps slowly through the puddles, pulls the door handle, and - before anything can happen - gets the hell out of there.

He hurries down the long corridor as the lights come back to life. His fucking crutches make everything take so fucking long, especially these old shitty ones that are too stiff and cut into his forearms the harder he presses. He just wants to toss them away and sprint down this stupid fucking hallway before he gets mauled. He can’t do that anymore.

He can feel it along the back of his neck, his hairs standing on edge, the goosebumps all over his skin. He feels it in the air, thick and heavy with anticipation and the door isn’t coming fast enough.

His leg is screaming at him to stop. His arms are protesting against how much he’s pushing them. He can’t breathe. It’s coming, they’re coming.

He’s finally there. He reaches for the door, pulls it open and -
It won’t open.

It’s locked.

He pulls harder, but it doesn’t budge.

“Shit,” he breathes, turning around, leaning back against the door. Unless he wants to travel all the way down the hallway again, pray the locker room is unlocked for some reason, and go out through the quad that he knows is pitch black right now, he’s stuck.

Now he regrets not just sobbing in front of everyone in the gym.

He throws his fist into the door, pounding against metal as hard as he can so that the metal buckles beneath the force. “Can anyone-fucking-hear me?” He grunts, turning to keep an eye on the long hallway.

No one comes.

He pulls his phone out and texts Pidge.

The fucking locker room hallway is locked can you open it

And then the lights start to flicker at the end of the hallway.

He takes a deep breath in, slips his phone away.

The fluorescent lights that line the path down the hall are always too bright, blaring against the lockers as they shine, reflecting off the linoleum floors, bouncing off the white ceiling and walls. They’re like flamethrowers, keeping the sun in hallways that would otherwise be pitch black. Keith has always taken them for granted, but now, he silently pleads.

He’s never been one to be afraid of the dark, but as the light farthest from him flickers and dies...and then the next...and the next, the air swoops from his chest.

Slowly, one by one, the lights in the hallway go dark, closing in on Keith, washing through empty space. He presses his back as hard as he can to to door, wishing he could just fall through it - get away. It’s coming. The darkness crawls toward him until the last of the lights flickers overhead...and goes out.

Black consumes him whole. He’s doused in darkness, only the light sneaking through the cracks of the door behind him are left, but it’s hardly anything. A thin spider’s thread of gold he can’t slip through. He can’t even see his feet.

But there’s something there. Intuition. Eyes. Watching him.

He thinks he can hear on the edges of the stagnant air, whispering. Quiet. Nonsensical words.

He grips the door handle behind him tighter, shoving against it desperately, trying to keep it together. “Come on,” he grits, jerking the handle back. “Come on.”

“Who the fuck are you?” He mutters to the sickness in the air. “Haggar’s slave? She summoned you and now you do whatever she wants? What does she even want with me...? Shiro’s gone.”

Calm, calm, he’s got to stay calm. There’s no mud. No weapons around. He’s fine here.

But they’re strong. Keith knows that. And Keith...Keith has nothing but crutches that hardly even
“Come on, Pidge,” he whispers. The silence is suffocating. He can’t see anything in this darkness. Hear anything in the silence. He just stands, tense, waiting for something he’s not prepared for, his anxiety building until he feels he’ll pop.

“Pidge,” he pleads.

His shitty crutch is grabbed from his hand and torn right out of his grip, sending it flying away. He can hear it clang, distant, through the hallway, straight on the other side.

He tries to grab for the wall, but before he can get a grip, something kicks his knee in and he’s down, being pulled away by his hair through the hallway.

He’s been here before; it’s useless to fight, but Keith struggles anyway, hands reaching up to pull the grip away. All he feels is air.

He twists, determined to pull out all his damn hair if it’ll get him free, but he’s yanked forward harder. He’s dragged down the hallway, further away from the door, where he knows his escape is. It’s going further away, a tiny door rimmed in gold, becoming even smaller in the distance.

“No!” He screams. “Let - me - go!”

He twists, sliding across the ground and his hand catches something. He snatches it up just as quickly as he feels it. It’s a bar, probably the one framing the water fountain - Keith can’t see. He jerks to a stop as he clings to it desperately, his scalp protesting angrily as he’s yanked back harder. He heaves his other hand over, pulling himself closer to the bar. He is not letting go. Wherever that thing thinks it’s going to drag him, it’s wrong.

There’s a dull roar. An electrical surge. The lights protest weakly with a flicker of faded blue light and then explode out.

And the tugs that felt powerful before were nothing like this as the bar in Keith’s grasp groans and then peels right from the wall as Keith is forced backward again, useless bar now in his grasp.

He swings it - he’s desperate, but it only strikes the ground. He tries to jam it into the side of the wall, to catch anything, to put a stop to this, but the bar is whisked out of his hands and tossed away. And he feels more hands. Not just the one dragging him, but others all around him, grabbing at his legs, at his waist, lifting him from the floor, carrying him off.

He tries to kick. He tries to twist away. It’s useless. They’re everywhere. Grabbing at him, forcing him to their will.

The door to the gym is so far now that Keith can’t even see the light anymore. There’s nothing around him.

Where next? Another grave? Will they toss him off the cliff in the back? Drown him in the lake?

How do you fight something you can’t see? Something you can’t touch or harm? There’s no hope. He can’t do anything, not as he is, alive. He’s on the wrong plane.

And just as he thinks that...certain this is it, this is the end of his life, in one sudden second, they burst into flames. As easily as the pages of a dried book, they ignite in a flash - the figures that Keith hadn’t been able to see are there, standing around him in the hallway, beacons bursting with light through this darkness. It’s like seeing the air crack and split into shattered glass, molten lava
in between, spreading wider and wider with flames that pull them apart from the inside.

They’re on fire, being consumed.

They drop Keith, bucking back, writhing in agony. Keith pulls away, leaning on his elbows and panting as he stares on. He can hear them clearly for the first time, screaming, tormented wails that cut through the hall. Their outlines twist and claw toward the sky, howling. They writhe, desperately reaching, searching for relief.

They’re burning.

“Jesus,” Keith breathes, watching in horror. He didn’t do anything. He doesn’t get why.

The floor tears beneath their glow, splitting wide at their feet, burning a hole in the floor that grabs at them, sucking them through. They’re sinking into the floor, being dragged through it, disappearing as if through quick sand.

And then, before Keith can get over his shock, one reaches up out of the pit, latches onto his foot, and pulls.

Keith’s foot sinks through the burning hole in the ground too.

“God,” Keith wheezes, throwing his weight back, trying to claw onto the ground with his fingers, but the ground is slippery and smooth and his nails are short. They’re leaving bloodied lines across the floor, but he can feel himself being dragged anyway, hands burning into his ankle, the grip too strong as it shrieks and screams.

“God, no, no!” What the fuck is that? Hell? He scrambles and fights, reaching out. “Pidge!” He screams. “Pidge!!”

Those creatures shriek behind him, clawing up his legs. He smells smoke and fire, powerful and burning into his lungs, searing the soreness already there. He coughs violently, his strength fading as his body protests.

Keith tries to dig his fucking elbows into the ground. Anything. He’s waist deep into the floor. He can’t get a grip. He’s going to fall in. It’ll be all over.

“Shiro!” He sobs as he’s yanked down. His fingers catch the side of the gaping hole. His whole body screams against the weight as they grab and pull at him, determined to drag him down with them. Their dead weight is too much. He can't hold them all. His fingers are slipping. He can see as each of his fingertips slowly lose their grip as the flames below light him up with blinding orange. He doesn’t know what’s down there. He’s scared. “Shiro!!”

He knows, right now, even if the rest of the ghosts were to fall away and just leave him, he doesn’t have the strength anymore to pull himself up. He’s done.

There’s a surge of electricity that groans overhead. The lights flare and dim. Something hits the ground up above.

A hand darts out of the darkness skyward, latching onto Keith’s arm tightly. A familiar hand.

Keith looks up in shock...and sees Shiro.

Shiro’s a mess. Sweat’s dripping off his face, his dark hair is plastered to his forehead. Keith can see the fire reflected in his eyes, a violent orange glow. Shiro heaves with strain, laying out over
the side of the edge, his other hand coming down to grab Keith tightly as Keith finally slips from the ledge. He’s supported completely by Shiro, dangling by his arms. If Shiro lets go...

“Shiro!” Keith cries, digging his hands into Shiro’s arms to get a hold. “They have me. I can’t get them off!”

“I’ve got you,” Shiro breathes, keeping his hold on Keith’s arm as he struggles. Teeth baring as he pulls. “I’m not letting go.”

It’s now a game of tug-o-war with Keith in the middle. They have his leg, trying to use him to crawl up and out. It feels like it’s about to pull right out of his socket and tear from his body and maybe that’s just as well. Then, he’d be able to be pulled up. Then, he’d be free of them. The cost doesn’t seem so steep.

“Hang in there, Keith,” Shiro grits out, words heaving from the depths of his being. He’s pulling Keith up with painstaking slowness. He reaches down, grabbing Keith by the back, using pure muscle to lift all of them. There’s nothing around to use as leverage. Only him. Just Shiro.

And he’s doing it.

Keith thinks his back’s going to pop off. He clamps down his teeth over a cry of pain. If he wasn’t preoccupied with that, he’d tell Shiro that with him, come the ghosts... And if they come back up, they’re still in trouble. It won’t end then.

“Just drop me,” Keith screams. “They’ll keep coming for you. And Pidge. They’re looking for Pidge. They can’t stay!”

Shiro heaves Keith up more, tossing Keith’s torso over the floor. He’s reaching down. He has his arm around Keith’s legs, stretching his other hand out...reaching for the others.

Shiro grabs them tightly with his hands and they screech in pain at the contact, their skin boiling and burning away where Shiro touches them. He digs his hands into their arms, a primal growl burning from his throat.

And they let go. The clawed nails that dig into Keith’s leg release. The tension is gone.

Shiro scrambles back, grabbing Keith by the waist and heaving both of them back as far away from the hole as they can get, pressed against the lockers.

Keith and Shiro collapse to the ground, winded, the smell of smoke hanging around them.

They push themselves up as the screams manifest and rise, only to be cut off as the hole starts fading away, closing slowly. It leaves nothing. The screaming stops.

They lay there for a second, staring blankly at the spot in the ground, getting their bearings. The lights spark back on. They still flicker weakly - they’ve had a night, but they shine down on the both of them, letting them see.

Keith coughs weakly, lungs rattling.

It feels like they’ve gone deaf in this sudden silence. The lights protest, small popping noises, but that’s nothing. It’s nothing.

Shiro tilts his head over to Keith. Keith turns to stare back.
Everything bad just melts away.

Keith felt like all he’s been doing is mourn Shiro, sitting in this miserable hopeless sludge of despair in his chest. He’s been chasing after Shiro’s fading trail through their neighborhood, all paths as empty as the next.

And now Shiro’s here. Worn out and panting, but here.

He’s the most beautiful sight Keith thinks he’s ever seen. Shiro had pulled not just Keith, but several other bodies up and out of the hole with just his own arms. It was the single most fierce display of strength Keith has ever seen in his life. The fervency of Shiro’s face as he fought to keep Keith alive, wild with energy like a live wire. Keith’s never seen anyone fight so hard for anything before...and Shiro was fighting for Keith.

And he did it. Keith’s alive. Those ghosts are gone.

He looks over Shiro’s familiar face, dazed. He’s here, Keith sprawled out in his lap, face inches away, in each other’s space. There are so many things to say. He’s here. He’s finally here.

Keith wants to pour out his entire heart to Shiro, he wants to thank him for saving him, spew out his undying loyalty and love. Lean up to kiss him. There are so many things he wants to do. But before his scattered mind can choose what to do first, it’s Shiro who moves.

Shiro grabs Keith’s face firmly between both hands and, without any hesitation at all, presses his mouth to Keith’s, and kisses him senseless.

He pulls Keith into him like he needs this kiss as a drowning man needs air, holding him fiercely. His grip is so tight that it almost hurts. And Keith grabs him back.

It’s here, like a dream, warm and golden and soft. Keith had never expected this, only plagued by dreams of this, nightmares, like he only ever gets, heartbroken that it’ll never come.

But here it is. Shiro’s actually here, kissing Keith as fiercely as he had saved him. It’s real. Shiro’s back. He's back. He's home.

Keith melts into the kiss, eyes fluttering closed. A dam inside him gives way for the first time in his life. He’s tried to hold it back for so long, but he can’t anymore. He has permission now.

He pours all of his heart into their kiss. All of his longing. The hurt he’s felt these past few weeks without Shiro, the hope he feels now, bursting inside of him like a star.

In the kiss, Keith can feel Shiro’s heart too. He feels everything the silence between them has left out lately. Shiro’s missed Keith too. He wanted to be here too.

The ground is cold and uncomfortable and the lights are flickering in and out, but they’re together. Tears pour from their eyes. They’re wet and their faces are salty and slippery, combining into such a big mess they’re not sure whose tears are whose, but they laugh into the other’s mouth, so ecstatic, so happy. Keith’s not sure if he’s sobbing or laughing and Shiro’s the same sort of blissed out mess.

“Is this a dream?” Keith whispers against Shiro’s mouth, face trembling with emotion.

Shiro lets out a shaky breath, brushing Keith’s hair back. “No. No, I’m right here. I’ve got you. We’re both right here.”
And it’s true. Shiro is here, and like an angel in the middle of all this chaos, he’s smiling.

**Relief.** The weight as Keith was dragged down into that dark hole was nothing in comparison to what he’s been carrying around in his chest without Shiro.

Everything’s just released from him. He’s light again. He can breathe again. Shiro’s **here**. Really here.

“**Shiro,**” Keith says shakily, reaching his hands up to Shiro’s cheeks so he can brush away his tears too. “It’s you. It’s really you. You saved me.” Keith tries to keep quiet, but seeing Shiro has opened something in him and he can’t fight against it anymore. He sobs softly, pressing his face into Shiro’s chest, his own chest heaving.

“Thank you, Shiro,” he breathes, and he means for everything, but mostly for this chance to see him again.

He’s missed Shiro so much. They’ve been through so much apart, feeling alone and scared, and now, **finally,** they’re back together. It feels like they can take on the world together. It’s such a sweet moment; Keith can’t take the emotions ravaging inside of him.

“I’ve thought about you,” Shiro whispers, words burning in his throat as he runs his hands gently through Keith’s hair in long tender strokes. “Every moment, every second of every hour, I’ve only had you on my mind. Since I walked out that door, I’ve only wanted to come right back.” He presses another kiss to Keith’s temple and Keith nestles into it. “There were things that needed to be done, but they’re taken care of now... I won’t leave you again. Not like this. I promise.”

Keith’s hands squeeze Shiro’s tightly. “**Shiro,**” he whispers on a soft sob. “...Shiro... You’re back.”

Shiro’s brow wrinkles as he presses his lips to Keith’s forehead, emotion flooding his eyes all at once, drowning him. “I’ve been here,” he whispers back, bringing a hand up to brush Keith’s hair behind his ear. He returns it gently down to cup Keith’s cheek. “I never left you. I’ve been beside you all this time.”

Keith lets out a small sob as he hangs his head. “I know,” he whispers. “I’ve felt you. ...I knew it was you,” Keith breathes him in, wrapping his arms around Shiro’s sturdy back and nestling his fingers into the base of his head, where his hair tickles Keith’s fingers. “It’s like your spirit is gentle, soft, in the way that the others weren’t... That was you in the forest, wasn’t it? And at Pidge’s place?”

“Yeah,” Shiro says, still running his hands through Keith’s hair as he watches Keith’s face. “Yeah, I heard you... It gave me strength to keep going.”

Shiro is still winded, rocking the both of them together. He holds Keith close, possessiveness in his tight grip, and Keith swears he can feel warmth, the soft fluttering of Shiro’s heart beneath his shirt. He falls into it, letting himself go - finally - feeling caught, cradled.

They stay there as their breathing slowly calms, secure in each other’s arms, hands gently touching the other’s face, weaving through the other’s hair.

Shiro leans up, brushing Keith’s tears away with both of his hands. Gently, like he’s handling broken glass, he presses his lips to Keith’s cheek, kissing away a tear.

“**Shiro,**” Keith sniffles, reaching his hands higher, to grab at Shiro’s wrists, to pull him closer.
“I’m so sorry,” Shiro says, voice cracking. “Everything that’s happened to you is because of me.”

Keith closes his eyes and just holds Shiro’s arms, leans his head into Shiro’s hands, into his gentle kisses, breathes in his presence. He’s here. It’s so much relief. This is all he could ever want.

“I’m so happy,” Keith breathes. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve missed you so much.”

“...Keith,” Shiro whispers, still looking at him with glistening eyes, so much love and longing sparkling there.

Keith never wants to let go. No matter what happens. Wherever Shiro goes, Keith wants to go too.

“I can’t believe you’re touching me,” Keith whispers. He presses his hand into Shiro’s back, amazed that he’s actually there. He feels just like a person. “You’re doing it. I can feel you.”

Shiro nuzzles against his neck. “Yeah, I - if I concentrate really hard. It’s getting easier.”

“Back at home, when I was sick -”

“- That was me too,” Shiro whispers. “I’ll tell you everything,” he murmurs. “But we should get out of here.”

“Mm... I knew it. But then you were gone in the morning, and I...” Keith traces his hand down Shiro’s jawline, across his neck, onto his chest. He feels the skin there, soft, until his thumb catches on a divot in his skin.

Keith stops, pushing himself up slightly so he can see. He pulls the collar of Shiro’s shirt down.

It’s a burn mark. And it’s not just like a stray ember skimmed across his skin. It looks like a brand.

“Shiro, you’re hurt,” Keith whispers with worry, tugging his shirt down even further. He reaches his hand out and then stops.

He recognizes it. Of course he recognizes it. It’s his own drawing. The one he had sketched out that day Shiro went missing, before he even knew. It’s the drawing that Keith had found on his floor only a few weeks back, the edges still smoking. Protection of a loved one.

It’s been burned into Shiro’s skin.

“Oh, god -” Keith breathes, heart spiking with horror.

“No,” Shiro whispers sharply, reaching up to grab Keith as he recoils. “No, it’s okay. It appeared one day when Hagger’s ghosts came after me. They were trying to drag me away and I couldn’t fight them. It’s what saved me. They can’t touch it - they couldn’t touch me - without being hurt. If it wasn’t here, I would’ve fell right into their hands ages ago.”

“It’s like a brand - I drew that -!”

“- It doesn’t hurt,” Shiro shakes his head quickly, grabbing Keith’s hand and placing it over the mark. It’s cool to the touch. “It’s protected me this entire time. It’s how I was able to save you. Keith, I’m so grateful for it. It’s the only reason we’re both here, together. Without it, we’d both be dead.”

Keith stares down at it. Shiro says it doesn’t hurt, but how can it be?
“It saved me, Keith,” Shiro whispers.

Keith gently traces his fingers over it. It’s faint, like an old scar, but his skin buckles where the marks are. “…It doesn’t hurt...?” He whispers.

Shiro shakes his head as he lets Keith feel him. Shiro looks at him for a long quiet moment before asking, softly, “Are you okay?”

Keith nods slowly, taking in a deep breath. “Yeah...” He whispers. “Yeah. This whole thing has just been horrible, hasn’t it?”

“I’m so sorry,” Shiro says.

Keith presses his fingers to Shiro’s mouth and shakes his head. “Me too,” he murmurs, placing his hand over the mark on his chest.

He lays back down into Shiro and sighs. He takes a moment to press his hair back. His scalp hurts and his neck is already sore but he’s okay. Shiro’s right here. They’re okay.

As memories of the night flit through his head, Keith slowly smiles. “I can’t believe this whole night. …You were so cool.”

“Mm?” Shiro hums, rubbing his hands in gentle circles over Keith’s back.

Keith shifts so he can smile up at Shiro. “You just leapt over the hole like a lion. Your wind caught the flames bringing them after you like a fucking cape. I’ll never seen anything cooler in my entire life.”

Shiro starts to chuckle lowly, chest heaving. “Keith.”

“How did you even do that? The hole was like...ten feet wide. How?”

Shiro laughs. His eyes are twinkling so much that he hides his face, snuggling his head into Keith’s. “How easily you forget. I was captain of the football team, remember?”

Keith laughs loudly, the sound of it bouncing through the hall. “Yeah, but I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Oh, you watched me?”

“What? No! I mean, sometimes, if I was there. Everyone made such a big deal out of you,” he shrugs innocently.

Shiro just laughs again. They’re both so worn down and weary that it’s contagious. They press their heads together and giggle in each other’s space.

“I’m so happy,” Keith breathes out, smile still on his lips. “Nothing can take this moment away from me.”

“Me too, Keith,” Shiro whispers. “...You have no idea.” He pauses. “Or maybe you do.”

Keith chuckles, clinging to him tighter. “Maybe a little bit.” He presses a kiss to Shiro’s cheek.

And it’s easy. Like they’ve always done it. Like today wasn’t their first kiss. There’s just something about the distance that had stretched between them and snapped right back to this moment. They’ve wanted it for so long, and now, it’s here in their hands.
Keith smiles softly. “You came just at the right moment. Right in time.”

“I’ve been so afraid something like this would happen. I sprinted all the way here. God. Keith... I was so scared."

“I’ve missed you so fucking much,” Keith says, the words burning his throat. He searches Shiro’s face, who softens.

“...I’ve missed you too.” The tension drains right out of Shiro and he sighs, closing his eyes as he leans his forehead against Keith’s.

They kiss again, softer this time, sweeter. Keith could stay here with him forever, but maybe this isn’t the right place for it. He wants to get the both of them home.

He rubs his thumbs into Shiro’s knuckles, hoping the friction might bring him some warmth.

Shiro basically purrs at the contact. “...That feels so good.”

“Yeah?” Keith smiles up at him hopefully.

Shiro is smiling. “I...I’m glad we’re here.”

“Me too,” Keith whispers. He leans back down, laying against Shiro’s arm as he keeps his hold on his hands. “God, I’m tired though.”

“You haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“No, not at all,” he groans. And then he blinks his eyes open. “How do you know that?” A smile stretches across his face as he tosses a mischievous grin at Shiro. “You really have been with me all the time, haven’t you?”

Shiro chuckles. “I already admitted it, okay?”

The gym doors burst open and Keith jumps a mile, gasping. Pidge pokes her head in. “Uh. I don’t know what you’re talking about; it was open. Sorry, I forgot to check my phone until now. ...Are you okay?”

He groans and lets his head fall back onto the ground. He lifts his arm, giving her the thumbs up. “I’m good. I just slipped.”

“...You...slipped...?”

“Uh-huh.”

He can hear her small footsteps approach and he groans as he pushes himself up. Shiro has his hand on Keith’s back and he helps him sit straight. He rubs gentle circles over his back as Keith coughs weakly.

Pidge just stares at him. He can see the concern on her face. The hesitancy. She wants to ask. He smiles up at her, feeling the genuine happiness in his heart bubble up past his defenses.

“You smell...” She says uncertainly. “Like smoke...”

Her eyes fall to his leg, where the pants are burned and torn.

“Uh...cigarette.” He panics.
Her face doesn’t change. “...You smoke now...?”

Shit. “Not well.”

She keeps staring. They sit in a deadlock, neither budging. There’s something in Pidge’s eyes - sharp, upset - that makes Keith think she’ll finally push, finally try to tear Keith’s secrets from him. But she has always been good about giving him his space. That’s true.

She runs a hand through her hair and steps back. “...Right. Well. Think you could have one of your parents come pick us up? I’m just about done here and Matt says he’s staying late to help clean up.”

“Oh, God, yeah,” Keith grunts, already grabbing his phone from his pocket. It’s cracked in the corner from the night. He sighs. It turns on fine at least.

Keith shifts carefully in Shiro’s lap so Pidge won’t notice and texts his parents for a ride.

“My dad says he’ll come,” he murmurs. “I’ve seen about as much as I can take I think,” Keith says quietly.

“Yeah. It’s heavy.”

“...Yeah.”

She frowns at his crutches down the hallway and goes to retrieve them. “What the heck, Keith?”

He sighs, taking them from her. “Thank you.”

The air in the gym is immediately different as they push through the doors and step inside. Buzzing. Excited. The slide projector is off and everyone’s faces are in their phones or wide-eyed speaking to their friends. The music is off. The fluorescent lights are on.

Shiro follows Keith closely, hand on the small of his back. Keith checks the clock, but the dance should still have at least an hour left to go.

“What’s going on?” Pidge asks one of her classmates who’s hurrying by.

They turn to her, eyes bright with excitement. “I’ll send it to you,” she says.

When Pidge’s phone chimes, she nudges Keith and he leans over her shoulder to watch the video.

It looks like a livestream. It’s dark in the video, all besides a house in the distance, lit up in orange. It’s on fire.

“Is that - ?” Keith starts in surprise.

“The funeral home.”

“Haggar’s place...” Keith turns his face up to Shiro who stares at him grimly.

Keith looks back down to the video. He can feel the shock on his face. “Jesus. The whole thing...”

“They won’t be able to save it like this,” Pidge murmurs, pressing her hand over his mouth. “Wow. I wonder what started it.”
“She had a shitload of candles in her room. Did you see? She was like...summoning shit or something; I don’t know.”

“God... How horrible...”

“Pidge! Keith! Did you hear?” Lance and Hunk come running up to them through the crowd. “It was her. She did it.”

“Did what?” Keith asks, seeing the bright light in Lance’s eyes.

Lance leans his head in the way to see the video. “This is old. You’re watching a recording. The house is totally done. The police are in there right now, sorting through all the stuff. She had a ton of Shiro’s belongings. She had pictures of him in her room. His shoes. His clothes. We don't even know how much of it's been lost. She hung his jersey on her wall above her bed like some sort or prize.” He crosses his arms over his chest and holds his arms, shuddering. “She’s the murderer! The actual killer.”

Keith bites his lip. His head is spinning. He had expected to deal with all of this on his own, but now everyone knows. “...But... I mean - that’s disgusting and insane and horrifying...but is that proof enough for her to be the killer? Without a doubt?” Keith asks.

Lance squawks. “If I had a creepy shrine of you and you suddenly turned up missing, what would you think?”

Pidge crinkles her nose. “God.”

Hunk says, “That thought had crossed my mind too. I mean, hasn’t she always had these photos? Isn’t that what the restraining order was for? But she had his backpack that he had the day he went missing. That’s not just some random item. Everyone says he was wearing it as he left from school.”

“What?” Keith hisses, his stomach dropping.

“How do you know that?” Pidge frowns.

Lance says, “My brother’s friend is an officer, duh. A lot of the stuff is burnt, but enough remained I guess. But Keith. You don’t have to worry anymore, man. She’s done. The police have her now. She can’t hurt anyone again. That’s good, yeah?”

“But the body,” Keith says, his voice is all over the place. Loud and winded. “Did they find the body? Is he alive?”

“I haven’t heard anything about that. But I mean, she lives in a cemetery. He could be in any one of those graves and how would we know? They can’t just go digging through each and every one. That’s just so wrong.”

Keith looks up at Shiro, wants to ask what do you know? But Shiro just says, softly, “I don’t know about my body”.

All the energy in the room. “It’s over,” he hears. “They have her. The murderer.”

But Shiro. Where’s Shiro? Where’s his body? That’s what’s important here.

He wants to go to the cemetery right now and dig through all those graves. He’ll do it with his bare hands if he has to.
Pidge seems to know what he’s thinking. “My dad’s got this, Keith,” Pidge says, looking at him. She grabs onto his arm and gives him a little shake. “This is good. Maybe she’ll tell them where he is.”

“Yeah,” he hears himself saying distantly.

Matt comes through the crowd, his face exhausted, but there’s light in his eyes. “Did you hear?” He breathes, hurrying over to Keith. “It’s over. It was Haggar all along.”

The whole school is saying it: “It’s over, it’s over, the mystery is over. He can rest now. Shiro can rest.”

But...

“You okay?” Pidge asks and it sounds like she’s speaking to him through a tunnel.

“Yeah...” He tries to breathe.

“Whoa, whoa,” Lance says, catching Keith as his legs and arms give out. Lance strains beneath the weight. “Hey. A little help here.”

Pidge grabs Keith around the waist and they heft him to the bleachers.

“Keith.”

“I’m okay,” he breathes, pressing a hand to his temple as he shakes his head. “Dizzy... This is all... A lot suddenly.”

She’s watching him closely. “Yeah...”

Everyone’s smiling. Some are crying too, but there’s relief in the air. Like all the bad has been washed away. He should be smiling too, shouldn’t he?

Shiro climbs the bleachers and sits right behind Keith, putting a hand on his shoulder as he leans in. “Are you alright?”

“M okay,” he whispers, leaning back into Shiro’s touch. He scans the crowd. It’s just so...curious. He feels disconnected from everyone. Faraway.

And then he sees Lotor leaning against a wall, complex expression on his face. He doesn’t exactly look like he’s celebrating either. He just looks tired. And wounded. His eyes flick over to the other side of the gym uncertainly.

Keith follows his glance and sees Zarkon, standing, a teacher chaperone. He’s smiling.

His dad texts Keith when he arrives in the parking lot and he and Pidge leave, Shiro following quietly behind.

“I’ve got to drop something off at work really quickly. It’ll save me a trip tomorrow.”

“Ugh,” Keith gurgles.

“That’s fine, Mr. Kogane,” Pidge says.
Keith’s dad stops when Keith walks past him to get to the back seat. He narrows in on his face, sighing, the corners of his lips drawing down. “...You look pale.”

“Don’t I always?” Keith says as he passes by, swinging the back door open.

“Well, you definitely have your mother’s thin skin... But that’s not what I mean. You look worse again. Tonight might’ve not been such a great idea...”

Keith gives a faint grudging laugh. "Probably not."

His dad looks back at his work on the passenger seat and then returns his gaze to Keith, thinking. Finally, he sighs. “Come on, let’s get you two home.”

His dad has to help him into the truck. Normally, he can struggle in, but he’s feeling peaky. That’s nothing though. Now that Shiro’s sitting beside him, everything’s going to be okay. Maybe the day is shit, but he’s happy. He can sleep in peace now.

They’re both tired so they don’t talk much on the way back, not that it’s a long drive to Pidge’s house anyway.

He grabs Shiro’s hand in his and leans into him, going back to gently rubbing his knuckles. He tries to do it in the shadows, but he’s at a point he’s not sure he cares. He closes his eyes and draws comfort from those hands in his. Everything’s okay if Shiro’s here.

“I forgot,” Keith says in the truck, slowly blinking his eyes awake. He leans over and spares one hand to give Pidge his phone. “I took pictures of Haggar’s room the other day. The shrine. The book. The jersey. I don’t know if it’d be useful or not, but you could show your dad.”

Pidge snatches his phone into her hand and gawks. “Oh, my god. This is what you’ve been hiding from me? Why? Why didn’t you show me sooner?”

Keith shrugs, shaking his head. The pictures make him feel physically ill. “I dunno. My head’s been static lately. I meant to send it to you right away. I just...forgot.”

She frowns at him but then sends them to herself and hands his phone back over. “Well, I'll show them to my dad. What a past few days...”

“Tell me about it.”

Pidge is silent again. As they pull up into her driveway, she slips out without saying anything, eyes deep in thought.

“Hey, Pidge,” Keith murmurs through his half-sleep, “...Thanks for coming...”

She smiles bleakly, holding her fist out for Keith. “We survived.”

He brings his fist out and presses it against hers. “We survived.”

His dad asks as he’s pulling away and back into the road. “You survived?”

“We’re not really the winter formal kind of people.”

“Ah. Right. Did you have a little fun at least?”

“Mm. They had a whole slideshow of pictures of Shiro from his youth. That was kind of nice, but also...sad. I don’t know. They think they caught his murderer, so...”
“Yeah, I heard. A girl from your class. I can’t believe it,” his dad says softly, reaching out and patting Keith on the shoulder.

When they make it up to Keith’s room and Keith closes the door behind them, the first thing Shiro does is wrap his arms around Keith. He scoops him up with a strength he doesn’t look like he should still have and lifts Keith right off the floor, holding him tightly.

Keith reaches out and nestles into the feeling, smiling into his shoulder. He’s getting emotional again. His whole face twists and wrinkles as he whispers harshly, “Welcome back.”

Shiro’s voice is just as thick. “It’s good to be back.”

“You saved me today,” Keith whispers. “Thank you.”

“And you never gave up trying to search for me. Thank you.”


“There’s a lot to say,” Shiro murmurs, brushing his hands through Keith’s hair. “But we have all day tomorrow. It’s not very exciting anyway. I mostly just stayed with you.” He reaches up and brushes his fingers against Keith’s face, look filled with wonder. “…It feels just like it should…”

He whispers. He smiles at Keith. “…You’re so soft.”

Keith chuckles lightly, “it’s the thin skin.”

“Yeah,” Shiro laughs. He scoops Keith up into his arms, who yelps. He carries him across the room, to his bed, laying him gently in the center. “Every night, I was with you,” he whispers, tenderly brushing a piece of hair from Keith’s face. “While you were sleeping…” He slips one leg onto the bed and then, after checking to make sure he has permission, the other. “I want to be with you.” He turns his eyes to Keith, vulnerable to his core. “Is that okay?”

Keith smiles up at him, tears in his eyes. He nods quietly. As Shiro lays down, Keith scoots back into his side, snuggling up close. “All I’ve wanted was to see you again.”

“Me too, Keith. You have no idea... You’re so warm...” Shiro whispers, emotion flooding his tone. “It feels like ages since I last felt warm. I’ve been cold down to my core since I woke up a ghost. There’s no heart. There’s no blood.” He carefully leans his cheek against the top of Keith’s head. “I thought I could do it. I thought I was strong enough, but I had no idea how lonely it is... How much being on your own like this can shake you to your core...”

Keith hums, smiling sadly as he brushes Shiro’s face. “…You don’t have to be alone anymore. I’m here for you. Stay with me.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Shiro whispers, conflict flooding back into his eyes. He looks to the ceiling, thinking, but his hand is slowly petting through Keith’s hair. He murmurs, “But it’s over now... You’re safe now.”

Keith tilts his head back to see Shiro’s face. “The fire. Was that you?”

“Let’s rest for tonight. You’re safe. We’re back together. It’s a night to be happy.”

“Yeah?” Keith says softly. “But I’m not tired. You can tell me everything.”

“I’ll be here in the morning,” Shiro promises, using his hand to gently guide Keith’s head back down onto his chest. “So we’ll talk then.”
“Mm.” Keith takes a slow breath in as his eyes flutter closed. It’s probably his imagination, but he thinks he can smell Shiro. It’s a calming warm smell. “Stay,” he murmurs sleepily, pressing his face into Shiro’s neck. It’s funny how comfortable Keith is doing it. Shiro is soft and inviting, his embrace is so welcoming; he suits Keith just right.

“I thought you just said you weren’t tired,” Shiro chuckles softly. He presses his lips to Keith’s temple. “Rest now, Keith. We’ll have all day tomorrow...and the next...and the next.”

“Mm...”

Shiro’s home. He’s here, pressed beneath Keith. Keith can’t help himself. He falls into slumber, still laying across Shiro as if they had since they were kids. Comfortable and content. He’s not going to let him go.

Chapter End Notes

Chat with me on Twitter?
“Oh, my god,” someone says suddenly behind him. He startles, dropping his water bottle and towel. The water bottle rolls beneath the bench.

“Oh, my god.”

“Wh-what?” Shiro chokes, leaning down to collect his stuff. He rubs the back of his neck where he feels it burning with embarrassment. Tries to play it off casually. He can salvage this.

Or maybe he can’t. Ryou rolls his eyes in exasperation. “I know what you’re doing.”

Shiro coughs into his hand. “What am I doing?”

Ryou stares for a good half a minute more before sighing. He turns on his heel and walks the other way. “Come on. Before your sorry face burns my eyes.”

“My sorry face?” Shiro follows after him as he jams his stuff in his gym bag and heaves it over his shoulder. “Ryou.”

Ryou hums, amusement and irritation battling itself for dominance on his brow. “Whoever would’ve thought? Baby’s first crush.”

“B- baby?!”

“I see you watching him. Again. I’m telling you, it’s a nightmare bound to happen.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Then stop staring.”

“I wasn’t staring. I’m just...wondering what he’s drawing.”

Ryou rolls his eyes again. “Probably monsters or something. My friend looked over Art Boy’s shoulder once and saw him drawing a heart with nails in it. It was gushing blood.”

“What?” Shiro wrinkles his brow. “No. He doesn’t look like that.”

Ryou laughs. “Oh, yeah? Then what do you think he draws? Unicorns and rainbows? Well, I’ve said it all before and it just bounces right off your thick skull. He gives me a weird vibe, but whatever. Do whatever you want. Don’t listen to me. Ask Art Boy out.”

“No, I’m not going to tell him... What if he reacts badly?”

“Reacts badly?” Ryou repeats, deadpanned. “Like a psycho? Why do you like him?”

“Not like that,” Shiro defends quickly. “But I don’t know him and he doesn’t know me. I’ll be humiliated.”

Ryou gurgles.
“You’re being such a brat,” Shiro says, pretending to run ahead. “I’m leaving you.”


“I will!” Shiro runs a few feet more. The air is cool and crisp - the perfect kind of running weather. He really could run all the way home and he’d be content.

“Hey!” Ryou calls. “Don’t you have a game tomorrow? Don’t expend all your energy.”

“Pfft.” Shiro slows and waits for Ryou to catch up, fond smile on his lips. “And here I thought you didn’t care.”

“Why wouldn’t I care about your games? They’re important to you.”

Shiro watches him suspiciously for a moment before he groans knowingly. “You made a bet with Rolo again, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I need you to score at least one more goal than last game.”

“What? Ryou!”

Ryou laughs as he presses his hands together and shoves them in Shiro’s face. “Please. I need this. I bet a lot.”

“Mom and Dad told you to stop that.”

“Come on, Takashi! It’s the game of the year. He says you don’t have what it takes to triumph against impossible odds. What was I supposed to do?”

Shiro is unimpressed, so Ryou continues, grinning cheesily. “I’ll buy you something with my winnings.”

“...Keep talking.”

“It’ll be a surprise. Something good.”

“I hope it’s something better than the last time you did this.”

“But you love macaroni and cheese.”

“A box of macaroni and cheese? For a gift?! You wrapped it and everything!”

Ryou snorts into his hand. “Okay. This time it’ll blow your mind. I promise.”

“Good.”

“But you’ve got to win first.”

Shiro gives a little casual shrug. “I can do that.”

“Yeah,” Ryou says, watching Shiro with a fond smile. “Yeah, I have no doubt.”

Shiro rolls his eyes, laughing. “Hence the bet.”

“Yeah,” Ryou laughs too.

“You’re awful...” Shiro sighs. “Okay, fine. Watch me. Tomorrow, I’ll be an unstoppable force.”
“Good. I look forward to it.”

“Please do. I look forward to seeing this gift that’s going to blow my mind.”

“Please do.”

They walk home together that afternoon, just like all the afternoons prior to that, years and years before.

Only, neither gets to see what the other promised. Neither make it to the football game the next day at all. It’s like the hours just hang in static after that afternoon. Like the next day gets caught up in a gear and everything becomes stuck.

It’s the day Shiro doesn’t come home.


He thinks about the way Keith smiles, but his eyes look so dark...so tired. Or the way pain shoots across his face and he blanches, sick, but he just chuckles and protests, “I’m fine, you worry too much”. But Shiro feels like he’s not worried enough.

He sees the suffering in Keith that Keith hides from even himself. ...How can Shiro live with himself? The more Keith stays beside him, the more he gets hurt. The proof of it today is in the rainbows that paint Keith’s hands, glass shards collecting light, jabbed into tender flesh.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Keith says, but Shiro knows it does.

And tomorrow, what new injury will Keith acquire because of Shiro? And the next day... And the next...

Shiro wants to be the best person he can be. He’s a work in progress. In class once, they had to write a paper on their hero and Shiro knew right away he’d write about his grandfather. He was the kind of person clearly worth looking up to: he was kind, patient, brave, thoughtful. Maybe Shiro didn’t get to understand everything his grandfather tried to teach him; he thought he’d have more time. ...But he’s trying with the time he’s been given.

Shiro’s grandfather wouldn’t have allowed for any of this to happen.

He looks down at Keith’s still form as he sleeps finally after a full day. The moon’s light slips through the curtains and cuts across Keith’s face. He frowns against the line, a small grimace on his face. Shiro wishes he could reach out and press the frown away, but he can’t. He can’t do anything. He’s helpless and relying completely on Keith, throwing all of his fears, his troubles, his journey completely on Keith’s shoulders.

Shiro’s grandfather would not have done this.

But leaving... Leaving would hurt too, the both of them.

He doesn’t know what to do. He tilts his head back, staring blankly at Keith’s ceiling, trying to take a deep breath in.

He doesn’t know what to do.
No.

He doesn’t.

Everything hurts.

A sharp stab of pain lances through his arm; he pulls his hand from his lap.

Again. Again, like this. The tips of his fingers are a strange color. Like they’re fading away... He swears, as he holds them up to the light, that he can see through them. The more tired he gets, the more he’s sure.

If he takes a deep breath and focuses - reminds himself of his solid form - he thinks it starts to look like normal again.

But...

It’s getting harder and harder to focus.

He's fading away. He wonders how much time he has left.

“...Shiro...” Keith murmurs sleepily and Shiro jolts up, shoving his hand away, out of sight, but Keith just rolls over onto his other side, eyes still closed, and snuggles into his pillow with a soft groan.

Oh. He does that. He talks in his sleep. It’s endearing, the way that everything he does is. Shiro feels warmth flicker alive in his chest as he watches Keith’s eyebrow twitch inward and his mouth form a little pout. He’s more expressive than anyone ever gave him credit for at school. Sweeter. Gentler.

Ryou warned Shiro that approaching Keith would mean a nightmare, and he supposes it’s sort of true, in a way. Shiro is in a nightmare...but Keith is the only part that’s keeping him afloat.

He cares about Keith...more than he thought he could.

And that’s why he should leave.

But that would hurt Keith...and he doesn't want to do that...

God... He keeps thinking himself in circles.

He settles back onto the bed, holding his hand up into the light and sighing.

It won’t be long now, he thinks.

This isn’t right, he thinks.

It’s in the early morning, sun shining through the window, that he hears Keith calling his name again. Only, this time, it’s different.

Keith is panting on hot puffs of breath. He wraps his mouth around Shiro’s name softly. Pleading. Vulnerable.

“Shiro.”
Shiro goes still immediately, turning his face to Keith in surprise.

Keith’s shifting in his sleep, red lips parted, blush in his cheeks, slight frown in his brow. His voice is thick with yearning, filled with need. His small chest expands as he takes a deep long breath, leaning his head back into his pillow, exposing his soft long neck.

Oh, god.

This is private. This is so private. Keith wouldn’t want him to see this.

Shiro rolls off Keith’s bed as quickly as he can, scrambling for what to do next. Run? But if Keith wakes up and sees Shiro gone, he’d know. And that would be too cruel. Shiro can’t do that to Keith.

Shiro’s eyes swing to the window seat. Right. The window seat. That’s fine. He’ll just look outside, pretend he misses the sun - perfect.

Keith’s soft moan sends electricity zipping up Shiro’s spine.

God. What does it mean? Just a horny teen? It could just be hormones, right? Or is it something else?

And if it’s something else...? If Keith likes Shiro as Shiro likes Keith?

The excitement in his gut at hearing Keith call his name like this...it’s... He can’t afford this. He needs to remind himself that this is temporary. Shiro holds up his hand, stares at its iffy transparency.

He forces himself to sit down.

No. He can’t afford this.

Right.

Right. He’s got to make sure he does what’s best for Keith.

He bites his lip, trying to ignore the way Keith pleads with him in his sweet voice. He presses his hands over his ears and turns his eyes outside, desperately, searching for any sort of distraction.

And stops as he finds it.

Every fiber of his being freezes up as he sees what’s outside, standing on the lawn below. He forgets about Keith calling his name. He forgets about his hand hurting and disappearing.

There are figures there. They aren’t human; they can’t be. Their skin has no color to it, drained of life. Their limbs are too stretched and loose, spindly, more spider than human. Their faces are melted off, dark bottomless pits where their eyes should be. Mouths that gape and jaws that swing.

They look dead, Shiro realizes. They’re dead.

And they’re just standing there, on Keith's lawn, looking up. They’re still. There are crows in the trees looking in.

All of them. They’re looking in. Right at him.

He brought them here.
“...Shiro?”

These monsters.

They’ve come for him.

He led them right to Keith.

“Shiro?”

What does he do?

He realizes Keith is awake, sitting up in his bed, staring at Shiro with wide worried eyes. He looks like he’s about to get up out of bed despite his leg. Shiro realizes he’s standing...he doesn’t even remember getting up.

“...Are you...okay?” Keith asks on a whisper.

He checks outside again. ...But they’re gone. What does that mean?

Birds. The birds are gone too.

Is he hallucinating? Seeing on another plane? Keith is still watching him, worry budding into fear. Shiro tries to pull it together. He manages to convince Keith nothing’s wrong, but it does nothing to quell the fear inside. It’s racing around inside of himself, festering out of control. He’s going to hurt Keith like this.

And Keith is...he’s so soft today. The way he’s watching Shiro, vulnerability in his eyes. Hesitance. A small tentative smile.

God.

What is Shiro doing?

His grandfather wouldn’t be doing this.

He's going to hurt Keith. Physically and emotionally, in every way possible, in every way he doesn't want to.

Keith is special. Not just in general, but to him specifically. Keith is willing to lay his life down on the line for Shiro...and Shiro feels the same way. He has to keep Keith safe.

No matter the cost.

Shiro knows what to do, it’s doing it that’s the hard part.

He stares at Keith's face. Sees as he tears him apart.

“I have to go,” he tells Keith, and watches as his fragile soft face crumples in horror.

It kills him to do it. He thinks he doesn’t have the strength, especially when Keith’s voice tightens and his eyes glisten and he leans forward, swallowing Shiro’s vision whole, begging, Shiro, no. Shiro, please, I can do this.

No. No. Keith deserves a future. Keith, who leaned up to try to kiss Shiro. Keith, who looked so soft and sweet, only a few inches away. Keith, who Shiro wished for so long could be his... And
now he’s here, in his hands, and...

He has to leave.

Shiro has to do this for him.

Tears pour over Keith’s eyes and down his cheeks and Shiro has to hold strong in the face of it. He cannot break. If he breaks, he’ll hurt Keith even more. He cannot do that, he cannot.

But as Shiro walks out the door and hears Keith hit the ground with one awful heavy thud, Shiro’s name on his lips, his voice tearing with pain, Shiro has to lean against the wall and stop.

He grips at his face with his hands, cuts the air from his lungs. He has to do this. He has to.

It kills him. Keith just sobs.

If Shiro weren’t dead already, it’d kill him for real. As it is, he’s killed again.

The first thing he does is a perimeter check. It helps to keep his mind off things. He starts at the white tree outside Keith’s bedroom window, peering out from around the front yard, afraid to go closer.

What the hell were those things he saw? Keith’s never mentioned seeing them. Shiro wants to make sure it stays that way. But if they’re violent? If they choose to attack? Shiro doesn’t have anything besides his own fists and he’s tired. He’s weak. His whole being feels raw and hurt.

...But it’s what he’s got. Shoulders tense, body tight, he walks around Keith’s house, eyes peeled. There aren’t any crows. No monsters.

...Ghosts, he thinks. Maybe they’re ghosts. Maybe they’re what Shiro will turn into soon. Forgetting himself, the body he knows now fading away. His being just...melting. His mind corrupted, no longer his own.

He’s scared. He’s so fucking scared. He doesn’t want to be like them.

But he takes a deep breath, centers himself, and keeps looking around Keith’s yard. He pushes into the forest, checking around for anything strange there. He looks up into the trees, seeking crows. Checks the mud for footprints, but there’s nothing, not even his own.

So he waits. He takes a seat on the back porch, leaning against the door and sighing. Keith hasn’t left the house. He can hear Krolia and Keith’s dad in the kitchen, talking in low voices - “I don’t know what to do” - and he hears Acxa as she comes in, loudly, but there’s no Keith. Shiro wants to check on him, but he stays put, picking at his fingers instead.

He stays there all day, until evening bleeds into night. The Koganes turn their lights off and go to bed, but still, nothing comes. ...Maybe he was just delirious... Maybe he was seeing beyond. He doesn’t know.

He thinks about Ryuu, about his family, about Lotor, and Matt. He wonders how they’re doing. He could visit them, but as he does another perimeter check, he stops outside Keith’s window and sighs. He’s up there, still waiting probably.

Shiro slips through the wall, walks up the stairs, and goes through Keith’s door, peering in
hesitantly.

He’s on his bed, completely still. The lights are off but the t.v. is on, the pale blue light dancing across Keith’s face. He’s asleep.

Shiro knows it’ll ruin everything if he’s caught, but he finds himself walking in anyway. He looks down at Keith, at his innocent face. He sits at the window seat. He can’t leave. He’ll watch out for Keith when Keith can’t watch out himself. That makes sense. Sure. It’s only because of that, not because...

It doesn’t matter Shiro’s intentions. Keith just needs to be safe, that’s it.

He looks out the window and waits.

One thing Shiro has learned about Keith is that he never wakes early. His mom comes in, tsks when she sees the t.v. on, bulldozes through the room, but Keith doesn’t stir. Shiro knows he’s tempting fate by staying here, especially as morning slowly stretches into afternoon, but he doesn’t want to leave. He likes sitting here in Keith’s room, it’s like a place of safety, wrapped in Keith’s scent, surrounded by all the things Keith loves, watching over his face as he experiences peace for once.

But when he hears Pidge at the door downstairs, Shiro reluctantly presses through the wall and into Acxa’s room. It’s the safest place from Keith seeing as he never comes inside and also, he can listen if Keith’s in trouble. Acxa can’t see him. It’s perfect. He proclaims it his new base.

Well. If Pidge is here then maybe he can leave for a little while. He can hear them arguing and it sounds like it’ll be awhile so he slips out and makes his way home.

But home is empty. His mom and dad aren’t home and Ryou’s room is dark and cold.

Shiro sighs. He doesn’t know what he expected, he just misses them. Even though part of him is scared, he wanted to see them. But maybe another time.

Shiro spends that night in Keith’s room again. He watches the t.v. that Keith has left on for him again. He doesn’t want to leave early morning again.

He’s laid out on Acxa’s floor, looking down into a magazine that she’s left sprawled out on the rug. The same two damn pages about boyfriend troubles.

He’s so bored. He heard Keith murmuring to Red earlier but he’s quiet now. No t.v. No chatting. He’s hardly moved off his bed since Shiro left and Shiro’s starting to worry again, in a different way. It’s growing in the depths of his gut. ...Maybe this was the wrong choice.

All Keith has been doing is sleeping and yelling at people. When he sleeps, he frowns. When he wakes, he doesn’t say much unless provoked and even then, he’s miserable. It’s like the spirit is drained out of him and that kills Shiro to see.

What would his grandfather do? ...God. Shiro doesn’t know. Things aren’t always as black and white as he wishes they could be. He wants to do what’s right, but what is that?

He hears Keith grumbling again and then Red skitters down the hallway and peers through the
door straight at Shiro.

He looks up, frowning. She’s been ignoring him lately as he sneaks through their house. Not angry, not upset, just ignoring. She stares now, eyes wise, trying to relay a message.

“What is it?” He asks softly, holding his hand out gently. He's desperate for contact. One pet will do. “Come here. I won’t hurt you. Tell me what you want.”

Her eyes dart around nervously and then she darts away again. It feels like a message though, so Shiro pulls himself to his feet and goes to follow after her.

He hears someone stomping up the steps and Keith shouting angrily, “Acxa!”

...But Acxa’s not there.

Right at Keith’s door are the white eyeless spirits.

Shiro stumbles back in shock. He had seen them before, but not this close, and he hadn’t actually expected to see them again. But they’re here. Several of them, all of their attention swinging to Shiro.

They can see him too.

They crowd through the hallway, forcing him back into Acxa’s room. He trips over his feet as he stumbles backward, watching them with wide eyes as they advance.

Acxa’s light flickers. They slam the door shut behind them. They can touch the physical plane...

Maybe they're not bad. Maybe they're just...lost... He clutches at his chest, tries to speak over the clumsy stuttering of his heart. “Wh-who are you?” He says, forcing his voice to sound bold. His hand trembles as he forces it down to his side. “What do you want from me?”

They reach out for him, their fingers and limbs long and spindly, like spiders. “Come,” they whisper, walking forward. “Come with us.”

“No,” Shiro stammers, backing away and bumping into Acxa’s bed.

“She calls,” they hiss, slithering closer. “She calls.”

“No,” Shiro says loudly. “Leave me alone. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

They don’t care. They crowd around him, blocking off his exits. Circling him, around Acxa's bed, blocking off her window.

He should not have stayed here, he realizes. He thought he could watch over Keith, keep him safe, but he didn’t realize how it could be. That they literally would follow him here.

They lunge for Shiro, all coming for him at once so there's nowhere to run. With their claws, they pull at his arms, his clothes, wrenching him forward and down. He feels something crack inside of him as they force him to his knees, like something solid shattered inside of himself, something glass.

When he looks up, he’s somewhere else.

Or...or is he? They’re still in Acxa’s room, but it’s darker. The light that shone through the window has lost its edge; it’s murky and hazy now, like he’s underwater, like the light is being
bent in angles that don’t make sense. Everything has a strange deep purplish blue tint laying over it, pulling at the edges, as if this place is one big leaking bruise. It’s quiet. Static. Humid without the moisture. Someone pressing a towel over his mouth.

But somehow, he feels... better. Not so tired, not so weak. The strain in his body is gone.

He doesn’t know what this is, but that’s not what matters. He heaves himself up, and, before they can assess him, he pushes off the ground and throws himself at them, tackling them hard. They all tumble down, knocking over into Acxa’s bed.

He reaches up, grabs the lamp to use as a weapon - only his hand slips right through.

Dammit. So not like the other spirits.

They push him back, heaving him against the dresser, but he falls through, hitting his head on the floor. The dresser shakes, the lamp tilting and falling.

He stumbles out of the way just in time and it shatters across the floor. He kicks at the first one closest to him and it smacks against the wall, hitting against the shelving. It pushes itself up and Acxa’s collection of perfume bottles topple over and fall, cracking against the floor.

It’s not even hurt.

There are too many and Shiro’s just one person. He retreats, scrambling away from them, trying to think.

There’s no time either.

Shiro’s backed into a corner.

One grabs him by the arm and pins it roughly behind his back. They kick his knees out from under him and he’s down. Another grabs him by the tuft of his hair and jerks his head up so that they can stare down and into his face.

They’re horrifying. If Shiro hadn’t started believing in ghosts lately, he’d think he were in some twisted nightmare, not reality. What was horrifying in the distance is worse up close. The unnatural way the skin hangs off their bones, the empty holes where their eyes have rotted away, the delicate flesh beneath torn and obliterated.

It’s like he’s staring into a mirror of himself. He can see it already: his hair falling from his scalp and slipping through his fingers, his skin shriveling, losing its life, his eyes sinking from his skull.

That will be him one day, maybe one day soon. Everyone he loves will be here, together, safe, and he’ll be all alone, wasted away. Keith won’t ever see him again.

They shove him forward.

“Keith,” he breathes. It’s not a plea. He doesn’t want Keith in the middle of this. He just wants it to be the last name on his lips in this impossible situation. He wants to cling to his memories as tightly as he can so he doesn’t fade away like these monsters have.

He hits the ground with both hands hard as they shove him again and he refuses. “Keith.”

Maybe the transition’s already started. Warmth blossoms across his chest, foreign and strange. It’s not so bad, not at first. It’s soft and warm, like the fluttering of a heart. Comforting, almost,
the only true warmth he’s felt in ages. ...But then it starts to burn. And the minor pain begins to twist and squirm through skin and it ignites, crushing into his chest with debilitating weight, like someone’s dropped a car on him. He grits his teeth and tries to force back the yell of pain that tears in his throat. What's happening? Is he turning? Is he losing himself? It hurts.

But then it's over. The heat and pain fade away all at once.

His skin still feels raw. He pulls his collar back to look at the damage and sees a mark there. It’s familiar. He can't place it before the spirits all hiss and keen, stepping away from him like he’s a beast.

They pull from him, staring.

*Protection of a loved one*, Keith’s voice whispers in his head, falling over him like a blanket of protection, and Shiro realizes that’s exactly what it is.

It’s Keith’s mark, he realizes in shock. One of Keith's drawings, done by his own hand. Shiro runs his fingers across the branded flesh. It has power here.

He looks up at the spirits all hesitating around him, staring at the mark on his chest.

Shiro stands.

Some of them flee immediately, running out the door and down the hall. Others are braver. They reach forward to grab him again, but as they touch his skin, they screech, pulling back.

On their hands are painful black boils that expand and pop. They bleed black sludge.

They can’t touch him. He’s immune. He’s protected.

“Keith,” he breathes in awe. So he’s much more special than Shiro even knew.

But then he looks up and sees Keith standing there, in the doorway, his hand still out from tossing the door open. Shiro’s heart sinks into his stomach.

Keith’s staring stock still, wide-eyed, face white.

They all turn to look at him.

“Keith!” Shiro breathes. “Keith, get out of here!”

But Keith just stares around the room, eyes never quite falling on Shiro. “...Axca?” He breathes. His voice is trembling.

“...Keith...” Shiro whispers. He steps forward and yells, “Keith!”

“Mom?” Keith’s grip on Red tightens as his pupils constrict. His voice tightens. “Dad?”

Shiro feels like he’s been smacked hard across the face. Keith can’t see him. He can’t hear him.

Oh, god.

The spirits turn on Keith. *No.* Shiro runs forward, tackling the one closest to the Keith and it stumbles, hitting the back of the door and slamming it shut.

Shiro grabs its face, digging his hands into it, forcing it back onto the ground and it screams,
writhing in pain. Black ooze sprouts up like a fountain, bleeding up and over the white of Shiro’s hands, swallowing them whole.

Shiro never wanted to hurt anyone. Or anything. And maybe, if things were different, he would hear a tiny voice in his head whispering, “stop, this isn’t you”. But, as it is, he pushes his hands harder into it, watching as its skin bubbles and oozes. Watching as the pain renders it useless.

Keith is in trouble. Everything else is insignificant. He’ll kill every single last one if he has to. He won’t rest until Keith’s safe.

He’s still on top of the thing, listening to the gurgling last sounds of its struggle when he’s hit hard over the head. He goes flying, shoulder slamming into the ground and he’s dazed momentarily, staring up at the ceiling.

Right. Right, there were others.

They all scramble up and away.

Keith.

Shiro pulls himself from the floor, trying to overcome the dizziness as it overtakes him. He slips to the floor again, spitting out blood.

No. It’s not blood. This isn’t his body right now - he’s fine. He pushes himself up again and heaves himself out the door, looking downstairs.

“Keith?” He calls. He looks in Keith’s room, but it’s empty. He hears Keith swearing downstairs and he immediately turns, called by his voice, and sprints down the steps.

Now, Keith’s their target. They’re holding the door closed on him, trapping him inside.

Keith crawls on the couch, shoving the window open and tossing Red out despite her protest and then he tries to get out himself.

The spirit behind him lunges right for Keith. But Shiro’s there first. He grabs it from behind and hurls it backward. They both hit the ground with a loud crash, dizzy and stunned.

But Keith falls out the window and out of this madhouse. That’s all that matters.

The other spirit grabs a knife from up above and tries to drive it home, but Shiro’s ready again. He rolls to the side and grabs its wrist as it comes down, pulling hard, using its weight against it. It hits the ground and he’s on top of them both, pressing his hands into their ghastly faces as hard as he can. The lights pulse and then die out as they reach for him one last time with the remnants of their strength. It’s not enough. Shiro shifts, pinning them with his legs and they scream, dissolving into messes of agony.

Shiro pushes himself to his feet and runs after Keith.

Keith’s there, on the lawn, looking around fearfully, eyes darting, face pale. He clings to Red tightly. “Shiro?” He calls, looking around, like he can sense him, but he just looks right past. “Shiro!”

“I’m right here,” Shiro whispers, stepping closer, reaching his hands out to Keith. They’re still coated in black. Tainted. Keith doesn’t see. “Keith,” his voice tears. “It’s me! I’m here! I’m right here.”
Red hisses at Shiro’s proximity and jumps from Keith’s arms, charging at the tree outside Keith’s window.

Keith turns and chases after her as quickly as he can. “Keith -” Shiro calls. Keith doesn’t react at all, he just stares after Red.

Shiro tries to breathe. Tries to ignore the horrible dread gripping at his throat, crawling up his spinal cord. Alone, it whispers. Terror rises in his throat at the thought. Alone, alone, completely alone forever. He tries to push it away.

...Maybe it’s temporary. This doesn’t mean anything.

Taking another deep breath, Shiro follows after her.

Ah, Shiro thinks wearily as he sees the puff of black rise up into the air. Hears Red yowling angrily. That explains some things.

But he’s still in darkness. He looks down at his hands as Keith catches Red in his own arms and murmurs to her.

Shiro’s alone. Really alone this time. Keith can’t save him now.

He looks back at the house and he thinks he should check again. Though it’s quiet and still, that means little. But, to be honest, he’s scared.

He’s still freaked out about the fight. His heart is still pounding hard. He’s never fought another person before, let alone these... creatures. He’s still in a daze, mind spinning, groggy, like he just woke up from a terrible dream. He just feels...nothing and everything all at once.

...What did they do to him? The world is still twisted, dark in ways he’s never known it. He looks down at his hands and then back up at Keith, who’s trembling on the lawn, afraid. Shiro wishes he could do something.

He reaches his hand out, tries to comfort Keith, but his hand just goes through. Keith doesn’t turn to him.

His world is still pulling with dark blues and purples. This strange tone settling over the land. Another plane, maybe. Far away from Keith, the only comfort he had left.

He’s glad for Keith’s mom. Shiro leans against the tree trunk and listens to them as she comforts and soothes Keith in the ways that Shiro cannot. He listens to Keith opening up for the first time in...who knows how long. Listens to Krolia actually hearing what Keith has to say, thinking about her responses, talking with him and not at him.

She’s a good mom. Shiro can see that and he knows Keith does too in the way that he smiles wetly through his tears.

When they get a movie, Shiro checks around the house again, hesitantly, but there’s nothing. They’re gone, along with the crows. He’ll have to keep a better eye out on them. At least now he knows he has some form of protection.

He watches as Keith’s dad comes into the house, frowning as he tries to flip the lights on. He grumbles, walking into the kitchen to get the same results.
With a sigh, he goes back outside and fiddles with the electrical box until the lights stutter back to life. Keith’s dad smiles brightly and goes back inside the house, none the wiser.

He starts to make dinner. Doesn’t think anything of it.

Shiro watches him. He’s fond of him already, he’s Keith’s dad. And he really does look like Keith sometimes in the soft quietness of his face. The way he focuses on a task and blocks out the entire world.

They all lay out on the couch after dinner with Keith bundled in the center...and Shiro is so glad. Even without Shiro, Keith will be okay. He’s so loved. If he can only just open his heart to that, then he’ll see. And it’ll be okay that Shiro’s not there, that Keith can’t see him. It’ll be alright because he’s on the same plane as his family. It’ll all be alright, for Keith.

Shiro takes his usual spot at Keith’s window seat, staring outside blankly, stretching his hand out. It hurts again, fading away again, and this time he’s certain.

He turns back to Keith, who whimpers in his sleep. He still hasn’t seen Shiro.

Shiro doesn’t want to just sit here and wait for those things to come back with a new plan and try to hurt Keith. Keith is innocent. He doesn’t deserve this.

Shiro needs to figure out who’s doing this...and why. He needs some sort of plan.

He’s surprised when he sees Keith waking up early with a soft groan and getting ready for school. Slowly, bleary-eyed and face slack, but he’s going for it.

“Keith,” Shiro tries again, watching him, but there’s no reaction. Of course there isn’t. Red just sits on Keith’s bed, wary eyes on Shiro, but she’s no longer angry with him. She’s accepted him as part of Keith’s room, like a decoration or something. It’s fine.

When Matt drives up and takes Keith to school, Shiro supposes he should get up too and follow. But he's tired. Being alone for so long is taking its toll. He’s a social creature by nature but being left alone like this would take its toll on anyone. He feels so grey. Lifeless. Without a soul.

Red keeps staring at him.

“What is it?” He hums unhappily. “Don’t worry, I think I won’t be here much longer... But when I leave, I want you to take care of him for me, okay?”

She looks like she’s frowning.

“Last time was good,” Shiro nods. “You really helped him out. He deserves your loyalty.”

With a swish of her tail, she hops off the bed and walks to the door. She stares at him and waits.

“...You want me to follow?” He asks, blinking.

She swishes her tail once more and then leaves down the stairs.

Shiro stands, following behind her and he sees her waiting, again, at the bottom of the stairs. Leading him.
And what else does Shiro have to do but follow Keith’s warrior cat? He follows her out of the house and down the long stretch of road. He follows her all the way through the line of trees and then laughs as he sees the school’s gates. He looks down at her as she lurks in the bushes. “You want me to follow him?” He asks on a chuckle.

She swishes her tail again, eyes focused ahead of her, waiting.

“Well, how can I refuse such a genuine request? I’ll watch him. Don’t worry.”

So he does. He keeps his eyes on the trees outside. Learns Keith’s class schedule as he hunts him down. It’s easy now that he’s got an ear for it - listening out for the sound of Keith’s crutches against cement.

He sees Keith trying his best...sees him failing. Sees him stuttering over his speeches and trailing off, sees him looking out the windows out and toward him, but never on him. They’re so close, but so far.

During lunch, Keith sits with his friends and Shiro lets out a sigh of relief. Lunch shouldn’t be a problem for him. It should be a time to destress.

He can still keep an eye on Keith while looking around at the others. As it is, he’s curious about Lotor.

He’ll admit, seeing him with the new car was a surprise. Lotor’s never been a bad person, but he’s never been all good either. Lotor is Lotor. But it was strange behavior. Shiro wishes he could ask him about it.

Shiro pulls himself up on the car beside Lotor and god, he didn’t realize how much he’s missed it. There’s something so comforting about laying out on the hood, almost like old times. Only, it isn’t. Lotor can’t see him. He talks to their friends like it’s a normal day. No one includes Shiro.

They don’t mention Shiro once, and he’s glad, in a way. It’s lonely, but he doesn’t want them to suffer. So he sits there, looking at his hands, picking at the skin around his nails and frowning into them. He’s tired.

But Lotor looks tired too. He laughs at all the right times. He flicks his hair back in all the right places. He’s being very Lotor. But it’s like Keith...there’s just something in his eyes that tells of the turmoil in the depths of his heart. Lotor’s just a bit harder to read.

And it’s strange, Shiro thinks, how Lotor keeps pulling his collar up, like it’s bothering him. How he keeps tugging his sleeves down, like he’s afraid they’ll rise up, reveal something. They are mannerisms he never had before.

As Shiro watches, he wonders. And as Lotor laughs loudly, tossing his head back, fangs exposed, his collar slips just a little, just enough for Shiro to see...

“I think I made a mistake...” Allura says gently as she approaches them, expression burdened with worry. “...Lotor... I think you were right about Keith.”

Shiro can see the way Acxa pauses.

“I... I mentioned Shiro and his face... It was... The way he reacted...they could not have just had a casual relationship.”

Lotor sighs. “Just leave him, Allura. Whatever was happening between him and Shiro, we’ll
never know. Shiro never told me a thing.”

“And Ryou doesn’t know?”

“You know Ryou. He’ll take Shiro’s secrets with him to the grave. Shiro was the same for him.”

They look to Acxa, who shrugs. “Keith hides in his room all the time. Shiro never came over that I saw. Doesn’t mean they didn’t talk. Honestly, I have no idea.”

Shiro looks to Keith’s table. He wonders what Allura said to him, how he took it. He sees Pidge, Lance, Hunk, all the usuals...but Keith is gone.

Shit.

He pushes himself from the car and hurries off. He passes by Keith’s table and hears Pidge spitting at Lance, “Use your brain sometimes. Now he’s never going to want to come back to school!”

“Like he was enjoying it so much before,” Lance groans, but he looks like a child being reprimanded by his parent.

Where’s Keith? Shiro checks the bathrooms first, but he’s not there. He checks by Keith’s locker, his next class, but there’s no one.

Alone. Keith would want to be alone. And where’s the loneliest place? In the building that’s turned off during this time of day. No one would be there. No one would happen by.

He hears the loud crack before he sees Keith. The sound echoes through the hallways, bouncing off and around. Shiro’s eyes widen in shock. It’s Keith, hiding in the darkness, brutalizing himself against the wall and sobbing.

Shiro knows Keith’s been struggling, that it’s been hard for him, but seeing this...

Shiro should’ve been there. He’d missed what set Keith off, but all he knows now is that Keith is here, sobbing, hurting himself, out of control.

Keith throws his entire self into each hit. He grips at the wall with both fists, crying into it. Cursing himself. Face red, tears falling.

“Stop!” Shiro cries, horrified, running forward. “Keith! Stop!”

But he’s a ghost. Keith can’t see or hear him. Shiro goes right through him and so there Keith stays, hurting himself until he can’t anymore. Crying, thinking he’s alone, but he’s not. Shiro’s right here.

But Shiro’s useless. All he can do is stand there, tears in his eyes, watching it all. All of Keith’s pain, wrapping him up tightly and suffocating him. Shiro wishes he could just take it into himself and heal Keith. But he can’t.

When Pidge brings Keith home, dragging him through the door as he grits his teeth against the pain, Krolia jumps to her feet immediately. She doesn’t waste time. She calls the doctor’s, loads Keith into the car, and drives off.

Keith is spent. He’s only half there. The light in his eyes is gone. Krolia has her arm around him,
trying to rub friction into his shoulders, but he doesn’t react to it. He just sits there. Breathes shallow small breaths.

When they have Keith pull his pants from his leg, there’s a horrified silence where they all just stare. It’s horrible. Shiro can’t look.

“...I tripped,” he says lowly, but his words come out tight. False. “I fell down the stairs.”

They check for broken bones; there are none, but the doctor can’t stop frowning.

“Mrs. Kogane,” the doctor says. “Mind coming with me into the other room to discuss proper treatment?”

Krolia hesitates, looking over to Keith, who doesn’t say anything. He has to know ‘proper treatment’ is just a cover, but he just stays sitting still, staring down at the floor.

“Okay,” she says softly, getting to her feet. “I’ll be right back, Keith.”

He doesn’t move, even when Krolia and the doctor leave the room and silence falls over him. The most Shiro can see is a twitch of his hand. With one last look, Shiro gets up and follows after Krolia.

The doctor’s face is grim.

“What is it?” Krolia asks, but Shiro can see the dread in her eyes.

“I think the trauma to his leg doesn’t match up with his story,” the doctor says gently. “I don’t think he fell down the stairs. ...I think the damage was intentional.”

Krolia’s still. “...Keith?” She breathes.

“I think Keith is hurting himself on purpose,” the doctor says again, even gentler.

“On purpose,” Krolia echoes, the sound winded. She presses one hand to her stomach as she stares out hard at the wall. “...I... Keith’s had his problems, but...”

The doctor gives her a moment to collect herself. She says, “There are different routes we can take to try to help him. Personally, I’d recommend a recovery center. There’s a home a little over an hour out that your insurance will cover. Maybe he can stay a few months. I think it’d be worth it.”

Krolia's in a daze, breath shaking. “...I’ve thought that. But...he’ll hate the idea. Hate us if we force him into it. He turns eighteen soon. It would not surprise me if, first chance he gets, he bolts. He’d have to agree to it...”

“In that case, maybe an intervention would help him. Make him see he has people who care for him, who worry for him.”

“God,” Krolia sighs pressing her fingers into her eyes. “He’d tear us apart.”

“Maybe it’s better than the alternative.”

Krolia looks up at the doctor’s face, eyes so lost and hurt.

“...He’s tearing himself apart right now.”
Pidge stays with Keith that night and Shiro is grateful, he is, but there’s a darkness sitting in his chest that’s new and Shiro has to take awhile to try to understand it.

It’s resentment, broken and hurt. He wishes he could be in Pidge’s place, sitting on the bed beside Keith, murmuring words to him that only he can hear. Words that heal him. All he can do is stand here at the base of the bed, hands at his sides, watching as Pidge mutters soft little jokes to Keith and sees as he laughs wearily, leaning his head against her.

It’s fine. It is.

It helps Keith and that’s what Shiro ultimately wants. But he has to close his eyes and look away from them sometimes. He feels like he’s infringing on something personal, like he’s spying. He feels dirty. Unwanted. Like he’s clinging in a way that’s desperate and sticky. He sickens himself...

Pidge starts hanging out with Keith more, staying over longer, trying to keep her face even and normal for Keith’s sake, who’s trying, he is, but there’s something hollow in his eyes that Shiro and Pidge both see. He’s retreated inside of himself. He’s injured.

But nothing happens beyond that. In fact, it’s so peaceful and calm that, on one of these nights that Pidge and Keith lay out on his bed, both not talking, just sitting in sticky silence, Shiro thinks maybe his presence isn’t needed. That it hasn’t been for awhile. Red still harrasses him some days to get up and follow, but he’s starting to stay back, like today. Keith goes to school and Shiro just stays at the window seat, staring down at his hands, wondering what the point is.

He’s tired. So tired. Keith can’t see him. And when he’s in trouble, even if it’s just from himself, Shiro can’t do anything. He has to wait for Pidge or Krolia to come. All Shiro does is watch.

Shiro looks out at the tree, clear of birds, and down at Pidge, who he knows would protect Keith with her life...Red, who lounges casually at the window seat.

It’s time to visit Ryou. He’s put it off long enough.

He walks through the moonlit forests on his way home. He misses it so much, mostly the normalcy of it, the feeling that things were alright. He feels so burnt out all the time now. This sharp pain in his gut that he thinks might be hunger. The fading of his hand. The stupid triangle he sees in his vision that he regrets ever telling Keith about. God, he’s just tired. There’s no light at the end of the tunnel, no rest waiting for him. Just more fear.

But it’s nice to be home, even if the same stuffed silence that hangs over Keith’s house sits in this room.

Ryou is sitting at the dinner table, leaning his mouth into clasped hands. His brow is furrowed. He’s staring bullets at the flowers in the vase in front of him. It has a message popping out of them that says in fancy handwriting, *condolences*.

“How were we supposed to tell?” Ryou whispers, words burning in his throat. “It looked - How ...? It didn’t even look like him.”

Shiro’s mom leans her hands on the counter, her tiny shoulders tight and high. “Ryou, please, just stop.”

“It was so messed up! That wasn’t even skin. It looked like rubber. How can we say that was Takashi? It was hardly a person!”
“It was him, Ryou,” their dad says firmly. “That happens with bodies as they die and decompose. You can’t expect it to look the same. The body’s no longer working.”

...Body...? Shiro stares, unable to breathe. ...They found his body...?

...No...

Keith...

Shiro steps forward, closer to them. I’m right here, he wants to say, at least one last time. Thank you for everything. I love you all. Goodbye. He stands there in the middle of them, looking at all of their faces. How much they’ve changed under the burden of this.

“I would give anything,” their mom whispers, “anything for it to not be him. Believe me.”

“You’ve already said that,” Ryou whispers, words burning in his throat. “I just... What we saw...”

“I told you not to come,” she mumbles.

“This just can’t be it. This can’t be the end for him. He’s supposed to come back. He’s my brother, not some...not some cold dead thing on a slab. That can’t have been him! He can do anything! Not fall like this.”

“Ryou,” their mom whispers again, face crumpling. “Ryou, stop.”

Ryou rises from the table, emotion on his face and a fight on his lips, but Shiro’s dad stands, cutting him off, shooting him a sharp look. Their dad walks across the kitchen and holds his mother.

“Let him find peace, Ryou,” his mother whispers through her tears. “We have to let him go.”

Ryou grits his teeth and shakes his head. His hands are clenched tightly. But he presses his lips together and forces everything down.

Shiro can see the rebelliousness in his eyes; the same fire he sees in Keith. The simple rejection: no.

Something about finding the body ignited something in Keith, and he’s active again, running around town. Shiro sees him waking early to walk around his neighborhood, biting at the end of his pen and crossing off addresses on a piece of paper.

Shiro sighs. If they found his body, what’s the point? Shiro doesn’t understand.

But he follows Keith, clinging his arm to his chest tightly. It’s become a huge burden. And his body feels heavier everyday. He’s tired; he just wants to sleep, but he can’t.

He follows Keith to Northside, listlessly wandering behind Keith and Pidge. Keith hasn’t turned to him in awhile or noticed his presence. Shiro’s trying not to think about it when Keith actually turns right to him suddenly, staring through him, but close. He’s close.

“...Keith...?” Shiro whispers, allowing himself to hope for one small second, before it washes away.

No. No, of course not.
Keith steps forward, looking out, face sad and lost. “Shiro...”

Shiro closes the distance between them, reaching out through the sunlight, his heart aching. Keith’s so close, always so close... But why can’t they touch?

Shiro’s so tired.

And Keith turns away at Pidge’s call, breaking the only connection Shiro’s felt in...ages, it feels like. He’s wasting away.

Later, Shiro sits in the living room of the Holt’s house, laying his head against the couch’s arm, staring down at their dog. Rover doesn’t sense him. He walks past Shiro casually, totally undisturbed, totally seeing through him.

He’s sad. He’s so so sad. He never thought he could get to this point, alone like this. Seen through by everyone. Keith’s right there, healing slowly, definitely getting better. And that’s good. It’s so good, but it feels like he’s pulling away.

How can Shiro reach him?

Pidge invites Keith to stay the night and she lays out some blankets for him. He’s at ease in Pidge’s room, laying in the bundle of them, content and warm looking. Shiro leans against the door frame and watches. He doesn’t feel welcome in there.

Where should he go? What happens after this? He can’t follow Keith around forever, like a haunting. Like his parents said, maybe it’s time to just...let go?

There’s no place left for him. Even his own home feels empty. ...Maybe he doesn’t have a home anymore.

The funeral’s soon. They’ll have their chance to say goodbye to him. Maybe that’s his chance too, to say goodbye to them. ...Maybe after that...

He’s not needed anymore. He can just fade away, like he should’ve from the start.

He looks back down at his hand. It's like an infection, spreading up his wrist and swallowing his elbow. ...It's spreading so quickly...

This is the right choice. It’s hard to admit it to himself, but it is.

“Matt?” Keith asks sharply into the darkness and Shiro blinks, looking behind himself.

There’s no Matt. Shiro turns back slowly. Keith’s looking at him.

“...Shiro?” Keith says.

Shiro stares.

Keith stands slowly, pulling a blanket over his shoulders and limping over to the door. There’s no fear on his face like before. He’s just searching, looking for Shiro. Down the hall, behind himself.

“...Shiro?” He calls again softly, voice filled with emotion.

*I’m right here*, Shiro wants to say, but he doesn’t have the energy for it. Keith can’t hear him and it kills him. He can’t take that disappointment anymore.
Softly, Keith murmurs in the air, leaning his head against the door frame, inches from Shiro. He closes his eyes.

“Shiro,” he says gently, his voice low and warm. It’s so inviting to Shiro, like rest after the longest day. “If you’re there, I’m not giving up, okay? I’m going to find you... I know it’s not what you wanted, but I... I just can’t leave you alone in this and I’m here for you if you ever need someone...” He pauses for a moment, like he can feel Shiro here. Like they’re on the same plane together, close again.

When Keith speaks again, his voice is soft and vulnerable. “I miss you,” he says. And then, quieter, “I’m sorry.”

Shiro presses a hand to his face. Tears fall down his cheeks.

He wants to respond. He wants Keith to know, without a doubt, that he’s right here, that his message has been received.

Shiro is not alone. He gets it now. Keith shifts off of the door frame and returns to his bed, but Shiro can still feel his warmth.

Keith’s here with him.

Carefully, Shiro steps into Pidge’s room and walks around her bed. He sits down beside Keith, watching as he closes his eyes, small peaceful smile on his lips. The usual frown is absent. He looks like he’s found peace for the night.

Shiro too. He leans his head against the wall and closes his eyes. The distance doesn’t feel as bad anymore.

Keith wakes up early the day of the funeral. Shiro watches him stare at the ceiling. Minutes pass, and then an hour, and still, he doesn’t move. It’s not until his mom knocks on his door and tells him to wake up that he finally rolls to his side, heavily, like he’s one hundred years old, and grabs his sketchbook.

Shiro slips off the window seat to sit beside Keith, watching as he sketches. But there’s something about the air around Keith, bitter and sharp, that’s different than his previous drawing sessions. Keith hisses at each attempt and his pencil starts to dig into each new sheet of paper as he flips the page and starts again. The lines become dark and wild. He’s angry and it’s cluttering his mind, hurting his work.

But Axca comes in, and then his parents, and Shiro remembers again what a strong support system Keith has, so he thinks maybe he can leave him to them.

He’s worried about Ryou. Their parents loved them, they did, but they were always busy. Shiro always made sure to step up when Ryou needed it. He was Ryou’s support system...and now he’s gone. Shiro’s not sure how he’ll take the day.

Shiro goes home. His parents are quiet in the living room, bouquets of flowers on the kitchen table, colorful and beautiful. There are baskets of fruit lining the counters. Cards cluttering the incoming mail box. But their faces are drained. The air is sharp.

He goes upstairs, seeking out Ryou in his room. His bed is made. His bed is never made. There’s no sign of Ryou.
Shiro sighs and turns. He heads to his own room.

And yes. Ryou is there, sitting on the edge of Shiro’s bed, staring flatly at the floor, eyes distant. He’s already dressed in his suit, his hair is combed, but he doesn’t look ready, he just looks sick.

In his hands, clutched tightly, is a box.

Shiro knows what it is immediately and he’s not surprised. When their grandfather got sick and was laying on his deathbed, fading, Shiro was the one there at his side, holding his hand tightly, begging him not to go. So their grandfather gave him something: his grandmother’s ring. It was a piece of his heart, their grandfather said, and now it’s a part of Shiro’s. He made Shiro promise he’d give it to the person he wanted to share his life with. And then, maybe, one day, pass it on to their grandkids.

Shiro had never been a ring person at that point, but he loved it from that day on. He kept it as safe as he could. So safe that he wouldn’t even let Ryou look at it when they were younger. Shiro tried to avoid being a selfish person, especially where Ryou was concerned, but he allowed himself this one thing to cling to. He loved his grandfather. The ring is a piece of his heart.

And now, Ryou sits, staring down at the box in his hand, clutching it close to his chest. Shiro and his grandfather are both gone.

“I miss you, Takashi,” he whispers to nothing. He lets his eyes close. “I’m so sorry I left you alone that day... I’m so sorry. ...I can’t believe you’re dead... Not now. Not like this...”

He lets out a small sad laugh. “You and Grandpa both... And this stupid, stupid ring... This is it? This is what’s left of you? I don’t understand how it brought you any comfort. I don’t feel a thing...” He sniffs, wiping at his eyes. He rubs his hand over the corner of the box, around the edges, then clasping at the side. “...I always wondered who you’d give it to. Who could possibly ever deserve you? ...Now, I’ll never know.”

He rubs a hand over his face, crying softly. “I love you, Takashi,” Ryou whispers. “I’m so sorry. I love you. Why did you have to go?”

Shiro leans down, taking a seat beside him. Ryou can’t hear him. He can’t even sense him, not how Keith still does, casting confused looks about himself. Ryou just sits, defeated, eyes filled with tears. There’s nothing left of Shiro to him, just this.

“Ryou,” Shiro whispers, looking over at him sadly, heaviness in his gut. “None of this is your fault. I could never blame you. I love you too.”

Ryou can’t hear him. He’ll never know.

Even though he hates the circumstances, Shiro has to admit that it’s beautiful at the funeral, in the graveyard. It’s a good resting place, lots of green, lots of flowers. The sun’s even shining down on them on the top of the hill. He looks up into it, opening his palms. He wishes he could still feel its warmth.

People begin to gather and Shiro has to laugh - it’s pretty much everyone from town. The school, the shops, the people from church, everyone. They come in mass.

He almost can’t believe it. He’s never seen this place so full before...all for him. He feels raw again. Heart touched.
It’s amazing...

“Oh, my god,” he hears Ryou whisper, voice trembling in tight rage.

His mother lifts her head, eyes falling on Ryou’s white face. “What is it?” She asks.

“It’s him,” Ryou hisses, hands balling into fists.

Shiro looks up and across the graveyard, following Ryou’s glare. It falls on a familiar face.

...Keith. He’s here finally, shoulders hunched forward, protectively over his heart, his neck hanging loosely forward. He looks even more tired than he did when Shiro left him. The pale milky white of his face is blotchy with patches of blood red, especially around his eyes. ...He’s been crying.

“How dare he!” Ryou chokes. “How dare he! This isn’t right. I’m going to tell him to leave.”

It’s not just Ryou’s voice that’s shaking anymore, but his entire body. He’s ready to burst free of this space and charge like a bull, but their mom reaches a hand out, placing it on his forearm.

“...Ryou, please. Don’t cause a scene. I knew his mother from high school. They’re good people; they deserve to be here too.”

Ryou whips around to her, eyes wide with disbelief, with hurt. “And if he’s the one who did it?! If he’s the one who took Shiro? Killed him?! You’re just going to let him roam around here, free? The last place Shiro will ever be! Soiled! By him.”

“Ryou. The police said he’s innocent -”

“- That’s bullshit!” Ryou screeches on a whisper that’s only half-contained. “They didn’t even check him because the sheriff thinks he knows him. They wouldn’t listen to me at all; they wrote me off completely. Mom! Please! Let me make him leave!”

She looks so tired. “Please, Ryou...” she breathes. “Don’t make this any harder than it already is... Shiro wouldn’t want this.”

Ryou watches their mom, his body fraught with tension. And then, after another tight moment, it falls out of him and he takes a step back, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. “I can’t believe this,” he whispers, but he lets his head hang.

So this is it. This is his final goodbye.

After today, Shiro will just...leave. He’ll start walking until he fades away, like the arm at his side that’s barely there anymore, just an afterimage, an echo. It has spread so far...

Maybe just the thought will be enough.

I want to disappear, he’ll say, and then maybe he just...will.

There’s no place for him here anymore. He’s dead. His body is right here, in front of him, prepared to be lowered down.

He can’t believe it. He still hasn’t been able to look. He hopes Keith will finally accept it. Soon.

Because here he is now, at the front of the line, Pidge at his side, staring hard into the coffin, like if he glares hard enough, he’ll be able to see through and reach Shiro. Pidge sets a flower into the
pile of others and then turns to watch Keith. She gives him time. There’s a long line behind them and they’re patient, but as time ticks on, Pidge gently grabs his arm.

Keith startles, his face caving, looking like he might start crying again. All the vulnerability there... It’s hard for Shiro to breathe as he watches it.

Carefully, Keith slips a piece of paper beneath the flowers, hiding it from sight, and, with one last shuddering breath, leaves to go sit on a bench. Shiro walks around the coffin and tilts his head, trying to see what it was Keith gave him, but Keith had meant for it to be hidden, so Shiro can’t see.

He wonders what Keith drew him... Is it one of his face? ...No, Keith wouldn’t do that. Everyone would know who drew it, wonder about it. Keith doesn’t need the questions.

Maybe a football game? A flower? Shiro doesn’t know. He’s not the artist.

The eulogies hurt. He knew it would from the beginning; he told himself to be strong, but still, he can’t stop the pain stabbing through him as he watches his friends cry over him, or the pain that he feels when he seeks out Keith through the crowd and sees the way he’s shaking. The haunted empty look in his eyes. Shiro can’t look. He can’t see that. Pidge isn’t even there with him, she’s walked over to Matt, and Keith’s alone and Shiro’s helpless.

Shiro’s dead.

...He’s dead...

He’s gone. He can’t help any of these people anymore, the ones who love him. He’s can never repay them for this kindness, for being here for him.

Shiro sits behind the coffin beside Ryou, up on top of that hill, and cries. The sun is gone - it doesn’t matter, he can’t feel it anyway - and he just shoves his face into his hands and lets himself hurt, lets himself bleed out all his pain. He forgets about the time. What does that matter anymore? He has to leave these people, all these wonderful, kind, loving people... He needs to let them go.

He doesn’t want to. He wants to stay...

He thinks he gets why those creatures earlier were melted and sick and stripped of their humanity. They were driven mad. Alone, like this. Torn from their lives, like this. Shiro can’t keep this up, haunting the ones he loves. He’s already seen what happens.

He sniffs into his hands once more, wiping away the tears accumulated on his face. His face stings. It’s funny, before all this time, he could count on his hand how many times he cried growing up. He wasn’t one to cry. Ever. ...There was never really any need.

He’s cried more in these last few days than he ever has in his entire life. It’s exhausting.

He looks up at the people gathered here still, umbrellas out and overhead. Of course it’d rain. The sun was just teasing them, but this is how it really is. Cold and miserable and hopeless and...

...The crows. Shiro can see them as his eyes catch the black hole in the sky...a murder of crows gathered in the distance, spanning out over the dark clouds. They’re circling, like buzzards, gathered down the hill.

His stomach drops.
Where's Keith?

Shiro scours through the crowd - to the right, to the left. He stumbles to his feet and runs through everyone, his stomach twisting tighter and tighter. Where is he? Where did he go? Pidge is gone too...

And then he sees her, down below, running from behind the house and looking around frantically. She pushes up the hill, eyes flying through the crowd like Shiro...fear on her face.

And he just knows.

Shiro sprints down the hill toward the birds as quickly as he can.

Keith. He lets his eyes off of him for two seconds and this always happens! He’s like a magnet for trouble.

“Keith!” He calls, even though he knows it’s no use. “Keith!”

With a strength that Shiro thought that he’d lost, he bulldozes through the graveyard, running straight through people without care, and darts around the side of the house.

That’s where he sees them. Those sick melted spirits from before, pushing hills of mud into a grave. Their bones protrude from their back as they hunch over it, staring down.

Shiro understands immediately.

No.

He doesn’t even stop. He tackles the first spirit within view to the ground with as much force as he can manage, pressing his hand into its face, clawing into is flesh with his nails. It hadn’t seen him coming. It crumples easily, but the second sees him and it has a knife gripped in its hand that glows strangely. It steps over the grave, barring Shiro from it.

"Haggar," it whispers. "Our master... Come..."

"Get the hell away from him," Shiro spews out.

"Come..."

Shiro dives. He's not a fighter, never been a fighter. He's a football player. He just wanted to have a peaceful life, that's it. He doesn't know how to fight to kill, or dodge to survive. He just wants to do his best.

Shiro tries to duck out of the way, but its limbs are strange and long, more like a spider than a human and it's taller than a person. He's not used to going against something like this on any level.

It's too fast. It cuts down, slicing him across the shoulder and Shiro cries out, grasping the wound with his other hand. His blood splatters across the mud. But it's red, not black. Not like them. Not yet.

He doesn't let it defeat him. He won't fall. Though the pain is thumping through his veins, he has to get rid of this thing and fast. There's no time. If Keith is really under all this...

He pushes his feet against the ground, hurling himself through air, tackling the creature with all his strength. It stabs through his shoulder, but he powers through it, grabbing onto it, watching as its skin bubbles and bleeds. As it chokes and gurgles until it's still.
The others retreat to the trees, watching in shadow, the darkness churning and lurking. His shoulders oozing warmth down his back and it hurts.

But Shiro doesn’t care.

He scrambles back to the mud.

“Keith!” He cries. “Keith! Are you in there?! Answer me!”

He dips down into the mud, his face pressing into it, diving into it up to his torso. He reaches through the mud...but god, is it useless? Even if he had Keith, he’d go right through him. How did the other spirits touch the physical plane? If they can, he can.

How?

He thinks of Keith’s house. How the lights went out when they screamed, as if they were summoning energy. That’s what Shiro needs.

He pulls himself out of the mud, turning around desperately.

Haggar’s house is lit up with the warmth of light. Energy. Force.

Harness it, he demands of himself.

Harness it! If he doesn’t, Keith will die because of him. If he doesn’t, all of Keith’s suffering would be for nothing.

Keith, the only one who’s fought this hard for him for so long. Keith, who cried out his name when he left, who has been suffering ever since, mourning him for so long, trying for him anyway. Keith, who smiles through pain. Keith, who got so much shit from everyone growing up, from Shiro’s friends, even Ryou...but became soft, and gentle, and good.

He can’t die like this.

Shiro’s mind is buzzing, brimming to the top with panic and fear and hope. He can do this. He doesn’t know how, but -

Keith.

The light from Haggar’s house brightens like the sun for one dazzling moment and then the lights shatter and he feels it. Warm and healing and soft, like the sun peering out after a cold storm, pouring into him.

It’s in his hands. It’s circling his heart. Beating through his veins. It’s powering him, like a battery.

He rips into the mud again, pulling through it. Keith’s got to be here somewhere. He falls into it further. Reaching. Somewhere...somewhere.

And there. A hand. Smaller than he thought. Still. It doesn’t react when he grabs it; it’s limp.

No, no, no. He can’t be late. Not like this.

The mud resists, fighting him, but Shiro pulls harder. He has the power of his panic and determination, firing him into something primal, something closer to his core. He’s heard of old grandmothers pulling cars off their grandsons in danger and he’d never believed it before, but now,
he feels it. He could do anything for Keith.

He pulls Keith out from the mud, grabbing onto his cold body tightly. “Keith!” He cries, holding him to his chest. Keith falls limply back. His eyes are closed.

Shiro sets him down on the floor, presses the mud from his face. There’s so much, it clings to him, smearing over the pasty white of his skin. The purple and blue of his lips, his eyelids.

He’s not breathing.

Oh, god. What does he do? What does he do? He’s not a medical student. CPR? A clap to the back? He’s only seen this sort of thing in movies.

He pushes himself to his knees, weaves his fingers together and presses into Keith’s chest. If he doesn’t start breathing... If he just stays still like this...

He can feel Keith’s ribs buckling beneath the force of his compressions. They’re fragile and smaller than he'd thought. Keith’s so delicate. So easily breakable. He’s going to break him like this. This is all his fault.

Keith coughs.

Mud pours from his mouth and Shiro’s heart stutters to a start.

Keith coughs again, choking up more mud. He’s struggling, the sounds of choking. He tries to push himself up, but the movements are so weak. Shiro lifts him up, turning him to his side.

“Come on, Keith,” he breathes, winded. He’s scared. Keith’s right here in his arms. What if there’s another step, something simple, that he’s missing?

Keith throws up, the sound violent and brutal. Brown sludge pours out of him.

God...

“You’re okay, Keith,” Shiro whispers. He has to believe. His hands tremble as he rubs Keith’s back. There’s so much he’s coughing up, choking out. But he’s starting to breathe. His inhales are less panicked and choked, getting smoother.

“Keith,” Shiro whispers, pressing his lips together tightly, trying to keep it together.

“...Shiro...” Keith coughs weakly, falling face first into the mud he’s just gotten out of his lungs.

Shiro gently turns him over, running his hand over his face, pushing his hair from his mouth and nose, trying to clear everything the best he can. The rain is slowly breaking it apart, revealing his soft skin, the darkness of his hair. “Keith... Keith, you’re okay...”

He feels a trickle up his spine, a warning. He turns, exhausted. Can’t he just have two seconds with Keith? Just two?

But no. He expected the long spindly forms of the spirits, hunched and empty. What he didn’t expect was a fellow student.

It’s Haggar. She’s standing at the bottom of the steps, staring at Shiro. Her eyes are wide. Her mouth is parted in surprise. “...You’re here,” she whispers.

“Leave him alone!” Shiro shouts, still holding onto Keith. He can feel Keith stirring slightly,
trying to come to. He groans softly in Shiro’s arms. “He has nothing to do with this! He didn’t do anything!”

“He blocked you from me...” She murmurs, still staring at him in awe. “I thought I’d never see you again...”


She’s not even paying attention to Keith. Her eyes are right on Shiro, like nothing else matters. “You’re coming with me no matter what...”

Lightning strikes, shaking the earth. He sees all the faces in the forest around them, eyeless, but watching. Waiting for Haggar’s command. He can’t possibly fight them all off.

He can hear Pidge in the distance, panicking, yelling for Keith. She’s close.

Maybe Shiro can lead them away. Give Pidge and Keith a chance.

He lays Keith down, who groans, soft and small. “Shiro,” he whimpers, hand trembling as he reaches for him.

Keith.

Shiro steps in front of him.

“I’m not going with you,” Shiro calls to Haggar. He takes the knife at his feet. “You’ll never be able to catch me.”

“You -”

He runs.

Follow me. He darts out toward the forest, toward her disgusting creatures, and runs as fast as he can. Follow me!

They hiss as he pushes past them and looks over his shoulder, sees how they all form on him, how Haggar turns from Keith, leaves him there. They don’t care about Keith, not now. All their attention is on Shiro.

Good. He feels relief flood through him, feels as it helps him focus, helps him center himself. Turn them away from Keith. That’s all he wants. Pidge will find him, like she always does. Help him, like she can.

And Shiro just runs. Like Keith always wishes he could, he sprints as quickly through the forest as he can, phasing through trees, just running straight through everything.

It’s strange how it works. When he had saved Keith, the world had averted back to how it had been during life. Haggar could see him. Keith too. He could touch Keith.

As Shiro pours his energy into running, he can feel the way that warm world falls away. Sees how the forests grow darker, the colors seep out of him, their tone shifts to purples.

Shiro is fast, but so are they. He feels a hand reach forward on him and try to dig its nail into his already weakened arm. Another tries on his other side, grabbing at his hair. He wastes no time, clutching to it with his hand, trying to fit as much of his palm across its skin as he can. It screams as it falls away and Shiro turns, grabbing the other one by the head and heaving it aside. It
writhes.

Any bit of contact. Any at all, and they’re in agony.

When the forest clears, he slows and looks behind himself. ...They’re gone.

Is Keith okay? Did they turn back?

His chest is burning and he thinks it’s from running at first. His shoulder aches and his arm hurts. Everything considered though, it’s really not as bad as it should be. He looks down at his arm and sees the cut there. Feels his shoulder where he was stabbed. ...They’re small wounds now, almost scars. He pulls the collar of his shirt down and feels Keith’s mark there, tingling at the edges. ...Ah. So that’s what’s burning. It’s healing him.

It’s amazing, but so many parts of today baffle his mind. He’s too tired to even think about it.

He wants to just lie down. But he has to get back to Keith.

He doubles back, finding another path, eyes wary.

The forest is quiet. He doesn’t come across them again.

When he makes it back, he clings to the edges of the forest, watchful in the shadows. And then he spots him: Keith, a small defeated bundle in his mother’s arms as she takes him away from this place, walking briskly to the parking lot. She’s holding him tightly to her chest. Keith’s dad is in the crowd, collecting Acxa, who’s listening with a divot in her brow, worry on her lips.

Shiro sees his own family up on that hill, bundled together, crying still.

He’s so tired, but he pushes himself off the tree and, with one last look back at Haggar’s house, walks toward the parking lot.

He can’t say goodbye yet. There are still things that need to be done.

“Pidge says they were messing around and he fell in a grave. The doctor says it looks like pneumonia.”

His dad stares at the fireplace as it glows and crackles. He runs his fingers across his lips. “...This is just getting worse.”

“He says the sweating is a good thing.”

His dad sighs. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“...Keith will never forgive us,” Krolia whispers. “If we send him away, he will hate us forever. You know what he was like after that whole mess with Zarkon. He still hasn’t forgiven us for that and it’s been years.”

“What were we supposed to do then? Argue against the whole town? His story didn’t make sense...”

“I don’t know! I don’t know! But all he’s ever wanted from us was our trust. We just turned on him.”
“I still don’t know what to believe about that time. He used to lie about *everything.*”

“I *know!* I was there, remember? He’s my son too!”

Acxa sighs, rubbing at her forehead. She steps away from her parents and walks into the kitchen.

Shiro watches her from the top of the steps, spinning the knife slowly in his hands. No one else seems to be able to see it.

“He needs to agree to go,” Krolia says. “We can *not* force him. Or we will lose him.”

“Krolia, he’ll understand... Maybe not now, but later.”

“You don’t get it. You know how it was with my parents. I never spoke with them again. You know how similar he and I are. I can’t let it be like my parents.”

“...He loves us, Krolia. Just as we love him. He will understand. And if he never does, then we can live in peace knowing we did what we thought was best for him.”

She presses her lips together tightly and grits her teeth. “...But what’s best...?”

“We need to get him help...and if the insurance isn’t going to work with us on a therapist, we need to find an alternative. Honestly, Krolia, do you think a therapist is even enough at this point?”

Acxa says from the kitchen. “He doesn’t believe that was Shiro’s body. He still thinks he’s out there.”

Shiro looks up. ...That’s so like Keith... But...

Krolia shakes her head, troubled.

“The arm,” Acxa continues. “He says he found Shiro’s in the forest, cut from his body. Says this body had two arms.”

*Where* did you hear this?” Krolia grunts tiredly. "The police never found an arm."

Acxa shrugs. “School. Word gets around. Matt told Allura who told Lotor who told me.”

Krolia shakes her head and sighs. “He needs help.”

His dad nods.

“I’ll call the insurance company again. ...If it doesn’t work...”

“We have an alternative,” his dad says. “...It’ll be alright, Krolia. We have to be strong for him.”

“I know,” Krolia whispers. “...I know, I just...” She lets out a small sigh. “I don’t want to lose him.”

“And that’s why we have to do this.”

She closes her eyes for a few long moments and then picks up the phone. “I’ll call now.”

Shiro stands and walks back to Keith’s room.

Keith is sick and weak with fever. Shiro hates to see him suffer. He stays at Keith’s bedside, occasionally turning to look out the window, trying to see the white tree to make sure its branches
are still white.

Keith shivers and coughs roughly, the sound horrible, but he’s breathing...he’s alive...

Shiro has to really concentrate hard and it takes a moment, but if he focuses all of his attention to his fingers, he can touch Keith. He can slip out of the darkness that’s so easy to sink into and reach out to be beside him. It’s such a relief.

Red sits beside him, watching curiously as he brushes his knuckles against the searing heat of Keith’s cheeks. ...He’s so warm.

But ugh - everything snaps back all at once and he’s sucked into the darkness again, hand going through Keith, dunked into purple again. It feels like being sucked into the ocean, but the surface is long gone.

It never lasts long. Each attempt requires more energy than the last.

...Tired. He’s got to conserve his strength for an emergency, in case something like the grave happens again.

“Shiro...” Keith groans, tossing fitfully in his bed.

Shiro looks down at him. He wants to seek out Haggar to end this all. But what if Shiro goes and succumbs to Haggar before Keith wakes up? What if Keith never knows he’s been here...? He wishes he could leave a message somehow. Write a letter. *Something.* But no matter how much focus he tries to conjure, he can’t touch anything beyond Keith.

He stands. It’s now or never. He starts to walk out when Keith’s hand reaches out. His face is still red and his eyes are glossed over and dazed, but he’s looking right at Shiro.

“Don’t leave,” Keith breathes. He tries to grip onto Shiro’s shirt, but his hand slips through. “Don’t leave me,” he pleads.

Shiro swallows hard and reaches out his own hands carefully. He gently touches his fingers to Keith’s face. He’s so warm. This is all Shiro’s fault.

“Please,” Keith shivers into his touch.

“Okay...” Shiro agrees gently. “Okay, I won’t leave you, Keith.”

“...Yeah?” Keith grins, face lighting up. He coughs weakly and again, Shiro can see as Keith’s consciousness wavers. He’s hardly even here. “...Stay with me.” But he breathes it out on a fading breath. His eyes close. He’s asleep again.

Shiro closes his eyes, leans his forehead against Keith’s, and stays.

Keith really does get better quickly though. Shiro thinks it might be because Keith never actually had pneumonia to begin with, just a bunch of shit in his lungs that his body was trying to deal with... But, within only a few days, he’s sitting up, talking and joking with Pidge on the phone. He still plans on going to the dance. Shiro wishes he could stop him and just make him rest.

But with Pidge at his side and going to a public place, it’s as good of a time as any for Shiro to sneak away. It’s convenient that Haggar’s place is fairly close to the school - about a ten minute
run. He doesn’t want to be too far from Keith if he doesn’t have to be.

Keith dresses up. Shiro wasn’t expecting it for some reason, keyed up and distracted with the
thought of Haggar. When Keith stands in front of the mirror in the first time since...god, Shiro’s
not sure if he’s ever seen Keith staring at himself in the mirror.

He looks good. Really good. ...Keith always looks good of course, but this is...

Shiro’s thoughts float away like balloons, up and into the sky, far far away. He’s transfixed.

Keith is so beautiful. Lithe and fiery, like a lion. But there’s grace, there’s a gentleness to him too,
and that’s what hooks Shiro. It all hooks Shiro. Everything about him.

Keith brushes his hair back in a different manner than he usually does. He looks so sleek.

Shiro has to chuckle as Pidge laughs her ass off and Krolia practically gets stars in her eyes as he
walks out. Keith gripes, glowing red. He does look different. An entirely different side of Keith
Shiro never thought he’d get to see. ...What a blessing.

And the pictures of Keith and Pidge buck naked in the bath together? The way Keith’s face blares
beet red as he stammers? Shiro is so in love.

...He’s got to go.

So he leaves Keith, which is getting harder and harder to do. Just as walking is. Just as existing is.

Shiro had expected to see some weird shit in Haggar’s room. The summoning stuff - the candles,
the chalk, the book - that was all to be expected.

But his jersey... The pictures of himself... He does remember, months ago, his jersey
disappearing, but he thought maybe one of his teammates got confused and took it. He remembers
having to request another, thinking nothing of it. And these pictures... God. He never knew...

How oblivious had he been during life? Now he’s suffering for it.

Shiro doesn’t pull himself from the darkness of this plane. He stays hidden here, on the roof
outside her window, eyes on alert. She’s sitting in the center of her floor, hovering over her book,
scowling into it.

“Nothing works,” she hisses, ripping another page from the book in a rage and crumpling it into a
ball. “I’ve tried everything. The boy’s damn spell is too powerful. ...If we can’t find the
spellbook, we’ll have to destroy the source.”

Spellbook...? The drawing, maybe. So does that mean... Shiro thinks of the book Haggar is
pouring over. How these spirits were summoned by her, using the book...

“I don’t care how you do it, I just want him gone. ...We need to break whatever connection to
Shiro he has. Take him to the lake and tie his good leg to the dock. He won’t be able to stay afloat
for too long.”

Shiro exhales slowly, trying to stay centered. They’re going to try to kill Keith...

“I don’t care who else has to go down in order to do it. Tear them all apart if you need to.”

Okay. Shiro focuses his breathing. He wasn’t sure how he’d do this - he thought he could come in
and just kill as many as he could before he went down, but this sounds more promising.
If the spellbook is what powers the summons and destroying it will break whatever power it has, then all Shiro needs to do is destroy her spellbook. He has the knife in hand. The spellbook is right there. Can he destroy the book? Can he focus that much energy to touch something on the physical plane? All he’s been able to touch is Keith...

Haggar gets to her feet. “Everyone’s going to the dance at the school for Shiro. He’ll be there. Go. Find him.”

They go.

She walks to her dresser, distracted by something over there.

Shiro needs to get rid of it before they find Keith. And by how quickly they run, Shiro doesn’t have the full ten minutes it takes to get there.

He sneaks quietly through the wall and leans over the book. He raises his arm high, knife pointed, focuses all his energy to his hand and prays for contact, then drives it down through the pages.

It goes right through. It does nothing.

Haggar turns. She’s not surprised.

“...Oh,” she murmurs, eyes falling down on the book. “...So you heard me.” Her eyes slip up to Shiro’s, looking right at him. “...I’ve been expecting you. ...You thought you could cut through the book and that’d get rid of my summoned spirits, is that it? ...Foolish. I see he taught you nothing of the art.”

Shiro stutters as he sees those white creatures creeping through the wall, surrounding him. He clings to the knife tightly. “How then? Churn it into little bits?”

She laughs. “You have to destroy every bit of it. Get the knife.”

Shiro knows his advantage relies purely on skin-to-skin contact. But by now, so do they. And they’re faster than him.

He tries to struggle, but they surround him. And it’s so easy from there. They pin him to the ground quickly, avoiding his skin, pressing into his shirt. They grab a fire poker Haggar has set out and they jam it into Shiro’s hand to force him to release the knife.

“No,” he grunts as they pry it from his fingers, and without any preamble they raise the knife and swing it down into his arm, pinning him into the floor. Shiro screams. There’s something about the knife that’s different. He knew it. He can’t move, he can’t slip out of it. They pin him by both hands and then turn back to Haggar, waiting for her command.

She watches them quietly, assessing him as his chest heaves and he glares at her.

“You’re going to wait here,” Haggar says. “As we kill your little witch.”

“Stop,” Shiro cries through his pain, tugging at the knives that render him useless, trying to rip them out with his struggles. “He doesn’t know anything. It was an accident. This whole thing...it was just a mistake. Please. You have me now, wasn’t that what you wanted? Call them off. I’ll do whatever you want, I swear. Just don’t hurt him!”

“I want you to writhe in pain,” Haggar hisses. “As you watch the one you care about die. I’ve been trying to get to you since that day... You have no idea how much trouble he’s caused me...”
“Please.” All Shiro can think to do is beg.

She doesn’t listen to him. She turns out the room and leaves, closing the door behind her. She leaves several spirits and they stand, lifeless, beside him.

There are candles everywhere, lit and warm. Flickering in the draft, spinning up that sticky heady smell of her room. It’s making Shiro sweat. He feels sick. He’s still pinned to the floor and his arms hurt.

But Keith. They’re going after Keith.

“Please,” Shiro tries, looking up at the spirits. “Please, you don’t have to do what she says! I knew you used to be human, like me, like Keith. I know you can remember if you just try. You’re still in there, the you that used to be. Don’t let her kill Keith. I’m begging you. Not like this. He’s a good person. He doesn’t deserve any of this.”

They don’t move and Shiro growls angrily, trying to kick at the fucking book, at the candles that are everywhere. It’s right there. He just needs to destroy it completely, this dried up crinkled old book, and this place is set up so perfectly for that.

“Just let me go!” Shiro cries, frustration making him roar. “That’s all you have to do. I’ll do the rest!”

They don’t respond. Just like everything else lately. Shiro’s sick of it.

Time’s running out. Keith’s suffered so much for him. His leg, the glass, his parents, Pidge, his leg, he had to climb that tower, he had to listen to Ryou cry and accuse him of horrible things, he’s been buried alive, he stopped breathing, he’s been so sick and feverish...

Keith has gone through the wringer and still, he’s trying. He’s a fire that never goes out.

Shiro needs to pull his weight. Keith’s in trouble. He needs to remember that he can do anything for Keith. Pull him through mud that’s like quicksand, lift a car, pull his arms through knives...

He can’t think about it. He just does it. With all the strength he has in himself, he pulls his arms up and off the floor. His whole body ignites with pain. He’s rattled with it. He screams. But he keeps pulling. His arms rip and tear, but maybe they’ll heal, like his shoulder. Maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe he’s just got to try this.

The knife pops from the ground and with a primal scream, he jerks the poker out of his arm and chucks it to the side.

The spirits had not expected such things. They try to get to him first, but he’s a ball of primal energy again, wild, barely human. But he’s never felt so heated, so alight with fury. He jams the knife into the creatures abdomen and then grabs it by its head, shoving it to the floor. He hits its head once, twice, three times, until black coats the floor and splatters across the wall.

The other one has the poker, but Shiro catches it in his hand before it can gouge him through the chest. He pulls it forward, angling the poker so that the spirit is jerked to the side, right where he wants it. He watches as it trips over a candle, knocking it over. He lifts his hands, catching it by the neck and throwing it to the floor.

He straddles it. Shifts forward and presses his thumbs into its neck, watches as the skin divots...and then bleeds. He chokes the life out of it as he listens to the way its throat rattles. Watches as it fights him, hands struggling to find anything...then lets go.
And they’re dead.

Shiro pants for a moment, sitting on its chest still. The two figures lay out on the floor, motionless. He did that. His breath is jerking out of his lungs. He begins to sob.

No. No, there’s no time for this.

The candle that was knocked over leaks wax and the fire runs around its trail, catching along the floor. It catches on the book. The fire is small now, but it’s growing.

Thank god. Thank god.

Shiro pushes himself up, stumbling a little. The adrenaline that had bursted through him only moments before is crashing and he feels its pulling him by the feet. He wants to just collapse.

He’s got to run.

He clings to his arms, groaning, as he phases through the door and runs down the hallway.

Keith. Keith. He’s got to get to Keith before they do. He can hardly think through the pain in his arms, but he feels the tingling in his chest that’s slowly becoming familiar, and he prays it’s what he thinks it is.

He races through the forest, again, following the moonlight through the trees. He feels the warmth flooding his arms, the pain begin to soothe away.

Where would Keith be?

He pushes through the campus, into the gym that’s lit up. He tosses his head wildly. The projector is running, showing pictures of him and Ryou. He sees people on the bleachers. The green of Pidge’s jacket. No Keith.

The bathrooms. He runs to the bathroom closest to Pidge, but he’s not there. He scrambles for the bathroom opposite, but no. He’s not there either.

The lake, Haggar had said, but could they really have him that quickly? Pidge wouldn’t have just let him be dragged out. He had to have removed himself somewhere...

Shiro runs outside, looking around. Maybe he needed air? Maybe he’s sitting on the bench outside; he had liked that tree by the locker room...

And that’s where he sees the flames inside, orange light flickering across the window. There.

Shiro pushes through and sees a hole in the ground, torn in the middle of their plain school hallway, blazing with flames.

Shiro sprints. He doesn’t see Keith anywhere, but he runs past his crutches, sees the broken bar tossed to the side. The lights overhead are crackling angrily. The smell of smoke is overwhelming, drying up Shiro’s sinuses, making each breath sharp and burn.

And the closer he gets, the more he can see into the flames. That’s when he sees Keith struggling, fingers clinging desperately to the hole’s edge. The spirits are there, clinging to Keith like a lifeline, trying to climb up him, pulling at his weak point - his leg. He’s not going to last.

Shiro’s been saving energy for this moment. His arms still ache, but he no longer feels the warmth gushing from them. It will have to do.
It’s easier to do when your mind is screaming at you. He pulls the life out of the lights above and jumps, flying over the hole without a second thought. His feet slam into the ground on the other side and he twists, leaping for Keith, throwing himself over the edge to grab him.

Contact. It’s like a breath of relief every time.

He looks down into Keith’s shocked expression, feels as Keith’s hands slip off the edge in his surprise. He braces himself as Keith and the spirits weigh him down. It’s almost more than he can bear; his arms are still raw, screaming at him as he clings to Keith.

“Shiro!” Keith cries, voice ragged. “They have me! I can’t get them off!”

“I’ve got you,” Shiro promises him. But he can feel the way his tendons cross and tweak, the muscles in his arm snapping, each string of strength he has giving way.

Keith’s counting on him. If he’s good for anything, please god, let him be good for this. He’d rather fall into this pit than let go.

“Hang in there, Keith,” Shiro breathes. Slow and steady, that’s what his grandfather always used to tell him. In life, in tight situations. He’s got to keep a cool head. He’s got to power on. He can do this.

He sees Keith in pain. He sees the way it’s killing him. Steady. Steady. He can’t do anything for that yet, not right now, but soon. If he keeps this up. He doesn’t have the strength for this but he has to. He has to.

“Just drop me!” Keith begs, his own grip loosening on Shiro’s arm. “They’ll keep coming for you. And Pidge. They’re looking for Pidge. They can’t stay!”

Keith.

...Keith. Always worrying about anyone but himself.

Why can’t he see? If Shiro lets go and Keith falls in, then it’ll kill him and Pidge anyway.

With one mighty heave, Shiro pulls Keith up and over. But those creatures. He leans down, bracing Keith against the side, and presses his hand into their faces.

Their screams bothered Shiro before. He felt guilt, sorrow. Because those creatures could be him one day...

But all he feels now is relief. The brand on Shiro’s chest burns. Keith saves him again, without even knowing it.

They fall away and, before anything else can happen, Shiro grabs Keith and pulls him away from the fire.

Safe.

They fall to the ground, collapsing to the floor.

He can hardly believe it as the sounds roll away, as the hallway quiets and returns to normal, reverts back to their high school.

Keith shifts beside him, coughing weakly into his hand and groaning softly.
...He’s here. Keith turns to him, holding his gaze. And Shiro could almost cry.

He’s seeing Shiro. The world is warm and golden and here and Keith...Keith’s not looking through him, or around him. He’s not talking to the air, hoping his messages get across. He’s holding Shiro’s gaze, watching him with wonder, with all the emotion in his heart that Shiro feels.

*I missed you*, Keith’s gaze cries. *You’re finally back*, it says.

That’s all Shiro’s wanted for so long.

He had meant to ask. Soft and gentle. If things had been different, he would’ve at least wanted to build up to it. But as it is, Shiro can’t stand their distance. He needs to be closer.

He sees all the love and relief in Keith’s eyes and he meets it halfway, grabbing Keith’s soft fragile face and kissing him as hard as he can.

Keith inhales sharply with surprise at first, but he eases into it almost immediately, kissing him back with just as much ferocity, arms wrapping around Shiro in a protective hold. Keith’s mouth is hot and he works eagerly, like he’s been dying for this as long as Shiro has, like this can heal everything that’s happened to both of them. And it feels like it does. Shiro feels saved. Keith has been Shiro’s guardian angel through this whole thing, whether he knows it or not.

“You’re here,” Keith cries. And Shiro cries too. It’s so good to be back at Keith’s side. His arm is killing him and he’s more tired now than ever, but he will take this time with Keith as it trickles away. This blessing. His one final goodbye. He’ll make it right this time. He’ll fight for this with all his spirit; he’s already learned he can do the impossible as long as Keith is involved.

He cries as he wraps his arms around Keith tightly. He never wants to let him go. Finally, they’re together, after these horrible few weeks. Keith’s safe.

Shiro’s home.

He’s home.

Chapter End Notes

Me to me: just do a really quick summary of their three chapters apart. It'll be short and sweet. It won't take long at all.
- 3 days and 17k words later -

The other, evil side of me: *diabolical laughter*

Twitter?
Chapter 11

It’s quiet when Keith wakes up. Peaceful. The sun is peeking through the cracks of the wooden panels. As he blinks his eyes awake groggily, he can see little flecks of dust floating through the air, swirling in lazy loops as he breathes life into them. There’s something soft and magical about it, like the atmosphere has shifted in Shiro’s presence, like everything’s changed because he’s here again. Things finally feel like they’ll be okay. Keith senses it warm and certain in his chest as he lets himself gaze at the person beside him.

Shiro is lying out peacefully, eyes closed, body nestled against Keith’s. Keith had forgotten to turn the t.v. on before he fell into dreams, but the silence around them is nice, healing almost.

They’re together again. And they can touch each other. Skin against skin. Though Shiro is a strange mix of lukewarm - not quite as warm as a person, but not cold - there is comfort to be had pressed into his side. It’s what he’s longed after for so long, here, as his.

Inspiration washes over him as he stares up at Shiro’s beautiful face and he rolls onto his side, slips his sketchbook from his nightstand, and tilts his head back, absorbing the serenity in Shiro.

Shiro’s awake, of course. He blinks his eyes open softly after a moment more, looking down at Keith with affectionate warmth. Keith smiles back, hand already sketching as he observes.

There’s something beyond relaxing capturing the face of someone you care about. Shiro’s so open about it. He doesn’t shy away or try to hide himself. There are bags under his eyes and he’s pale, so pale; he just looks tired. But that warmth is like the sun still and he shines. Keith won’t ever be able to do it justice - no one possibly could - but he can’t believe that he’s lucky enough to be able to give it a try. His sketch comes out so soft.

“You’re beautiful,” Keith whispers.

Shiro’s returning grin is brilliant. “Can I see?”

Keith slides it across his lap, angling it out for him.

“Amazing,” Shiro hums as he leans into Keith’s shoulder to look at the sketch. “You made me look ten times better than I actually do.”

Keith tilts his eyes down to look at the drawing and notices that Shiro is definitely wrong. “No,” he says softly, tilting his head as he looks. “I have a long way to go until I get you right.”

“You should submit your art to galleries. I mean... I don’t know how it works. You make a portfolio? But you should do that. Your art’s really special, Keith.”

Keith chuckles into the drawing. “My mom says that too. That’s how I know you’re crazy.”

“Not crazy,” Shiro says on a laugh. “It’s a shame not to share it with the world. Always trying to hide away your brilliance. You’re stunning, Keith. I want others to see that in you too.”

Keith is quiet for a moment. He allows, “I’ll think about it.”

Keith adds a few finishing touches, feeling Shiro’s eyes follow his hand as it moves across paper.

Shiro hums into Keith’s shoulder. “You know, I’ve never asked you...why do you draw some
things in this sketchbook and others in your other one? Why not just use one?”

“This one’s special,” Keith says, running his hand over the binding. He pauses to think, looking up at the ceiling. “...It’s kind of like...you know how people make photo albums of points in their life and then shove them away for awhile and forget about them? Then, years down the line, they pick them back up and, at the sight of it, suddenly everything comes flooding back... This is my way of capturing the little parts of my life that matter. This sketchbook is my storage unit. Each thing I choose to put in here are all things that are special to me, a part of myself that I don’t want to let go or fade away from as long as I live. Life’s so fragile and temporary... You know that. And this... If there’s nothing else left of me, I want there to at least be this.”

Shiro’s quiet. It’s starting to rain outside. The frogs are ribbiting down in the grass outside. The rain gutter jingles as raindrops hit against tin.

“How are you feeling?” Keith asks softly. While Shiro is beautiful, always beautiful, in the day’s light, up close, the rush of last night’s events faded, Keith sees how tired Shiro actually looks. Though he smiles, he’s haggard. The paleness of his face those days before was nothing in comparison to now. There are dark circles under his eyes that really do make him look like a ghoul, like he’s dead. He’s in a bad way. Keith can feel nervousness creep in his heart as he thinks about what it means.


“Good,” Keith says. “Now that you’re here.”

He musters up a smile. “You’re still in your formal wear. ...You look really nice.”

Keith looks down as he runs a hand over it. The shirt’s...alright, wrinkled in sleep, but the pants are ruined. He’s not sure how he’s going to be able to hide it from his mom; he doesn’t want to think about that now, especially when he remembers how she’d looked at it with such loving eyes. “It was my dad’s. It kind of creeps me out he wore it when he was younger. He and my mom went to prom together in it and who knows what they did in it... God.”

Shiro laughs. “Maybe that’s the day you were conceived.”

“Don’t,” Keith groans. “Why would you say such a horrible thing?”

“Well, it fits you just right. You look amazing, Keith. Really. I saw you when your mom was taking pictures and I...” He clears his throat. “Well, uh... Anyway, I want to see that photo album with your baby pictures.”

“Oh, god,” Keith cringes. “You were there? She was lying. Such a thing doesn’t exist. There are no pictures of me at all.”

Shiro chuckles. “Liar... You know, I might’ve been a little jealous that Pidge got to bring you to the formal...”

Keith blinks, face growing red. He rubs at his cheek shyly. “Ah... Well... She didn’t really take me. It was just as friends. ...If you’d have asked, I would’ve gone with you.”

“Yeah...?” Shiro smiles softly. “What about before all this? If it were just me, not ghost-me. If I had just come up and asked after Chem class.”

Keith laughs as he thinks about it. “Honestly, I don’t know. Back then, I probably would’ve
thought you were trying to play a horrible prank on me or something. I didn’t know how cool you could be.” He smiles at Shiro. “...But I do now.”

Shiro chuckles. He shifts forward and holds his hands out.

Keith moves his sketchbook out of the way and grabs Shiro’s hands, letting himself be pulled forward. He sits against him, leaning his head against Shiro’s shoulder and sighing out, content. It’s nice to just sit and laugh with Shiro, to pretend that everything’s alright, that these past few days were just nightmares. He still smells like smoke, his neck hurts, and his leg aches, but he’s happy. It’s easy to forget all the bad.

“You know...” Keith says softly. “The formal ended early. I didn’t even get the chance to dance at all.”

“Somehow, you don’t strike me as the kind of person to like dancing. I was under the assumption you were forced to go.”

Keith laughs. “Well, I can dance. Probably. Do you dare me?”

Keith can feel Shiro’s chest rumbling with laughter. “Dare you?”

“Yes,” Keith grins, sitting up and staring up at Shiro’s face. “Because obviously I wouldn’t choose to dance unless I was dared. That’s the Keith code.”

“Wow, okay,” Shiro rolls his eyes, but there’s laughter there. “Got a thing against dancing, I see.”

“This is your only chance.”

Shiro watches him fondly. “I’d better jump on it then. Yeah, I dare you. You can’t get out of this one.”

Keith laughs as he slips off the side of the bed. “Okay.”

Keith presses his lips together tightly, face glowing red with embarrassment. A second ago, this seemed like a really good idea, but now he feels way in over his head. He smiles over at Shiro shyly, offering his hand, “...Can I have this dance?”

Shiro’s quiet for one soft surprised moment. “...Of course you can, Keith,” Shiro says finally. He climbs across the bed so he can help Keith off of it. Shiro grabs Keith and pulls him up against his chest, wrapping one firm arm around his waist and holding the other in his hand.

“Your leg still hurts, doesn’t it?” He murmurs lowly.

“Ah... Yeah.”

“Then we’ll be careful,” Shiro murmurs, holding most of Keith’s weight in one arm and swaying them carefully side to side.

Keith snorts. “That intimidated by my dance moves?” He murmurs with a smile, but he leans his head on Shiro’s shoulder, nestling into him.

His chest rumbles as he speaks and Keith can feel it through their connection. It pulls at his heart. Shiro chuckles, “I think maybe you were making stuff up about the fancy dance moves.”

“I never said I had fancy dance moves.”
“You totally did. I’m waiting to see them.”

“I didn’t say that!” Keith laughs, pressing his face into Shiro’s chest in defeat.

“Okay, well, I just can’t imagine you with anything but,” Shiro murmurs into Keith’s hair and Keith laughs again.

Keith closes his eyes, letting Shiro sway them back and forth. He realizes distantly that he forgot music. His phone’s right on the bed and really, he’d just have to reach over. But he’s too content here, pressed closely to Shiro, in his space, the sounds of frogs chirping happily in the garden outside. The rain is light and soft. He’s so at peace. “…I’m so glad you’re back,” he whispers. “I was so afraid I wouldn’t ever see you again. That you were just...hiding from me. Or worse, I couldn’t see you anymore, and you were just alone. ...I was so afraid of that...”

Shiro presses his lips against Keith’s head and closes his eyes. “…You don’t have to worry about that. ...I’m here now.”

“Yeah,” Keith whispers. He had his hand resting gently on Shiro’s waist, but he lifts it, wrapping it around Shiro’s back and pressing his fingers into the muscle there, the edge of his shoulder blade, feeling him. Keith pulls him closer. He’s almost afraid to ask, but he needs to know. He’s been procrastinating enough. “Where did you go?”

Shiro’s quiet for awhile, smile fading. “Nowhere,” he murmurs eventually. “I stayed by you. There’s a place I discovered I can slip into. It must be closer to a place where I should be, away from the physical plane, away from here. I could still see everything that was happening with you, but...you couldn’t see me. Those other ghosts...I got pulled in by them and I wasn’t sure if I had the strength to come back.” He sighs, taking a moment, still breathing into Keith’s hair. “Eventually I discovered I could harness electricity to give me the strength to come back. That’s why it took so long. I’m sorry. ...But it’s over. Haggar was summoning them from her book and it’s burnt now. It’s gone. We don’t have to worry about them anymore. I promise.”

Keith presses his lips together as he stares into Shiro’s face. “So...so you were alone?”

“No,” Shiro whispers, still holding Keith tightly. “I had you.”

But Keith realizes that means so little. He couldn't see him or hear him. He feels like he let Shiro down. He reaches his hands up and holds Shiro’s face gently. He looks up into his eyes and Shiro looks down and they just stay there, holding each other’s gaze.

There are no words for how much that hurts Keith to know. If only he had tried to see harder. If only he had known Shiro was there, he could’ve still talked to him. Kept him company.

“I killed them...” Shiro says quietly leaning into Keith’s hand and closing his eyes. “The ones Haggar summoned. They were forced to her will just for the sake of getting to me. I don’t think they meant it and I...I just killed them.”

“They weren’t human, Shiro,” Keith says gently.

He meant it to soothe, to separate Shiro from the action, from the guilt, but Shiro’s silence is hurt. Sharpened with held breath.

“Oh, god,” Keith murmurs lowly. “Shiro - I didn’t mean that ghosts weren’t human. I didn’t mean you -”

“I know,” he whispers, grabbing Keith’s hand gently. “You’re right. They lost their humanity a
long time ago. ...I still have mine. ...For now.”

Keith tilts his head back to look into Shiro’s sad face, heavy with shadows. “...I’m so sorry. You’ve been suffering... I just left you alone.”

Shiro leans into his hand. “Really, Keith. It’s not your fault at all. It was alright. You still could feel me sometimes and that was enough. I visited Ryou a few times too. And Haggar. Those ghosts - they started the fire. I was there.”

“You were there?” Keith whispers. “...Did they hurt you?”

“They only do what she says, and she was focused on getting to you. She was so mad at you. She wanted me...and you prevented that.”

Keith hums, returning his hands to Shiro’s waist. “I have no idea what the hell’s going on... They’ve always said she was a psycho. But now they’re saying she killed you.”

“They are,” Shiro murmurs softly.

“They’re saying...you’re gone... But if there’s no body -”


Shiro stops swaying them. He gathers Keith gently in his arms and sets him down on the side of the bed. He kneels in front of him, face conflicted. Keith watches him, pressing a hand to his shoulder.

“I... There’s something I should’ve told you before I even left. ...But I couldn’t... It’s going to be hard to hear, okay?”

“Okay,” Keith whispers.

Shiro spreads the fingers wide in front of the both of them and then holds it toward Keith, gesturing for him to grab it. “Look,” he says softly.

Keith frowns slightly, grabbing Shiro’s fingers in his. He brings Shiro’s hand closer to his face. Looks at it carefully. “…It’s...fading…” He whispers in horror.

Shiro watches Keith’s face. “Yeah. It started before I left...and it’s just getting worse. If I concentrate hard, I can bring it back,” he says, demonstrating. Keith blinks down at it. “…But if I forget about it, or I don’t feel well, it can fade almost into nothingness.”

Keith grasps Shiro’s hand tightly in his, covering it. “We’ll figure it out, Shiro.”

Shiro’s quiet. “…Keith. This is why I wanted to talk to you about this. There’s nothing to figure out. ...Try to turn on the t.v.”

Keith turns to the t.v. and then looks back at Shiro. He’s scared to proceed with this conversation. Wants to go back to lazing around and laughing with Shiro. “Why...?”

He finally sounds as tired as he looks. “Please, just...try.”

Keith leans over his bed and grabs the remote from the bed stand. He clicks the power button. It doesn’t turn on.

He looks back at it. Feels the heaviness in Shiro’s being. Swallowing hard, he presses the button
again, harder.

“I...I probably need to change the batteries. I barely ever change them.” He ignores the fact that the light is going off on the top of the remote. He shifts to move out of his bed and harass the t.v.

Shiro puts his hand on Keith’s leg, holding him in place. “Stop,” he whispers. “And you didn’t get your morning call from Pidge.”

His eyes shift over to the nightstand where his fried phone lies. He knows that wouldn’t stop Pidge from contacting him. “W-well, she’s sort of irritated with me, so maybe...maybe that’s why.”

“The lights won’t work either.”

Keith closes his eyes heavily and asks, “...why?”

Shiro takes in a deep breath. “...This whole time, I’ve been wanting to contact you, but I’ve been too weak. I can feel myself going, Keith... I don’t know how much time I have, or how long I can fight against it, but each day, it gets harder.”

“But...but you said you were having problems figuring out how to harness energy and you learned. You’ve made it this far. Maybe there’s another way.”

“The lights. The t.v. The phone. I’m absorbing the energy around me because I have none of my own. But it’s not infinite. I can’t just keep doing this. The electricity isn’t enough.”

“Energy?” Keith whispers, thinking hard. “Like natural energy...? Well.... Well, use mine, then. Take mine.”

Shiro reels back in shock, horror plastering across his face. “No! God, Keith! No! Never! I didn’t mean that at all.”

“But we can share! I want to -”

“Even if I did,” Shiro says firmly, “it wouldn’t even matter. I expend it so quickly, it wouldn’t be enough. All of this is temporary, Keith, and we’ve known that from the beginning. I don’t have a body. I can’t hold onto energy, not like you. Not like a living human does.”

“But...”

“I told you, Keith: I feel myself fading. It’s not just about the energy. It’s like...it feels like sleep almost. Like right before, when you’re so exhausted you can’t think and you’re just about to drift off. It’s trying to get me.”

“No,” Keith whispers, blood drawn from his face. He leans closer to Shiro, grabbing tightly onto him. “Fight it.”

“I am,” Shiro whispers back, his mouth twisting as his face crumples with sadness. He puts his hands over Keith’s and holds him there. “But it’s getting worse....”

“I’ll think of something,” Keith says quickly. “I can go out right now and get more electronics for the time being and then.”

“Keith.” Shiro says softly. “Please.”

Keith watches Shiro’s face. The darkness that wasn’t there in the beginning, even as he ran through the halls, desperately begging for help. The weariness that plagues him. And still, Keith is
dying to beg of him, *don’t go*. Instead, he says, “…I just got you back.”

Shiro whispers again. “I’m... I’m okay right now. But I think it’s important that you understand now, in this moment, that we don’t have forever... I wish we did. But our time is limited.”

Keith leans forward even more, ignoring the way his hip joint protests. He slips his hand down Shiro’s chest, to the mark that’s there - his. “This can’t all be an accident.” He says, looking up at Shiro firmly. “Me being able to see you. This mark somehow finding its way to you. This isn’t how it ends.”

“I never thought it was an accident. What we’ve accomplished together has been amazing. But whatever happens, I want you to be prepared for it. You mean a lot to me and you’ve done so much for me. I don’t want it to crush you... I just wish I could give back.”

Keith lets out a sharp breath. “…Shiro, you’ve been my friend. ...That means the world to me.”

Shiro laughs softly, turning down at their hands clasped together.

Shiro looks at Keith. Really looks at him. He presses his lips together and lets the moment wash over them. He leans forward and brushes the hair from Keith’s face. “…Hey, since you didn’t listen to my last final wish does that mean that I get another one?”

Keith manages a weary crooked smile. “How many final wishes do you get?”

“That’s not fair. You didn’t listen to my last one.”

Keith chuckles lowly, shrugging. “…Depends on what it is you want.”

“I want to forget about all this. Haggar. Bodies. Doom and gloom. I just want to hang out with you. Two days. One will be mine and one will be yours. You can continue whatever it is you want to continue after that...but just this weekend...let's just...be together.”

Keith thinks about it. “Hmmmm...”

“Come on,” Shiro laughs, shoving two fingers into Keith’s face. “Two days. That’s all I want.”

Keith smiles over at him, grabbing his fingers in his hand. “I think we can do that.”


“Oh, my god,” Keith laughs. “It’s like you’re making up for lost time.”

“Well, you got all the Divine Beasts, but I never got to see you defeat the final boss. I need to know.”

Keith laughs. “That’s fair. Hey, we could tape my hands to your hands and it can be like you’re playing.”

Shiro snorts as he laughs, pressing his hands into his face. “That’s either the most ridiculous idea I’ve ever heard or the most genius. Okay. What are we doing on your day?”

“Tomorrow’s supposed to be clear for once,” Keith says. “…I want to draw you, but the lighting’s bad in here.”

“I wonder why.” Shiro flicks his eyes to the boards still plastered over the window. “You really thought the boards would help your parents think you’re not crazy?”
Keith smiles and pinches Shiro’s nose. “Anyway, there’s that hill in Northside. There’s a field behind it. I think...let’s go there.”

“Like a picnic,” Shiro hums happily.

“Yeah,” Keith says quietly. “Just like a picnic. You and me.”

“Mkay,” Shiro whispers. “Let’s do it.”

So they do it. Keith gives Shiro his day and they laze around on Keith’s bed all Saturday. Keith sits in Shiro’s lap, leaning back against his chest and letting Shiro grab his hands in his to use them to play. It’s not really as hard as Keith thought it’d be, but Shiro’s not quite as good as Keith thought he’d be either, and all he does in video games is die. Keith finds this hilarious and apparently his laughter is infectious, because Shiro can’t stop laughing. So really, instead of getting anywhere in their game, they spend the entire day laughing. And that’s just fine.

Sunday is Keith’s day. After a night of content healing sleep bundled against Shiro’s chest, held close, Keith is more inspired than ever. They huddle on that hill, blanket spread out.

Keith paints the surroundings first, those wide rich yellow fields against the moody dark blues of the sky, but then he starts painting Shiro because he can’t get enough of that. Never will be able to.

“Tell me your dreams,” Keith whispers as he looks up from his board. “I want to know everything.”

Shiro laughs softly, looking down at his hands laced lightly in his lap. “It won’t hurt you?”

Keith doesn’t lie. “I want to know...”

“Well,” Shiro hums into the wind, considering. He seeks out the sky, eyes scoping out the curves of the clouds, the splotches of the sea-like deepness painted through the white. “I’m afraid it’s never been too exciting. I just wanted what everyone else wants, I suppose.”

“And what’s that?”

“A future. A family. My grandfather, he... He was a big part of my life. I wanted to be like him one day. He married the one he loved most, he had kids with her, and then they had kids. And that was me,” Shiro whispers, tossing a smile at Keith. “And he loved us...so much. He gave it his all to guide us, to make sure we knew we were cared for and loved and had someplace to go if we ever needed it.

“...My grandmother, she loved lilacs. So when she died, that’s all he ever wanted to surround himself with. And I sort of followed suit. They got married when the lilacs bloomed... He would always pluck off just a few and weave them through her hair. They would clip the flowers and always have it sitting on their table, right where the sun peered through the window. ...I guess - I guess that’s what I wanted. Someplace I could feel comfortable. The flowers made me feel like he was still with me, even after he died.” He’s silent for awhile. “I thought I’d follow his footsteps: go to college, get a nice job, get married - with lilacs, of course -”

“-Of course,” Keith chuckles softly, watching Shiro’s face as it warms.

“And then...yeah. Kids. Grandkids. I don’t know. I thought it’d all sort itself out.”
Keith hums, looking out at the same sky Shiro watches.

“What about you?” He asks, turning to Keith.

“Honestly?” Keith sighs. “...I never allowed myself to dare to dream. I’ve felt broken and useless for so long...what could ever be done with my life? These fucked up pieces?”

“That’s not true, Keith,” Shiro whispers. “There’s nothing further from the truth.”

Keith smiles over at him. “You know...for the first time in my life, I... Maybe you’re right,” he murmurs.

Shiro looks up at Keith and reaches over. He leans up, off his elbows, and cups Keith’s face with his hands. Softly, he asks, “...can I kiss you?”

Keith’s smile grows warmer as he looks down into Shiro’s kind face. There’s no one else he’d allow. No one else he’d want. “...Of course.”

And so they do.

Keith’s face is pressed into his pillow and he’s warm and soft and comfortable when the door rings.

Keith groans.

“Door, Keith,” Shiro hums lowly, brushing his hands through Keith’s hair slowly.

“Mmf... Maybe if I ignore them, they’ll go away.”

“Delivery maybe?”

“God, I hope so.”

The door stops ringing and Keith sighs in relief, rolling sluggishly off his stomach and collapsing back onto the pillows. He lies there for a moment, basically purring at the feeling of Shiro running his hands through his hair. He turns up a smile to Shiro. “I still need to take a shower.”

“You really do. That smoke smell never seems to leave you.”

“I’ve been using the soap sparingly because my scalp is all ugh. You know, it hurts getting dragged by your hair. Maybe I’ll cut it all off.”

“No one will be able to recognize you.”

“No one will be able to drag me either.”

Shiro begins to laugh.

“Drag you?” Pidge asks and Keith jumps.

“Oh! Pidge! Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

“...You didn’t answer, so I used the key under the mat. You didn’t hear my texts or calls all weekend either, I assume?”
He lets out a small groan, grabbing the fried phone and tossing it to her. “It’s dead. Like, beyond dead. Charging won’t help it.”

“I’ll fix it,” she says, giving it a few jabs and frowns before shoving it in her pocket for later. “I guess that’s a good excuse for today... Talking to your cat again? You must be lonely.”

Keith stretches his weary back out. “Red makes for good company. What’re you doing here?”

“Oh...” He looks around like suddenly the date will appear to him. “Wow, already, huh...? The weekend went by so quickly...”

“Did it? I wouldn’t know. I was too busy worrying over you when you didn’t return my calls. I had to hear about you through your mom again. Where did you go? She said you were out painting somewhere. I could’ve gone with you...”

Keith pushes his bangs away from his face as reality slowly starts coming back into focus. God, he forgets everything whenever Shiro’s in his sight. “Pidge, I’m sorry, I...I should’ve called. Time got away from me. Here, let me get my clothes and brush my teeth and...” He scrambles around the room, looking to Shiro, who smiles faintly.

Pidge sighs. Her face is grudging. “I’ll go wait in the car and try to fix your phone while you get ready.”

“Pidge, come on, don’t get like that. I’m not trying to avoid you or anything, okay? Just...some stuff happened and I got distracted. I’m a mess lately.”

“I know,” she says softly. She catches sight of the sketchbook on his bed, sprawled open carelessly.


“Oh -” Keith gasps, a small sound in the back of his throat and that’s all it takes.

Pidge blinks over innocently and when she realizes the rejection in his posture, she tenses just slightly. She’s too far to see the sketchbook. She hadn’t even been moving toward it. They’d both jumped the gun.

They all just stand there in silence. She forces out a laugh but there’s no humor to it. It’s stiff and uncomfortable. “Another porn sketchbook?”

He presses his lips together. Doesn’t know what to say. He should play it off as a joke, he knows this, but the guilt is too high in his throat and he’s never been one to lie to her. It just doesn’t come easily. So the truth is there instead, written across his face guiltily: rejection.

Hurt stabs through her expression and she pulls back, her eyes dimming in innocent confusion. “…Sorry,” she mumbles, taking a small step back and shoving her hands back into her pockets. “We’ll be in the car.”

She can’t see those images of Shiro. There’s nothing to say. “Okay, Pidge,” he whispers.
But she doesn’t leave. She rolls onto the back of her feet and gazes unhappily at the bed, her eyes distant. “Keith...” she says as he digs through his backpack to check for his wallet. “...Are we alright...?”

He blinks up in surprise. “Like...fighting or something?”

“Like...should I even be here right now? Is it okay with you?” She keeps her face neutral, steady, but that’s why it’s so concerning.

He stares. “You’re my best friend.”

“I’m your only friend,” she murmurs. “There’s a difference.”

“Yeah? Lance and Hunk are just pond scum?” He blows out in exasperation. “It’s been one weekend, okay? I just...needed to collect my thoughts. Have some time to myself. But that doesn’t mean anything. We’ve been side-by-side for how long? Our parents used to think we’d get married. Shouldn’t that tell you enough?”

“No, I know, but don’t insult me like this. Not just this weekend. I know something’s up with you and I know you’re not telling me. I’ve been trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, but...” She fiddles with the bottom of her jacket. “…I mean, are you ever going to tell me what’s going on with you? I thought you trusted me...”

Keith bites his lip. “A lot of shit’s been happening lately. They just found Shiro’s murderer the other day.”

“Don’t. Maybe that works on other people, but not - me. It’s beyond that. You’ve been like this. You’re being so shifty. I’m afraid you’re doing something you shouldn’t be doing.”

“Pidge, I’m fine -”

“-Just tell me, Keith. I won’t betray your trust. I promise I won’t tell anyone, not even Matt. Just let me in. Haven’t I given you enough space by now?”

The pleading in her voice hurts him.

He turns to Shiro and takes in his look.

It’s sticky. It’s complicated. How can he tell Pidge everything that’s happened? How much he’s willing to do and throw away for Shiro, who he didn’t even know a few weeks ago?

Keith’s always been so closed off from everyone. Lance still hasn’t seen his room and they’ve been friends for years. Even if she believed the bit about the ghosts, she’d never believe the story.

“Can you wait?” He whispers, letting his eyes fall down.

“Wait...” She mutters lowly. “For how long, Keith?”

“I don’t know. ...Probably not long. But I just...I can’t right now. I’m sorry. You know I care about you, Pidge.”

“...I know, Keith.” She sighs, shifting her glasses on her face. “And I care about you. It’s why I’m so worried.”

“Don’t be. I’m fine.”
She watches him for a moment longer with a look in her eyes before she steps back and out of his room. “Fine.”

Keith sighs, grabs his crutches, and follows her down the stairs.

“What’s taking you guys?” Matt grumbles from downstairs. He’s wearing a denim jacket and swinging his keys around his finger. “We’re going to be late.”

“Sorry, Matt,” Keith huffs. “I forgot it was Monday. I just woke up.”

Matt takes a look at him, laughing slightly as he pauses to see Keith’s hair sticking up on end. “Looks like it. You can take more time if you need.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m probably just going to sleep all throughout class and mess it up anyway.”

Matt laughs at that again, but Pidge is in a foul mood, so she just waits by the door, arms crossed and kicking her feet against the rug’s edge.

Keith slips his shoes on and they’re off.

It’s nice, being in the back seat together. Keith and Shiro. Almost like they’re a couple or something, going out on a date with their friends.

Keith realizes that this is exactly how it could be. He’s best friends with Pidge and Shiro is close with Matt. He kind of wonders how it hadn’t happened before, how their two paths hadn’t crossed. The most he saw was glimpses of Shiro and Matt laughing in Matt’s room together. He wasn’t social then either.

The proximity now is effortless and seems necessary. Their last few days together and they’re still just pushed along by the current of life. Keith wishes he had been quick enough to avoid this excursion - just wants to have time with Shiro all day to himself - but this is nice too. Just sitting side by side, being lulled into comfort by the sound of the car humming along the road, the scenery passing them by in blurs of color. Keith leans into Shiro and Shiro leans into Keith.

Pidge’s usual chatter is absent though.

Matt notices the silence. He frowns into it for a little while before going, “what gives? You two never fight.”

“We’re not fighting,” Pidge grudges.

“...We’re not fighting.” Keith confirms softly.

Matt says, “Okaaay. Well, I guess it’s none of my business.”

It goes back to silence for a few moments and Keith thinks that’ll be the end of it when Pidge says, “Keith is free to do whatever he wants. I’m not his mom.”

“Oh...” Matt hums knowingly.

Keith tries to keep his voice gentle. “Pidge, it’s been two days -”

She jerks around in her seat to glare at him. “-It’s not just about these two days! At the homecoming, when you were in the hallway and you were ‘smoking’. *Smoking? Do you think I’m stupid? Or the windows. What was that about? Or Lotor! Where are you getting this info from? I heard that you climbed the cell tower. Several people confirmed it. Were you really
stupid enough to do that? Normally, I wouldn’t have believed it, only you’ve been so -” She reels it all in mid-sentence, pressing her fingers into the knot forming on her forehead. She looks at his face, eyebrows raised, asking a very clear, well?

He cringes guiltily and she spots her answer.

“Okay, wow. Wow, you did that. Of course you did. Whatever, Keith. Whatever. You can do whatever you want obviously. I’m just... I thought when this was all over, you’d at least tell me. And they found Haggar and her house is burnt down and it’s done, you said yourself that it was done, he’s in his grave, annd you’re still just the same sneaking around doing god knows what, ignoring me and lying to me when you’ve never once been like this in your entire life. I thought we were over this. I was just so ready for this to all be over. God.”

Keith looks down at his and Shiro’s hands. He’s quiet for awhile. “...I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“The truth.”

He’s quiet. “Pidge, I’m sorry.”

She just shakes her head into her hand. “It’s fine, Keith...”

Matt pulls up into his parking spot and she opens the door before he’s even fully in gear, slamming the door behind her.

Keith and Matt sit in silence. Shiro runs his thumb over Keith’s hand comfortably.

Matt says, “Uh...Keith. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...you know, start something. I was just curious. I don’t know why I didn’t think...”

Keith shakes his head. “No, it’s my fault. Sorry, Matt. I’ll try to fix things.”

“Don’t worry so much. Katie loves you to death. You know she’d forgive you for anything. Just...be careful. Whatever you’re doing. We all care about you.”

“Yeah,” Keith breathes, heaving himself out of the car and taking a moment to catch his breath. The month’s starting to really take its toll on him. He rubs at his face as he closes the door shut after Shiro.

“God,” he says, looking toward the gates of their school, a walk he usually takes with Pidge. She’s gone, blazed ahead. “I can't remember the last time Pidge was mad at me.”

Matt laughs. “I think it was that time you accidentally broke her copy of Final Fantasy VII.”

“Oh, my god, you’re right,” Keith whispers. “The original version.”

Matt snorts.

Pidge is already in her seat during English class, doodling in her book with a somber cloud over her head.

Keith bumps his knuckles on her desk as he passes by and whispers a, “hey, Pidge,” but keeps going.

She mutters a low, “hey, Keith,” so he guesses they’re not on too bad of terms.
He goes to sit down, Shiro taking a spot on top of his desk, when someone pops up from their seat and hurries over. “Hey,” the guy says to him, getting in his face.

He immediately tenses. He doesn’t like people he doesn’t know, he doesn’t like confrontation, he wants this random guy out of his face immediately. He sees Pidge put her pencil down and look up from her seat, ready to come to his aid if he needs it.

“Thank you,” they say breathlessly, bowing slightly. “It’s all thanks to you. You’re so brave. I won’t tell anyone you did it.”

He stares at him blankly. “…What?”

The guy winks at him like they’re sharing a deep dark secret together. Keith doesn’t even know his name. The stranger turns to go sit back down.

Okay, that was weird. Keith’s ready to brush it off as someone just finally cracking beneath all the news lately, when the girl sitting next to Keith brushes her long hair carefully behind her shoulder and leans forward. “Really. It’s amazing what you did,” she says lowly, chewing around her gum. “That freak deserved it.”

His stomach sinks. “…What are you talking about...?”

She laughs and leans back into her seat. “It’s okay. You’re not going to get in trouble. Why would you?”

Keith turns his gaze to Pidge who shrugs and shakes her head, equally as confused.

He gets it all throughout the school day. People he doesn’t know patting him on the back, congratulating him, winking at him. He can’t get away from it. “Keith did it,” he hears. “He uncovered the truth. It was him.”

Shiro says lowly, eyes sharp as he watches everyone around them, “…Someone must’ve told them you burned the house down.”

“…But...who?”

“I don’t know...”

“And why...?” Keith says, carefully avoiding a group of people who have locked their sight onto them. He just wants to go home. He doesn’t like the attention. It feels like a death sentence somehow.

“Uh, hey,” Lance says, snatching him up from behind, tossing his arm over his shoulders. They’re in the hall still. “What the hell? You lit Haggar’s house on fire?”

Keith tsks and elbows Lance off of him, trying to get his balance back. “No.”

Lance raises his eyebrow at him. “…Everyone’s saying you did it. Someone saw you.”

“What?! Who?!”

“I...don’t know? It’s a rumor? I can ask around?”

“Please, if you can find out who... I didn’t do it. No one believes me. Everyone thinks I’m joking when I try to deny it.”
Lance starts laughing, head tossed back.

“I’m not kidding!” Keith says.

“For real?” He finds it hilarious. “You really didn’t do it?”

“No! I’m so confused!”


“The kid in my science class says you did,” Pidge says to Keith, voice sharp with accusation. “He says he saw you with his own two eyes. And then my dad just called. He said he found your crutches - you know, the nice ones? - in the debris in the house.”

Keith’s used to her animosity, just not turned on him. He stares at her incredulously. “I... I must’ve dropped them when I fell off the trellis...”

“I thought you said you dropped it in the grave.”

“I don’t know! I was flustered running from that psycho. I don’t remember all the details.”

She shakes her head darkly.

He steps forward into her space. “Pidge. I was right there with you at the formal. I didn’t burn down Haggar’s house. How could I have when we were together? I promise I didn’t do it.”

She holds his gaze for a moment before flicking her eyes away angrily. “...Yeah...you just took a half hour ‘smoking’ break.”

His stomach drops.

“God,” Shiro whispers. “...Keith, you’ve got to tell her.”

Keith shakes his head. She won’t believe him. “Pidge. Pidge, I swear. You have to believe me.”

“Okay,” she says, holding her hands up, but her face is tired. “Right. You swear. You’re a smoker now. Right. Smokers light their pants on fire all the time. ...Let’s just eat. I’m tired of today.”

They eat in silence. Even Lance, sensing discord, scoots to the other side of the table and starts chatting it up with Nyma.

Keith’s food is dry in his mouth as he tries to chew it. It goes down like chalk. It’s cold and he’s uncomfortable and people keep giving him looks from across campus, winking or giving him the thumbs up.

Keith shoves his face into his hand and groans, trying to block it all out.

Hunk is brave enough to try to start a benign conversation between the three of them. “So my mom wants to get a dog, you know, so if any intruder comes, we’ll have some protection. Look at this. A German Shepherd/Golden Retriever mix. Isn’t he the cutest little puppy?”

Keith pulls his hand down and looks over. “Oh, wow, you’re not kidding. What a gorgeous dog. What’ll you name him?”
“You know, I’m not sure yet. My mom says I can name him whatever but that seems like way too much responsibility. What if he doesn’t like it?”

“I’m sure he won’t care...” Keith laughs softly, eyebrow cocked. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Not yet. What about you guys?”

“I’m bad at names. Hence, Red, my cat.”

Hunk laughs. “Oh, man, yeah, I don’t want to do that. You’ll name him Yellow or something.”

Keith looks over at Pidge, who’s staring hard at something in the distance. He thinks maybe he’ll try. Softly, he asks, “...Pidge, any ideas?”

Her sharp glance cuts right through him. “You know? I just... I won’t be mad,” she says. “If you did it. Why would I be mad? I wouldn’t tell my dad, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

His jaw drops. “Are you seriously thinking I did it? Pidge. I’d tell you.”

“Yeah, you used to tell me everything. But now you’re all... You’re all -” She tosses her hand at him.

“I can’t believe you’re believing a stupid high school rumor about me!” Keith says, leaning forward and tossing his hand in the air. “You of everyone hates dumb high school rumors. Why would I lie?”

Pidge grips onto the side of the table and shoves herself forward. “Then what were you doing the other night? Why were your pants burnt?”

“Oh, man...” Hunk murmurs lowly, scooting over a bit, shoulders high.

“I -” Keith’s a shitty liar. He shakes his head vehemently. “I wasn’t lighting Haggar’s house on fire, that’s for sure! How could I have run there and back that fast? I can’t even walk! It makes no sense!”

“Just tell me. Just tell me, Keith! You were a huge mess that day and you smelled like smoke. The whole hallway did! And it wasn’t cigarette smoke, so don’t even try that again. Everyone else seems to know more about you than I do! You’re my best friend. I tell you everything! I even told you about what happened to me in science class in eighth grade! Everything! You know everything. I just... I thought you felt the same way for me too.”

“Pidge... Pidge, I do,” Keith whispers. “You’re my best friend too. We’re family, you know that, but I... I just...” He shakes his head and clenches his eyes shut tightly. “Pidge, please, don’t do this. All this shit with Shiro, I don’t want to fight with you too. I promise that I’ll tell you -”

“Eventually,” she cuts him off, shaking her head angrily. “Right? That’s what you’re going to say. I know you enough to know that much.” She stands and starts collecting her stuff with bitter sharp grabs, everything clanging and clattering in her backpack. “I’m going to go. I’ll get my dad to pick me up. Matt can drive you still.”

Keith scoffs, pressing his palms into his face and groaning softly. He pulls his hands back tiredly, shaking his head. So tired. “No. No, don’t bother your dad. I’ll get Acxa to do it.”

“She’s not going to agree and then you’ll have to walk home. Haggar caught or not, I don’t want you walking home alone. Have Matt drive you.”
“No. He’s your brother and I have a sister. Acxa will do it.”

“When has she ever - ”

“It’s not your problem-”

“-Of course it’s my problem!”

“I’m not a baby. I can deal with things myself. You always do this!”

“Well, if you would just - ”

“- Oh, my god,” Lance calls from the other end. “You two stop fighting. I’ll drive him back home myself. You drive with Matt,” Lance says, pointing to Pidge. “And you, drive with me,” he says, pointing to Keith.

Pidge looks over at Lance, thinks about whether she trusts Lance enough with that task and eventually nods her head. “Okay. Okay, good. See you later.” She pauses, turns back as she fishes in her pocket and passes Keith’s phone back to him. “I fixed it for you in class. It’s fine now.”

Even the crack through the screen is fixed. How the hell...? Keith rubs out the tension from his temple. “…Thanks, Pidge.”

“Bye.”

He sighs and looks over at Hunk, who is smiling hesitantly back at him. “Fights happen,” Hunk shrugs. “It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Keith sighs. “I know.”

“Honestly,” Lance says, “I dunno if I’ve ever seen the two of you fight.”

“Final Fantasy VII,” Keith grumbles.

Lance snorts into his soda. “Oh, yeah. She almost murdered you.”

Lance starts talking loudly as Keith looks out and away. Shiro sits on the table beside him, swinging his feet, looking with him.

“I don’t feel right about any of this...” Shiro murmurs. “Something feels...off.”

Keith give a small uneasy nod. “Like a mouse trapped in a corner...” he murmurs into his hand. He scans the crowd. His eyes fall on Lotor.

“It’s weird,” Keith says aloud, voice thoughtful. “Lotor was so peppy at first, after Shiro went missing. And now, he’s all...depressed.”

“His best friend died,” Hunk draws the words out slowly for Keith.

“...But, the car, the sparkles.”

“It was almost like he was overcompensating,” Shiro says. “It’s like him.”

“He was acting weird at the dance. He looks...” Keith keeps staring. “…Like the weight of the world is on his shoulders.”
“Hm,” Hunk and Shiro murmur.

Keith gets to his feet, sighing as he grabs his crutches. He slowly makes his way over to Lotor, who, upon seeing Keith, narrows his eyes defensively.

“What do you want?” Lotor asks, one tone down from ferocity. “You already have all you want, don’t you? Since you were the one who burned down Haggar’s home, as the story goes.”

Keith shakes his head. “I didn’t do it.”

“Sure,” he rolls his eyes, slipping off the hood of his car. He disengages from his friend’s group and walks off to the side, where they’re alone. “So. Tell me. What are you onto next? Or have you finally found peace?”

“I just...” Keith doesn’t know what he’s doing here. Talking to Lotor, who he already thinks didn’t do it. He bites his lip. “...I just feel like... This isn’t the right justice.”

Lotor fixes a hard stare at him. “What’s that supposed to mean? You think Haggar’s innocent?”

“I think something’s not right,” Keith allows. “Something’s telling me there’s more.”

“...That’s great. And what do I have to do with it? I thought you had cleared me from your list.”

Lotor pushes his hair back, tilting his head to the side.

Keith’s eye catches ahold of something: there are bruises on his neck. They’re discreet, hidden beneath the collar of his shirt and several layers of makeup. But it’s not enough. Keith’s eyes are trained to notice things. The colors on his neck are wrong, uneven.

Keith stares at them. Some are yellowing. Some look darker, newer. But they all look violent... The long sleeves. The dark circles under his eyes. The burnt out glare, more moody than usual.

“Well?” Lotor arches an eyebrow at him. “Where do you go when you drift off, hm? Must be nice to let your thoughts wander every two seconds...”

Keith takes a deep breath, peering out into the trees that probably have buried so many secrets beneath their shadows and roots. He presses his lips together tightly. “...Do you know something?”

Lotor rolls his eyes. “The police have already questioned me. ...And so have you.”

“I know,” Keith says. “I know, but I just... Shiro was your best friend. It always seemed strange to me - the two of you. But you meant a lot to him. He defended you when no one else would. He always believed in you. That means something.”

“...What?” Lotor narrows his eyes, but there’s emotion deep within them. Uneasiness.

“He’s a good person,” Keith says. “Everyone thinks this is it, that it’s over, but is it right to stop now? Will it be right by Shiro to stop now...?”

“...He would want you to stop.”

“Can I still help him?” Keith whispers.

Lotor is silent. Still. Keith can feel the wind spilling from over the trees and into their school, soft and gentle. Bringing its sharp cold.
“Can you still help him?” Keith holds Lotor’s gaze.

His lips part.

“What are you doing?” A gruff voice says from behind. Keith turns, heart stopping in his chest.

Zarkon’s there - a shadow looming over them. His arms are crossed as he glares down at the both of them. His shadows swallows them whole, blotting out the light.

Lotor’s mouth pulls down and he says, lowly, almost a snarl, “we were just talking.”

“About what?”

“About how wonderful it is now that Haggar’s homeless. Now we get to see her shrines all over the road.”


Lotor gives Keith a brief confused glance. “...That was it. Someone’s spread a dumb rumor about him around. He was wondering if I knew who did it, but I don’t, so that’s that.”

Zarkon narrows his eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Lotor puts his hands up. “I won’t fraternize with the enemy anymore. He’s not that interesting anyway.”

Zarkon fixes his gaze on Keith.

Keith tries to force himself to breathe.

His voice is deep and rough. “...Students aren’t allowed outside the gate.”

“S-sir...” Keith says faintly. But he can’t move. He thinks of that dream. Of falling. You tripped, they said.

Shiro puts his hand on the small of Keith’s back and nudges him along. “Come on,” he says softly. “You don’t want to get in trouble.”

Keith swallows hard and moves, automatic. Pained. Only when they’re away from everyone, in the field by the lake, can he finally breathe again. He walks over to a nice willow tree, taking cover beneath its sanctuary. He slides down the trunks and sits for awhile, tossing his crutches to the side.

Shiro’s quiet as he stands beside Keith, leaning against the tree and looking out.

“What was that about?” He finally asks.

“...I... Something’s not right. Don’t you feel it?” Keith knows that's not what Shiro was asking.

Shiro frowns at the deflection, but he doesn't push. He resigns himself with a low sigh. “…Lotor seemed off.”

“He knows something. Did you see those bruises on him?”

“Yeah,” Shiro says quietly.
Keith licks his lips as he thinks. “What if... Do you think-?” He swallows hard. “Pidge checked his house for windows... she said it was fine, but...” Keith swallows hard. “It's been different between us lately. She’s been keeping things from me too...”

He bites at his lip until it bleeds. “Shiro. What if it wasn’t Haggar?”

Shiro doesn’t respond, just keeps staring out at the dark clouds that meld and deepen into dark blue across the horizon.

“What if it was Zarkon?”

Shiro inhales sharply. He holds onto his stomach and closes his eyes. He looks like he’s in pain. “He’s known me since I was a baby. Like you are to the Holts, I am to Lotor’s family.”

“Shiro, I know you. You believe in the best in everyone. And I’ll admit, I used to think there was good in Zarkon too, but... he’s changed since his wife died. Honerva meant everything to him. Now, he’s just a twisted horrible snake. Zarkon lies. That’s what he does. He was smiling the day Haggar’s place was burning and everyone said she did it. Lotor was watching him with this strange look on his face and he was smiling...”

“He’s... different, but to kill me...?” Shiro’s shaking his head. "Why?"

Keith stares off into the distance, thinking. “Look. I don’t want to do this either... But if he knows something...” Keith trails off, conflicted. “I’ll just... go in there. Ask Lotor -”

“- You can’t ask Lotor. Say Zarkon did do it and he’s stuffed me in the shed, Lotor has to have known.”

“Then we’ll bypass Lotor and I’ll check the shed directly.”

“Keith, no.”

“Well, you just said that you were like family to them. You must’ve been over there a lot. You can’t remember the shape of the window on their shed?”

“I don’t know... It’s not like I went around trying to memorize window shapes. A shed’s a shed, the most boring thing on a property. I’m not as observant as you.”

“But you said family. That you guys were like family. How long has that shed been there?”

Shiro huffs out an irritated breath. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Keith. Please. Let’s not start. Haven’t you fought enough today? It’s over, okay? The police say it’s Haggar, so let’s just trust them. It’s okay to trust others sometimes.”

“No. They said that body in the lake was yours too and it was, in fact, not.”

“So they made one mistake -”

“- What if they made two?” Keith says lowly. "I'm not betting your life on it."

“**Keith.** Yesterday was fun, wasn’t it? And the day before? Can’t we just enjoy each other’s company where you’re safe and out of harm’s way?”

“If Zarkon didn’t do it, then there will be no harm. But if he did, then we will find you.”

Shiro grits his teeth, cringing and shaking his head. His voice is pained. “Keith, we’ve gone over
“I don’t care -”

“- I’m already dead!”

“You’re not! You’re right here!”

“I’m a ghost, Keith! I’m a ghost and my body’s been missing for weeks. If I’m not already being picked apart by bugs, I’m sure as hell not doing so well, so just stop! You have to give me up! I’m not going to last -!”

It’s sudden. One second, Shiro’s trying to argue with Keith, the next, he’s rendered with pain, clutching at his chest like he’s caught by a heart attack. His eyes go wide. His whole body tenses and he hunches over, falling heavily into Keith’s arms. He breathes out, short and sporadic. He tries to say something, tries to force out words -

Next second, he’s gone. It’s like he’s pulled away, out of sight.

Keith draws himself up very straight, arms still out. He looks behind him, around, frantic.

“Shiro?” He breathes. “Shiro!”

But all there is is the wind.

The lights a few feet away shatter and are snuffed out. Glass falls and, suddenly, Shiro’s back again, panting, clutching at his chest, kneeling right over Keith. There’s that frazzled look in his eyes that was there when Keith first met him, running through the halls and sobbing. It’s a little bit more resigned. A little bit more hopeless. But still so scared.

Keith had been terrified and lost back then during their first day together, but it somehow feels so much worse this time as he looks at Shiro’s shaken white face. Now he knows Shiro. Now it’s personal. And he’s just as helpless as back then, maybe more.

“It’s getting harder to come back,” Shiro whispers, swallowing hard. There’s real horror there.

Keith softly puts his hand on Shiro’s cheek and lets him lean against it. He does not make promises that he can fix this, because maybe he can’t. Maybe this will just keep happening, slowly getting worse each time until he just...disappears for good.

Shiro slides his cheeks across Keith’s hand and kisses his palm. “So warm,” he breathes into it, letting himself fall into Keith.

Keith holds him tightly.

“Welcome back,” Keith whispers, slowly weaving his other fingers into Shiro’s hair. “...I’m sorry for yelling.”

Shiro nods quickly, swallowing hard. “Yeah... Yeah, me too.”

He wraps his arms around Keith’s waist and leans there, pressing his face into Keith’s chest. Keith lets him, holding him gently, running his fingers along Shiro’s shoulders, up over his neck, along his scalp through his hair.

Keith presses his lips together and asks softly. “...Are you still having the dreams?”
Shiro inhales softly, breath fluttering Keith’s shirt. “I don’t sleep.”

“You know what I mean. Are you still seeing the triangle?”

“...It’s less and less lately, but...yeah. I still see it. I saw it this morning.”

“Then you’re still alive.”

“We don’t know that. And the risks, Keith -”

“I’m willing to take them. Look, you’re worried about my safety? Well, I’m worried about yours. Shiro... I know you want me to have a future. ...I want you to have one too. That’s all I want. So please, just...let me try.”

Shiro’s silent as they lie together.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” Keith says. “I’m going to Zarkon’s. Today.”

Shiro sighs, rubbing his hand across his face. He lets out a weary laugh and looks up at Keith’s face. “...Don’t want to continue fighting as long as you have the last word?”

Keith flicks his gaze to him, sees Shiro watching him, smile on his face and genuine jest in his eyes, even though they’re dark, even though they’re weary. Keith allows a little chuckle. “...Pretty much.”

“It’s just in your nature.”

“Pretty much,” Keith laughs, pressing his hand onto Shiro’s face to quiet him. “Will you come with me?” he asks. “...You don’t have to.”

“You know I will,” Shiro whispers around his fingers as Keith pulls them back. Shiro leans forward and presses a kiss to Keith’s hands.

Keith leans down to gather Shiro in his arms, helping him to his feet and they both toss their arms around each other tightly. They can’t take any moment together for granted.

They smile fondly at each other and though it’s cold, somehow, together, they feel warm.

“What’s the passcode again?” Keith asks after school, running his fingers over the buttons in front of Lotor’s house.

“Um...” Shiro breathes out slowly as he scratches his head. “...God, why can’t I think of it? I’ve known it since forever... Um. 612...”

Shiro pauses. Blinks. His face pinches as his mind blanks on him.

Keith waits patiently. “I think there was a 32 in there.”

“Right. 612...32...” He presses his lips together and runs his finger over his chin. “...It’s literally been the same password since I was a kid. I’ve done it a million times.” He steps in front of the keypad and stares bullets into it. “...612...32...25...8?”

Keith tries it and it blinks red.
“Oh,” Shiro breathes out. “Get it wrong three times and the police are notified.”

“The police. Wow.”

“Okay,” Shiro says, nodding to himself as he thinks. “612322589.”

“You sure?” Keith raises an eyebrow.

“I... Yes? It sounds right. Try it.”

Red light again.

“Shit,” Keith breathes out. He looks up at the fence in dismay. He can’t climb that.

“Keith, I’m sorry. I swear I wasn’t trying to sabotage your trip inside.”

“Now that you gave me a reason, I’m suspicious,” Keith chuckles, giving one last sad look at the gate. “I’m just kidding. It’s fine. We’ll find another way in.”

“There’s a panel in the back that you can sneak through.”

“We can work with that. Where is it?”

“Um...over here...” They walk along the side of the house and Shiro begins to frown as he looks at all the panels.

Keith takes in a deep breath to stop himself from worrying. He can see the fear building on Shiro’s face as he digs through the depths of his memory, trying to find things that are slipping through his fingers.

“...Keith, I...”

“There are so many panels,” Keith says. “And they all look the same. How is anyone supposed to remember?”

“...I used to know it,” Shiro whispers.

“Well,” Keith says, lifting a crutch to hit it against a panel. “Let’s rediscover it.”

“Don’t,” Shiro says quickly, going tense. He throws his hand out to stop Keith as he peers through a crack in the paneling. “...There’s someone out there. ...It looks like...Lotor... He’s close. Don’t talk.”

Keith lowers his crutch and frowns. They’ll never be able to go through them all, not at the rate Keith can go.

He looks up at how tall the fence is and deliberates.

Just then, his phone rings.

“Keith, the noise.”

Keith scrambles to toss a crutch away so he can answer the phone to stop the sound. He scoops his crutch up and hurries away from the fence. “H-hey?” he says into it.

“It’s me. It’s Pidge,” she says in a soft low voice. “...Did I catch you at a bad time?”
“Um.” Keith coughs into his sleeve, muffling the sound as best as he can. He’s shuffling through pine needles, kicking up dust and it’s messing with his allergies. “No, I’m good. You okay?”

“My dad came home. He says that the cause of the fire was due to some candles she had in her room. One tipped over and well... It was deemed an accident. ...I’m really sorry. About blaming you. About yelling. I’m sorry, Keith.”

“No, Pidge,” he says lowly. “You don’t need to apologize. I know I’ve been frustrating lately. I’m the one who’s sorry. I swear, things will right themselves soon. I promise.”

“I don’t know why everything’s getting to me,” she says quietly. “I just feel like...you’re in trouble somehow and I have this bad feeling taking residence in my chest, like I’m going to lose you. Like if I don’t do something and quick, you’re going to get seriously hurt. I want to help you, but it seems like whenever I take any sort of step toward you, you take three away from me...”

“Keith,” Shiro whispers harshly. “Put the phone away.”

He can hear someone on the other side of the fence, feet away.

“Pidge,” Keith whispers into the receiver. “God. I’m so sorry. I can’t talk right now. I’ve got to call you back. I’ll call you -”

“Keith!”

“O-okay,” Pidge says on the other end.

Keith grimaces and hangs up.

“Lotor’s right on the other side,” Shiro says lowly. “Don’t say anything. Don’t move.”

Keith can hear Lotor walking along the side of the fence line, probably sniffing the air.

“Hm?” Lotor answers someone, turning toward the house. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

When Lotor walks away and closes the door behind him, Shiro huffs, giving Keith a look. “That was reckless.”

“Pidge was calling,” Keith shrugs. “Was I supposed to just hang up on her?”

“It doesn't matter. He's gone anyway.”

Keith grins up at him, pushing himself back up.

“I can probably climb this fence, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t. Not unless you want a broken neck.”

“Ye of little faith,” Keith hums. He tosses his crutches over the top, ignoring the small scandalized gasp from Shiro, and jumps onto the side to propel himself up. He grabs onto the top of the fence and voila! Nothing to it.

His arms are actually pretty strong. They do most of the work that his leg refuses to do, so lifting himself up isn’t a huge deal. The rest of his body kind of is, though. He scrambles over it, not any part graceful. The only way to make it work is to roll himself over the top. He falls with a loud oomph that sounds less painful than it actually is.
He lays in the bushes for a moment, stunned. “Ow.”

“Keith,” Shiro agonises, already there, appearing through the wall. He hovers over Keith, blocking out the sky with his worried face.

“M fine. ...Probably.” His head pounds for a bit and then he peels himself up, rubbing at his face. His crutches are a few feet over.

Shiro, ever the gentleman, tries to get them anyway, but it’s no use.

“Shit,” Keith mutters, looking down at his leg. “Yeah. That was reckless…”

“You okay?” Shiro worries, kneeling beside him and placing a hand on his shoulder.

Keith sighs. “It’s fine.” He laughs as he comes up with another idea, “Maybe you can just carry me everywhere since you can’t touch anything else.”

“That would probably work…” Shiro says thoughtfully.

Keith laughs again. “I’m joking. I’m not that useless. Here, help me up though.”

Shiro grabs onto his hand and pulls him to his feet. Keith hobbles over to his crutches and groans as he picks them up.

He frowns, looking around the backyard. It’s more zen garden than murderous killer’s barren shack. There’s a golf course running through it. A creek with a koi fish pond on either end. There’s greenery Keith can hide in, but then again, it means there’s greenery other things can hide in too. “Lotor doesn’t have an attack dog, does he?”

“No. Just...watch out for Zarkon, Keith. I feel uneasy here.”

“I know.”

They look out across the lawn, to the other side, where their destination awaits. It’s nestled between some trees beside the golf course.

“The shed,” Shiro says softly, eyes flickering down to the ground, away from it. “…I don’t like this. It feels strange.”

Keith places a hand on Shiro’s arm. “I’ll go. Be my lookout.”

Imagining it is both a relief and a horror: a body. Shiro’s body. Motionless and in limbo maybe only a few feet from them. Eyes glazed over, clouded and empty. What if it’s not actually there? What if it is? Both situations sound horrifying.

“I’m not going to leave you,” Shiro whispers.

They stare at each other. Keith reaches for his hand. Wordlessly, Shiro grabs it back.

They begin their journey forward, walking through the pebbles, pushing through the maple trees. Keith lets out a shaky breath. “I was so eager to get here, but now that we’re just one wall away from what’s inside, I... It’s hard to want to move.”

Shiro nods slowly, staring ahead with Keith.

“Remember when we came to Lotor’s the first time and you said you felt strange? Do you still feel
strange now?” Keith whispers.

“...Maybe. I don’t want to call it a pull, because it... It sort of is. Subconsciously I feel like I should go there, but every bit of me wants to stay away. I don’t know if it’s just mental... But if it’s the same thing as before, it’s different. I feel...I don’t know. It’s weaker.”

“God... We should’ve come here before,” Keith mumbles.

They walk along the backside perimeter, out of sight from the back of the house. The shed gets closer. It’s large and grey. A nice shed in a nice yard, one you might expect to find organized and filled with shiny appliances. Not a body. Not Shiro’s body.

“If it’s there,” Shiro breathes, casting his eyes toward the glass house; it’s not that far away from where they are, all walls open. “What then? What will you do?”

Keith shakes his head, a little dazed at the thought alone. All this fixating on Shiro’s body...if he actually finds it...actually sees it with his own eyes... He stammers, “I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far. Call the police? Get you out somehow?”

“And if it’s not?”

“...Shiro. I don’t know.”

“It’s okay,” Shiro whispers, squeezing Keith’s arm. “It’s alright whatever we find out. Right?”

What if he’s dead? The thought flashes through Keith’s mind and he’s left trying to catch his breath. “...Right.” That body in the lake... What if he looks like that...?

“It’s okay, Keith,” Shiro whispers again, his voice shaking. “It’s alright.”

They’re there. Keith can touch his hand the side of it to help him balance. They walk alongside the edge of the shed, pushing past the tree’s obstinate branches. They cut Keith’s face, trying to hold him back as he pushes nearer.

He stops walking. And just... stares.

There, in the center of the shed’s side, is something he wasn’t sure if he wanted to see or not.

“Oh, no,” Keith whispers. “Oh, no. Pidge lied...”

It’s a window. The one they’ve been searching for.

“Oh...” Shiro’s breaths are coming in labored. “...A triangle.”

“Maybe it’s just a shed thing,” Keith says, feeling fear build in the pit of his stomach. He’s so scared. This is so much worse than anything he’s ever done. So much hangs on this moment. He steps over a large rock. Shiro holds out his hand to help him. But he’s shaking visibly. So hard his breathing’s impaired.

“The feeling’s back, Keith. I don’t think I can move. I don’t think I can see that -”

Keith reaches over to pat his hand as he disentangles his arm from Shiro’s. “Stay here,” Keith whispers. “I’ll look.”

Shiro’s so pale. His wide-eyes follow Keith’s face closely. “Okay... Okay, be careful.”
They’re only about a foot apart but Shiro is leaning forward like he’s about to dive and save Keith from whatever feeling is in the air.

Keith reaches out, pressing the tips of his fingers to the window’s edge. And he peers in.

“Keith. Keith, what is it? What do you see?”

He bites his lip. “I... It’s too dark. I don’t...”

It smells weird. The window’s totally shut, but...

He fumbles for the phone in his pocket, taking it out with shaking hands. He turns on the phone’s light, but doesn’t move it to the window. He stands there for a moment, trying to ground himself. One second. Two. Three. He’s so afraid. He thinks he might throw up.

He tosses the light up and aims it toward the window.

And freezes.

He feels it rising up within himself. This feeling of knots and oceans all weaving through his being, twisting it within every fiber of his spirit, trying to choke and pull him down.

He’s not sure what he actually wanted from this. He had been bulldozing his way through today, these past few weeks, hoping for...for something. But seeing this. Seeing this...

It’s not a body, it’s a bag. A large, human-sized bag and Keith knows. He just knows. He can make out the head. The chest. The legs. The arm. He might as well be seeing the body.

Shiro doesn’t ask. He stands there a foot width distance apart and just watches Keith’s face. And he knows that way.

Keith can’t breathe. He can’t breathe. He presses his fingers against the glass and just shakes. “Shiro,” he tries to say, but it’s all garbled. It’s all tight knotted pain and shock. “Shiro.”

“...Hey. Hey, I’m right here.” Shiro whispers, taking a few steps forward to grab onto Keith’s forearms. He pulls him away, helps him take a seat on the ground.

Keith keeps staring, wide-eyed into the floor, not really seeing, mind still caught up in that shed.


“It’s you,” he breathes, clinging to Shiro as hard as his hands will allow it. “He just tossed you in a bag like some...some... He just tossed you in a bag.” He turns, trying to claw his way to his feet. “I have to get to you. I have to get you out.”

“Keith! Be careful!”

But Keith is already running, tripping and stumbling without his crutches to the front of the shed, in plain view of their living room.

He feels his way to the door, but the lock is there, holding firm and strong. He tries to pull at it with all the emotion and turmoil in his heart, but it’s no use. Soft flesh doesn’t trump steel.

Keith kicks the door with all his might. It dents, but it doesn’t give.

“Keith,” Shiro yells, snatching him up by the waist and throwing him back into the side, beneath
the tree cover. “What are you doing? They’ll hear and they’ll come for you too! The police. The police. Call the police!”

Keith is shuddering. It feels less like shivers and more like a seizure and he’s scared, he’s so scared. He’s sick to his very core. How could anyone do this to another living thing? How could anyone hurt Shiro? Toss him in a bag and lock him away?

He’s fumbling. He can’t keep the phone in his hands. It keeps falling to the ground and Shiro can’t help. Keith’s sobbing and it’s completely out of control. That’s Shiro. It’s Shiro in there. And Shiro’s here, holding him, rocking him back and forth and muttering soft consoling words, but there’s tension and anxiousness in him too. It’s like two buzzing things trying to get the other to calm down and soften.

He feels like he’s in a nightmare trying to get his fingers to press into the right numbers, but he can’t. He keeps missing and missing and he has to start over again and again and time’s running out and he can’t even do this simple thing. He can’t do it.

"Calm down, Keith," Shiro’s whispering in his ear. "It's alright. I've got you."

"Mr. Holt!" He basically screams into the phone when he finally gets through.

“Keith, shhh!” Shiro begs in his ear.

He can hear the stunned silence for a split moment before Pidge’s dad says, voice firm and strong, "Keith? Calm down. Tell me what's wrong."


“Keith. Calm down. Where are you? Are you somewhere safe?”

“I’m...I’m in the backyard.”

“Okay. Listen to me. I’m coming right now. Is there a way you can get out of there safely?”

“No. I’m staying. He’s right here. I’m not leaving him.”

“Keith. Keith, listen. I’m five minutes away. I’m already turning around, okay? I want you to meet one of my officers at the front of Northside gate, got it? I need you to give them all the info you’ve got. I will handle this in the meantime. Can you do that for me?”

“I...I...yeah.”

“One last thing: is he alive?”

“I don’t know,” Keith sobs, clinging to his phone tightly. “I don’t know.”

Maybe he’s tense. Maybe he’s just finally feeling a pain he didn’t know was there earlier. But he can’t move. He goes to push himself up and his leg gives out completely. It’s like his muscles have been cut.

“Shiro,” Keith breathes as he falls back into him.

“I’ve got you. It’s alright, Keith. Calm down a bit. You’re not breathing.”

“I’m trying...” He wheezes, pressing his forehead to Shiro’s chest. His heart rate feels like more of a churning than a rhythm. He’s faint. This is too much.
The door to the back of Lotor’s house opens. The footsteps are loud and heavy. They’re not Lotor’s.

Keith’s eyes snap open.

“Oh, god,” Shiro whispers, looking over. “Oh, god, you can’t stay.”

“Your body!” Keith wheezes, trying to pull himself from Shiro’s arms to look into the shed. “I’m not leaving without you!”

“He has a gun. Christ, Keith –”

“No! You’re right here! No!”

“He will kill you! We have to go! I won’t let us both die!”

With one quick swoop, Shiro grabs Keith in his arms. “Shiro! No!”

They forget his crutches as Shiro stumbles out. He remembers which panel of the fence is loose and he kicks it - or tries - his foot goes through.

“Dammit!” Shiro wheezes, turning back to see where Zarkon is. "Keith!"

They can hear him by the shed, roaring, “who’s out here?!”

“Here.” Keith struggles out of Shiro’s hold and slams his body weight against the wood. The panel caves and he pushes through.

Shiro phases through the wood and pulls Keith back up into his arms.

And they run.
Chapter 12

I've seen some people a bit confused about this, so just to clarify, in this AU I've split Haggar and Honerva into two different people. Haggar's the high school student who summons spirits and Honerva was Zarkon's wife. Not related.

“It was him,” Keith says firmly. “It was Zarkon. Zarkon killed Shiro.”

Keith is beneath the comfort of a blanket, his breath still clipped and short. He sits on the back of an ambulance. He keeps looking behind him, toward the house. His ears are open, waiting to hear the sound of some scuffle - the shot of a gun cracking through the quiet of the trees, maybe a shout, but there’s nothing.

“He’s not above hurting people; I know that. Who’s to say he wouldn't build from that and try to kill someone? I went to investigate by the shed and it...it smelled weird. When I looked inside, I saw it. I just knew...”

The officer nods her head, writing it all down diligently. She looks up when Mr. Holt comes back. He has his hands on his hips and a strange look on his face. He’s sucking his bottom lip in between his teeth. He’s not looking at Keith.

“What is it?” Keith barks. He can’t take the silence or the weird hesitance in his eyes. Keith’s gut twists at the sight. “How’s Shiro?”

Mr. Holt takes in a deep breath. He pats Keith on the shoulder once and holds out the crutches he’d left behind in Zarkon’s backyard. “Can you come with me?”

“What is it?” Keith asks hollowly. There’s a hook in his stomach and he doesn’t think he can move. Shiro’s still at his side, squeezing his hand.

“Come with me.”

His leg hasn’t recovered - it tugs like a rubber band about to snap - but he grabs his crutches and pushes all his weight into his arms, heaves himself after Mr. Holt, whose walk isn’t hurried. There’s something almost resigned in it. Mr. Holt sighs again.

They walk through the driveway, past the gate, through the side of their house and on the way to the shed.

Mr. Holt pushes the door open and Keith tenses, preparing himself.

“Is this what you saw?” He asks, leaning back so Keith can get a good view.

The shed light is on, illuminating everything. In the center is a bag, right where he saw it. It's opened.

It's full of leaves.
Keith feels all the blood drain out of his face, body going cold all at once. He feels Shiro go ramrod straight beside him.

“No,” Keith whispers, shaking his head, tears already building up in his eyes. “No. That’s not it. That’s not the same bag. The shapes were different. I saw the outline of it. It was him. It was Shiro. I know it was him.”

Mr. Holt isn’t looking at Keith. He says, voice calm, “Did you see any features? His hair? His clothes? Anything? ...Keith?”

Keith shakes his head harder. Tries to bite back a sob. “You don’t understand. I know it was him. It’s a feeling.”

“We’ve already determined the body from the lake -”

“-the arm! That body had two arms!”

“Keith. Look at me.” He does and they hold eye contact. “I’ve questioned Zarkon; I got nothing. I had to let him go. I followed this lead, but if you didn’t actually see a body... And the bag you mentioned - we opened it, Keith. You can see for yourself.”

“Mr. Holt, please...! Zarkon moved Shiro. He’s somewhere around here. He was just here.” Keith looks around wildly, throwing his hand out. “Check the garage! Check the surrounding area! I know what I saw! He’s in trouble. He needs our help.”

“There’s a lot of tension going around lately. I think it might be getting to you. Later tonight, I want you to go take a bath, get some sleep, and try to forget about all of this. But right now, I’m going to have to take you in. I’m sorry, Keith. I don’t want to do it... It’s protocol.”

“What...?” Keith’s white-faced.

He sighs, eyes falling wearily, looking so incredibly tired. “Breaking and entering. Destruction of property. You dented his shed. You broke his fence. ...You know better than this, Keith. Come on. Follow me to my car.”

Keith grabs Pidge’s dad by the shirt before he can turn, forcing him to look at him, holding him to the spot desperately. “Mr. Holt. We can do this later, but Shiro!”

He puts a calm hand over Keith’s tight grip. “We’ll search the surrounding forest just to be thorough... But Keith, you need to calm down first. You’re hysterical, okay? We’ve called your parents already.”

“No...” He turns, eyes scoping the scene for any changes. Anything to convince him. He was right here. Right here! Keith’s got to think fast. He’s got to be here somewhere, close. But where?

There’s Zarkon, at the steps, face stony, arms crossed over his chest. And there’s Lotor, back straight and eyes wounded, right beside his father. He’s staring at Keith with a sense of desperation, like there’s something to be said, something to be done, but...

Zarkon says, face somber. “It’s alright, Chief Holt. You can let him go home; I’m not pressing charges. It’s horrible what happened... He’s just trying to do what he thinks is best; he thought he saw something. I understand.”

Keith can’t help it. He knows now who did this to Shiro, who caused him all this pain, physical
and emotional, who stole his life. And this monster stands up on the top step of his house, police all around him, safe, untouchable. It’s more than Keith can bear.

The pain in his leg flares, shooting rage through his entire body, obliterating any rationality he might have left. “You did this!” He roars, pushing forward like a storm after Zarkon, to throttle him, to make this just. “You have Shiro! Give him BACK!”

He hears a loud snap! and he’s down. The pain from his leg blinds him. The only thing keeping him there is Shiro’s hands, warm and gentle as they cup Keith’s face with one hand and hold him up at the waist with the other. “Keith, listen to my voice,” he’s saying softly. “Listen to me... You’re alright. We can’t do anything like this. You’ve got to calm down.”

“Shiro,” he’s wheezing, rabid. “Shiro.”

“I’m right here. Listen to my voice. I’m right here.”

Mr. Holt is down beside him too, waving Zarkon away, who has stepped forward to help. He commands a few of his officers to step back and then says, as steadily as he can, “Keith? Keith. God... Can you hear me? Can you understand what I’m saying? Put your arm around me. I’m going to lift you, alright? We’re going to bring you to the hospital, okay?”

Keith sounds rabid as he foams at the mouth. “I don’t need the fucking hospital; you’re wasting time. Every second he’s out of your sight, he could be doing something. Now’s our only chance! We can’t wait!”

“Zarkon’s known Shiro since he was a baby, much like I’ve known you. Keith, he wouldn’t hurt Shiro. Shiro’s like a son to him.”

“He used to say that about me too,” Keith wheezes. “He used to say so many things to me and look how that turned out. Look at how I’ve turned out!”

“Keith, come on. Up we get.”

“Mr. Holt! Please! Please listen to me! ” The beating of his heart is as turbulent as the emotions raging inside of him, pressing against the confines of his skull, bursting through his chest, but his body has failed him and he can’t even stand on his own. He leans all his weight into Pidge’s dad, clinging to his shirt, pleading with him. He’s Keith’s only hope.

He just looks down as steadily as he can in the face of Keith’s terror, trying to mask the hurt in his eyes. “I’ll be here to talk to when you’ve calmed down, but right now, I need to follow up on this, okay? Like you want me to do. Understand?”

“God... Yes,” Keith nods, cringing hard. “Yes.”

Pidge’s dad lets Keith put his arm over his shoulder and use him as a crutch, but he’s the one dragging all of Keith’s weight along to the front of the house. The siren lights are flashing their obnoxious red and blue. It’s bouncing off the tall dark trees that stand there somberly, looking down. They know the truth but do not speak a word.

When they reach the road, Keith’s mom and dad are already there, hands over their hearts as they race to him. Their faces are pale with horror, that strange siren light catching them with each revolution. Keith hangs off of Pidge’s dad like a limp doll.

“I’m so sorry, Sam.” They’re apologizing for him, scooping him up from Mr. Holt like they can hide him in their jackets forever. Krolia lifts him into the truck and lays him down. She looks
down at his leg but her eyes are blank, not able to comprehend. She’s frazzled. She gives him one last look - Keith catches the fear there - and then turns, closing the door shut.

Everything goes muffled. Quiet.

She’s still clutching her heart as she says to Pidge’s dad. “I’m so sorry. We’ll pay whatever damages. We’re getting him help. I thought maybe if we waited it out...but... I’m so sorry.”

Pidge’s dad looks between Keith’s parents sympathetically, “Katie’s been keeping me updated. It’s hard, Krolia... I know it’s hard. He’s a good boy. I just think this whole thing with Shiro has made Keith’s past with Zarkon resurface. Maybe he needs some closure. Zarkon seems willing to help. I’m just afraid he’s going to hurt himself if this continues.”

“We’ll look into that. Thank you, Sam. We’re so glad you found him. Thank you. Sorry.”

The car ride home is quiet. Keith can’t sit without being in tremendous pain, so they help him lay out in the back seat of the truck. He lays there in the darkness of the night, as lights skirt past their car occasionally. He has his feet in Shiro’s lap, who softly brushes his hand over Keith’s good leg.

“I can’t believe you went there, Keith,” his mother is whispering harshly as she drives. He doesn’t look over at her face, keeps his arms over his own, but he knows how disappointed she must look from the deep tone of her voice, how scared and bright her eyes must be. He knows they reflect in his father’s too, who is more quiet than usual.

“God,” she curses and the vehicle lurches as she turns too quickly. “Are you okay?”

Keith pulls his arm down and says, voice quivering and wet. “I know you think I’m crazy. I know you think I just saw some - some stupid leaf bag, but I didn’t. It was really him, Mom. Please...please, you have to believe me.”

“Keith.” Her tone is odd and gentle, but he catches sight of her hand on the wheel and sees, bathed in pale blue from the moonlight, how it clenches tightly. “They already found his body. His family confirmed it. You were at the funeral. Haggar is in jail now. It’s over. He’s dead.”

“It wasn’t Haggar and that body wasn’t his.” The words burn in his throat until his voice is raw. “I saw it and I know.”

“Sam thought he’d have to bring you into the police station for questioning. As a suspect. Do you know how painful that must be for him? For you to get to this point? He held you the first day you were born. He loves you.”

“I’m not trying to be a nuisance,” Keith says icily, trying to keep the trembling rage from pouring from him. “I’m trying to save an innocent person. He is someone’s son, Mom. Someone’s brother. Someone’s friend. If that were me, and you had any shred of doubt that I was alive out there somewhere, would you just give up because you didn’t want to inconvenience someone? Sorry Mr. Holt feels sad he almost had to question me. He’ll live. Shiro won’t. Can’t you see?”

“Keith,” Shiro whispers, reaching his hand up and placing it on Keith’s stomach. “Stop this...”

Keith turns, looking at the weariness in Shiro’s face.

God, he looks horrible. Every day, Keith thinks he’s seen the worst of Shiro, but then he wakes up and things just get worse. It’s heartbreaking.

They were so close. So close. Shiro’s future was there, held tenderly in Keith’s hands. And then
it was ripped right out of his grip. Gone. Again.

Helplessness rushes into him. He tilts his head back and tries to keep the tears from falling from his eyes, but it’s no use.

He cries. It bursts from him in hiccups and ugly gasps and he’s choking on it and now his parents can hear him and he’s a mess and he’s hurt, he’s hurt, he’s hurt.

“I just want him to be okay,” he tries to explain through sobs. He never cries in front of his parents. He’d rather cry in front of anyone else but he just can’t stop. He’s met by a heavy lost silence and it just makes him feel worse. They don't understand him. He's scaring them. This is the most important truth in his life and no one believes him. Nobody.

“Keith,” Shiro says again, leaning across the seat beside him so they’re laying side by side. He pets Keith’s cheek with gentle shaking hands and nestles his lips into the side of his face, kissing him carefully, like he’s made of glass. “Everyone dies, Keith. That’s what it means to be alive. This is just the flow of life. It’s not malevolence, it’s not benevolence, it just is.”

“God,” Keith whispers, turning his face so he can see the emotion in Shiro’s eyes. The soft acceptance. The sorrow. The pain Keith feels reflected in the depths of the grey cool oceans of Shiro’s irises.

“I’m okay with it,” Shiro says, voice rich and earnest. “I’ve made peace with the way things have turned out. Now is just my time. Maybe one day we’ll see each other again.”

A fresh wave of hot tears pours from Keith’s eyes and he shakes his head, pressing his lips together tightly so he won’t sob out, stop saying that. It hurts to hear.

Keith’s dad has to carry him from the truck. Even then, his leg is in so much pain Keith has to grit his teeth to keep from screaming. He hates the fact that they have stairs.

He’s muddy and needs a bath, so his father sets him down in the tub, coming back with a cup full of water, a few orange bottles, a set of new clothes, and a towel.

“The heavy meds...? Muscle relaxants, too... I must really look like shit. My lucky day.” His parents are stingy with them. Don’t want him to become a pill addict. He tilts his head back and downs the maximum amount.

Keith pulls his shirt over his head, still in the tub, hoping his dad will get the hint, but his dad just kneels beside the tub instead, face serious. He’s quiet for a long while.

Keith grits his teeth, feeling the anger welling up in his stomach - the bitterness that’s been planted through each reaction his parents had all night, finally coming to a head. “Well?” Keith presses. “You haven’t spoken all night. You let Mom do all the talking. What’s on your mind?”

“I want to talk.”

“Then talk!”

His dad shifts but doesn't get angry. His face is quiet and still, like Shiro’s, who’s in the room, sitting atop the counter. Softly, he says, “That was a very reckless thing you did today. All this sneaking around...blaming people. You know how much your mother and I have worried for you - all of our friends - and still, you don’t stop... That’s not how we do things in this family.”

“If it were to save a person you care about?”
He takes a deep breath. “Keith, you are very much like your mother. You know I respect your bravery, but there’s a line when it crosses over to foolhardy. Your mother is careful to assess the damages she might cause, but you - you’re crossing that line. Keith, I want you to take one good look at yourself. At your leg. At your choices. At this family and your friends. I want you to think about the damage you’ve left behind in your wake. It’s not just affecting you anymore. I hope, in the morning, you choose to do the right thing.”

“Give him up?” Keith whispers.

“...You can’t give up someone who’s already dead.”

*He’s not*, Keith wants to scream.

“Keith, what is this really about? A boy you didn’t even know, who’s already dead? Why are you doing this? You’ll only find trouble this way. ...We love you very much. We don’t want to lose you.”

Keith stays still, staring down at his pants, hands clenched into fists on them. He rubs the back of his nose and then begins to wiggle out of them.

His dad finally takes the hint, standing. He walks to the door, sighing the entire way. His hand stops as he rests it on the doorknob. Softly, he says, “I haven’t seen your mother cry in more than two decades. ...But she did today.”

Keith looks up. His father isn't looking at him, already turned away. He closes the door softly behind him.

Keith stays hard at the end of the tub for a few moments. Then he takes his pants off and leans back against the bathtub edge, turning the warm water on with his foot.

“...He thinks I’m crazy, so he tries to guilt me out of it,” he says, kicking the water with an angry splash. “If only things were really that easy.”

Shiro is still on the counter, staring down at his hands. “...Keith,” is all he manages.

Keith runs the water up his arm and back down. He leans his head back and watches the ceiling for a minute. Closes his eyes. Lets the reality of tonight hit him. He can’t believe it. After all this, he was right there.

Right there.

And now, Shiro’s gone again.

“I’m so sorry, Shiro... Words can’t even begin to explain how sorry I am. I just... I should’ve stayed with you. But I didn’t. I *didn’t*. I left your body and he...he hid it away.” He’s quiet for a moment, tapping the side of the tub antsily before whispering, “If only I had someone on my side here... If my mom or my dad fought with me then maybe Mr. Holt would take me seriously, but no. It’s always like this. They say I can tell them anything and then when I do they suddenly turn their backs. No one believes me. No one ever believes me. Not my mom... Not Pidge... I thought I had learned, but...I’m such an idiot.”

He's quiet for awhile, breath caught in his throat. It was so horrible last time. It was like the whole world was against him and he was just this *lying disgusting warped little freak*. ...Things feel different this time though. His voice is a whisper as he asks hesitantly, “But...you... You believe me...don’t you...? Shiro.”
“Yes,” Shiro whispers, words tight in his throat. “Of course I do, Keith.”

Keith takes in a sharp breath and presses his fingers into the bridge of his nose. He nods shortly. It’s so funny, it’s just a few words, that’s all, but they’re so freeing.

“...Thank you, Shiro. I knew you would,” he says, voice breaking. “...God, that was a different bag. I know it. Zarkon, that bastard. He’s smarter than I am. Faster than I am. I can’t do anything with this stupid - useless - ugh!” He kicks at the water again, clutching tightly to the edge of the bathtub. “It fucks up everything. I’m so fucking sick of it!”

“Keith, stop. You'll hurt yourself.”

Keith tsks in disgust, but he settles back down. “This is exactly what I mean.”

Shiro takes a deep breath and then sighs it all out. All things considered, Keith thinks Shiro is taking this all well. He looks tired, but not surprised or hurt. He asks quietly, “...You said... Well, it was Matt’s dad - he said you have a ‘history’ with Zarkon...” He hesitates. “...Does that have to do with your leg?”

“My leg,” Keith spits. “Always the problem, isn’t it? My leg and me.”

The water drips from the faucet. One. Two. Three. Four. Keith stays there, arm over the side of the tub, staring hard at the end of it.

Shiro’s voice is gentle. “You don’t have to tell me...”

Keith takes in a long deep breath. “Yes,” he says. “I do. It’s you. Of course you deserve to know... But I hate it. I hate it so much. I just...” He sighs, loosening. There’s an uncomfortable pause in which Keith thinks everything over, eyes going distant. “I haven’t told anyone after it happened... I haven’t talked about it in years.”

“It’s okay, Keith.”

“I want to tell you...” He murmurs softly. Keith stays there, staring at the end of the bath, biting his lip. He takes a deep breath. “Almost nineteen years ago, when my mom got pregnant, she told everyone that bullshit about how she just wanted the baby to be healthy, but in all honestly, she had wanted a girl. She had wanted Acxa. But I came along too... I was the surprise. ...I was the extra. Everyone loved Acxa. For her, it was effortless; Acxa was smart, she was kind, she was beautiful. Everyone saw that. And I was just...” He shakes his head, pressing his finger to his temple. “Just me. Even though I was a child, I could tell. No one said it, but...you feel it, you know? My parents tried to be fair, but I hated - hated - that I always had to fight to get what people just gave Acxa. I wanted their attention, but I resented them too. I didn’t want to do things like perfect Acxa. So I sort of became this monster. I did the opposite of what they wanted. It was somehow extremely satisfying. I used to wreak havoc with the neighbors. I’d toss rocks through their windows. I’d go in there and just steal shit; not for any real reason, just...just because I could. I was horrible.

“My parents didn’t know what to do with me. They yelled. They grounded me. They tried to keep me inside, but then I’d fuck up shit in there. I think they got Red as some sort of distraction, but it didn’t help. Nothing did. Pidge and her perfect brother and her perfect family killed me, so I couldn’t even find refuge in our friendship. I avoided her as best as I could. The neighbors hated me, the principal was always calling me in, I got into fights with everyone I could. They started telling my parents that they couldn’t keep me in school the way I was going. That they’d have to
homeschool or find some other alternative. My parents had their hands full. I think part of them hated me. Regretted me. ...And that’s when Zarkon came into my life.

“He was different then. You must remember. He was like a completely different person... He saw me one day, in the school parking lot. I didn’t want to go home to argue with my parents or have to look at Acxa, so I just loitered. God, I couldn’t have been more than eleven, maybe twelve. I was throwing rocks at the cars, smoking something I’d stolen from an upperclassman and he came around the corner, this huge giant of a man. I thought for sure I was in trouble. Thought he’d send me straight to the principal’s office or call the cops, I dunno. But he just looked at me for a moment. It wasn’t with disgust. It wasn’t with aggravation or hurt or anger. He just looked. He nodded toward the field. He said, ‘track and field is starting in a few minutes. Want to join us?’ And I’d never seen someone look at me like that after I’d misbehaved. It caught me off guard. It surprised me. So I said yes.

“And it just sort of...developed from there. He was a good coach and I was a natural at it. I had so much pent up energy and I loved to run. Loved to feel the way I could cut through the wind, how the ground just slipped away underneath my feet. We made a good team and everyone noticed. The times I used to terrorize the neighborhood, I started spending running the track. The teachers, the neighbors, my parents...they all breathed a sigh of relief.”

Keith dips his hand into the water and brings it up, watching as the droplets fall and trickle back into the small ocean he’s bathing in. He does it again. He can feel the medication running through his veins already, numbing everything. It’s more relief than he’s strong enough to handle at the moment and so he gives himself to the feeling. He feels almost like he’s floating. Light. Bliss.

“...I was a good runner,” Keith says into the warmth of the room, letting his head lean back limply. “When I had my leg, I... I could do anything. I won a bunch of awards in middle school...they’re still there in the trophy case if you go look. It was exhilarating. I didn’t understand it then, but that was what freedom was. Just going and outrunning all the others... Cutting right through that wind. Trophy or not, I felt like I was at the top of the world. Like things finally were looking up.

“Everyone started noticing me. My parents stopped giving me that look all the time, like they were disappointed. They started talking to me like I wasn’t just a burden. My teachers, my neighbors, everyone... I loved running... I loved everything about it. And it was all thanks to Zarkon. I... I was so grateful to him. He led me through it all. He treated me like everyone else. He used to tell me how proud he was of me. How, if I set my mind to it, I could do anything. He encouraged me. He made me feel like I was worth something... I think, back then, he meant the things he said...”

“And then Honerva got cancer.” Keith rubs his finger against his bottom lip. He’s quiet for awhile, the occasional soft drop of water falling from the faucet.

Shiro slips off the side of the counter and takes a spot beside Keith, so they’re sitting side by side. “I remember that,” Shiro says softly, leaning on the side of the tub and watching Keith’s face. “By the time they found it, there was nothing they could do. They sued her work for not taking proper precautions. They got a lot of money from it.”

“...It wasn’t enough,” Keith whispers. “She suffered. For a long, long time.

“I didn’t really know Honerva, not really, but Zarkon talked about her like she was his sun. His face would light up when she’d call. Even before she got sick, I knew how much he loved her. His world started falling apart. ...The sicker she got, the more it’d kill him. And so, he started taking it out on me.
“It was little things at first. He was just upset. He’d push me harder. He’d stop encouraging, only yell. I’d hurt myself and he’d bark at me to pick myself up and go. It’s like he started hating the world and everyone in it. Like, the more she withered away, the more his heart shrunk.

“After she died, he didn’t know how to cope. He’d call me in before school started and then after, until night. And he would just yell and yell and yell. I don’t think he wanted to go home... I put up with it for a lot longer than I should’ve. Months. I thought maybe he was just grieving and he’d start to heal. ...Zarkon...he’d done so much for me, I couldn’t just abandon him in his time of need. So I’d do what he wanted. I pushed myself. I won the awards he wanted me to win. I went to the meets he wanted me to go to. I’d break the records he pushed me to break. I’d let him vent his anger at me. But it was never enough. Never.

“I think he started to feel like he owned me. Like I was just a tool for him to distract him from his pain. I don’t know. I couldn’t keep up with his demands. I started getting angry with him. I tried to talk with him, but he wouldn’t listen. He wouldn’t even look at me. Months before, he felt like a father to me. For years, I found comfort in that. He’d given me so much, and suddenly, it was like he just took it away... Like he was trying to punish me. I felt like every bit of encouragement he had told me was a lie...but that was all I had... The angrier I became, the more I let things go, and the more people started hounding me again, and everything began to unravel again. Like it had been, back when I was miserable. I couldn’t stand the thought of it getting to that point again, but things just got worse and worse... I started to hate Zarkon. I started to hate running.

“One race, I was just fucking around. Pidge had invited me over but Zarkon wouldn’t let me go - I never could - and I was bitter that I couldn’t ever spend time with her. He wasn’t my actual parent. He had no right to tell me to do anything. And then he had the nerve to yell at me beforehand about focus and taking things seriously. I was so pissed. I guess I wanted to show him he didn’t own me. I didn’t care about his stupid trophies. I didn’t have to be his puppet and I could do whatever the fuck I wanted. So I lost on purpose. Badly. It was a big one too. It as a clear deliberate move against him. But I really couldn’t care less.

“When the race was finished, he told me he wanted to talk to me inside. I mean, I knew he’d yell. I think I was hoping he’d be pissed enough he’d forsake me. I thought that would be the best and worst of it.

“We got into a huge fight. I told him I hated him. That he ruined everything. That this was all his fault and he was the worst person I knew. I felt like he’d taken the only place I could find solace away from me. I was cussing and swearing at him and he was doing it right back. And he knew me; he knew how to hurt me. ...And he just...tore me apart. Started talking about my parents and how they hated me. How I would’ve been nothing without him...and wasn’t that the truth? It hurt me so badly. And I wanted to hurt too. So I told him...” Keith whispers, pressing his fingers into his eyes. “I told him I was glad he was alone. That maybe Honerva died for a reason. ...I didn’t... I...” Keith sighs low and long. “...It was a horrible thing to say. I wish I had never said it. I regret it.

“It was quiet for a long moment. His face just...he went white. I meant to apologize immediately. I knew I had gone too far. But then he grabbed me by the collar roughly. He held me over the steps. I didn’t even fight back, I was so surprised. And then he just...threw me. Right down the stairs.

“I hit my head. I still can’t hear right out of my right ear. I was dizzy and disorientated. At first, I didn’t even feel anything wrong with my leg, but as I pushed myself up, I saw it. It was...disgusting. It was twisted the wrong way. Like someone had popped it off and put it back on the wrong direction. All I could do was stare at it. It felt like any hope for redemption was
over. Not being able to run when that was all I had... And this shadow just fell over me. I looked up. He had followed me down. I thought maybe he’d apologize, but he stood over me and he leaned over and...” Keith swallows hard and shakes his head slowly. “He grabbed me.” He closes his eyes, shifting so his neck lays over the back easier. “He jammed his foot down right into my twisted backwards leg and he...he just...” Keith whispers. “He was like a father to me. He saved me... I looked up to him, I trusted him. He used to say I was like a son to him. And then he just...”

The water is still dripping from the faucet in soft melodious drops. Keith clears his throat, running his fingers across his lips. He’s medicated enough that it doesn’t hurt as much as it should. He’s numb from the tips of his toes to the usual sharpness of his mind. “He just snapped. I used to get nightmares about it whenever I’d close my eyes. I felt like I couldn’t trust anyone. My parents threw me in anger management classes, but I swear...” he laughs “- I swear they just made me more angry. I started failing all my classes; I didn’t even care. They held me back. And I just...I dunno. I closed myself off from everyone as best as I could.”

He sniffs and turns his head so he’s looking at Shiro. He whispers as he holds his gaze, “Shiro, I’m so sorry... So sorry. Zarkon should’ve been my first suspect when I was looking for your killer. I wasted so much time just hoping it could be someone else... I wanted to believe any other little excuse I could to investigate someone else, believe everyone when they told me that it couldn’t be Zarkon, that he was innocent. I didn't want it to be him. Because if it’s him, it means I have to face him and I already have before and....and I know I don’t have the strength. So what then...?”

Shiro whispers. “Keith...”

Keith’s slouched over the side, cheeks pink from being slightly overheated, face lax from the meds. Shiro weaves his fingers through Keith’s hair, brushing it away from his face, watching him with hurt in his expression. “I don’t understand. Why didn’t anyone believe you? You have the proof right here. Why didn’t he get in trouble? I never heard about any of this.”

“Well,” Keith murmurs. “If you had some shitty delinquent kid who used to steal from your stores and lie to your face or toss rocks through your car window, would you believe him or the teacher who tried everything to save him? No one needed a reminder of what a shitty kid I was; they had it fresh in their minds. Zarkon is Zarkon and everyone knows him. That asshole Judge Sendak was his best friend in high school. He wouldn’t listen to me even if he saw Zarkon doing it with his own two eyes. The journalists were his old buddies. And he went around, masking it like he was being a good guy for keeping quiet about it, like he was doing it for my sake. You saw him tonight - how he can act in the face of people who matter. My parents thanked him back then because he was the one who called them after he wrecked me. ...But how could I blame them? I used to do everything they said I did. I lied, I stole, I caused trouble. Mrs. M still hates me for it all.

“Pidge...tried to understand, but she had so much faith in teachers and their vow to protect students. She thought everyone was as noble as her dad. No one was in my corner. So I just...went under the radar, where no one could see me. He never talked about it again and neither did I. And that was it.”
“No one ever asked what happened to your leg? No one in the school seemed to know.”

“People ask. You asked. But it’s easy enough to avoid. No one can force me to tell them anything. And people don’t usually talk to me much anyway.”

Shiro shakes his head. He looks overwhelmed. Hurt. He breathes out shakily. “...I’m so sorry, Keith. I can’t even imagine how that must’ve felt being on your own like that...it must’ve been crushing.”

“You know? It’s alright. I was really mad about it for a long time. But I started doing art because of it and that sort of saved me. Pidge too, whether she believed or not. I wouldn’t have gotten through it without Pidge. But I really have no right to complain. It’s not even half as bad as what he did to you.”

“I don’t remember anything...and besides...I haven't been alone. You’ve been with me every step of the way. That makes a world of difference... You had no one.” He’s closes his eyes. “...I remember what you said when this whole thing first started about how you understood what it was like to have no one and I always wondered what you meant. You were so quick to help me, you didn’t even hesitate.” He swallows hard. “I wish I could’ve been there for you. I wish I could take your pain away...”

“You do, Shiro,” Keith whispers, managing a small smile. “You bring me so much peace.”

Shiro watches Keith’s face, still brushing his hair back gently. “I’m sorry,” he whispers back. “You didn’t deserve any of that. No matter how much pain Zarkon was in, to hurt you like that...”

“Well,” Keith hums, curling onto the back of the tub peacefully. He closes his eyes to rest. “When we take you back from him, that’ll be payback enough. That’s all I want.”

“Yeah,” Shiro says quietly, slowly brushing the hair from Keith’s face. Keith blinks at him sluggishly. He was worried about how he’d feel after telling Shiro, but it’s not so bad. Not at all. If he could tell anyone, it’d be Shiro. After awhile, Shiro says, “Hey, shouldn’t you get out? You look...like the meds are working.”

Keith smiles cat-like up at Shiro. “They’re definitely working. I can hardly feel anything. I can’t feel the tips of my fingers. Feel them.”

“Jesus,” Shiro whispers. “Let me help you.”

Keith uses his toe to empty the tub. Carefully, avoiding his bad leg the best he can, he pulls himself up with the bar on the wall. He wobbles and Shiro has to grab him around the back to steady him.

“Sorry,” Keith grunts, out of it enough to not be bothered that he’s buck naked in Shiro’s arms.

But Shiro’s face is bright red as he helps Keith. He uses Keith’s hands to snatch a towel up from the counter and dries Keith the best he can without veering into any sensitive realms. Keith’s hands are mostly limp as Shiro uses them to unfold his boxers and help him step into them. Then, he lifts Keith from the bathtub and to his room, setting him gently beneath his covers.

“There,” Shiro whispers, hands on his hips as he stands over the bed, trying to think of what’s next. “Anything else I can get you?”

“Mm...” Keith’s eyes are already closed as he turns into his pillow. He reaches his arms out for Shiro, trying to grab onto him and Shiro complies. He crawls onto the bed and lets himself be
pulled forward into Keith’s arms who cuddles with him, basically purring. Shiro gently sets his hand down on the most tender sensitive part of Keith’s leg.

Keith peers through heavy cracked eyelids at Shiro. “You look so sad,” Keith murmurs. “I’m over it, you know... It was years ago. The leg sucks but...somehow it made me appreciate my parents a lot more,” he laughs softly, reaching his hand up to press his fingers to Shiro’s cheek. “Don’t look like that. Not for me.”

“You’re so brave, Keith... I hope you know that.”

“Mm, no. No, not like you.”

Shiro lays there beside Keith, watching his small face. “Thank you for telling me, Keith. Thank you for trusting me...”

“Hmm,” Keith sighs into his chest. He seeks out the remote blindly with one hand. “What do you want to watch?” He mumbles.

Shiro laughs softly, the sound tired and stretched thin. He leans over Keith’s head, pressing his lips gently to his forehead. “Sleep, Keith. I just want to watch you tonight.”

He blinks tiredly over at Shiro for a moment before letting a small smile stretch over his lips. “We’re still going to find you. We were so close today.”

He presses another kiss to Keith’s hand this time, massaging the knuckles.

“You never rest, do you? Goodnight, Keith... Sleep well.”

“Goodnight, Shiro... I’m going to find you...” He’s already in the dreams that tell him so.

His dreams are coated with all of his hopes and, blissfully, leave out all the fears: Keith finds Shiro and he’s safe and they can be together, both as normal people, just hanging out after school, after Shiro’s football practice. Shiro can actually grab the remote and turn the channel himself and they hang out together through the evening, until it starts to get late and Shiro needs to head home so he can be with his family. And they can welcome him home. Kiss his temple and ruffle his hair and ask him how his day went.

When he wakes, this dream will fall apart and he’ll realize, as the pieces come together slowly with consciousness, that none of this can happen.

Because Zarkon knows Keith knows it’s him.

Shiro is upset in the morning. Irritable. He keeps his voice steady, but Keith's found he uses his hands to talk when he's upset about something, like that can nail down his point better.

“Keith, I think going back to Zarkon’s is a horrible idea,” he opens a palm. "You need to stay home. He’ll know you’re coming; he’ll be waiting for you.”

Keith leans to the side, off his leg, and looks around for his pills. “Can you help me find -”

Shiro tsks. “-You need to eat first. It’ll hurt your stomach if you don’t have any food in you.”
“What about the hurt in my leg,” he growls.

“You can get an ulcer. Literally. Keith, you’re not expendable. When I’m gone, I want to know there’ll still be someone here taking care of you - you.”

Keith huffs, turning a bleary eye down at his legs. His dad had picked out the wrong boxers for him and these are ten times way too tight and small. They look ridiculous and they’re uncomfortable. He pinches his nose and frowns at the dresser across the room. It’s only a few feet, but he probably won’t make it on his own.

“Fine,” Keith mutters. “Fine, you’re right. I’ll eat. Let me...change...and then can you help me downstairs?”

Shiro takes a deep breath. “...Just tell me you won’t go to Zarkon’s.”

Keith doesn’t.

The door swings open.

“Ah!” Keith squawks, latching onto the blanket over his lap. “Acxa! What the hell? Knock or something!”

“Why? Watching porn again?”

“God. Aren’t you late for school? It started like an hour ago.”

She rolls her eyes. “Aren’t you?”

He closes his eyes and groans. “I’m not in the fucking mood right now. Whatever it is you want, just get it over with and tell me and then leave.”

She hangs on the door, watching him for a moment.

He hates when people watch him, especially Acxa. It’s like she’s trying to pick his features apart, trying to find their differences.

“What?” He grunts unhappily.

She leans back to look out and down the hallway, checking both directions. Quietly, she slips in and pushes the door shut carefully behind her.

“I have a proposition for you.”

He frowns at her. “...What can I do? I’m crazy now, or haven’t you heard?”

“Oh, yeah. I’ve heard. Last night was a mess, Keith. Mom was more upset than I’ve ever seen...”

She presses her lips together tightly, looking back at the door carefully before walking in closer. She sits on the bed beside him, drawing herself up, posture tight.

“What are you doing?” Keith asks as he scoots over slightly, confused.

Her brow is furrowed. She’s glaring hard like she’s thinking beyond her capacity. She’s psyching herself up. “Okay,” she says, holding her hands up in surrender as she takes in a deep breath. “Alright. Here’s the deal. I... I’m going to tell you something, but I want something in return.”

“...What is it?”
“It was my boyfriend’s birthday the other day and I forgot and I sort of might’ve told him I was having you draw a portrait of him but it takes you awhile and that’s why it’s late.”

Keith sighs and is already looking away, over at Shiro, who just shrugs. This is literally the least important thing he’s heard these past few weeks.

“...So, I was thinking, if you agreed to draw something of him, maybe I’ll tell you something important. Something you’d want to hear.”

“What is it?”

“Agree first. Trust me, you’ll want to hear this.”

“Nothing you can tell me is worth my time. Your boyfriend is one of the ugliest people I’ve seen; I’m not kidding.”

She gives him a look. "Not everyone can have your eyelashes and pretty face, Keith. If only the rest of us were so lucky."

Keith rolls his eyes at her. "He treats you like shit. Honestly? You deserve better. No. He doesn’t get to disgrace my sketchbook. Now, can you leave? I need to get dressed.”

She takes a deep breath. He can see her steeling herself before she says shortly, “It’s about Shiro.”

He blinks in surprise, turning. Shiro looks up.

“...What about Shiro...?” Keith licks his lips. “Should...should you really be telling me this after last night?”

“That’s exactly why I’m telling you,” she murmurs, but she looks away. “...Mom and Dad are scared,” she whispers. “They’re always scared where you’re involved. You’ve always done just what you want, like a fire blazing toward the sky and they don’t know how to guide you without dousing the flames... They can’t see what I see. I’m not saying I don’t think you’re crazy... I...I don’t know what I think. But I do know that you truly believe what you’re doing is right... I know you really think that you saw Shiro yesterday and that Zarkon’s the one who killed him. And...if you want to give Shiro a second chance, out of everyone, he deserves it so I just... If you’re right, if you did see him, just...who are we to withhold info from you?” She takes another deep breath, clenching her eyes shut tightly. “So, I heard Mom and Dad talking awhile back ago. The day after Shiro went missing, the police got some random phone call. One of those anonymous tips. It gave out a very specific location. So the police went out and found a notch in the tree. They took a sample of it and tested it.” She holds Keith’s gaze. “There was a trace of luxite.”

His brow furrows. “Luxite...? Like...Mom’s blade...?”

“Exactly.”

He frowns. “So...what are you saying...? Mom did it?” He’s so fucking confused.

She closes her eyes in exasperation, pinching the bridge of her nose. “No. Isn’t it your blade now, anyways? They’re rare blades, right? I’ve only seen one other before, during cheer leading practice, when I was helping my friend put something away in a certain office of a certain coach. ...Can you guess where?”

He just watches her face. Is she implying what he thinks she is...? “Acxa...” Keith whispers, stunned. He would’ve never expected her to come in here and say this to him. Never. Not in a
“Look,” she whispers. “I told Mr. Holt about seeing it in Zarkon’s office, but he didn’t find anything. Mom and Dad made me swear not to tell you. I don’t want you running off and hurting yourself. Trust me, I don’t. I worry about you too. But Keith...if you’re right...if you’re actually not making this stuff up...” She turns to him and holds his gaze. “If anyone can find Shiro, it’s going to be you. You’re a flame that doesn’t go out, even when everyone’s trying desperately to do so.” She takes another deep breath. “...I’ve always felt like...like we made a mistake those years ago,” she whispers. “I think...maybe we should’ve believed you. ...Maybe I do.”

He stares for a long moment. “Acxa,” he whispers again. The backs of his eyes are starting to sting as he lets what she’s saying start to sink in. She doesn’t start laughing at him, playing a prank, like he thinks she might. She just holds his gaze. She gives him a small smile.

“I’m sorry,” she says softly. “...All these years, I’ve given you a lot of shit. You really are a good little brother.”

He lets out a small laugh. “...We’re twins, Acxa.”

“Forty minutes,” she reminds him on a hum, chuckling under her breath. “...For whatever reason, Shiro’s important to you. I want to make sure that you don’t have anything else you’ll regret... You know what I mean?”

He nods, unable to speak. His throat is tight.

She laughs. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying,” he manages to force out the protest, but his voice breaks.

She looks like she might try to say something more, laughter still ringing through the air, when their mom comes in.

Krolia stops in surprise.

“Acxa,” she immediately stares, frown on her face. “What are you two doing...?”

“Keith just said he’s going to draw something for me for Chad’s birthday.”

Krolia tilts her head, scoping out Keith’s face carefully. There’s fear in her eyes still. She didn’t expect to see Acxa in here so she’s thrown off her game and doesn’t know how to proceed. “...You did?”

“Yeah,” he huffs, tossing his hand in the air. “Why not? I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Oh, I’m just...surprised.” She looks between the two of them. “Glad to see you both getting along.”

“Well, time’s up for that. I’m going to Narti’s,” Acxa says pleasantly, whirling on her heel and walking around Krolia to get out. “Don’t forget to make his eyes look bigger than they are because he’s really sensitive about how small they are.”

She disappears down the hallway.

Krolia crosses her arms and leans against the door. Keith takes in a deep breath, tossing a nervous look to Shiro, who still sits on his bed, watching them all quietly. Keith tries to steel himself.
“...How are you feeling?” She asks eventually. “Your leg was pretty messed up yesterday.”

“My leg is your biggest concern?”

“...No.” She murmurs. She’s quiet for awhile. When she speaks again, her voice drops in pitch.
“...What did Acxa tell you?”

“She wanted me to draw her ugly boyfriend -”

Krolia tilts her head back and sighs. “I know you two. I’m your mother. ...Of course I know you.”
She takes another breath. “Okay, well, you don’t have to tell me. I came in here to tell you that I’ve talked with your father -”

Keith lets out a bitter laugh.

Krolia pins him with a look, but then fights it. “...There’s a home just under an hour away -

“- No -”

“- And he and I really think -”

“- No!”

“...Keith...” She whispers, taking a hard look at him. “I know it won’t be easy in so many different ways. But what we’re doing right now is -”

“-I’m not going to a fucking home-”

“- trying to prevent something horrible from happening to you. We think-”

“-Look,” Keith says, holding his hands up. “I’ve got to go.”

She stares. “...Go?” He can feel her rage growing beneath the surface. “... Where ?”

“Lance and Hunk are going to the football game tonight and I thought it’d be nice to join them.”

“No,” she says, voice booming and firm. “You will not.”

“You’re the one who said I should try normal things.”

“No,” she whispers again, but the rage is there, risen up like a wave. “Not after last night. Last night changed things.”

“Did it? Everything looks the same to me. Shiro’s body still missing? Check. Two parents who still don’t believe me? Check. Everything’s in order, just how you want it.”

She goes very still. Very quiet. She does not move, but Keith can feel it, like electricity crackling through the room, currents running through the ground from her, coming for him.

“Keith,” she begins, but there’s nothing she can say to make this right. Nothing that she’s willing to say, anyway...

“All I’ve ever asked of you,” Keith whispers, glaring at her with all the ferocity he can muster, “is for you to believe me. I’m your son. Please. Please. You asked me once if I could tell you what I need. I need this.”
Her eyes begin to quiver. Her arms begin to shake. Slowly, she takes a step back. “Keith. That’s not fair,” she whispers. They watch each other silently from across the room. Lowly, she says, “...You know you’re going to that home one way or another. I’d really like it if you went willingly... But at this point, Keith... At this point... You understand, don’t you?”

He chuckles softly, looking down at his hands. “I knew it. ...I knew it...and somehow, I’m still disappointed.”

He doesn’t look up as he hears her take a step back. And then another. And then the door closes and there’s just silence.

Keith and Shiro sit alone for a moment, but not long enough for the conversation to settle. There’s no time.

“Okay,” Keith murmurs. There are still knots in his shoulders and a sick pit in his stomach. “I guess we have to trust Acxa’s word. Let’s go see Zarkon’s office.”

“Keith.”

“Not you too,” Keith whispers on a bitter laugh. He steels himself, pushes himself off the bed and clutches to his crutch with a death grip, forcing himself off the bed. “-Shiro, please. Please, don’t start. God. I think you and I both know that no matter what you say, I am not going to stop. We’ve been over this like fifty thousand times.”

“-We haven’t-”

“-We have. And you know what? You can stay here if you want. You can stay.”

“You are killing yourself.”

“It’s a leg, not my heart. Worse case scenario, they can just chop the damn thing off-”

Shiro gasps. “Keith.”

“God. I’m sick of all of this. Come or don’t, I don’t fucking care anymore. Everyone’s constantly arguing with me about everything. Maybe you have some sort of death wish, but I’m not going to let it happen. You were right there... I saw you. You were right - there. And now this lead with the luxite blade... If I can get it and show it to Mr. Holt. If he can just see...” He grabs the pills on the nightstand and dumps a bunch in his hand. He doesn’t care how many there are. He’s got to last through this.

Shiro pushes himself up roughly and tosses himself off the bed, clasping his hand around Keith’s before he can take them. Keith tries to move away, but Shiro holds him down firmly, forcing him up against the wall. He pins him there, looming.

Keith’s never realized just how intimidating Shiro could be. He’s always so gentle in everything he does. But now he’s firm, unyielding, like a rock.

His grip is tight over Keith’s wrist. “Drop them, Keith,” he demands lowly.

Keith grits his teeth and tries to wiggle his way out of Shiro’s grasp.

“Drop them.”

He jerks inward, against, away. It’s no use. Shiro’s too strong. But Keith doesn’t let them go.
Shiro leans down into his face. “Last night was enough, Keith. Zarkon can kill you. Look at what he’s done to you already over so little. You lost a race and he destroyed your leg. And after last night, the game’s changed... You publicly called him out. What will he do to you now? I won’t let you go in to get hurt again... Not because of me. Do not let me be the reason you get killed. Please, Keith. I lived the life I had as I wanted it, but this? Killing you? I’d regret that for eternity. Don’t let me kill you. Don’t, Keith.”

“Let go of me,” Keith says lowly, his voice soft.

“No.”

“Let go of me.”

“I won’t.”

Keith thrashes against him, throwing his bad leg at Shiro, the only thing Shiro doesn’t have pinned. “Let go!”

It hits Shiro, but it’s Keith who reels in pain, wheezing. Shiro presses himself into Keith harder so he can’t move. “I will keep you here as long as it takes for you to calm down. Keith, I don’t want to see you hurting like this! I don’t care about my body anymore. Zarkon can take it! I don’t care.”

“Well, I do!” Keith shouts, trying to twist beneath Shiro’s grip, but it’s no use. Shiro, even weak and fading, is infinitely stronger than Keith. Keith is powerless. Like a child, helpless. How could he fight anyone and expect to win? Pidge, almost a foot shorter than him who’s never worked out a day in her life could beat him. And it’d be easy. “Shiro!”

“Stop!” Shiro pleads with Keith. And even though Keith could never hope to overpower him physically, mentally is another story. Keith can see it. It’s deep within Shiro’s eyes - something hurt, something bleeding. Shiro is going to crumble first if Keith just holds steady. Each time Keith yells, no matter how much Shiro tries to steel himself, it tears down another one of his defenses.

And Keith doesn’t even have to pretend. He feels the words visceral and raw in his throat, burning at his eyes. “Stop telling me that this doesn’t matter! That you don’t matter! It’s too late! I care about you! If there is even a shred of a chance that I can get you, then I will. I’m going to find your damn body, Shiro. If it’s the last thing I do. I’ll die if I have to! I want to. You’re not going to stop me! Fuck. Off!”

“Keith!” Shiro begs. “Stop fighting me! Please! Please, I can’t -”

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“No,” Shiro cries.

Keith bites down a scream, still trying to thrash and twist his way out. “Why can’t you just let me go?” He screeches.

But Keith knows the answer: he’s too weak. He’s permanently injured, it’ll never get better. He needs to be protected. Pathetic! His mind shouts at him. Useless! It rages.

“Why?!” The words tear from Keith’s throat. Agony.

Shiro leans forward harder, body against body. He presses his forehead to Keith’s, bellowing, the
depths of his words bursting from somewhere deep within his heart, “Because I love you!”

His words fill the room.

They both go very quiet. Very still. The only sound heard between them is their labored breath.

Keith stares, eyes wide, right into Shiro’s grey eyes.

Shiro hadn’t meant to say it. Keith can see the knots of emotion clogging Shiro’s face. The terror. The truth of it. The vulnerability. Shiro, stripped bear in the heat of the moment. He did it to himself.

“I...” Shiro forces out, breathless. His eyes go distant, stunned, flustered. He hangs his head for a second, closing his eyes, and then he slips away from Keith. The weight pulls away, but so does the support. Keith slips down the wall to the floor. He doesn’t even hear the clatter of pills against wood as his grip loosens, the one that had been so stubborn, so sure only a moment ago. The pills fall.

He watches after Shiro, whose shoulders are hunched forward. Who just keeps shaking his head.

“God,” Shiro whispers, turning away, toward the wall Keith posts all his art. He stays there for a long moment, looking to each individual piece. He takes long deep breaths.

“Did you mean that?” Keith whispers.

Shiro rocks forward, hanging his head even lower. He makes a noise in the back of his throat that sounds a lot like pain.

“...Me too,” Keith whispers through the quiet of their room. “I wouldn’t do this for anyone else. Me too. ...I love you, too, Shiro.”

Shiro nods softly. He sniffs and rubs his arm across his nose. “I know, Keith. ...I know.”

“Then why? Why are you trying to stop me? You know how it feels.”

“God,” Shiro breathes into his hands and turns back around, staring right back at Keith. There’s so much pain there. “This isn’t how I wish things were, Keith. I’d give anything to change it all for you. I can’t take it. Not like this.” He walks to Keith and leans back against the wall, sliding down to sit beside him. They stay there, sides pressed together, air heavy.

Shiro rubs at his face roughly and then lets his arms fall at his sides. “You deserve so much better... But instead, you’re here, marching off to your own death because of me. How is that love...? How can I let you do that? I can’t, Keith,” Shiro tilts his head back, trying to keep the tears from falling from his eyes. “I can’t let you go. What if the roles were reversed? What if it was me going off to meet my doom?”

“Don’t you get it?” Keith mutters, pressing his hand gently over Shiro’s. “I have to worry about that everyday. When I wake, before I open my eyes. Will you be there? When you’re riddled with pain. When you disappear suddenly. When I go to bed and close my eyes...am I wasting my last moments with you on something as stupid as sleep? Shiro. Every moment could be your last. And I’m scared... I’m so scared. I can’t lose you. Finding you is my last hope. If you die, I can’t live with myself knowing how I’ve failed you. I won’t lose you. I won’t.”

“Keith...” Shiro breathes. “...We don’t have to die together...”
“No, that’s not it. I’m not asking you to let me die with you, Shiro. I’m asking you to live with me.”

“Keith.” Shiro closes his eyes. He shifts, wrapping his arm around Keith’s shoulders and bringing him close tightly.

“Just a bit more,” Keith murmurs, snuggling close into his chest. “I can feel it. Please. You said you believed me. ...Have faith in me now. I can do it, Shiro. I can see it, how it can be for us. Both of us...alive. You and me.” Keith lets out a shaky breath, rubbing the tears from his face. “...We can do this. Believe in me. Please. Believe in me.”

Shiro takes in a deep breath as he blinks his eyes open. He meets Keith’s gaze for a long moment and then lets his eyes fall down to their hands, wound tightly together.

With great effort, he pulls from deep within himself: “...On game days, Zarkon is usually in and out of his office...but during the game, he stays out on the field. ...If we can sneak in then, we might have a chance.”

Keith’s face softens. A small smile grows on his lips.

“But it’s a risk. He’ll be on campus, only a field away. Keith... If you get hurt...” he whispers.

“Thank you, Shiro,” Keith whispers back. He squeezes Shiro’s hand in his. “I’ll be careful. Thank you.”

Quietly, Shiro says, “Just...please don’t make me an accomplice in you killing yourself...”

Keith lets out a shaky breath and nods. “Okay.”

“...I’m coming with you. I can help.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I want you there.”

“God,” Shiro mumbles, letting his head fall back on the wall as he stares up at the ceiling. “You are so stubborn.”

“Mm,” Keith hums, looking at the ceiling too. “That’s what everyone tells me.”

They both sit there in silence for awhile. The pills lay untouched and still, scattered beside Keith. He gathers them up in his hand and shoves most of them away. He has to take a few, there’s no helping that, but Shiro doesn’t seem upset as he watches.

Grabbing Keith's hand in his, Shiro murmurs softly, “So...do you think your mom will let you go to the football game with Lance and Hunk? Maybe if you bring Pidge too.”

“...I’m afraid to face Pidge. I can only imagine what she thinks of me. What her dad must’ve told her... But I think, no matter who I go with, my mom won’t let me out. I think she’s waiting at the door right now, ready to clock me out if I approach.”

“She wouldn’t clock you out,” Shiro snorts tiredly, leaning his head onto Keith’s.

“If it’s that or let me out, she just might.” He looks out toward the window. “...How are you feeling? Think you can help me down?”

“The second story?” Shiro sighs, mouth pulling down. “...Come on, I guess...”
Keith turns to the window. He grabs the hammer and pulls the nails from the boards as quietly as he can, shoving them to the sides of his room. It’s been so long since he’s been able to see out. He doesn’t worry about the crows anymore, there are other things he fears. Worse things.

He tosses the window open and shifts himself out over the edge. There’s mist in the air, cold and irritating, like thousands of tiny bugs. Keith rubs it away and looks down. Shiro’s already there, on the ground, staring up.

He opens his arms. “I swear I’ll catch you.”

“Right. Just...” He shifts uncomfortably. He really doesn’t want to land on his leg. “You think if I go this way? I’m just going to do it.” He tosses his crutches down and then himself. And yeah, Shiro catches him. It’s not as soft and romantic as Keith would like, but he’s alive.

“How’s that for a trust fall?” Keith grins toothily at him.

Shiro rolls his eyes as he sets Keith down gently. Keith collects his crutches and sneaks carefully around the house.

His mom’s in the front yard, hands on her hips, talking to someone closer in, where Keith can’t see. But he can hear him.

“Holy shit,” Keith breathes, eyes flicking up to Shiro’s. “It’s Zarkon. What’s he doing here? He knows I know! Shiro! What if he’s here to kill my parents?”

Shiro shakes his head, going forward, around the house. He holds his hand out for Keith to wait. After a few moments, he murmurs. “...It sounds like your mom invited him. ...They keep talking about a truce. She wants you two to talk things out.”

Keith grits his teeth. “They look friendly? He doesn’t have a knife or anything?”

“No, Keith. They just look like old friends... They’re not doing the meeting between you two today... She’s just telling him about what’s going on.”

“It’s fine, Shiro. I’ve heard enough. By then, hopefully we’ll have proof he did it. We have to do this tonight. It can’t wait. Let’s go.”

Shiro walks back, following Keith as they make their way behind the house, pushing into the forest.

Keith is focused on walking ahead bravely, ignoring the pain in his leg, when he realizes Shiro isn’t following. He’s stopped by a tree, closing his eyes, looking totally disconnected from the situation.

“...Shiro?” Keith asks.

Shiro startles, looking up. “Sorry. I was trying to listen to them still.”

Keith has learned Shiro’s a bad liar. He watches him - the guilty expression, the too-innocent eyes.

Shiro comes forward, catching up to Keith, expression on his face totally normal. A little too normal. “Where are we going again?”

Keith bites at his lip, watching Shiro’s casual expression. “The school. We’re going to the school. Zarkon’s office.”
“Right. Right, yeah. For the knife.”

“...Yeah.” Keith takes a deep breath and keeps dragging himself forward. He tries to play it off too. It won’t do any good to worry. He swats a branch out of his way angrily. “You know, I can’t believe, after everything, my parents think inviting him over to talk with me is a good idea. I’ve always maintained my side of the story, but still...it’s easier this way for them, I guess. To not believe it. Because if it were true... If Zarkon really did it, then what? But if I were a liar, everything could just...stay the same. And I see it now again, with you. He’s a fucking murderer. He hurt you. And they just...” He grits his teeth and smacks a rock hard with the bottom of his crutches. It goes flying, hitting a tree with a loud crack.

“...Please be careful,” Shiro says, turning back from where they came, making sure no one’s following. His eyebrows are down in concern and disapproval. “We don’t want the both of us floating around as ghosts.”

Keith smiles. He thinks it might not be a bad idea. “...You don’t float.”

“I probably could. If I tried.”

Keith laughs softly but then he starts biting at his lip. They’ve hardly gone anywhere, but even with the pills that he took before they left, he just knows in his gut, he won’t make it like this.

“Here,” Shiro hums, kneeling in front of Keith. They both stop walking. “I can carry you.”

Keith chuckles softly, looking down at his leg. “Do I look that bad?”

“Mm. You look exhausted.”

Keith tilts his head and reaches his hand down to brush his fingers against the dents beneath Shiro’s eyes. “So do you.”

Shiro nods to his back again. “Come on. It’ll be fun. Like an amusement ride or something.”

“In what world?” Keith laughs, but he crawls onto Shiro’s back. “Those rides are all rickety and stupid. You are much more well put together.”

“Why, thank you,” Shiro says, securing Keith carefully into place and then beginning their journey forward.

He wraps his arm around Shiro’s neck and lets himself be carried. He drags his crutches behind him.

They enter the forest and Keith hums happily at the sun peeking through the clouds and the treetops. The sun hits Keith’s face as he tilts his head toward the sky. The weather can’t make up its mind, always changing, always moving. Keith can close his eyes for a moment and not be tossed around by wind or hit by the rain on his face, like little needles.

He stretches his arms out, reaching for the sky. “It’s warm.”

Shiro chuckles, looking up white spans over the blue. “Not for long.”

Keith laughs. “This reminds me of when Pidge and I were little. You know that field behind the school? I’d toss her on my back and we’d go running. Oh man, I used to be able to do that for hours.”
“Like this?” Shiro says, picking up speed.

Keith laughs. “Yes.” It’s easy for him to carry Keith. Keith is so small and compliant at his touch. He holds on, laughing, pressing his face into Shiro’s shoulder.

Shiro jumps and weaves. He really is fast. For a second, Keith can see the athlete that he used to be. The human he was when he was just a person. Just a boy.

“Yes!” Keith laughs. “Exactly like this.”

Shiro laughs, the sound free and warm. He leans into Keith’s face. “You fit suspiciously well on my back.”

“Hm, maybe I belong here.”

“Maybe you do,” he says softly. He jumps over a fallen log and slows to a stop as the sun fades back to grey. But he’s still grinning, humming happily. “Shoot. Looks like that was it for the sun.”

“Longer than usual.”

Shiro laughs. “...That’s true. We were lucky today. I love this town and all, but sometimes I wish we could get just one full day of sun. Just one.”

Keith sees a few trees he wants to draw, his eyes catching the curves in them. He wishes he could just tell Shiro to stop and he can take out his sketchbook. He wishes they had time like that.

“That tree,” Shiro says.

“Hm?”

“You wanted to draw it, didn’t you? You kept looking at it.”

“Oh,” Keith chuckles. “Yeah. It was beautiful.”

Shiro blushes a little.

“What?” Keith asks.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“What is it?” He presses, heaving himself up higher to poke Shiro on the nose.

“...You were looking at it the same way you look at me,” Shiro says softly.

Keith smiles up at him, pressing his fingers into the divot in his collarbones. “Yeah... Well, you’re beautiful too.”

“That’s another thing I like about you,” Shiro hums. “You see everything around you. Even the things others overlook. Maybe that’s part of why you can see me. Your heart’s in everything.”

Keith presses his lips together in amusement. “Well, there’s something about you. There always has been. Everyone could see it. The students, the teachers, the townspeople.”

“...Maybe especially them,” Keith murmurs. “I’ve been thinking to myself: why? Why you? And I kind of think that’s it. You’re so golden. So pure. ...And it’s effortless for you. You had everything. The respect of everyone, the admiration. A wonderful past, a wonderful future. ...This world is so filled with suffering. In the middle of chaos, somehow it just feels so...rare...so unbelievable to see someone like you still standing in the middle of it all, untouched. I think that’s ‘why you’. You’re one of a kind.”

Shiro is quiet. He doesn’t acknowledge what Keith said, so Keith looks up. Shiro’s jaw is clenched tightly and his eyes are red. He swallows hard, throat bobbing.

“...Sorry...” Keith says gently. “Shiro, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said all of that.”

“No. You’re right. I took everything for granted. I should’ve been helping others, not basking in my own glory. I didn’t even know Acxa had a sibling and she was one of my friends... I gave Matt a hard time when we were little. I was always so wrapped up in myself that I overlooked so many people, more than I will ever know. I took things for granted. It’s my fault.”

“...I was much the same way,” Keith whispers. “When I ran, I could beat everyone without even trying. ...When you have something, it’s easy to not appreciate it anymore. ...But we do now and that’s what’s important.”

Shiro nods quickly. “We do now...”

They’re quiet for awhile. The air is cold, but not uncomfortable. Keith stares up at the grey sky. Shiro sniffs. “Hey, Keith?”

“Hm?”

“I...I don’t see the triangle anymore.”

Keith goes still. Hears the wind blowing through the air, a lone bird calling through the trees. “You don’t?” He asks.

“No. Not since yesterday. All night, I...I tried, but there’s nothing. It’s just black.”

Keith tightens his grip around Shiro’s neck, holding him close. “It doesn’t mean anything. He probably just...he moved you somewhere dark.”

“Maybe,” Shiro whispers. “I was thinking... When we get back, would you mind typing out letters for me? And possibly delivering them to people?”

Keith takes in the treetops’ patterns, the way the leaves dance in the faint breeze, parting for deep blue sky. He listens to the way Shiro breathes, in and out. How there’s no sound of his heart.

“Goodbye letters...?” He finally asks.

“Maybe more like a ‘thank you for my life’ sort of thing. I mean...maybe they won’t even believe them, maybe they’ll think it’s some sick joke. They probably will, but...I’ve thought about it for weeks honestly. And now that we’re here, I’d really like for them to know anyway.”

“Of course, Shiro. Of course I will.”

“Thanks, Keith,” he says softly. “I was thinking, maybe a few for Ryou. Like. For his graduation, for his wedding, for his first kid. You know? I’ve...I’ve seen that on a movie before and I thought that was nice.”
Something wet falls on Keith’s face, like the rain, only it’s not raining. Slowly, Keith reaches his hands up, brushing the tears from Shiro’s face.

Shiro creases his brow and purses his lips. “I don’t want anyone to ever think I took them for granted. I never said once how much I appreciate them...” His voice cracks as he says, “So those few for Ryou... And at least one to my mom and one to my dad. One to my cousin in Japan.” He clears his throat, sniffing wetly. “One to Lotor, for being my best friend through everything. He’s so much better than anyone knows. I never told him.”

Keith shifts slightly, leaning up to press his face against Shiro's. “Okay. We’ll do all of that.”

“One for Matt, for helping those even when he’s hurting. ...Can you...can you tell him I’m sorry? He deserves to know it wasn’t his fault back then when we were kids. I was the idiot. I always meant to tell him but never got the courage... I thought I’d have time, I just... He’s such a good person. He helps everyone. He deserves the world.”

“I’ll get your apology to him,” Keith says gently. “But he probably already knows.”

Shiro nods sharply.

“One for Pidge,” Shiro continues. “For taking care of you. I’ve never even talked to her before and I love her already. She’s so good to you.”

“She is,” Keith whispers.

Shiro still walks on, even as he cries. He makes soft little gasps of sound with each inhale. His chest quivers. Keith holds onto him and just listens.

“Professor Hutter for being the best teacher in high school.”

Keith hums in agreement.

“Chief Holt for working around the clock to try to bring me home... And that angry librarian who always shushed everyone to uphold the peace. She put up with so much of my shit.”

“Lotor’s, you mean,” Keith chuckles. He knew them well enough to understand that one.

“Yeah,” Shiro laughs through his tears. “Yeah, it was Lotor. But then I couldn’t ever stop laughing.”

“I remember in Chem class. There was no end to it.”

Shiro chuckles again, a fresh wave of tears falling onto Keith’s arms. “...All of these people I took for granted. I never told them thank you. I never held them and made sure they knew how much I loved them and appreciated all they’d done for me and for everyone else, beyond themselves. I never realized how selfless and kind and giving people could be. But I do now. And I can’t do anything now. It’s too late.”

His arms are warm from Keith’s body heat, like the flickering of a flame. He holds Keith to his back tighter. “And you,” Shiro whispers, leaning his cheek against Keith’s forehead and breathing him in through small shuddering breaths. “And you...I want to write a letter to you. One for each morning you wake up, I want to be at your side still, even if I’m not actually there. One when you’re out and about, so I can ask how you’re doing. One at night, when you’re going to bed. I want to be there with you too. All I wish I could do for you...I want to do those things everyday in whatever way I can. Keith. Keith...”
Keith wraps his arms around Shiro’s neck tighter and presses a kiss firmly to the back of his neck. “Okay, Shiro. We can do that.”

“Even if it’s too late now,” Shiro whispers, shifting Keith’s weight on his back so he can free one hand and grab Keith’s hand in his. “I want you to know...if we had a chance and we were in a normal world together, you and I... I’d... I’d want to ask you out sometime.”

“Where would we go?” Keith whispers.

“I’d drive us away from here. Maybe just for a weekend. Maybe longer. We could go wherever you want. Someplace where the sun actually shines. The coast, maybe.”

“I’ve never been to the ocean.”

“No? It’s beautiful. You’d love it. Your sketchbook would get no rest. I’d have to steal you away to take breaks. Can you swim with your leg?”

“No... But I can just lie on the beach and watch you. That sounds nice.”

Shiro chuckles wetly. “No, no, no, you’re coming with me. We’ll get one of those huge floaties and I’ll tow you around. I’m a good swimmer. I’m going to aim to impress.”

Keith laughs. “Yeah? I can’t wait.”

“Let’s do it. You deserve a day off. You’ve been fighting so hard. You’ve fought everyone on the way here. Even me.”

“Even you,” Keith laughs softly.

Shiro slows. “Mind if we take a break?” He asks.

“We have a lot of time until the game. There’s no need to worry.”

He sets Keith down on a log gently, kneeling in front of him. He hesitates on his words, frowning as he struggles against them.

“It’s okay,” Keith prompts gently. He leans forward, taking Shiro’s hand in his. Shiro has his full attention. “Whatever it is you want to say... you can say it...”

Shiro stares into his eyes. Slowly, he nods. “Keith,” Shiro says firmly, looking up at him with determination in his eyes. “Whatever happens from here on out, I want you to know, I love everything about you. Your ferocity. Your caring, soft, sensitive side. Your abounding talent that you’re so damn modest about... And god, your legs,” he says, gently putting his hand over Keith’s hurt leg, “your arms, your face, your everything. Keith, no matter what happens, this won’t change. You’re amazing. Everything about you is amazing. ...So, if there’s just one thing I can ask of you if I leave... please... Please, try to find it within your heart to love yourself at least half as much as I love you.”

Keith takes in a shuddering breath at the words. He doesn’t know what to do with them. They’re bursting in his heart. “Oh...” He says in a small little shiver. He reaches up and wraps his arms around the back of Shiro’s neck. “Shiro.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Shiro says softly, rubbing Keith’s back in comforting circles. “Whatever happens. I want you to keep drawing, okay? Whatever it might be. Let it out. And call Pidge... She loves you and I know you love her. And I know it’s hard, but take it from
someone who can’t speak with his parents anymore... Try to let your parents in a bit more, okay? Just try. I know it’s hard, Keith, and I know they’ve let you down. But they’re there for you in their way. And they love you very much.”

“Shiro...” Keith sniffs, turning his face in Shiro’s shoulder to try to shake the emotions pouring from his eyes and filling his voice. “...Why does it sound like you’re saying goodbye?”

“No. Not yet,” Shiro whispers. “But it’s coming. I know you can feel it too... If it just takes me swiftly, if it just surprises us... I want to have said everything I need you to hear.”

He takes Keith’s hands in his. He’s so beautiful. Not just his face, but his spirit, the way it shines from his eyes and weaves through all of his actions. Shiro is everything to Keith.

“Keith,” Shiro says. “I love you. I love you with my whole heart. No matter what happens, no matter where I am, I need you to know that you’re a part of me and that will never change.”

Keith leans forward, pressing his hand to Shiro’s chest, right beneath the collar bones. “...This mark that I made. Did you know I named it back then? The day I was sketching it out, I heard the words in my head.”

“What were they?” Shiro asks, his fingers following Keith’s so that they can weave together.

“Protection of a loved one. I didn’t even know you, not like now, but something on the wind knew what you’d mean to me. Something... somewhere... beyond our comprehension, it understood that you would be part of my heart.

“I love you, Shiro. Before I even knew you... I’m glad this mark helped you. ...Somehow, I want it to help you now.”

“I’m yours,” Shiro whispers. “That’s enough, Keith. That’s more than enough.”

Keith shifts forward, pressing his eyes into Shiro’s shoulder as he holds him close.

He’s never felt so loved... or so sad.

*I’m yours.*

It’s enough.

It has to be.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith has his eyes closed as he clings like a koala, feeling the sturdiness of Shiro’s back pressed against his chest, the gentle way he cradles Keith’s legs with his arms, how he’s being careful to step gently against the forest’s bumpy floor, raw as the earth intended, unchanged by man’s hands. Keith tries to carve the memories into his mind. He wants to keep these memories with him for as long as he lives.

“Hey, Keith?”

“Hmmm?” Keith hums, the warmth of the sun is pushing its way around the clouds and through the cracks of the treetop again, blanketing his face.

“Mind if we make a little detour? ...I want to give something to you. Back at my house... It’s not far. Do you mind?”

Keith blinks his eyes open. “Can I see your room?”

Shiro smiles crookedly. “Yeah. My family went back to Japan after the funeral so it should be safe. I can show you around. Give you the grand tour.”

“I’d love that,” Keith hums happily.

Shiro’s house is fairly close to the school; it’s a cute little thing and somehow so him. Keith’s seen it before when they were hunting windows, but it seems different somehow. Maybe it’s his heart that’s different.

They go through the backyard and keep to the trees, out of sight still, always lurking. Keith turns to Shiro, laughter on his face, as they pass through the white picket fence and the neatly upkept garden.

“Plants were sort of my thing,” Shiro explains, watching Keith with amusement.

“No kidding? Shiro, the big bad football player, tending to plants.”

Shiro rolls his eyes. “I was not the big bad football player. I’m Shiro who happened to enjoy playing football and also happened to like tending to plants. They’re nice, aren’t they? How they respond to you. Care for them and they’ll grow.”

Keith laughs. “I was only teasing. I know how you love your lilacs. You’re just the type to be able to care for them. Plants only make me sad. I try to keep them alive and they all die on me.”

“You water them way too much and then you blocked out the window like that... The plants in your room never stood a chance. Of course they were going to die.”

Keith blinks in surprise, his mouth opening in a tiny little ‘o’.

Shiro laughs. “We can write out a care guide for you when we get back and have them back and healthy in no time. You’ll be a pro.”

“I’m going to hold you to that.”
Shiro peers around a tree, checking the driveway. “Ah, my parents’ car is gone. Looks like they really did leave, so let’s go.” He kneels by the lilac bushes lining the walls and points. “If you could look under the rock, there should be a key there. I’m sorry, Keith.”

“No worries. I’ve got it.” He leans over off of Shiro’s back, shifting the crutches in his hand so he can fish for the keys. “I’m surprised they kept it here after everything.”

“I imagined they left it there in case I came back...” His voice is softer than usual. He walks up to the door and turns so Keith can unlock the door.

It swings open slowly, letting light melt from outside and into the darkness of the house.

Everything’s just silent. Still. Like a house they’re not supposed to be in. It almost feels cursed or something, like the air is heavier inside, thick.

Shiro hesitates, staying at the door’s threshold, eyes hesitantly scoping everything out.

Keith thought that maybe since he knew Shiro, his house would seem familiar, but it doesn’t. It’s dark and cold and sad and Keith doesn’t know if he’s just making these things up because he knows the pain they’ve been going through, or if it’s really there, a tangible thing, hanging in the air.

“...Let’s go,” Shiro whispers, taking a decisive step in. “I visited them a bit during those few days away from you, but it feels so different now that they’re gone. No lights on. No airflow. No anything. ...I wonder how long they’ll stay in Japan. It feels abandoned.”

“Yeah...” Keith murmurs. It really does. Keith can’t blame them. Having a constant reminder of Shiro everywhere would kill him to. But it’s sad to see the way Shiro hesitates. How he tenses as he looks around at the house he had grown and loved, now cold.

“It’s cute,” Keith says to try to cheer him up, but it seems wrong to say.

“There’s nothing down here,” Shiro says quietly.

He carries Keith up the stairs and Keith leans his head on Shiro’s shoulder, looking at the photos on the wall of Shiro’s little face, a proud child. Of him and Ryou, tossed over each other and smiling. Happy memories.

When they reach the top, they stay there at the end of the hallway for a moment, looking down its long corridor. Shiro takes a deep breath and nods his head toward a closed door. “That’s Ryou’s room, at the end. Around the corner is my parent’s room. And...right here, is mine. First right. Just like yours.”

Shiro slows and Keith reaches out, wrapping his hand around the door handle and pushing it open gently. It creaks, the sound jarring and loud.

Shiro’s room is so still.

“Well,” Shiro breathes softly, staring within. “This is it. My room. Everything’s just as I left it.”

Keith doesn’t feel right here. It’s quiet, hallowed ground. Someone like Keith shouldn’t touch it. Shouldn’t even be looking at it. He stiffens, lungs full of breath, ready to protest, but Shiro tilts his head back slightly to look at Keith.

“Please,” he whispers. “Just really quick.”
“I—it’s okay?” Keith stammers back, turning wide eyes all around the room.

“I mean...I’ve been living in your room for some time now. What’s mine is yours. ...Okay?” He asks.

“...Okay,” Keith says.

Shiro takes the first step in, slowly walking in like he’s never known the place. Like everything’s different. It’s dark, the sun on the other side of the house, missing this window. The curtains are still open, but not much light finds its way in. The street outside is empty.

Keith watches Shiro’s face. He’s biting his lip, but the real pain is in the brow. Shiro thinks he has it hidden away, he thinks Keith can’t see. There are lost dreams on his brow. There’s real agony and sorrow for everything he never managed to do, everything he never had. Everything he’ll never have again.

“Hey,” Keith says softly, tugging at his hand. “Can we sit down for a bit?”

“Oh,” Shiro says in surprise, already making his way to the bed. “Of course. I’m sorry. How’s your leg?”

Keith hums as Shiro gently places him down over the covers. There’s something personal about a bed. Keith can remember Shiro the first time he came into Keith’s room. The way he avoided Keith’s bed at all costs.

Keith scoots himself up into the center, leaning his head back on the pillow. He lets himself look around from this vantage point.

This is where Shiro slept. It’s where he spent his careless days, it’s where he dreamt, it’s where he stressed about tests. It’s where he lived his life. His home. His bed. His space. The normal days. Despite everything, Keith finds himself smiling. “I like it here.”

“Yeah?” Shiro whispers, leaning over Keith and watching him as he inspects everything. “Scoot over,” he says. Shiro crawls up onto the bed and lays out beside Keith, staring up at the same ceiling, considering it.

“Remember when you first came into my room? You were so afraid of sitting on my bed. It took you forever no matter how I coaxed.”

Shiro chuckles. “…Well, I was a blood splattered ghost. I thought it’d be upsetting.”

“You were embarrassed.”

“I was a little embarrassed...” Shiro snorts. He tilts his head on the pillow, looking at Keith, eyes warm. “It’s not everyday that Keith, the art boy, talks to you, let alone invites you onto his bed. I was a little shocked at your boldness.”

“As a place to sit. Get your head out of the gutter,” Keith laughs, pushing at Shiro’s face as he squirms and dodges, successfully burying his face into Keith’s neck as a place of refuge. Keith gives up with an amused chuckle and pats him on the head.

Shiro’s fringe is so long as Keith runs his fingers through it. It really is nice like this, just the two of them together, not having to worry if Acea or Krolia or Pidge might somehow barge in. It’s just them.
“We could just stay here, you know,” Shiro mutters. “We don’t have to tell anyone where we are... They won’t know. We can just stay here until I go... Let the rest of the world heal, carry on without us. ...It could just be you and me.”

Keith’s quiet. He settles his fingers on the base of Shiro’s neck for awhile before he pushes himself up. “I thought you said you had something for me.”

There’s a hurt yearning in Shiro’s eyes as he watches Keith’s face. Words he doesn’t say. Slowly, he pushes it away, sitting up beside Keith. He manages a smile that touches his eyes. “That eager, hm?”

“You know, my birthday’s coming up...and it’s not everyday you offer me a gift. I’m excited.”

“Hmm.” He smiles, nodding to the closet. “It’s on the top shelf. In a box. Want me to carry you?”

“I think I can make it,” Keith says, grunting as he pushes himself to his feet and leans all his weight to the side.

He opens the closet door. What he expects is the same sort of order that he saw downstairs, in the garden. There was care and organization. But apparently that does not translate over to his room. The second Keith opens the closet, clothes fall out of it in one huge landslide. It’s a mountain of it that just keeps bursting out - pants, shirts, jackets, shoes. It’s an avalanche.

“Whoa,” Keith steps back quickly to avoid it. Shiro grabs him by the arms to support him.

“Oh man, I’m sorry. I...I forgot I had left it that huge of a mess.”

For how clean Shiro’s room is, his closet it a disaster. Keith stares into the closet that collapsed in on itself. His fear subsided, he can feel a smile stretching across his face and he begins to laugh. And then he just can’t stop laughing. Shiro groans, pressing his own laughter into the back of Keith’s neck.

“Stop it,” he moans, leaving a kiss on Keith’s skin.

“Wow,” Keith hums, wiping at his eyes. “This seems like a metaphor somehow.”

“Har har, laugh it up. I don’t have a lot of room in my room, you know?”

“A fan? Really? Can’t that go like...anywhere else? And is this a chair in here? Why an entire chair?”

“It folds! See? I don’t really use it but I really like it and I’ve had it since forever. I can’t just get rid of it. We’ve had memories together.”

“Memories!” Keith laughs. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Not like -! I mean like it has sentimental value? It’s really not that - You know what? Nevermind. That box on the top. Can you reach it?”

Keith chuckles, but grabs onto the shelf, reaching up to grab the box.

“I can’t believe you.” Keith’s still grinning, turning down to the box in his hands.

It’s wooden, carved and detailed with care. It’s hand crafted, the carved edges of the design a little rough - maybe the work of a beginner - but it’s been well taken care of. Loved for many decades.
“This looks old,” Keith says, grabbing Shiro’s hand as he helps Keith back to the bed.

Shiro nods quietly as he sits beside Keith. “It was my grandfather’s,” he says quietly. “He and I were really close. When he passed on, he gave this to me... Open it,” he whispers to Keith.

Carefully, Keith holds the lid and pulls it off. Inside glints one small item. The box is ten times too big for it. It’s a single small ring, sitting in the direct center of its cushioned throne.

Keith reaches in slowly, grabbing it into his hand, feeling its weight in his palm. It’s small and delicate. It doesn’t speak loudly. He’s immediately fond of it.

Shiro leans forward over Keith’s shoulder, wrapping his hand beneath Keith’s so that they both support it gently. “My grandfather, he was kind of the black sheep of the family. His brother got the ancestral rings, and he passed them on to his son. So my grandfather got this for my grandma. He carved the box himself. Cool, isn’t it? I used to love it as a kid, but they’d never let me touch it back then.” He chuckles softly, looking down at the box with a bursting fondness in his eyes. “When my grandma passed away and he was dying, he gave it to me on one of the last days I saw him. And he told me...” Shiro trails off, swallowing hard in nervousness. “...He told me to give it to someone I wanted to share my life with...”

Keith turns, staring.

Shiro slowly weaves his fingers through Keith’s and closes his hands around the ring. “I want you to have it...”

“...Shiro,” Keith whispers, mind going blank. This is sort of... It feels almost like... Keith’s face grows red as he gets flustered. “Shouldn’t Ryou have it? He’s your brother.”

Shiro smiles warmly, leaning forward to press his face into Keith’s shoulder. “...It’s not that sort of ring.” He leans back and looks into Keith’s face as Keith stammers. “...You don’t have to accept it. Really, Keith. And it doesn’t have to be like that. I’ve just been thinking... My grandfather wanted me to give the ring to someone I cared most for, which would be you. Someone who I respected and cherished, which is also you. And someone who I wanted to share my life with. ...You. If I had a life, at least... But even if we won’t have decades or years, maybe the ring might be a nice reminder of me...” His face has gotten progressively more red the more he talked. Finally, he shies away. “...It’s selfish of me, really. A selfish thing to push on you. I’m sorry. You can just put it back.”

“No!” Keith shouts, clutching his hand around the ring. “No, I want it!”

Shiro blinks up at him in surprise. “Y-you do?”

“Y-yeah. Of course. Of course I do. Why wouldn’t I? It’s a part of you I can carry around with me always. I just...” His face grows dangerously red as he presses his fingers to his mouth and looks away. “It’s embarrassing. Like you’re asking for my hand in marriage or something...” He murmurs lowly.

Shiro huffs a small laugh beside him. He reaches for Keith’s hand and gently grabs them into his. He still can’t touch the ring, but he guides Keith’s hands, helping him slip it over his finger.

It fits perfectly.

“Mmm,” Shiro hums happily, looking down at it on Keith’s hand. “Now,” he says, “I have this piece of you to keep with me.” He brushes his hand over Keith’s mark still pressed into his chest. “And you can have this piece of me.” He clasps his hands warmly over Keith’s again.
Keith grins up at him, his chest flaring with warmth. “...Yeah. Thank you, Shiro. I love it.”

“You’re wonderful, Keith. I wish we had the rest of the world together... At least I’ll have the rest of mine with you.”

Keith takes a deep breath. “Yeah?”

“...Yeah.” He hums, pressing his lips together. “And I’m so glad for it.”

Keith can see the way Shiro’s eyes flick down to Keith’s mouth, so Keith leans up into Shiro’s space, pressing his face up close. “...Then we better make sure it’s a long one.”

Shiro chuckles, hands falling on Keith’s waist to bring him closer. He presses a kiss to the corner of Keith’s mouth, and then, gently, over Keith’s lips. “Okay.”

Shiro’s lips are so soft.

Keith shifts slightly so that he can try to crawl on Shiro’s lap, into the security of his arms, when there’s a loud thud in the room.

They both jump. Keith jerks back in fear, but then he sees the lava lamp rolling toward them, fallen from the top shelf in the closet. It rolls, the sound like a mini thunderstorm against the floor until it stops at their feet.

“A lava lamp?” Keith laughs. “What is that? From the 90’s?”

Shiro tilts his head back and gurgles out laughter. “Okay. My friend got it for me before he moved. It has sentimental value.”

“All I’m hearing right now is that you’re such a hoarder.”

The door bursts open. “I fucking knew it.”

Keith and Shiro’s laughter dies on their lips and they both go stiff at the sound of a new voice. They swing toward it, eyes wide.

“Oh, god,” Shiro breathes. “...He didn’t go with them.”

“Ryou,” Keith says, stumbling off the bed and taking one breathless step back. He carefully lifts one hand in front of him and says as calmly as he can, “Put the bat down.”

Ryou does not, in fact, put the bat down. He is a sturdy shadowed figure in the opening of the door, rage emanating from his body. He has the bat up, at the ready to swing. He sees it’s Keith and he does not stop. He advances slowly with each step.

“I knew it,” he says quietly, but his voice is shaking and thick with emotion. “Keith Kogane, the quiet little art boy always in the corner, always playing by the rules. He wouldn’t hurt a fly, Officer Holt said to me. He’s a good kid, he said. No matter what I said, he wouldn't believe me... And look. What we have. Here.”

Ryou presses his lips together tightly. His hand shakes in rage as he clings to the bat. “Tell me! What are you doing in my brother’s room, you sick freak? And why did you KILL him?” With a loud splitting crash, he rams the bat straight into the dresser. Hard wood breaks apart beneath his strength. Keith’s face is very soft. His bones are very delicate. He thinks this as Ryou swings the bat back to get another good grip.
“Oh, god.” Keith breathes. “Oh, Ryou. No. No, I would never. This is a misunderstanding. I swear.”

“Why the hell are you digging through his closet? Are you stealing his clothes? You just thought you could come in here? Into my brother’s room and take his stuff? Isn’t his life enough?!” He laughs, eyes wide and hysterical. “Why? Just tell me that much. Just tell me. Why did you do those things to him? It wasn’t enough to kill him, you had to fuck him up too? His hands and feet and his face and they couldn’t even...they couldn’t even fix him. They keep telling me...it doesn’t matter who did it because knowing won’t bring him back... But guess what? It matters - to - me. Do you know why?”

He points the bat right to Keith’s nose, eyes bright with mania. Keith shakes his head slowly.

“Come on,” he roars, slamming the bat into Shiro’s bed post. It’s so much louder than Keith thinks any noise should be. Keith’s whole body is tense and receptive, taking in everything. Too loud. Too bright.

He doesn’t want to hurt Ryou. He looks just like Shiro. Shiro loves him. He couldn’t. It’s not even an option.

“I don’t know why,” Keith whispers.

“Because I’m going to kill you. That’s why. No. No, Takashi won’t come back. But at least I’ll know you’ll never be able to hurt another person like you did my brother again. You’re dead.”

“Ryou!” Keith stumbles backward, right into Shiro’s arms, who holds him, staring on like a deer caught in the headlights. “Let me explain. I’ll tell you everything.”

“He was an ugly baby,” Shiro whispers.

“What?!” Keith chokes as Shiro tosses him out of the way of Ryou, who’s advancing.

“Say it,” Shiro commands on a shout.

“Y-You were an ugly baby,” Keith gasps, backing away as quickly as he can.

Ryou is not small. Ryou has been training, trying to catch up to his brother. His figure blots out whatever light reaches this room. Shiro cannot protect Keith.

“What?” Ryou whispers, lifting the bat again.

“When he was ten, he still wet the bed.”

Keith shakes his head quickly. “You wet the bed still. When you were ten. You still wet the bed.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!”


Keith breathes out, Shiro’s words ringing in his ears. He reflects Shiro. Says the words Shiro breathes out, winded, eyes trained on Ryou. Keith says, “When Shiro was born, everyone thought he was the perfect child. From the first damn day. And then you were born and you were all shriveled up and had a full set of hair. Shiro used to give you a hard time about it because it’d make you laugh every time, but you knew he never meant it. Shiro was the only one who could
say it. Anyone else and you’d get mad.”

“That...”

“He accidentally ate your dinner once, when you were little, and you got so mad at him that you cut his lilac bushes to bits. Shiro cried for hours. On that rocking chair. It was the first time you fought. He tried to make you a muffin in a cup to make up for it, but it blew up in the microwave. He’d never seen you laugh that hard. You made him macaroni and cheese as your apology. He’s loved it ever since.”

Ryou’s eyes are wide, bat slipping from his hand. “How are you...?”

“You wanted to be an astronaut when you were little...because that’s what Shiro wanted to be. But then when Shiro joined football, you joined soccer...because you thought that’s what Shiro wanted you to do to stop following him. But Shiro didn’t care. He wanted you to do whatever you wanted. Anything. Even if it meant you wear the same damn clothes.”

“He... He said that to me. How do you know it?”

“You had a dog named Spot. He loved the rain, he loved the storms. Your parents told you to keep him inside during a storm, but you wanted him to have fun, so you let him out. He got hit by lightning. His grave’s out back, behind the willow tree. You’ve been afraid of lightning ever since. Even last year, when the nights were really bad, you’d sneak into Shiro’s room and you’d let you stay in his bed with him. He’d always accept you, no matter what.”

“I... I’m fifteen now. I’m fifteen. I’m grown. Why would... I...wouldn’t...”

“You did just last month,” Shiro whispers for Keith to say. He clings to Keith on the ground, kneeling over him, both hands digging tightly into Keith’s shoulders.

Ryou is breathless, his entire being shaking, even the pupils of his eyes. He says, voice choked and small, “how do you know that...? Even my parents don’t know that. He wouldn’t tell a soul. If there’s one thing I know about Shiro...he wouldn’t tell anyone.”

“I wasn’t lying to you that day in the hall,” Keith says. “He’s been with me since the first day he disappeared. I found him at your side that one time, begging you to hear him, following you, tripping over his feet.” Keith laughs softly. “He’s clumsy, for being so athletic... He’s here now, in this room, right here, beside me. He’s telling me to say these things.”

“Jesus...” Ryou puts a hand over his mouth, shaking his head fiercely. “What the hell is wrong with you? He’s dead. He’s dead. We just buried him the other day. You were there. You saw the fucking casket. I saw his body in the morgue... It was...grey. He looked like...putty... They lowered him into the dirt. And that was it. That was the last I’d ever see of him...”

“That was not Shiro,” Keith whispers. “I don’t know where his body is...but I’m trying to find it. Ask him anything. Ask him, he’ll tell you. I’ll speak for him.”

Ryou shakes his head, swinging the bat against the floor, loud anxious rolls, looking around the room. Not for Shiro, but for some way out. He’s squirming. “No...” He whispers, voice pulled tight like the string to a violin, pulled too thin and ready to snap.

“Ask him. He’s wanted to talk with you for so long. He misses you all so badly everyday. Please. He needs this. You’re his brother.”

“Stop it!” Ryou screams. “Stop it, you freak! He’s dead! He’s gone!”
“He’s right here! Anything! He’ll answer anything.”

“Fine! Fine! Tell me then. Last month...last month, there was this person who he wouldn’t shut up about. He kept blabbering about it to me for weeks. He was driving me nuts. I left him that day. I left to go home without him because he was driving me so insane - first time ever - the day he died.” Ryō presses a hand over his face as his eyes well up with tears. “You have no idea...how much guilt I feel. If I had just waited... But I was so petty...” He shakes his head roughly. “Who was it? The one he kept trying to psych himself up to talk to. The one he made a huge idiot over himself for. He was so fucking smitten, it was disgusting. The most embarrassing thing I’ve seen in my life. Tell me that.”

Keith looks over to Shiro, who freezes.

“Shiro?” Keith whispers.

Shiro doesn’t move, just takes a shaky breath in.

“Shiro. It’s okay, I don’t care if you liked someone else. But now is not the time to freeze up.” Ryō snarls. “Oh, god, I knew it. You’re insane.”

“...Keith,” Shiro says faintly.

“Shiro, come on,” Keith presses.

Shiro shakes his head slowly, pushing his fingers into his eyes. “God. No. I mean... Keith.”

Keith’s eyes go wide.

“It was you...” He whispers, not able to look at Keith.

Keith’s mouth drops.

“Well?” Ryō demands.

Keith tears his eyes from Shiro to Ryō. He blinks. “Um.” Keith tries to remember how to breathe. “Was it... Was it me...?”

Ryō rolls his jaw. “Okay. Alright, so maybe he did get up the nerve to tell you.”

“He didn’t tell me...” Keith whispers. He tries to stop himself from thinking back, wondering. That life is so separate. He can hardly remember that time. “Why would you ask that?”

Shiro lets out a dazed breath. “He’s such a little shit sometimes.”

Keith looks over to Shiro. “Shiro, I don’t care. Why would I care at this point? It’s fine.”

Ryō says, slowly, “That day after he went missing, when you were there, calling after him... What did he look like?”

Keith bites his lip. He remembers the blood, the sobbing, the fear, hanging thick and palpable in the air.

“Everyone thinks they know Shiro... I’ve already heard so many stories of people believing Shiro would just rise from a ditch, brushing himself off, totally unaffected. What do you think?”
Shiro lowers himself to the ground, sitting beside Keith and placing his hands on his knee. He looks to Keith.

“I don’t have to think, I saw him. He was scared,” Keith says softly. “He was crying. And frantic. He was calling your name, Acxa’s, others... I don’t know. It was all happening so quickly and I was...shocked.”

He laughs softly, but his face is all pinched in, like he might cry. “...What does a ghost even look like?”

“It’s him,” Keith whispers gently. “He’s a little paler, more shadows under his eyes, but he laughs and smiles brightly... He tells all his lame stupid jokes just the same.”

Shiro chuckles lowly.

“He can’t sleep, so he watches the t.v. in my room. He watched the Homeward Bound marathon the other day for like... the third time since he came here.”

“God,” Ryou hangs his head and makes a noise in his throat that sounds like half a sob, half a laugh. “He loved that stupid golden retriever.”

“Yeah, he sure does. It’s kind of like him, in a way.”

Ryou laughs, nodding his head harder. He drops the bat and raises his arms to his eyes, pushing them into his face. “God. What’s happening? He’s here? He’s here right now?”

“He’s right here,” Keith whispers.

“He can hear me?” Ryou whispers.

“Yes.”

“This isn’t some sort of sick joke?”

“No, Ryou...”

“Takashi...?” Ryou sobs, collapsing to the ground in one boneless movement. “Takashi?”

Shiro leans forward, crawling on the ground to sit beside Ryou. He tries to touch him, but his hand goes through. He clenches his eyes shut and presses his lips together.

“Keith,” Shiro whispers. “Can you tell him I love him?”

The moment is private and Keith feels like he’s intruding. He clears his throat, hardly daring to look at them in their moment. “Shiro wants me to tell you he loves you.”

Shiro says, “And that...that it’s not looking good, but if there’s any way for me to come back to him, I will. And he can sleep in my bed with me as many nights as he wants and I won’t tell anyone else.”

Keith repeats it softly and Ryou laughs through his tears, nodding.

“And, of course, he’s welcome to my bed even now, if he wants it.”

“God...” Ryou whispers. “I can’t believe this. I can’t. This is so strange. This is so much. It feels like some sort of fucked up dream.” He looks to Keith, hurt on his face. “Why can’t I see
him?"

Keith shakes his head. “I have no idea honestly. No one else has been able to see him. My aunt, she said she used to see ghosts. Maybe there’s something to that. He can’t move things on this plane. Except me.”

Something tightens in Ryou’s face at that. “You...? And he’s just been...living with you? Haunting you? I don’t understand... If that wasn’t his body that we buried, then... Then where is he?”

“Keith,” Shiro says softly. “...Lie.”

Keith looks up, staring at Shiro.

Shiro swallows hard. “He’s going to want to join. I can feel it. ...I don’t want you hurt. You know that. And I wish you could have a better sidekick than me, but I... If my mom and dad lose him too, it’ll kill them and I -”

Keith smiles softly, giving Shiro a small nod. “This is something Shiro and I have to do together.”

“But I -!”

“Ryou. Listen to me. It’s true that I didn’t know him well when he first went missing, but I’ve been spending every moment with him afterward and we’ve gotten really close... I’ll give my life for him if it means I can find him. I’ll do anything for him; I promise you that. But you have to stay here. For your family. It’s what Shiro wants.”

“Well, Takashi can go stick it.”

Keith laughs a little. “You and I are in agreement; that’s what I’ve been telling him too. I agree with him on this though. Your parents have suffered enough... I don’t want you to get into any trouble. Shiro wouldn’t want it.”

“I was just going to murder you with my own hands,” he says, looking down at the bat. His eyes go distant. He whispers lowly, “I was going to do it, you know...”

“I know. And I wouldn’t have blamed you. If I was in your position, I probably would’ve too.”

Ryou looks up again, licking his lips. “Why are you here? What are you doing digging through his stuff?”

“He wanted me to get something.”

Ryou’s eyes immediately flick down to Keith’s hand and he stops as he sees the ring. His whole body goes still. Something vulnerable and sharp cuts across his face. He tries to fight it, but it stays, drawing tears. “Oh...” He breathes out shakily. He stares, stock-still. “Oh, Takashi.”

“Shiro wants me to tell you,” Keith murmurs. “That even though everything’s horrible and he misses you and Mom and Dad, that he’s somehow also never been happier... And that he doesn’t regret any of this.”

Ryou is watching them...or Keith. He’s smiling gently, something Keith’s never seen on his face. There are still tears in his eyes and that rawness all over his posture. But he looks happy. Genuinely happy.
“Yeah?” Ryou says, voice low with emotion, “I’m so glad... Everything that’s happened lately...it’s been like this nightmare. This horrible nightmare. I’ve been in agony, wondering, god, where is he? My brother’s been nothing but good to everyone he meets. And then he just disappears and...and the world just seemed so horribly cruel to do that to him, of all people. I wondered every night where he was. If his soul was safe somewhere. If he just...became part of the universe, dispersing his life force across the stars in the sky... But god. No. He’s been here this entire time. With you. ...What are the odds? What are the odds...?”

Ryou presses his two hands over his face, brushing the tears off his cheeks and laughing wetly. His eyes are clear. “I’m so glad. So so glad. That you’ve been here for him. And, despite everything, all this bad, some good has come from it...

“He’s found you.”

Ryou pulls up into the school’s parking lot, staring out into the football field. He taps his fingers anxiously on the steering wheel, frowning. They’re in Shiro’s jeep, driving with only a permit, but it’s more than Keith’s got and when Ryou offered to drive, it sounded like a luxury Keith would be a fool to refuse.

“So why do you need to go here...?” Ryou asks hesitantly. “You don’t strike me as the type to enjoy football games. ...Especially in a time like this....”

“Hopefully you’ll see tomorrow,” Keith murmurs, chewing on his lip.

“Tomorrow...” Ryou breathes, eyes wide and overwhelmed again.

“You must’ve already heard about what happened the other night?”

“No. I haven’t left my room in awhile. I turned off my phone. Everyone kept calling to check up on me and I couldn’t take it anymore.”

Keith takes in a deep breath. “I can’t promise you the results we want, but...I’m going to give it my best. Every last bit of me will go into this. ...I can swear that much.”

Ryou nods slowly, gripping the steering wheel tightly. “...Good luck, Keith. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

“Thank you.” Keith pushes the door open and heaves himself out.

“And tell Shiro,” Ryou stammers quickly. “Tell him...I love him forever. No matter what, he’ll always be with me.”

Shiro takes his place beside Keith, turning back to smile at Ryou.

“He loves you too,” Keith whispers for him. “So much.”

Ryou nods, tearing up again. “Go,” Ryou laughs, aggressively rubbing at his face. “Go. And thank you...”

As Ryou drives off, Shiro helps Keith into the dark edges of the forest again as they assess their options.

Keith cringes against the music. It just sounds like noise. Bouncy loud irritating noise. “Well, the
parking lot is just about the worst route in. Tailgate party...” Keith looks down the line of trees, spanning far down the way. He tests his leg out and cringes.

“Here, come on,” Shiro says, offering his back again.

“God... No. No, I can do it.”

“Use me while we still can. Save your strength for when we need it. Besides, I like being close to you. And you weigh practically nothing.”

Keith sighs and shifts his crutches. “I know you’re right and I like being close to you, but god, do I miss walking by myself.”

A group of students walks past, laughing and talking loudly. Evening’s fallen and the only light that’s out here comes from the huge flood lights in the football field, so they’re safe from prying eyes out here. But Keith still feels uneasy. There are so many people.

Shiro walks them around the perimeter of campus. They need to sneak in through the back, into the boy’s locker room. Through there, they’ll find the office.

But the locker room is locked. Shiro sets Keith down and Keith tries to bang against it, but he comes up empty.

“Keith, you can’t always just throw yourself at something and expect it to open,” Shiro sighs. “How much metal are you going to thrash into?”

Keith tsks. “You never know. Maybe if I hit it at the right angle -”

Footsteps come around the side of the building and Keith tenses. He knows how shifty he looks in the dark, definitely not a football player, trying to force his way in.

“Hide,” Shiro breathes and Keith tosses his head around, searching.

“Where?” There’s nowhere. He’s out in the open.

He breathes out a sigh of relief when it’s just familiar face.

“Keith?” Lance frowns in complete confusion. “What are you doing? I thought you were locked up in your house.”

“Lance,” Keith sighs. “I snuck out. Hey, do you know how to open this?”

“Oh...what for? You in football now?”

“Funny. No, I just...needed to check something.”

Shiro nods toward the side of the building. “I’m going to search for another way in.”

Lance shrugs. “Oh, yeah, Hunk is always getting locked out, so he has this method. It’s easy.” He claps his hand together and rubs them, gesturing for Keith to stand back. “You just got to give it a little one, a little two, a little -” He kicks the door a few times.

Keith frowns at him. “That’s your secret method?”

“What?” Lance shrugs innocently. “I don’t see you doing any better.”
“Ugh, forget it. I’ll figure something else out.”

“You’re not doing something... illegal, are you? I heard about Zarkon.”

“No, Lance. Kindly fuck off.”

“Well, I just... I mean, if you were, not saying you are, since you’re not, but... if you were, he keeps coming back here... I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Shiro’s wandering along the edges of the building, not listening. Keith bites his lip. “...It’s fine, Lance. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Huh...” Lance gives him another look. “You don’t seem crazy. I don’t get why Pidge is so scared of you now.”

Keith’s eyes flick over. “...What?”

“Yeah, I mean, can’t you tell? She hasn’t -” He pauses, face twisting guiltily. “Ah. She probably doesn’t want me to tell you.”

“...Whatever, Lance,” Keith sighs. “What are you doing back here?”

“Bathroom. The other one’s full. Have fun not framing Zarkon.”

“F-Framing? I’m not framing him. What the hell, Lance?!”

“Whatever! Not my business.”

“Jesus,” Keith hisses, watching him go.

Shiro comes walking back, noticing Keith’s distress. “...What’s up?” he asks.

Keith hesitates. Thinks of the info Lance just gave him and discards it. “...We’ve got to find another way in.”

“Mmkay. I think I found one. On the side.”

“Great. Good work. Now, let’s just -” Keith grunts, hand flying out to catch himself on the wall. He breathes in slowly, trying to feel his way through pain.

Shiro waits for a moment, and when Keith’s eyes begin to clear, he scoops him up into his arms. “Here,” he hums happily.

“Oh!” Keith breathes, tensing in surprise and then relaxing into it. “This is nice. I get to watch your face this way.”

Shiro chuckles deep within his chest. “Mm, lucky you. Okay, be quiet now. We’re going to have to go around the building and there are people on that side of the quad. I’ve got to make it fast, alright? There are bushes we can hide in, but I think they’re roses...”

“I’m sure I’ll live,” Keith says, holding on.

Shiro stalls at the edge of the building, peering his head around like a spy, his eyes sharp and focused. Then, he’s speeding them through the campus and across the lawn. He slides across it on his heel, slipping them beneath the bushes and pressing Keith to the wall.
It happens so quickly, Keith’s head is spinning. He knows Shiro said fast but he didn’t expect it all
to be mashed into one second.

“Jesus,” Keith laughs softly, clinging tightly to Shiro’s neck. “You know, I heard all sorts of tales
about how you are a god on the field, and I disregarded them as myths back then. What a poor
misguided soul I was.”

Shiro laughs on a soft breath. “Yeah? Believe them now?”

“‘God’ doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

Shiro snorts. “Stop that. You’re going to bloat my head, Keith. Come on, let’s just focus on
getting you in safely.”

Keith slips from Shiro’s hold and wiggles through the rose bushes. The cuts don’t hurt and they
smell nice, so Keith’s not mad. He grabs the window, trying to pry it open. “This - isn’t - easy -”
he grunts, right as it flies open. “Okay. Okay, good. Nothing to it,” he pants, winded.

Shiro sneaks inside and drops to the floor; he opens his arms for Keith. “Come on.”

“My hero,” Keith grunts, shoving his stupid leg through the window and dropping himself. Shiro
grabs him. Keith is still in pain, but he fights to mask it, turning to Shiro to smile. “Thanks.”

But Shiro's not looking. He's turning wired eyes toward the door. “Come on, let’s hurry. I don’t
like this idea at all. I feel like I’m going to explode in here.”

“You’ve already said so,” Keith hums, looking around the office. He wants to hurry, but he can’t
rush this. He needs to find evidence.

The lights are off and the door is locked. What Keith would really like to do is turn all the lights
on and dig through every nook and cranny, but he can't.

He starts in the shelving, whipping his phone's meager light out.

“I wonder if your mom’s found you missing yet,” Shiro worries, hanging his top half of his body
out the door and looking through the hallway. He pulls back inside. “What’ll she do? Call the
cops?”

“Probably. But what’s he going to do? Frown in discouragement at me? Tell me how he used to
change my diapers and feed me mashed peas?”

“Keith...he’s not going to just keep letting you off the hook. You know that. He’s already caught
you in this case twice.”

“Yeah, third time’s the charm. Help me,” Keith says, digging through his file cabinet.

Zarkon’s desk is fairly organized, but the files inside are dense with info. “Disgusting. He still has
my file. He has a file on you in here too,” Keith mutters, flicking through it. “All this shit about
your scholarship. He has the application here... A copy of the acceptance letter?”

“What?” Shiro breathes, walking from the door to look at the papers. “...That’s...weird?”

Keith licks his lips, whipping his phone out and taking a picture. “Definitely weird. Did your
school need to get info through him? I know they brought scouts over. And they had all the stuff
in the paper...”
“I...I don’t know.”

“It’s worth showing Mr. Holt. We can’t just take it though.”

“No. You have the picture, put it back. Hurry, Keith. This doesn’t feel right. I’m telling you. I hate it here.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. If you see a knife, holler, but, so far, I’ve got nothing. I’m not fucking leaving without it.”

Shiro groans. “And now your fingerprints are all over everything.”

“I’ll - wipe it -” Keith grunts, rubbing everything he’s touched with his jacket. He’s starting to get irritated. There’s a sharp pain radiating up his leg and into his gut. He knows his posture is hunched over with visible symptoms and he knows it’s only a matter of time before Shiro starts pecking at him about that too.

He rips another drawer open and digs through that, lifting the folders and peering beneath.

“This is so stupid,” Keith hisses, ripping the next one open.

“Did you try the middle one? On the top?”

“Who’d be stupid enough to put it -” Keith opens it anyway, and stops.

There it is. A luxite blade, like the one his mother gave him, the one Pidge took hostage.

Keith and Shiro stare at it for a moment before meeting each other's gaze and exchanging a long careful look.

“It’s right on the top, Keith,” Shiro says lowly. “That’s... It’s too suspicious.”

“Maybe he likes knives and uses it a lot? Acxa says she saw him with it in his office, so obviously it’s not a huge secret.”

“But why would he put it right here?”

“Maybe he thinks there’s no reason to hide it?”

“Keith, don’t take it.”

“Shiro... I just... It’s all we’ve got.”

“Keith! What if he’s setting you up? Don’t.”

Keith takes out a plastic bag from his pocket, flips it inside out, and snags the knife. “Even if he is, I’m going to deliver it to Mr. Holt anyway. Let Zarkon call him on me, it’ll save me the trouble. It’ll have his fingerprints on it and hopefully a trace of your DNA. If not, then it’s luxite. It’ll be enough for Mr. Holt to search maybe... Or...I don’t know. It seems like proof.”

Shiro rears back like it’s poison. “In your hands. Keith, I don’t like this.”

“Too bad,” Keith mutters, shoving it into his bag that he tosses over his shoulder. “It’s all we have and it’s why we came here. Boost me up? I’m getting out of here.”

Shiro purses his lips in disapproval, kneeling beneath the window and positioning himself to help
Keith.

Keith steps up on him and reaches for the window, trying to push it up, but it won’t go.

“Dammit,” Keith hisses, frowning at it. “It’s stuck.”

Shiro groans and lets his head fall back in agony. “Of course it’s stuck. I hate being a ghost.”

“Well, I hate my sucky leg too. I can’t...get a grip on this.” He tries to force it with the weight of his body, but he overcalculates and falls backwards.

Shiro’s always there, always watching, always catching him.

“Thanks,” Keith hums, patting Shiro’s arm. Then he twists and goes for the door instead. “Let’s just go out this way.”

Shiro puts his hand on his shoulder and stops him, hurrying around him. “Let me check first. At least I can be good for something like this.”

He watches Shiro disappear through the door and poke his head back in. He waves Keith forward. “All clear. Hurry, Keith.”

Keith unlocks the door carefully. Each sound seems extremely loud as he tries to do things with the grace and gentleness that Shiro has. The door whines and groans as it opens.

The corridor is empty. Keith closes Zarkon’s office behind him, but whispers, “I can’t lock it from here.”

Shiro huffs. “Maybe...maybe we can go back around, open it from outside again, shove a rock beneath the window and lock it from the inside.”

What a long way around, but there really aren’t any other options from here. “Fine. Let’s hurry.”

“Let me check around the corner again first. Stay here.” He starts walking off and Keith waits, but halfway down the hall, he stops mid-step, body caught in shock.

“Shiro...?” Keith whispers.

With a small sharp intake of breath, Shiro collapses to his knees and hands, the energy just zapped out of him.

“Shiro.” Keith’s beside him in a moment, crutches tosses aside on the floor. He leans into Shiro’s face placing his hands carefully on either cheek. “Hey... Hey, can you hear me?”

“Mm...”

“Shiro. Shiro, are you okay?”

Shiro’s breath quivers. He’s slow, body lax and sluggish, as if he’s moving through sludge. “...What...? Where am I...?”

“We’re - we’re at the school, remember? We were just in Zarkon’s office, looking for the knife.”

Shiro lifts his eyes to Keith’s face. There’s confusion tangled there. Keith can see the words forming on his lips, developing slowly. Who are you?
Keith’s body goes cold.

But he doesn’t say it. His eyes fall to the ring on Keith’s finger and he stops for a moment, surprised. He blinks to himself and his eyes clear.

“Shiro,” Keith breathes. “Shiro.”

“I’m fine, Keith,” Shiro murmurs softly. He clears his throat and reaches a hand to his face, pressing into his forehead firmly. He takes a few moments to slowly steady his breathing. He reaches his hand up and pats Keith gently on the shoulder, encouraging him even now. “...I’m fine. ...I... I just must’ve overdid it earlier...”

Keith’s still holding his face tightly, desperate. “Can you harness the electricity?”

“No, I... This is different.”

“Try.”

Shiro closes his eyes and Keith sees the focus there, the effort. But nothing happens. The lights don’t even flicker. “I can’t,” Shiro sighs breathlessly. “...I’m fine. Just a little dizzy.”

“You’re not fine. Come on, let’s go home. You can rest there...”

“Yeah... But I... I don’t think I can move.”

Keith stands - and bumps into someone. He stops, startled. He turns his eyes up. And he comes face to face with none other than Zarkon himself.

He’s just standing there. For how long, Keith doesn’t know. He was so focused on Shiro and now... Now.

Keith slowly lifts his face.

“That part of the building was locked,” is what Zarkon says, voice low and rolling, like the thunder outside on the horizon.

Keith tries to take a breath in, but it’s caught in his throat. A small strangled noise is all that leaves him.

“Keith...” Shiro whispers, grabbing his hand from the ground. Squeezing it.

“What are you doing here...by my office?”

“I...” Keith is sweating. He can feel the feverish stickiness of panicked fear burning over the top layer of his skin. His mind is a jumbled mess. He can’t think. He can’t think. “I thought...the game...”

Zarkon just stares, deadly calm. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I...” His heart is thumping loudly in his ears. Some part of him can hear Shiro behind him. He knows he’s trying to say something, but in Keith’s panic, his senses melt away. It’s just Zarkon, a huge shadow looming up and into his vision, blotting out the light.

Keith can’t breathe.

“What’s wrong?” Zarko mutters lowly. “You look afraid. There’s no reason to be, you know. I
haven’t done anything."

“Breathe, Keith,” Shiro’s whispering. “Breathe.”

“As I recall, it was you who fell. And this time, with Shiro, it was Haggar, wasn’t it?” Softly, he smiles. “...Or was it?”

“You...” Keith breathes, shaking his head quickly. “No. It was you.”

Zarkon leans in close, whispering down into Keith’s space. “...Or was it you...?”

“No,” Keith stumbles back. He’s got to run, but he always forgets... He takes one step, but the second is what gets him. He falls to the floor instead, right on top of Shiro.

And then he’s being pulled back roughly, by the arm, before Shiro’s hands can grab him.

Zarkon has him.

“What does he matter to you anyway?” Zarkon hisses in his ear.

Keith cries out as Zarkon twists his arm and yanks him back further. He jams his foot into the crease between Keith’s hip and swollen leg and he steps into it, the entire bulk of his body weight anchoring down. Keith is two points pulling apart.

“Keith!” Shiro cries out, but as he gets to his feet, his strength is gone. Still, he drags himself forward.

“You’re a demon,” Keith spits. He can hardly see anything through the pain. “He was completely innocent! You have no heart at all.”

“No,” Zarkon murmurs. His grip tightens. “Maybe not. ...Not anymore.”

He slowly puts on more pressure and Keith feels as his arm and leg are pushed to their limits in their sockets. He can’t get out of it. If he moves -

His body holds. Stutters. Stutters - There’s more pressure. More. Keith’s going to burst apart.

Then, there’s laughter down the hallway, a group of friends innocently joking and having a great time with each other. Their footsteps clack through the hall, approaching.

The pressure is released. Keith falls to the floor, gasping.

It hurts. Keith can’t move. But the peak of it is lessening. Fading... Shiro pulls himself beside Keith, panting. “Keith,” he whispers, clasping his hands to his face. “Oh, god, Keith. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

Keith lets his head fall forward onto Shiro’s shoulders. He tries to focus on his breathing.

“He’s fine,” he can hear Zarkon saying distantly. “Leave him alone. I’ll get him home.”

Keith’s eyes snap open. “No!” He wheezes, pulling himself to look behind him. “No! Don’t! Don’t leave me with him! He did it! He did it! He did it! He did it! He’s the one who murdered Shiro!”

Everyone in the group goes still, their smiles falling off their faces. He vaguely recognizes them. He doesn’t know their names. They’re younger than him. They look afraid of him.
“Don’t leave,” Keith begs them. “Don’t.”

Zarkon stays still in the hallway for a moment. His back is turned to Keith. Keith thinks he’ll lose it. He already can see it playing out: Zarkon flying back, strangling Keith, the other students just scattering. But finally, Zarkon says, trying to keep his voice soft, but there’s an edge to it, “His parents have already notified the school of this. He’s having a lot of delusions. ...I’ll go get another teacher. I don’t want to make things worse. Stay here with him so he doesn’t hurt himself.”

Zarkon leaves. Keith lets out a sigh of relief, letting himself collapse to his elbows. His neck hangs.

Was Zarkon going to actually kill him? He can still feel his hands buzzing. The tug and pain in his shoulder. The agony in his leg.

The group of friends stay where they are, at the end of the hallway, as far away from him as they can be. They shift nervously, buzzing together, watching him like he’s an animal in a zoo.

“Isn’t...isn’t he friends with Lance?” One murmurs quietly. “Maybe we can call him?”

“He left already. He’s probably already home.”

“W-well, who else can we call? I don’t want to stay here with him. I’m scared.”

“I think...it looks like he can’t move. We’re probably fine. We can just run if he gets up. He can’t walk anyway.”

Keith grits his teeth and pulls himself up. He looks to Shiro, whose face is grey.

“I’m fine,” Shiro breathes, but his voice is clipped, like he’s going to throw up. “Just give me another second...really quickly... I’ll help you.”

Keith swallows hard, looking down at his leg and then over at his crutches a few feet away. Using his arms, he pulls himself across the ground to them. “We can’t stay here,” he murmurs to Shiro.

The students scatter, running down the hallway and away, stammering out, “go, go!”

Keith watches them leave wearily and then turns to what matters. He goes back to Shiro and pulls him up by the armpits, balancing them both up shakily, their weight shifted on his crutches.

“Keith,” Shiro grabs onto his arm for balance. “Keith, you can’t. You can’t even carry yourself. Just wait... Just wait a moment... I’ll feel better in a second and I can carry you.”

Keith’s fear spikes, boiling up and out of his defenses. His voice is uneven. “Who knows if Zarkon’s actually getting another teacher. I... I can’t fight him. Not like this. We...we have to go.”

But Keith is dissolving. He drags the two of them out of the hallway, even as Shiro struggles to get ahold of himself, to carry his own weight.

Don’t think about the pain, Keith tells himself, but the only other thing blaring violently in his mind is the fear. And that’s worse.

Keith wasn’t sure what he had expected. If Zarkon hurt Shiro, of course he’d have no problem hurting Keith again. Of course. But somewhere in his mind, past the stubbornness, Keith’s mind
has always been a little bit afraid that maybe everyone was right. Maybe he dreamt it all up. Maybe he fell. Wouldn’t that make everything so easy?

But no. No. He has to believe in himself. Because Shiro believes in him now. He’s not all alone.

“Keith, I’m fine now,” Shiro mutters, trying to gently undo Keith’s hold on him. “I’ll walk.” He stands up tall, looking sick, but better. “...Are you okay?”

“Please hurry,” Keith whispers, breath jagged. “Please hurry. I’m going to lose it. I can feel it.”

“Okay. Alright. We’re okay, Keith. We’re going to be okay.”

There’s a weary weak drag in Shiro’s step, but Keith’s also. It’s a blur getting out of there. He had to have gone down the hallway, out the door, and through the field beneath the blaring flood lights, but his mind is shifting, clunking around. He can only remember chunks of it. Of the focus in Shiro’s eyes as he forces himself to walk. Of the way Keith’s leg is just dragging like a chunk of meat. Of the wounded whistling of his lungs as he panics.

And Shiro, voice soft, keeping his hand on Keith’s shoulder despite himself. “We’ll be alright,” he whispers, like a soft gentle mantra. “We’re out of there.”

And they are. Keith’s desperate to put as much space between himself and this awful place. It’s so dark outside without the lights. The moon isn’t even out, it’s like someone found the darkest black paint they could and wiped the world away with it. And Keith pushes through it, trying to find home, seeking out a comfort he can’t feel in his heart right now.

He’s on that road, the one he walked on that first day, when this all began, but everything’s so different. He can’t see. He’s panicking.

We still have the knife, he tries to tell himself, but his optimism is dried up. Right now, there’s just the fear. The fear isn’t leaving him, it whispers and finds truths he tries to look away from and tells him what it knows: no one is going to believe you.

He’ll be locked up for the rest of his life, withering away and forgotten - a slow death - or killed by Zarkon, limbs torn and knowing this is how he took Shiro too, and both aren’t what he wants. He can’t choose either of them.

His foot catches and he doesn’t have the strength to plow through it. He slips and falls...and god, Pidge always told him to walk in the middle of the road or he’d fall in the ditch but he didn’t listen, and he rolls through the leaves in a confused shuffle and then he’s just...down in the ditch. Just like Pidge always warned him about.

As if he needed any more of this shit. Pain blinds him and he turns to his side, vomiting.

Too much.

It’s too much.

“Keith,” Shiro is whispering. He’s pressing his lips to Keith’s sweaty forehead. Holding him gently. “You have to go to the hospital. You have to.”

“No,” he murmurs, clinging to Shiro’s shirt. He swallows hard around his throat that burns. “Pidge’s dad. We have the knife. We have to get it to him.”

“Keith, you’re killing yourself.”
As another wave of pain rolls over him, he turns and dry heaves into the ground again.

“Keith...”

“I can’t get out like this,” Keith spits into the leaves, pushing himself up so he falls onto his back. He stares up at the sky. A cloud parts for a split moment and he can see the stars shining brightly. Only for a moment. Then they’re gone again.

Shiro looks up at the road above them and then down at Keith. He shakes his head, cringing in regret. “I don't think I can lift you...”

"It's fine, Shiro," Keith breathes. "I'll call someone."

He feels cold now, drained and scared. He has nowhere else to turn to. So he calls the first person he can think of. The phone rings for a moment and then she picks up.

“Pidge,” he says softly.

There’s a pause. He can feel the silence changing, an energy that had been one thing now morphing into hesitance - something else. “...Keith?” She whispers quietly. “Where are you? What’s wrong?’’

“I...” He presses a hand to his face and tilts his neck back. He can feel Shiro’s hand on his arm as he stays there, trying to hold himself together. “Iucked up, Pidge,” he tries to say steadily, but his voice falls apart and breaks. Hearing her voice brings him back to simpler times. When their greatest worry was whether or not Lotor’s grating voice would irritate them that day. They’re so far away from that now. She’s on one side of the mirror and he’s pushed through into the other. It tugs at him painfully.

“What?” She whispers. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno. I just... I thought I could do this, I thought I could fix things, but I keep just making everything worse.”

“Keith,” Shiro whispers into his ear, pressing his forehead on top of Keith’s head. “No, you haven’t.”

“I don’t understand,” Pidge says, keeping her voice low and gentle. “Keith, what’s been going on? You haven’t been telling me. But I’m here right now. I’m listening. Let me in, Keith. Let me in.”

“I’m just an idiot. A stupid, useless idiot. Everything I do turns to shit. I’ve made things worse at every turn. I can't fix this. I can’t fix it. Pidge.”

“Keith, I don’t understand.”

“You would’ve never done this,” he chokes. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Keith, stop it,” Shiro says, grabbing Keith’s wrists, trying to tug the phone away from his face.

“Stop it,” he tells Shiro.

“Keith?” Pidge says faintly.

Shiro’s eyes are wide as he shakes his head. “You can’t say those things to her without context. You’re making yourself sound guilty.”
“What does it matter?” Keith grits out angrily. “Nothing matters! You’re dead! You’re gone! I don’t care what happens to me anymore.” Shiro shakes Keith’s wrist just hard enough to snap the phone from his grip. It clatters to the ground loudly.

“Stop it!” Shiro says. “Stop it. You’ve worked this hard and this long. We’re not giving up yet! You have the knife now.”

Keith watches him, face hurt. “Shiro...” He whispers. “You’re hurting... and your arm is starting to fade.... What can I do...?” He presses his hand to his face.

“It’s fine. Everything’s fine,” Shiro repeats, running his hands through his hair as he looks down at his arm. At the sight, his face becomes stuck in a strange expressionless haze. He shakes his head once.

Pidge’s voice is small and tinny from the ground. “Keith.” She’s yelling.

He takes a small moment to breathe and then heaves himself up wearily to snatch the phone back up.

“I...I’m sorry,” he says softly. He wipes at his nose and sniffles. “I’m sorry. I dropped my phone.”

“What the hell is going on, Keith? Who’s there with you?”

“No one. No one.”

“You’re scaring me,” she whispers. “Where are you? Your mom called a minute ago. She’s freaking out. No one knows where you are. They’re driving around trying to find you.”

“I must’ve...not heard my phone...” His voice is strange, even to him. Automatic. Dazed. He slowly lowers himself back to the ground. He doesn’t feel right.

Shiro stays beside him, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and leaning his head into the cover of his neck.

Keith holds him back.

“Where are you, Keith? It’s getting dark out. You shouldn’t be out.”

“I don’t...” He looks around himself. His mind is spinning. “...School. I was at the school. And then I...” He thinks of Zarkon. He thinks of his unlocked office. The knife in his bag. Zarkon knows. When will he make his move? It’s got to come soon. And when it does, Keith is dead. He’s so dead. He can’t even think. Will he come for Keith in his house? Will he wait until Keith’s asleep and sneak into his room and kill him in his bed, where he can’t fight back, just as he killed Shiro? Is he hiding on the road ahead of him now, waiting. Waiting.

And no one trusts Keith anymore. They’d just think he did it himself somehow. That he just went insane, like his aunt. That this was no one’s fault but his own. Zarkon would probably get away with it. With killing Keith. ...With killing Shiro.

It’s so much. It’s too much.

“I fell in the ditch on the road, just like you always said...” He laughs softly, something fluttering oddly in his chest, tumbling out of control. “You always warned me. I forgot. I never listen, do I?”
“Okay,” Pidge whispers. “It’s okay. Matt and I will come get you. You can stay here. I’m going to call your mom and tell her, alright?”

“Don’t tell her where I am. I don’t want to go home.”

“Keith, I... We’ll be right there. Stay where you are, alright?”

“I’m right outside the gates...” He looks up at the sky. The way the trees are shifting over the darkness there, ambiguous and full of secrets. Secrets he doesn’t want to know, can’t protect himself or anyone else from. “Pidge, hurry. I don’t want him to find me. I’m scared.”

There’s a long full pause and then a, “I’m coming, Keith...”

They wait.

Shiro lays out beside him and they hold hands and watch the sky together. There’s not much to see when it’s all black, but they both pretend that they see the stars, covered by the clouds that haunt this town.

“How’s the leg?” Shiro whispers.

Keith rubs his thumb against the soft curve of Shiro’s finger. “...Shit. How are you?”

Shiro’s quiet for a moment before murmuring, “...shit.”

They fall into silence again.

“I keep meaning to tell you,” Shiro whispers. “I saw something today. Like the triangle.”

Keith looks over. “...Like what?”

“Rivers,” Shiro murmurs, reaching his hand up to the sky. It's beginning to fade again. The sky is there behind it, peering through. “...Not actual rivers. Just...lines that run and intersect and flow... White. Close, but not touching. But there are holes in the land. They look like the patches leaves make when light shines through and the wind blows through them... It’s sort of beautiful.”

“Hm.” Keith watches Shiro’s hand. “...I don’t know what that’d be.”

“Me neither.”

“Maybe...tomorrow, it’ll be clearer. Maybe we’ll get Zarkon to tell us instead. ...The triangle hunt was sort of a disaster.”

“We found it, though.”

“...We did. ...Though it didn't do anything for us, in the end.”

Shiro cringes, holding his gut.

“...Shiro?”

Shiro pushes himself, like he’ll be sick. He waits. Waits...

Keith follows him up, gritting his teeth. He reaches his hand out and leans his head on Shiro’s
shoulder. “We’ll get through this,” he says. He wants to believe. “It’s temporary. It’ll pass.”

Shiro shakes his head hard, breath coming in short gasps. His back heaves and his muscles tighten. His hands dig into his gut as he fights it. He looks like he's in so much pain.

Keith whispers, eyes tearing up. He clings to Shiro tighter. “Please, no...”

Shiro’s right arm disappears. He’s slouched. But slowly, very slowly, his breathing starts to smooth itself out again.

Keith stares at the void where his arm was. Tries not to look at the way Shiro’s eyes are dazed and empty. “...Are you okay?” Keith asks, afraid.

Shiro turns, frowning around the both of them, eyes distant. “What...?” He breathes. “Why am I...?” He grits his teeth and holds his head in pain. When it passes again, he turns to Keith. “...Who...who are you?”

Keith freezes. He presses his lips tightly together, but he keeps his hand on Shiro’s shoulder, fingers digging in tightly.

“...Don’t...” Keith whispers harshly. “Don’t say that. It’s not funny, Shiro. It’s not funny.”

But he’s not joking.

“I...I’m sorry,” Shiro blinks, horror creeping into his face. “...I...I can't remember right now. Something’s wrong with my head.” His eyes fall to Keith’s leg, where he’s crumpled and shaking. Shiro asks softly, “are you hurt?”

“I’m Keith,” Keith whispers, pressing a hand to his chest. “I’m Keith. I’m your Keith. Look,” he holds his hand out, where the ring is.

Shiro looks down. “...Why do you have my grandmother’s ring...?”

“You gave it to me. Shiro! Shiro, please. Stop. Stop it! I hate this. I hate it so much. Please, remember! You...you just said...you just said you wanted to share your life with me. Remember? You and me. You’d take me on a date to the coast. I’d draw on the beach. Remember?”

“...Keith...?” Shiro asks, frowning hard.

“Yes! Yes! It’s me. It’s Keith.”

“Oh, god...” Shiro starts shaking. “Oh, god, I... I...” He stares at Keith’s face for a moment and then turns his eyes skyward. He doesn’t find what he’s looking for.

“Your name,” Keith breathes. “Come on. Let’s work through this. Tell me your name.”

“My name’s Shiro,” he whispers. “Takashi Shirogane.”

“Yes,” Keith whispers, leaning forward to grab Shiro’s hand in his. He nods his encouragement desperately. “That’s right. Lilacs. You love lilacs. You have them right outside of your house.”

“...Yeah... I...I live with my brother and our parents...”

“His name. What’s his name?”

“Ryou,” Shiro breathes. He clenches his eyes shut tightly and leans his head forward onto Keith’s
shoulder. “Oh... Oh, god, I don’t feel good.”

“It’s alright. We’re okay.” Keith wraps his arm around Shiro’s back and holds his head in his hand. “You’re just having a moment. It’ll pass.”

Shiro nods quickly. He gasps out, “Red. You have a cat named Red.”

“Yeah. Keep going.”

“Acxa’s your sister. Krolia’s your mother.”

“Yes.”

“You have a dimple sometimes when you smile so widely it crinkles your eyes. On your right cheek. ...When you laugh, you tilt your head to the side.”

Keith sobs. “...I don’t know. Do I?”

Shiro cups Keith’s chin with his hand. Smiles into his face. There are tears falling from his eyes. “...Your voice softens on my name, even when you’re sleeping. When you kiss me, your heart flutters.”

Keith clings to him.

“Keith...” Shiro whispers his name like a prayer. “...Keith...”

“Fight it,” Keith whispers back. He begs. “Please, god... Fight it.”

“I love you,” Shiro says, pressing his cheek to Keith’s. His touch is so weak. “I love you forever.”

“Shiro. Shiro, no! Don’t! Don’t!”

And then he’s gone. Faded away like a magic wish that finally expired. And Keith is just holding nothing.

He opens his arms wide, looking all around him, seeking out the light that was Shiro.

“Shiro?” He breathes. “Shiro!”

Nothing responds. An owl hoots in the distance and the wind picks up, twisting through the leaves.

But he’s alone.

He didn’t even get to tell him he loved him... He’s just gone.

“No,” Keith whispers to the air, like it’ll listen and agree. “No.” He tries to stand up, but he can’t. He’s stuck here. He swallows hard. Tries to keep it together. His voice trembles as he tells the air again, “no.” Shiro’s not gone. Not for good. ...No.

Movements disjointed and hurt, Keith lowers himself back to the ground. He just lays there, mind completely blank, staring up at the darkness.

“He’ll be back,” he whispers to himself. “He’ll be back...” He has to believe. Because if he’s wrong... If he’s wrong...
But the silence stretches longer over him and he’s still alone.

Shiro does not come back that night.

Eventually, light does shine over the road above and then there’s Pidge, her small silhouette appearing from up above, looking down. Her glasses glint in the car’s headlights.

“Keith!” She breathes, horrified, and then she and Matt are there, both in the ditch beside him, pulling his limp body up.

“I don’t want to go home,” Keith says. He grabs onto her and shoves his face in her shirt. “I don’t want to go to the hospital, I just fell in the mud... It’s not that serious. Please... Take me to your place. Please, Pidge.”

She’s always been weak to him.

Their dad is working, so it’s quiet when they get back to the house. Pidge doesn’t let go of him, arm laced around his back tightly. There’s something weird in her face that Keith doesn’t want to see, but it’s mostly drowned out by fear and sadness, and that is something Keith can relate to.

Matt follows them. They go down downstairs to the den and Matt brings down a bunch of fluffy blankets and pillows. They lay out over the couches and Pidge gathers Keith up into her arms and he lets her. She soothes his hair back and holds him tightly.

“I’ve missed you lately,” she whispers to him, voice tight and full of tears. “I’m sorry I haven’t called... I’ve been wanting to talk with you, but I just...I don’t know how to say the things I want to say. I don’t want to make things worse. I don’t want to hurt you...”

Keith closes his eyes, letting the droning sound of the t.v. going off in the background fill his head with static. “Pidge. I’m sorry.”

Matt sits there on the couch, feet kicked up for awhile, running his finger over his lip. Pidge’s dad isn’t here, but maybe in the morning... Maybe then. ...Just...hopefully it won’t be for nothing at that point.

“What are you sorry?” She murmurs, still running her fingers through his hair.

“I wish I were a better friend to you, like you are to me.”

They all sit together and watch t.v. but no one’s really paying attention to it. There’s a storm inside Keith and he’s not even sure what he’s feeling. He can’t tell if he’s mad or sad or filled with regret or what.

It’s been a long time since Shiro’s faded away. Usually Shiro doesn't take this long... Where is he? When will he come back?

It’s past midnight when Matt heaves himself to his feet with a small groan, rubbing out his shoulders. “I’m going to get something to drink. Anyone want anything?”

“It’s like, one in the morning, Matt.”

“Is that a no?” He grunts. “Keith?”

“He doesn’t want anything, Matt.”

Matt sighs and turns to go up the stairs.
Pidge still has her arm around Keith’s neck. She holds his other arm with hers. It’s a different sort of quiet with just the two of them. He didn’t realize he was tense, but he can feel himself relaxing his weight into her. Falling asleep with true rest at her touch.

She keeps brushing her fingers against his arm. Her hands stop at his wrist and she stops, angling his hand in her grip.

After a few moments, she says, on a soft whisper, delicate as a rose petal, “Keith.”

He’s already halfway in slumber, eyes closed. “Mm?”

Even though she’s the one who opened the conversation, she’s quiet for a long while. “…Can I...can I ask you something?”

“Mm.”

Her voice is quieter than the air around them. “…Do you know what happened to Shiro?”

He inhales sharply, tensing all over. And he knows, right then and there, that he’s given his answer. For her, his reaction is enough.

She presses her lips together for a moment, her fingers not stopping.

He doesn’t have to ask why she’d ask him that. He doesn’t know what she knows. What’s she’s already deducted from all of this.

He doesn’t know if her silence is reprieve or a sentence, but she doesn’t say anything more. She just runs her fingers comfortably along his arm and he just stays there in her warm hold.

He starts to cry.

He’s tried really hard throughout this whole thing to keep it together. For Shiro’s sake. For his own. He hasn’t been perfect about it, that’s for sure. His face has been stinging from tears constantly these past few days. But it all feels like the pressure has become even more. Everything’s a five-hundred pound weight and he’s crumbling.

He cries softly at first, but then it snowballs and manifests and it’s choking him. And he’s sobbing. And he can’t stop. Everything’s sharp and jabbing straight into his heart.

Why did this have to happen to Shiro? Why? Out of everyone. Why this one person? This kind, sweet, innocent, heart. Why couldn’t it have been him instead?

He cries for a long time, until he’s all out of tears. Even then, he’s just trying to concentrate on breathing, his shaky uneven breaths foreign to him.

He wants to let go. Shiro’s time is coming to an end and somehow, Keith feels like it’s only a matter of time for him too. He’s been run straight into a corner. He didn’t listen to Shiro’s warnings, or Pidge’s. He had said that, sure, he’d take the consequences if they came, but now that they’re here, he's crumbling. He always just assumed that things would work out. That his life had only given him shit beforehand, that, with all that’s happened to him before, couldn’t life just throw him a damn bone? For once... But no. It was just setting the stage for what was to come.

This. The end.

The ring on Keith's hand glints in the light, but the air around them is empty. Cold.
It hurts more than anything he’s ever felt in his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

Chat with me on Twitter?

ALSO please listen to this song, I feel like it fits this story so well. ( Mirage ) 牧。 I love it so much.
Dreamer by Low Roar
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Keith’s in blank slumber when he feels a soft cool hand on his cheek.

He blinks awake with a small gasp, eyes fluttering wide as he seeks the source out with a desperate reach.

Keith’s hand finds him first, sturdy and sure above him.

“Shiro,” he whispers into the dark. He just hangs there in the moment, almost too afraid to believe. Too afraid to get closer.

“...Keith,” Shiro says softly.

It’s him. He’s here. Keith throws himself at Shiro’s form. He pulls him in to his chest closely. “Shiro. You’re back... You’re back.”

“Hey, shh, shh... I’m right here.” His arms come around Keith’s shoulders and he wraps Keith up in his embrace, pressing a kiss to his temple. “I’m right here...”

Keith is protected. Keith is warm. Keith is soft.

“You're okay? You remember me?” He gasps.

“Yeah... Yeah, I remember everything. That one took awhile, didn’t it...?”

“I didn’t know if I’d ever see you again. I was so afraid...” A soft sob escapes him. He doesn’t mean to cry again - he wants to smile for Shiro, make whatever time they have together bright and warm and normal - but he’s still weak and his chest is pried open and raw, so it’s easy to. He clings to Shiro harder, his clothes bunching up in his hands. Keith’s shaking. Breathing him in. He’s afraid to let go.

“It’s alright, Keith. I feel a lot better now. I think it’s passed.” He soothes the hair on Keith’s forehead back softly and gently pulls away to inspect Keith carefully. His brow furrows in concern and then he musters a smile, nodding to his arm. “Look, my arm’s back,” he says happily, holding it out.

Keith laughs through his tears and presses his hand to it. “Good,” he breathes. “I’ve missed it. It looks great.”

“Yep,” Shiro says, trying to be cheerful. “How are you feeling? ...Your face is all puffy.”

“Ugh.” Keith wipes at his cheeks; the skin there is sensitive and irritated. The slightest touch is uncomfortable, but he doesn’t mind when Shiro leans in again to press soft chaste kisses along his cheeks. “I’m good. I’m so good.”

Shiro keeps running kisses along Keith’s face. Keith allows his hands to follow Shiro’s movements, feeling along the crease of his elbow, up his shoulders, through his hair, across his forehead. Anywhere. Everywhere. “Shiro,” he whispers.

Shiro leans back, smiling down at Keith, this radiant being. He’s not really lit up, but to Keith, he
seems outlined in gold as he takes Keith’s features in. He presses a finger to Keith’s nose, still running from crying. “This is good? I’m scared to see what you look like when you’re bad.”

Keith laughs softly and rubs the back of his hand across his nose.

“I’m just kidding,” Shiro chuckles lowly. “You always look gorgeous. Even when you’re all snotty and puffy and your eyes are probably all red.”

Keith laughs helplessly into Shiro’s hold. “Shiro. Don’t make me laugh. You’ll make me wake Pidge.”

“You’re right, you’re right. Don’t cry, Keith...” he says softly as he wipes the tears from Keith’s cheeks. "Don't cry. I'm here for now. We should cherish the time we have together...right?"

Keith nods fiercely as he wraps his arms around Shiro again and rocks them slightly back and forth. He can hardly believe this is real; he’s half convinced it’s a dream, but he’ll take it. ...He’ll take it. “I’m so glad you’re here...”

It’s early morning. The clock in the corner says it’s nearly four. There’s no sound outside or in, just darkness pressed around them. Keith can hardly see Shiro in this sort of lighting, but he wants to just stay like this. He’d live in this darkness the rest of his life if it means he’d get to keep Shiro.

Pidge shifts and sighs in her sleep, whimpering softly.

Shiro tilts his head to look over at her. “...Sounds like she gets nightmares too...”

They both look over to her sleeping form. She’s on the other side of the couch, lain out loosely over the armrest, glasses hanging off of her nose in a crooked uncomfortable mess. Keith stays pressed against Shiro, but he reaches over to pull her glasses from her face and sets them gently on the coffee table. “She asked me if I knew what happened to you...”

“What’d you say?”

“I didn’t... I started crying.” He lets out a small sad laugh but keeps staring at her small clear face in the darkness. “I’m so lame... I can’t even answer one of her questions correctly. I have to call her to save me because I can’t pull myself from a ditch... I hate this stupid leg so much. If I didn’t have it, think of all the things I could’ve done without her and Matt. ...I wouldn’t have needed anyone.”

Shiro looks to Keith, all the hurt in Keith’s heart reflecting in Shiro’s own eyes. “Maybe,” he whispers, words falling gently over them. “But maybe they need you, Keith...even with their two working legs and their two strong arms. With their wit and their cleverness. Maybe even then, with all the strength they all have in the world, maybe they still need you. Like your family needs you. Like I need you...”

He reaches down and grabs Keith’s hand in his and leans in gently, placing a kiss on Keith’s mouth. Small, gentle. And then he shifts, pressing himself in deeper until the kiss becomes wet. And they stay like that, warm and content, mouth moving slowly against mouth.

Shiro swallows hard as he pulls away. He slides a hand down to Keith’s thigh. “How is it doing?”

Shiro presses his hand against the top of it and Keith leans into his touch more. Shiro's here and everything else seems pointless to worry over. He hasn't really thought about his leg. “Ah... I don’t know... I’m going to have to get it looked at soon. It sort of feels...rearranged. But it’s alright for now.”
“Hmm...” Shiro runs his hand over it once more before looking up to Keith’s face. He finds a stray strand of hair tickling at Keith’s nose and he seeks it out, weaving it back behind Keith’s ear. “...I was worried about you.” He’s quiet for a long moment, his mustered cheer chipping away at the edges. His voice is tight as he says, "...That was the worst thing...to leave you alone like that..."

Keith puts on a brave smile, pressing a hand to Shiro’s cheek. “I was worried about you. I was fine.”

They hold each other’s gaze. Keith doesn’t have to see his eyes well to know that Shiro knows how fucked up Keith was about it, but he doesn’t push it. Keith can sense behind Shiro’s smile the hurt and despair that’s there, but they both just smile at the other, even as their hearts tug painfully. Even if it hurts. Because this is the time that’s left. They can’t spend it upset and in pain, they just can’t.

Shiro pulls himself up, bringing that smile back onto his lips. “Hey... When was the last time you went stargazing? I checked already; the sky is pretty clear.”

“Outside? You want to go out there? It’s cold.”

Shiro chuckles into the crook of Keith’s neck, digging his hands into his shirt and feeling Keith’s stomach. “Come on. I’ll let you hitch a ride on my back.”

Privacy, Shiro’s hands say what his mouth does not as he touches bare skin. Pidge is sleeping right beside them and Shiro shifts forward into Keith’s space, his eyes imploring.

Keith hesitates, only for a moment though. But still, he does.

He just spent the last few hours thinking he’d never see Shiro again and he knows - he knows - that the end could be creeping up any moment now.

Will it catch Shiro as they’re midway through a kiss? Will it take Shiro right from Keith’s hands, no way for Keith to grab him back? Can Keith take that? His heart feels so weak already. It will kill him this time.

Somehow it feels safe here, in Pidge’s den, hidden away from reality by the dark.

...But maybe this is Keith’s only chance left.

Keith nods slowly. “Okay,” he whispers.

“We don’t have to go out, Keith,” Shiro says and means. “We can stay here. Whatever you want, that’s what I want too.”

“Only if you let me walk.”

Shiro arches an eyebrow at him.

“I’m perfectly fine,” Keith insists.

“You just said it felt rearranged.”

“Come on.” Keith uses Shiro’s shoulders to propel him off the couch and up and Shiro gives in, wrapping an arm around his back and helping him walk.

“Maybe bring your phone and crutches, just in case,” Shiro murmurs and Keith pretends he doesn’t
know what for. He just does as he’s told. Both of them do a lot of pretending in order to keep smiling.

When they get to the front door and Keith carefully closes it behind him, Shiro ignores Keith’s protests and scoops him up into his arm, carrying him bridal style.

“You’re horrible,” Keith laughs, but he lets his head fall back against Shiro’s chest as he looks up into the sky. He takes long deep breaths, trying to push away the sludge in his mind. He just wants to be here, with Shiro, in this moment.

He knows Shiro must be hurting. Keith’s hurting too. But they can pretend like this just for a little while longer... Keith can do that for Shiro.

Keith pats Shiro on the chest. “Where are we going? The playground? We can lay on the jungle gym. Though, I know you said the sky was clear, but it kind of feels like it’s going to rain.”

“It’s fine. We won’t need the jungle gym. If my guess is correct, my Jeep should be open.”

Shiro really does live close to Pidge. It’s just a few houses over and then they’re there on the driveway. Keith grabs the back handle of Shiro’s Jeep and it pops open with a click.

“I knew it,” Shiro says. “We always tell Ryou to lock the doors, but he never does.”

“That seems...unsafe.”

“Well, it works out in our favor today. What do you think?” Shiro asks excitedly. “Premium stargazing setup, right?”

He sets Keith down into the back. The back seats are down - or gone, Keith can’t tell - and there are blankets lain out. Pillows. Keith lies down on them and stares up at the roof for a moment as Shiro climbs in; they’re comfortable.

“...Why do you have blankets here?” Keith teases with an eyebrow raised. “I guess the rumors are true about you. Is this how you seduced the college girls?”

“That is not it,” Shiro laughs, scooting himself up beside Keith. “And do I really seem like I want girls in that way?”

"Okay, fine. College boys."

Shiro’s smile is patient. "There’s no college around here.”

“Well, they’ve heard rumor of you, of course -”

“-Of course.”

“So they drive from wherever they come from - hours out - to get to you.” Keith shrugs. “What? I’d do it.”

Shiro laughs, the corner of his eyes crinkling and face beaming. “No. Lotor and the rest of us would all go up into the mountains on clear nights and stargaze. You know that place past Minnow Creek. Have you been there?”

“I don’t think so. That sounds nice...”

“It really was,” Shiro hums lowly. Keith positions the pillows for them and shakes out a blanket.
He lets it lay out over them. Shiro snuggles into his side and scoops Keith up in his arms and they stay there, quiet for awhile, looking up at the tiny blotches of stars before they’re hidden away behind clouds. “...I wish I could take you,” Shiro says softly.

Keith cuddles into his shoulder. A drop hits the hood above them, and then another. It’s starting to rain. The drops sound big and hard against the metal top. The cover of the hood protects them.

“Have Ryou bring you,” Shiro says softly, tapping his toes against Keith’s as they both look down at their feet together. “He’ll drive you. He knows where it is. Take Pidge, too. ...If I can just ask you think of me for only a moment...I’d be really happy.”

Keith shakes his head. “No... No, I couldn't. I want to go with you. ...What’s it like?”

“Well,” Shiro hums as he thinks. Keith watches his face. The way he bites at his lip. How his eyes lift to the ceiling as he thinks hard. “…Close your eyes,” he whispers.

Shiro brushes his fingertips over Keith’s eyelids as they flutter closed.

“You know the way you feel up on the cell tower? How the whole world looks like it’s at your fingertips? It starts like that as you drive up that mountain and park out in the dirt. If you step in a certain area and look between the trees of the forest, there it is - home. Our little town, warm and sparkling. Not that many lights though.”

Keith chuckles. “Everyone’s asleep by eight.”

“Eight-thirty on the weekends,” Shiro chuckles. “But that’s not the best part. You can lay out these blankets we’re lying on now, you can fluff up your pillows, and just...slip behind that opening in the trees so you see nothing. No lights, no humanity. It’s just you and the sky up above, the stars so big and bright, it’s almost like you can reach them with your bare hands.” Shiro lifts his own, nearly touching the roof. “You feel limitless. Like there’s no end to anything. Like you won’t ever die. Like you can just remain here, bright, burning, full of life... Like you can go anywhere. Do anything. ...I love it up on that mountain.”

Keith hums. “…Normally, I’d say you were a little bit crazy, but I remember how it felt to be on the cell tower and I wasn’t even at the top.”

“It’s kind of like that. Makes you wonder how many places there are beyond this small town that could leave the both of us just stunned breathless.”

“So many probably,” Keith hums, blinking his eyes open so he can look over at Shiro. Shiro, eyes like moonlight themselves. More beautiful than any sight Keith has ever seen or will see, far more than the cell tower. Far more than the mountain past Minnow Creek. Shiro catches him staring and smiles warmly back. He glows.

He points to Keith’s eyes and Keith snickers, closing them again.

“I’d ask your parents first and then I’d take you for a drive through the forest. The trees and their branches hang low in this part of the town and it’s kind of bumpy so it feels different somehow than just driving. I think you’d like it. Maybe you’ll see a sight you’ll want to draw and we can stop whenever you want. You can sit in my lap and I’ll watch you.”

“That would be boring for you.”

“No,” Shiro whispers. “I love watching you draw... When you’re ready, we’ll find the top of that mountain and I’ll park so we’re overlooking the world below us. We’ll bring more blankets than
this; it can be like our secret little cave. And then we can just lay out together under the stars...as long as you’d like.”

“Until my mom starts calling.”

Shiro laughs. “We’ll be home soon... But then I’d lean over and kiss you. And we could just stay there for a bit longer. ...It’d be perfect.”

“Hmm...” Keith hums. Lying here, bundled together, Keith feels like they’re already there.

No more worries. No more time slipping away. Just them.

“Can you see it?” Shiro asks. “The night sky up on the mountain?”

Keith nods, smiling. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s beautiful.”

Shiro hums, content. He swings his feet happily again so that they dance along with Keith’s.

“Okay, you can open your eyes. I’m done. I just think it’d be fun... And really, if you ever want to go up there after this is all over, I think you’d really like it.”

Keith nods softly, squeezing their hands together set on Shiro’s stomach. Shiro’s chest still expands and contracts with breath. He still looks here, alive. “...How are you feeling?” Keith asks. He’s afraid to check, but he needs to know.

“Alright,” Shiro replies, but he doesn’t continue and he doesn’t make a big show of it, so Keith knows the truth of it.

He pushes himself up. “It’s kind of cold, isn’t it? Maybe if I close this...” He pulls the back door closed and the chill from outside is cut off. Keith lies back down beside Shiro. “Better?”

Shiro lets out a small laugh and shrugs.

Keith knows harping on about it will do neither of them any good here. He wishes he could give Shiro the world. At least the future he wanted, even if only a part of it. Something.

So he tries.

“Hey. What about me?” Keith says softly. “I want to give it a shot... Close your eyes.”

Shiro’s eyelids flutter closed and Keith pulls himself up on his elbows so he can lean over Shiro. He settles over Shiro’s chest, watching his face. He murmurs into his cheek lowly, “Imagine the world’s most beautiful man -”

“-You.”

Keith smiles into his skin. “No. You. Imagine you, standing beside me, in the park across from the library.”

“The one with the willow tree?”

“That’s the one. Imagine us, together, white chairs set up across the lawn in an orderly fashion. There are swans and geese swimming in the lake behind us. And that massive willow tree that’s seen so many things, it covers us in its umbrella, just in case it rains.”

“Oh, it’ll rain,” Shiro laughs. And he’s right. It’s raining now, full out rain pelting the top. But they’re used to it.
Keith laughs. “...They have those lilac bushes out there, did you know? We’ll go there when they bloom.”

Shiro softens as he opens his eyes.

“You’re cheating,” Keith chuckles. “I closed my eyes for your thing.”

But Shiro’s eyes sparkle. “...Will there be live music?” Shiro asks hopefully.

Keith smiles down at him. “Mmhmm. And all of our friends and our family.”

“A caterer.”

“A florist.”

“Ducks!”

Keith stops for a moment and then bursts into laughter.

“What?” Shiro defends. “I like ducks! And if there are geese and swans, why not ducks? What do you have against them and their pure hearts?”

“Okay. You’re right, how silly of me. Of course there will be ducks. Though, ‘pure hearts’ might be a stretch. Especially when they’re chasing all our guests around.”

“They have such little heads, they have to be sweet.”

“Since that is exactly how it works.” Keith laughs and then settles back in, closing his own eyes as he imagines it all happily.

Shiro says, “You can take out your dad’s fried formal wear outfit from the closet where you’re hiding it and I’ll borrow my dad’s from his closet. Should I burn my pant leg so we can match?”

“Or maybe we can just get new ones.”

“Or maybe that,” Shiro laughs. “And you already have my grandmother’s ring, so I don’t know what I’ll get you...”

“Mm-mm. I like this one. It’s not coming off.”

“Yeah, but this ring is different. I want to get you another one too.”

“Well, we can go ring shopping together. I don’t know what I’ll get you either.”

“We’ll exchange vows.”

“We’ll write out our own -”

“-Yes-”

“-Definitely-”

“And then we’ll kiss...”

“Yeah.” Keith whispers, holding Shiro’s hands tightly in his as he stares up at the hopeful glint in Shiro’s eyes. This. This moment. It’s theirs and only theirs. No one can take it from them, not even time. Not even sickness.
“Let’s get married,” Keith whispers to Shiro. “When the lilacs bloom, surrounded by our loved ones. ...Let’s get married. You and me.”

Shiro’s nose crinkles and he nods his head sharply. “...Yes. Married, the both of us...together. I want that...”

Keith smiles crookedly and goes in for a kiss.

And it’s easy between them, as things often are because it’s so obvious that they were both born for the other.

Keith loves Shiro with his entire heart. And he’s scared of it, of how powerful it feels sitting in his chest like this, but he’s always in awe of it too. That something he never knew existed in him could have flourished and bloomed beneath Shiro’s care. How their two hearts, so far apart weeks ago, now feel so intertwined. So in sync.

It’s amazing.

It could’ve been perfect if they had met years ago. If Keith were at the top of his game, running through the tracks with two working legs at their prime, just doing what he loved. If Shiro were still out there in the field, blazing through the grass, going somewhere. And they could meet in between. They could still have this, but golden, but warm. They could be as equals.

He wishes it could be perfect. That’s what Shiro deserves. He wishes he could be perfect. Or at least how he was...

He reaches up for Shiro, trying to crawl onto his lap but it’s not as easy as he had pictured it would be. It’s not like his dreams had been, where he felt no pain. His leg is in the way - it’s always in the way - and whenever he tries to force it to his will, it hits him right back. He just wants to crawl up on Shiro and kiss him as hard as he’s been dreaming of kissing him, but he can’t. He can’t do it.

The things he wishes he could do...he never can.

“Hey,” Shiro whispers, leaning his head back to look up into Keith’s face. He moves a hand from Keith’s hip and lifts it to his brow, pressing the frown out. He smiles crookedly. “Why are you frustrated?”

“My fucking leg,” Keith grudges lowly. “Just ignore it...” He goes in for another kiss, which Shiro returns briefly before pulling away. Shiro looks down at Keith’s leg with concern.

“Ignore it?” Shiro asks, turning his eyes back up to Keith’s. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Oh,” Keith groans. “I can give you so many reasons but that would last for the rest of our days and it still wouldn’t cover it. Just push it out of the way. I want to get to you.”

Shiro shakes his head softly. “It’ll hurt you.”

“I don’t care. It’s useless. It’s the worst leg in the world.”

Shiro watches him for a moment and then gently rolls the both of them so that Keith is on his back. “It’s not useless,” he tells Keith, leaning over him.

Keith gives him a tired look. “Just forget I said anything... Come kiss me.”

“It’s not useless,” Shiro repeats patiently. He places a hand on the top of Keith’s thigh and closes
his eyes. “The very first night we went out, despite the damage, despite the pain, you put your crutches aside and you walked for me. You hunted through the forest, fought against a fox.”

Keith tries to hold his stubbornness, but he chuckles a little. “That’s what you call a fight? A fox running away for its life. A fierce competitor. I’m glad I made it out alive.”

Shiro grins. “And then you climbed the cell tower with it. I honestly didn’t think you’d be able to do it...but I didn’t know you back then. Your leg was with you then, Keith. And it held strong with you.”

“I guess...” He shrugs, still not convinced.

“And then when Haggar’s spirits went after you -”

“-Yeah, but you helped.”

“I didn’t guide you out the window in your living room, or scramble off Haggar’s roof -”

“-If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve asphyxiated in mud because of my leg.”

“The edges of the grave were too soft to support anyone, even with a good jump.”

“You’re just saying that,” Keith raises an eyebrow.

“I’m not. It’s still with you. It’s still yours.”

“My leg... If it were still my leg, I could’ve continued my karate lessons. My mom could’ve continued teaching me how to use a knife...but that’s all gone. Maybe if I had my leg, I would’ve found you by now...”

“Keith. It’s not your leg’s fault. It’s Zarkon’s. This whole thing is because of him. And despite him, it’s still here. It’s doing it’s best. Just like you. And I’m so proud of you...” Shiro looks into Keith’s face, eyebrows pinched together. He finally lets out a sigh. “I see I can’t convince you. Well, it’s okay. I’ll love this leg enough for the both of us.”

“Shiro,” Keith laughs as Shiro dives in, pressing quick kisses on every inch of it. “Stop. It tickles.”

“I love this leg,” Shiro says and presses another kiss to it. “I love it. I love it. I love it.”

“Shiro.”

“Tell me you love it and I’ll stop.”

“No! Never!” Keith laughs and squirms. He tries to grab at Shiro, but he’s so sturdy. It’s like trying to make a wall yield.

“Say it! I’ll stop.”

“Make me!”

Shiro laughs, clinging to Keith’s leg and continuing to pepper it with kisses without end. He picks up the pace. “Challenge accepted!”

“Okay, okay! I yield! I yield! You’re going to make me pee myself.”

Shiro arches an eyebrow at him, but he stops. “This is my leg now,” he says, clinging to it fondly.
“My property. Treat it kindly or I’m coming after you.”

“Ha! Coming after me? You’ll have fallen right into my hands. You’re right where I want you.”

“Mmm,” Shiro hums, smiling up at him. He keeps his arms wrapped around Keith’s leg and leans his head against the side. “...I love this leg,” he says again, but his voice has mellowed out. It’s no longer a joke, but a statement. “...I love it. I love it. I love you.”

Keith softens, smiling down at him. “I love you, too,” he whispers.

Shiro presses a kiss to the inside of Keith's knee, deliberate and firm. His brow furrows as he does it. Keith watches him from above. Watches the gentle way he does it, like it’s something that deserves this. Like it’s something that Shiro cherishes.

“I love this leg,” he whispers.

Keith bites down on his lip and takes a deep breath to try to steady himself. There's an intensity about Shiro suddenly that Keith would rather not face. He wants to go back to just messing around, their hearts light and full. He doesn't want to remember reality, what life has taken and will take from them.

But Shiro keeps treating him so gently, showering his leg in love.

Keith tries to jerk back. It doesn't hurt - Shiro is gentle as always, but it's gross. It’s so gross. The thought of it - it’s like kissing shit. Someone like Shiro should remained untouched by this, not nuzzling it like this, breathing it in, holding it tenderly. It doesn’t deserve this treatment. "Shiro," he says, his voice quivering.

"I love this leg," Shiro says softly, lips brushing against it. "...I wasn't kidding. It's part of you," Shiro whispers against it, his breath running across it in puffs. "Stubborn, like you. Strong, like you. Beautiful, like you.”

“No -” Keith shakes his head. “No, it’s none of those things. I hate it.”

“I know you do,” Shiro whispers. “I know. And it’s okay. I understand why, but, to me, it’s still a part of you worthy of love.”

Keith huffs out a perturbed breath through gritted teeth, but he lets Shiro run his hands across it, he lets him place soft kisses down the length of it. It does feel nice if he doesn't allow himself to think about it. He feels warm and cared for...

There’s something raw in Keith’s chest as he watches Shiro, something slowly coming undone, so he turns his eyes up to the ceiling and frowns into it.

“I love you,” Shiro whispers. “I love you... You’re amazing, not despite your leg, but with your leg.”

Keith feels emotion flaring in his chest, tightening his throat. He shakes his head. Tries to think of something to say, but there’s nothing. He doesn’t want to talk about this, not when time’s running out so quickly. This time that’s so precious between the two of them - wasted on his shit of a leg that so much other time and effort is wasted on.

“...Shiro...” Keith bites down on his lip as the words pierce into him. He wants to tell him to stop. He wants to just turn his eye from this conversation like he always does and bury it deep in the confines of his heart, locked away from even himself. Stop, he means to say, but what leaves his
mouth instead, words choked and torn, is, “Then why do I feel this way?”

Shiro is the calm warmth in the turbulence of Keith’s heart. Everything, from his voice, from the way he soothes Keith with his gentle touch, stroking his leg softly up and down. “I’ve thought about it a lot. Why it makes you so angry.”

“So have I,” Keith chews out bitterly. “How’s that going for you?”

“I think you know, deep inside, but you’re too afraid to see it.”

“See what?”

"That it's not your fault."

Keith’s eyes go wide. He swallows hard. Quietly, he whispers, “...Of course it’s not. Wh-why would you think I thought that? It’s Zarkon who did it. Why would I think -?”

“Then why do you torture yourself like this? That one day, in the Ag building, the way you abused it against that wall -”

“-You don’t understand. I was just frustrated.”

“You’re afraid. No one else believed your truth, so you struggle to do the same as well.”

Keith’s gut squirms uncomfortably. His breath catches.

“No one believed in you. So you started to doubt yourself. But even still, all you’ve done is try your best with what you’re given,” Shiro whispers.

Keith presses a hand to his face and groans. “Shiro,” he whispers around the tightness in his throat. He feels so torn open and raw.

“You’re not to blame,” Shiro whispers again. "You weren't lying. It's not fair what happened to you."

"...If I had been a child my parents could trust, if I hadn't reacted that way to Zarkon, or said such horrible things -"

"You didn't know what would happen."

"I did."

"Keith, you can't keep blaming yourself for something Zarkon did. He's horrible and he's the one who did this to you. Just because he won't own up to it, doesn't mean that you're the one who has to.""But it feels like it does," Keith grits out. "I'm stuck with this! I can't run from it. I can't do anything about it. He twisted me up and laughed and I could do nothing to stop it. I hate it,” he whispers, rubbing away tears. “I hate it, I hate it, I hate it. I hate it so much. I wish it never happened. I wish I could just go back and fix everything. I wish I could get revenge. I know it's horrible, but I wish I could. ...God.”


“No one believed me. They just took everything Zarkon fed them. I just don’t understand why. Pidge. My parents. I lied, but about this? They really thought...? It’s like punishment for every
bad thing I’ve done. Like fate’s somehow trying to spit in my face for being who I am.”

“Keith...”

“But maybe it’s right to, since all I did when I was younger was shit on everyone who tried to care for me.”

“That’s not true. Do you think the mistakes I made when I was younger mean I’m a bad person now and forever?”

“No,” Keith parts his hands from his face and runs his finger roughly through his hair. Shiro’s staring up at him calmly. “But it’s different.”

“How?”

“I - Because -”

“Keith, you’ve grown and you’ve learned. You’ve changed so much. All I’ve seen in our time together is a kind, caring, brave soul. You are filled with so much goodness and heart it just blazes out of you...and if someone like you deserves to be punished by fate, then *fuck fate.* I won't stand for it.”

Keith huffs out a shaky breath, holding Shiro's gaze desperately.

"Keith, trust me. Zarkon hurting you just shows what a horrible person he is, not what a horrible person you are. It’s not your fault. So stop shouldering the burden all on your own. Stop blaming yourself when all you ever do is try your best.”

“I don’t -”

“I know it’s not Zarkon who has to live with it, it’s you, and it’s not fair. ...But you do your best. Your leg is hanging in there too. ...And I love you for it.”

“God,” Keith whispers, voice so thick it burns at his throat. Tears force their way from his eyes. "Shiro.”

“I love this leg,” Shiro whispers, pressing a kiss to it again. “It’s not ugly. It’s not useless. It’s not pathetic. It’s part of you. A part of you that’s just as special as the rest of you. No matter how damaged it is, it’s still yours.”

Keith hiccups in soft sobs. “Shiro.”

“It’s every bit as brave, every bit of a fighter as you are. I think it’s beautiful. It’s my leg,” he whispers, ducking his head to continue kissing it. “It’s mine. And I cherish it.

“I love it,” he breathes around a kiss.

“I love it...” He kisses it again.

“I love you.”

Keith’s crying. His face is wet and stinging from his tears. He rubs at his eyes trying to wipe them away, but they just keep coming. His breath catches in his chest. And Shiro keeps kissing him. And the pain is rubbed away, bit by bit.

Keith’s never felt this raw. This torn open and stared into. But still, Shiro cradles him. Shiro
looks into the ugliest bits of him and smiles down into the gaping twisted ugly hole with love.

He’s never let anyone talk about it like this with him. He’s been so afraid to hear what they think. He’s never wanted this leg; he misses how it was. But Shiro, with his kindness and his acceptance... Shiro, with all the love in his heart...

Maybe he's been hating the wrong thing all along. Maybe the hurt in his heart can be rubbed away, if only just a little.

“Shiro,” Keith breathes around his tears. He feels so much. “Shiro. I love you.”

“I love you,” Shiro whispers back.

Keith’s sniffling, a gross mess, his voice choked with tears. “Earlier...I thought I wouldn’t get a chance to tell you... You disappeared so suddenly. I need you to know. ...I love you, Shiro. I love you. More than anything. I love you.”

“I know,” he says. “I know.”

Hand still gently holding his leg, Shiro lifts himself and crawls over Keith to get to his face, gently kissing away the tears from Keith’s cheeks.

“You are everything I could ever want,” Shiro whispers, nuzzling his nose into his neck. "Everything."

“God, Shiro...” Keith cries. "You too. You too.”

Shiro leaves a trail of kisses down Keith’s neck, across his shirt and down his soft belly, and then lower. As he draws back, his hands slip over Keith’s sides. He pulls back to watch Keith’s face as a small groan pulls from his core.

“Is this okay?”

“Mm,” Keith nods, parting his legs slightly as he shifts back to get comfortable. He sniffs again, hands rubbing at his face again. He clears his throat. "I was trying not to cry today. I'm sorry, Shiro."

Shiro hums softly. "When you cry, your eyes sparkle in a certain way. Set over the purple of your irises, it looks like the stars in the night sky."

A small chuckle warms Keith's chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Shiro nuzzles Keith through his pants.

“Oh,” Keith breathes. He’s not even sure where it comes from when he says, breath fluttering in his lungs, “...I had a dream like this before.”

“Oh, did you?"

“Mm... Mmhmm.”

“How did it go?” Shiro grins up at him, eyes twinkling.

Keith blushes. There’s no way to look into Shiro’s beautiful face in this position and keep a cool head. Keith’s sprawled out on his back, legs parted for Shiro as he lies between them casually, as if he belongs here. And he does. He definitely does.
Everything about Shiro just speaks of strength, of steadiness, but there’s that brightness about him, untouched by the world. He will be cool headed and firm whenever the time calls for it, but it hardly ever will. Because what needs to rise and fight against Shiro? Keith knows he couldn’t. Could never. Who would?

Shiro takes pity on him, chuckling slightly at Keith’s expression as he dips his head down. “Did it start like this?” Shiro asks lowly.

Keith tenses, breath fluttering in his throat. “U-um... Yes.”

Shiro sneaks one hand into Keith’s shirt as he gently cradles his leg. Keith can feel his breath against the edge of his pants. But he stops and asks, very gently, “Is this okay? I...I know it’s not how things usually go. And in our situation...”

Keith reaches down to carefully run his fingers through Shiro's hair. “Of course it is,” he whispers, their two gazes holding onto the other. ”If it's you, of course. I want this, Shiro.”

Shiro lets out another small nervous chuckle. “...Okay.”

“I’ve dreamt of this,” Keith says again. “You have no idea...just how badly I want it.”

“I know,” Shiro smiles crookedly up at him again. “You sort of talk in your sleep.”

Keith’s face flares red and he stammers, blazing with embarrassment. He’s certain his whole body’s gone red. “No! Th-this detailed -?”

Before Keith can combust in embarrassment, Shiro leans down, nuzzling against the hardness in Keith’s pants.

Keith lets out a sharp breath. So much has been happening lately - his life has been going back and forth from tragedy to blessing to blessing to tragedy and his defenses are stretched as thin as they can go. And that includes Shiro. No, maybe especially to him.

He’s so susceptible to his emotions lately and right now they’re bursting inside of his chest. He can barely stand how much this feels, having Shiro just laying here with him, but when Shiro carefully undoes Keith’s pants and mouth gently presses to flesh...Keith’s mind cannot handle the sensation all at once. It stretches apart into a thousand different glowing pieces and all he can do is let his head fall back and gasp. If Shiro weren’t handling him as carefully as he is, then Keith is certain he’d just die.

He’s so gentle. Each movement is tender and so full of love and Keith both hates it and loves it because half of his mind is screaming, ‘this is it, this is the one and only time you’ll have before the end,’ but at the same time, all he hears is, ‘this is it, this is what you’ve longed for all along and it’s finally here’, like his prayers have been answered. Like, finally, all the pain and hurt is gone.

Because Shiro is his. There’s a ring on his finger that tells Keith of that and a warmth in his heart that assures him.

“I love you,” Shiro breathes the words that Keith thought only a few hours ago he’d never hear again spoken from those soft lips. But he’s here, mouth working against Keith slowly.

Somehow, his mouth is so warm against him.

“Shiro. I love you too,” Keith pants, desperately reaching down to run his hands through Shiro’s hair and cradle his head. Shiro reaches his hand up for Keith and he grabs on tightly, squirming
with the sensation. His breath trembles and he fights against his hips as they try to disobey him. He wants to roll them up, seeking deeper into that warmth. He squeezes tighter onto Shiro’s hand instead. “It feels so good.”

Shiro hums against him and Keith has to bite back a strangled cry.

Keith has never been the one to seek something like this. He hates people. He hates humanity. They’ll turn their back to you the first chance they get. How can you trust them with any part of you - physical or mental? They’re all selfish. They’ll all leave you alone.

But Shiro, the popular football player, vapid and self-absorbed, he’s fought so hard to stay beside Keith at every turn. If he had a real body, if the situation were different, Keith knows - he knows, doesn’t just hope - that Shiro would be there for him. No matter what. Even if it was to hell and back, they’d have each other’s backs.

And that... Keith never imagined that. Not for himself.

How can you trust a person? Keith hates people...

But Keith could never hate Shiro. Keith trusts Shiro...with everything.

“I love you,” Keith says again, but it’ll never be enough.

I want this forever, Keith wants to say, but he knows he can’t.

He can’t be that selfish. Shiro would never. So this. This. He will just have to treasure this.

And it’s so much. Keith’s so swept up in the feeling, in Shiro, that he forgets to even warn him as everything rises up inside of him and takes him under. He hasn’t ever felt so good in his entire life. His body is so electric and burning and -

When he comes back to himself, swallowing hard, he feels Shiro first, pressing lazy kisses along the inside of his leg again.

“Hey...” Shiro hums, looking up at him with a soft smile on his face.

Keith nods hard, still breathing on winded breath. “Hey.” He opens his arms wide and gestures toward him. Shiro lifts himself up onto Keith’s chest and lays out on top of his body carefully.

Shiro’s still smiling. “Was it like your dream?”

Keith nods again, a small laugh escaping him. “Only a hundred times better,” he breathes out, smile going wider as he recovers himself. “Come here,” he whispers. “I’m not done with you yet.”

Shiro looks to him in confusion. “But...?”

“You don’t want this?” Keith tilts his head and reaches his hand down to brush against Shiro’s waistband.

Shiro smiles down at him. “...Of course, I do, Keith,” he says softly.

“I’m not done,” Keith smiles, rising up to catch Shiro’s mouth with his and he kisses him harder than any kiss he’s ever given.

He’s going to make this count.
“Keith?” Shiro whispers gently. Keith feels a delicate touch against his face and he inhales sharply. “Keith, are you awake?”

“Mm...no,” he grumbles and shifts to bury his face deeper into Shiro’s neck.

“Come on,” Shiro chuckles, sneaking his hands around his shoulders and gently trying to rouse him. “Don’t get like that. We should go back soon before Pidge wakes up.”

“I’ll just tell her I went for a smoke,” he mumbles, tilting his head back slightly so he can leave messy kisses up Shiro’s neck. Their openness together feels so good.

“Since that went over so well last time.”

Keith’s not listening. He moans softly against him, lifting himself slightly so he can rub himself against Shiro’s side, feel the electric currents of excitement start sparking in his belly again.

“Keith,” Shiro laughs softly, but he curls his hand around his waist and slips it into the edge of his boxers, letting his hands go with Keith’s gentle motion of his hips. His skin is softer there and Keith knows it. He focuses on the way Shiro’s hands dive down lower, feeling the curve above the start of his leg. Shiro digs his fingers into the softness of it and sensation blooms up into Keith’s core.

Keith pants and arches his back, seeking out the feeling.

“You really want to go again?” Shiro breathes.

“Yes,” Keith pleads, crawling up Shiro’s chest and tilting his head to fit his mouth against Shiro’s. “Please,” he breathes into his mouth. “...I want to feel you. I want to be with you...for as long as I can...”

He sees the soft sadness on Shiro’s face for a moment before it’s replaced with a smile. “Me too,” Shiro says, shifting down a little so Keith falls closer into him.

And the hesitance that was in Shiro’s fingers is no more as he slips them in deeper, feeling into Keith.

Keith’s whole body unravels at the touch. All the tension that’s built up inside of him for years now just lets go. It’s like his body really melts at Shiro’s fingertips. His heart start to thump strangely, a warm blush reaching up his chest and into his cheeks. And he just wants to kiss Shiro as open and messy as he can, let himself have this just once like this, not caring what anyone else thinks. How the world is still turning. He doesn’t care. It’s just Shiro and him.

And Shiro responds to him so well. Tilting his head back to give Keith better access. He groans softly into Keith’s mouth as his fingers keep reaching up into Keith.

There’s heat between them, Keith knows there is. He feels it with every one of Shiro’s touches. That has to mean something... It has to.

He presses his palm firmly to Shiro’s chest, right over the mark and prays.

He’s not sure who he’s praying to, but he bottles it up in his heart and sets it sailing off over the waves, into the ocean of all his hopes, straight into whatever power his soul might have.
Give Shiro strength, he burns into his mind. Give him the strength to survive.

And me. Help me make it through this too. So we can stay together...

“You okay?” Shiro breathes, fingers resting gently on Keith’s wrist.

Keith nods and goes back to kissing him. Shiro opens his mouth easily for him.

He reaches down and feels for Shiro’s pants. His hands are clumsy and hurried as he undoes the clasp on them and wiggles them down Shiro’s hips.

“Keith,” Shiro breathes into his mouth. “Are you... Tell me what you want. Tell me and I’ll give it to you.”

“You,” Keith says firmly. He has to use his hand to push his leg out of the way, but Shiro reaches for it and holds it instead.

“Okay,” Shiro says, giving it a gentle rub as he moves his other hand to Keith’s hips. “Okay... In the side compartment, there should be a bottle. Grab it for me?”

He helps guide Keith over him, both hands on his hips, and Keith tries to control his breathing as it jumps out of rhythm in anticipation. Slowly, Keith sinks down. He can feel Shiro pushing up and into him and it’s...it’s so much.

He tilts his neck back and bites down on his lip as he tries to cope with everything blaring alive inside of him. The pain is sharp, but it’s different from what he’s used to. This has meaning. This is him and Shiro, together. And of course he can take that sort of pain. Of course.

“Keith,” Shiro calls through the hazy distance between them and Keith can feel his fingers brushing his cheeks. “Keith, are you okay? We can stop if it hurts you.”

“I’m okay,” Keith promises, blinking his eyes open. He’s breathing hard, concentrating. He sees Shiro’s worried eyes trained on him. “Really. I’m alright. Are you?”

Shiro nods and laughs. “How could I not be with you right here in my hands? I’ve only dreamt of this for ages now. ...You’re so warm.”

Keith smiles warmly back. “Mm. So are you.” He leans carefully over for another kiss. “Every bit of you,” Keith says between tender kisses. “Every single part of you is so good. I’m so lucky.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

“No,” Keith says, rocking his hips forward. “No - ah... Trust me. It’s me.”

Shiro inhales sharply and closes his eyes, falling into silence as he lets himself feel.

It’s comforting like this. The feeling of opening yourself up and being able to trust the other with your heart, with your mind, with your body.

And it’s Shiro. Keith feels like he’s in some sort of dream still as he looks down and watches the man beneath him. Him, here, totally vulnerable underneath Keith, his face encompassed in peace and happiness and only that. They’re in a space where there’s no sorrow, no leaving.

Keith grabs onto Shiro’s hand and he feels him as they move together. As Shiro, patient as he always is, slowly and carefully pushes up into Keith and how Keith follows him, follows that feeling that delves up into his core and keeps him here, makes him want to be here. For once, he’s
not grudging about who he is. He loves his place here.

And they just alight.

“It feels so good, Shiro,” Keith gasps and it almost sounds like a sob for how overwhelmed with feeling he is. His whole body is burning, growing in his core and drowning him. He presses his palms to Shiro’s chest and holds him there, pinned, where he can’t escape, where he can’t leave.

And Shiro lets him. “I love you,” he whispers, biting onto his lip. His face is flushed and vulnerable in a way Keith has never seen, in a way Keith cherishes. “I love you. I’ve wanted this...for so long. And now you’re here. And now you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” Keith breathes. “...And you’re mine.”

“Yes. Yes... Keith.”

They rise together, clinging desperately to the other, fingers pressed into flesh, skin that should be cold blazing with warmth.

And it’s like they burst into a million different stars together at once, and they see everything - all the love there is in the world, all the hope, all the light - painting the night sky, past the rain, past the clouds. It fills up their minds and their spirits with too much until they’re almost choking with it. And then they sprinkle down onto this earth, human again, falling into each other’s arms...safe.

“I love you,” Keith murmurs into Shiro’s chest, trying to remember how to breathe. “...I love you.”

They were stars once, a long time ago. Energy bright and spanning the universe. And now, they’re small and fragile, but still here, somehow, despite everything. And it seems like the universe’s way of telling them something.

That things will be alright.

Keith tells himself that as he drifts, purring at the feel of Shiro’s fingers tracing down the skin of his back.

Because Shiro is Shiro and Keith is Keith. Bodies at their prime or not, they will find each other, and they’ll meet halfway.

“I knew it,” Keith says, reaching around Shiro for the bottle of lube he made Keith seek earlier from the side compartment. “College boys.”

“No,” Shiro laughs helplessly as he sees it, pressing a hand to his eyes in embarrassment. “Don’t do that. There were no college boys or girls. I wouldn’t lie to you. I swear, I’ve never opened it in my life. I just... I just... What if? You know? I didn’t want to be unprepared.”

Keith chuckles.

“And honestly...?” Shiro says quietly, still looking away, embarrassment risen high on his cheeks. “...You weren’t the only one having dreams...”

Keith blinks at him in surprise. “Really? I thought you just meant that like...poetically.”

Shiro cringes.
Keith laughs at his face. “Oh, come on. You were in the room with me as I had them, it can’t be more embarrassing than that.”

“I... I liked you for a long while. It started developing into a really pathetic crush by the time Ryou found out.”

“Are you serious?” Keith laughs. “I had no idea.”

“It’s horrifying. You didn’t even know me.”

“I knew you.”

Shiro pinches his nose. “Knew of me, maybe. There’s a difference. But oh man, the way you’d sit there with your sketchbook, staring into it like you had the world in your palm. Your hair would blow around in the wind and I just...I didn’t stand a chance.”

Keith snorts. “I liked how Ryou’s grand reveal yesterday was like - *bam* - ‘Shiro likes you’, like I didn’t already know.”

“That was still so embarrassing.”

“You had just told me you loved me!”

“It’s different; you didn’t know about my humiliating crush at that point.”

“‘Humiliating’...” Keith laughs. “...God. If we could’ve had this before too...it would’ve been too good to be true, I guess.”

“Mmhmm,” Shiro agrees.

The rain hasn’t relented. It still pours down over them, comforting white noise.

“We really should go,” Shiro says. The clouds are starting to lighten. Day approaches.

“Just a little longer,” Keith whispers. And Shiro wants that too, so he wraps his arms tighter around Keith and they stay.

Forever, Keith wants. He wants to stay forever. He’s more comfortable and warm than he’s been in his entire life. Safe, in the back of Shiro’s Jeep, the one he loves right at his side.

“I keep forgetting to ask you,” Shiro hums. “What did you give me during the funeral? It was a drawing, I saw that much, but I couldn’t fish it out.”

Keith turns bright pink. “That’s for dead Shiro only.”

“What? I’m right here, come on. Pity me.”

Keith groans. “Okay...it might’ve been...fanart of something...”

“What?” Shiro laughs, popping up onto one elbow to look down at Keith’s red face fully. “Don’t tell me. The fish. Your fish.”

“Okay, well, I couldn’t do a picture of your face or something or they’d be *suspicious* and... I really cherish those times with you. I don’t know if anyone’s ever made me laugh as hard as you have and I...” He bites down on his lip. “Yeah, it might’ve been the fish guy.”
Shiro laughs again, pressing his forehead to Keith’s as he looks into his eyes fondly. “I love it.”

“You haven’t seen it. What if it’s horribly offensive?”

“Then I’d love it even more.”

“...Damn. It’s not. I didn’t want to traumatize your parents.”

Shiro laughs again, scooping up one of Keith’s hands and kissing him all the way up his drawing arm. “I love this hand,” Shiro tells Keith. “It’s about as crazy as you are.”

Keith snorts, watching Shiro kiss him with amusement.

“Isn’t this all so strange?” He says, wiggling his fingertips to brush against Shiro’s collarbone. “It’s like you’re here with me, but you’re not. It feels like I’m touching skin...it’s soft, pliant, it dips beneath my touch, but it’s not your body. Wherever your body is, does it feel me touching you? Do these divots I press against you here reflect there?”

Shiro looks up thoughtfully. “The world is a mysterious place. We’ve just gotten used to the mysteries right in our faces, I think we’ve just stopped asking the questions.”

“No kidding.” He lies there for a moment, thinking. “Did you know we didn’t know about germs until the late 1800s?” He says. “No one took it seriously. Surgeons were literally doing demonstrations on cadavers downstairs, then they’d go upstairs to operate on live people without even washing their hands. And this one surgeon was like ‘hey, hey, why don’t we try to...I don’t know, clean things?’ and everyone thought he was insane at first. They tried to get him kicked out. I’m not kidding. It’s true.”

Shiro hums with interest. “I didn’t realize you were a historian. I thought you were an artist.”

Keith laughs. “I had biology last year and we talked about it for awhile. This bit blew my mind. It’s interesting, isn’t it? The 1800s wasn’t even that long ago. My great grandma just died only a few years back, and she was alive in the 1800s.”

“But she was like...a hundred-something.” Shiro frowns. “I’ve seen the photos of her in your living room.”

“Yeah, but I’m just saying...think of what we will learn in a few hundred years. The discovery of germs will seem absolutely primitive. What else is out there among the things we can’t see - germs, waves, ghosts. Maybe, in the future, they’ll learn to talk and channel ghosts? Who knows.”

“Write a book about it. They’ll call you crazy now, but just wait a few years.”

“A few centuries, maybe.”

“Maybe. Think of Van Gogh. He wasn’t famous when he was alive.”

“That kills me. It does.” Keith laughs suddenly, elbowing Shiro on the arm. “Look at you. Paying attention to art.”

Shiro laughs, rolling his neck so his head rests on Keith. “It was an infomercial the other night.”

“Oh, god. That’d do it.”

Shiro runs his finger over Keith’s hands for awhile, contenting himself with that. He asks, “What was that surgeon’s name, anyway?”
“Joseph Lister.”

“Huh.” He trails his fingers to Keith’s shoulder. Presses down on the muscle there. “Keith Kogane.”

Keith looks over at him. He keeps going, pretending Keith’s not giving him a weird look as he says it again, lower, “Keith. Kogane.”

“Hm?”

“I’m trying it out. In the future, when some nerd starts talking about who was one of the pioneers of ghost theory. Keith Kogane.”

Keith presses his lips together and pokes Shiro on the nose. “Everyone already thinks I’m crazy enough.”

Shiro chuckles, snuggling his nose into Keith’s neck. “What’s your middle name?”

“Akira.”

“Keith Akira Kogane,” Shiro hums. “...I like it.”

“What’s yours?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Don’t have one?”

“No. Everyone calls me ‘Shiro’, does that count?”

Keith laughs. “Shiro Shirogane.”

“That’s not my real first name,” Shiro laughs.

Keith pauses, hesitates, and then says it: “…Takashi Shirogane.”

The air changes. Shiro watches Keith's face carefully, eyes a little bit wide, a little bit stunned. A soft smile finds its way to his lips.

His lips part. “…Say that again,” Shiro asks softly.

Keith meets Shiro’s eyes, almost more embarrassed now than when he was exposed and vulnerable in front of him. “…Takashi…” Keith whispers again softly. “…Takashi.”

“Keith...” Shiro presses his lips together tightly, eyes glittering with tears.

“...Takashi,” Keith says again. It gets easier each time. It becomes more his each time.

Shiro nods. “...Yeah,” he breathes, rubbing at his face as he chuckles wetly. “…Yeah, that’s me.”

Keith reaches a hand up to run his fingers across the wetness that fell from his eyes. “…I love you, Takashi Shirogane.”

“I love you, Keith Akira Kogane,” Shiro leans in, voice thick with emotion as he kisses Keith again.

They hold each other for awhile longer, but they really do have to leave. But maybe they can just
pretend. They’ve become good at it. If they can just pretend they can come back here, whenever
they want...

Both of them.

Together.

That sounds nice...

When a car drives past a while after, they know it’s time. Their morning together is up.

When Keith and Shiro come back from the Jeep and sneak into Pidge’s house without incident,
they’re still warm and soft. Shiro carries Keith and Keith doesn’t even protest. And then they lie
out on the couch together, snuggling close.

Pidge is still asleep on the couch, turned on her other side, deep breathing.

It’s only been a few hours, but so much has happened. Keith feels so much closer to Shiro and he’s
so happy. He’s so happy. He can’t believe that they’ve been given this time together. That
Shiro is still here. His arm isn’t fading.

Selfishly, Keith asks silently to whoever might be listening for even more time. He asks for all
they can get.

Shiro wraps his hand around Keith’s hand, fingers intertwining with Keith’s. He holds them up
and they gaze up at the ring together.

“...Did you mean it?” Shiro asks quietly. “If none of this had happened...could we really have
been together?”

“I mean it, Shiro,” Keith hums. “Every word I’ve said to you... We don’t have to get married at
the park if you don’t want to, I just couldn’t think of any other place with lilacs.”

“No, I like it there. It’s so beautiful. It feels like us somehow.”

“Mnhmm,” Keith says. “Marry me,” he says to Shiro again, just because he can. Who will stop
them? He leans his head to the side and kisses Shiro. “...When the lilacs bloom, that’s when. I’ll
wait for you...for as long as it takes.”

Shiro turns his eyes up to Keith’s, so much emotion and strife there. He grabs both of their hands
tightly together.

“...Sleep, Keith. I’ve kept you up all night. You need your rest for today.”

“No...I don’t want to sleep. I want to stay with you.”

Shiro smiles crookedly at him, at the way Keith feels his eyelids already pulling down in
weariness. He’s just so comfortable and soft... And tired. He’s also tired.

“Goodnight, Keith,” Shiro says again. “I’ll wake you if anything happens. I think I might go
check on Ryou in a bit though.”

“Mm... ‘Kay. ...I love you, Shiro. I love you so much. Thank you for being with me tonight.”
“And you too,” Shiro whispers, pressing a kiss to Keith’s temple.

Keith wakes up to the warm golden scent of waffles and sugar. He blinks his eyes open, wrinkling his nose.


“Pidge? Wow. Are you kidding me? Thank you.”

It’s a whole setup. A stack of waffles on a tray, some cut up fruit, maple syrup on the side, with a glass of orange juice and a small daffodil in a little vase. He laughs, reaching out to flick it gently. “Wow,” he says again. “I look that good today?”

“Do I always need a reason to spoil you? And no. Actually, you look like shit. Like. Really bad. One step from the grave.”

“Oh...” He rubs at his cheeks, huffing out a breath. He looks down at his phone on the table and cringes as he sees all the missed messages he didn’t respond to. “Did my mom call you?”

“Yeah. She wants you home by this afternoon, but I convinced her you’re safe with me. I’m pretty trustworthy. She didn’t even argue.”

Keith chuckles. “Wow, really working your miracles today.”

She laughs like a little villain, sitting by his feet at the end of the couch, crossing her legs together. She pats his ankles fondly. “How are you feeling? I know I said you look bad, but you do look a lot better than you did yesterday. There seems to be some progress.”

“Ah, always so full of encouragement. I’m fine, Pidge. Don’t worry.”

She shifts forward a bit, her smile going stale on her face. She takes in a small breath and says, “So what was yesterday about?” Her voice is small and hesitant.

“Oh...” Keith scratches the back of his head. “...Right. Um...”

She sighs, eyes dimming. “Eventually?”

Keith rolls his neck out, sighing. “...Right.” He doesn’t want to fight. He can feel it so easily slipping that direction. “...Thanks for the waffles, Pidge.”

She lets out a shaky breath, hurt slicing across her face, but, with a valiant effort, she stuffs it away, behind her eyes. She decides to crawl up beside him and dump herself bodily into his lap. She slaps a hand against his chest, leaving it there as she pouts. “You’re awful sometimes.”

“...I know,” he whispers, gently ruffling her hair. “I’m sorry... Pineapple to make up for it?” He stabs one on his plate and offers it to her. She pushes herself up and snatches it from the fork like a little piranha before falling back onto him.

“Damn,” she whispers as she chews it slowly. “This is a good pineapple.”

“It really is,” he sighs, leaning back against the couch and closing his eyes again. He’s warm and soft inside. Somehow, in his heart, he knows Shiro’s still alright, hanging out with his brother even if Ryou can’t see him.
“Hey, Pidge.”

“Hm?”

“Is your dad home? There’s something I want to ask him.”

She messes with the end of the blanket, pulling off the loose threads. “No. Not yet.”

“Wow... Long night.”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “He works hard.”

He can tell she’s moping still. She’s never been one to hide her pout. He doesn’t blame her.

“Pidge, I’m going to tell you. ...Not right now, but...it’s not going to be a secret from you. Okay? I want to tell you.”

“...Okay, Keith... You were really scaring me yesterday though... Matt too, he didn’t want to let you out of his sight last night. You weren’t yourself.”

He swallows hard, remembering the pain in his leg. Remembering Zarkon. “...I got hurt a bit when I hadn’t expected it. It scared me too. But next time will be different... I’ll be ready next time.”

He has to be. Third time’s the charm.

“Your leg?” She whispers, turning around so she can see it. She places a hand by the knee, feeling the heated swelling there. “God, Keith... This is...”

“IT wasn’t my leg. My leg is always hurting. It was...” He trails off. He can’t mention Zarkon. “It just...scared me...”

“I’m sorry, Keith,” she says softly, leaning her head into his arm. “You know if you ever need me, you can call.”

“I did last night.”

“I know, but like... More.” She sighs. “...I know you already know...”

“Pidge... I care about you too much to do that to you. Haven’t I taken enough from you already?” He starts as he realizes that this had been Shiro’s exact argument to stay away from Keith.

“...Keith, I want to help you. You’re like my little brother.”

“Okay, Acxa. I’m older than you.”

She snorts. “I’m always the one helping you on your homework. Driving you places.”

“Matt’s the one who drives.”

“But he wouldn’t if I didn’t manipulate him into it.”

Keith snorts. “You’re trouble.”

“I know.”

“Really bad trouble.”
“I try my best.”

There are footsteps from up above, getting louder, and for two seconds, Keith brightens, thinking it might be Shiro returning.

Of course there wouldn’t be footsteps.

It’s Matt, scratching at his stomach and rubbing his eyes. “Mm...morning,” he grunts, slouching in and tossing himself on the couch. He looks over. “How are you feeling, Keith? You look a lot better.”

Keith nods. “Yeah, I’m okay. Thanks for yesterday, Matt. I mean it.”

“Yeah, of course. Are those waffles?”

“There are a few burnt ones left on the stove,” Pidge says.

“Oh, nice,” he snorts, switching through the channels on the t.v. blearily.

“Ahh,” Keith hums, tweaking her nose. “So the great amazing Pidge is mortal after all. She burns things.”

“It’s cooking!”

“Isn’t cooking just chemistry in the kitchen?”

“What! You! After all the nice things I do for you and you insult me!” She crosses her arms and huffs haughtily.

Keith laughs. “I’m sorry, Pidge. Forgive me, Pidge. You’re the best. You’re the only one for me.”

“That’s more like it,” she hums in approval. “Hey, Matt?”

“Hey, what?”

“Can you drive Keith and me to his house later on?”

“Might as well,” he yawns. “The Katie and Keith taxi service, that’s me. You guys should help pay for gas.”

“Keith can pay you in art.”

“Pidge too,” Keith offers.

“Maybe I’ll write a textbook,” Matt hums. “Have you two do the illustrations. A two-thousand paged textbook about the most boring things on Earth. Three illustrations per page. And you’ve both got to do it.”

Keith stabs a strawberry and offers it out to Matt. “Um, how about a strawberry instead?”

Matt snorts before heaving himself off the couch. “You’re too kind, but I’m going to get my own breakfast.”

Pidge waves her hand in the air at him. “Can you get me some too?”
“I think you’re perfectly capable...” he grumbles from the top of the stairs.

Pidge laughs.

“Not a morning person,” Keith laughs.

“Nope. Though, usually, you’re about five thousand times worse than Matt. You’re in a surprisingly good mood today.”

“Mm. Well, breakfast in bed will do that to you.”

“Is that so...?” She trails off, humming. She leans back on the couch so she can watch him and think. Always thinking. “You know, you’ve never really dated before.”

Keith chokes on a mouthful of food. “God. Pidge. Don’t tell me you’re interested in me. I knew it was only a matter of time.”

“No,” she shoves herself up and whirls on him, poking his nose. “It’s not that.”

“Good, because I’m taken.”

“Taken! By whom?”

“You wouldn’t know them.”

“No? Enlighten me.”

“They’re tall, dark...handsome... Smile like the sun, humor like some weird homeschooled child.”

“Hey!” Pidge flicks him on the nose.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot you were homeschooled for awhile. I guess that’s why we get along.”

“Yeah, because you’re so weird.”

He snorts and leans into her, bumping his shoulder into hers. “I’m just kidding. What about you? You’ve never dated either. Somehow it’s not a problem if it’s you?”

“Bah. I’m not interested in that. Maybe there will be a day when I care, but it sure as hell isn’t today and it definitely won’t be tomorrow. But you...you’re different than me. You always have been. Your heart’s so...I dunno. It’s always been like you were waiting for something, but now...it almost feels like you’re not.”

Perceptive. Dangerously perceptive. Whatever vibe Keith is giving off, he doesn’t know what’s changed. He can’t see it himself. He swallows hard.

“This isn’t an interrogation,” she sighs, sending a look his way. “But I dunno. You just seem softer. ...More frightened too. Like now you have a lot to lose.”

“...Pidge...”

“I’m right, aren’t I? And what’s this?” Pidge asks, rolling onto her side casually, poking at the ring on his finger. “Are you engaged or something? You hate rings.”

“I don’t hate rings.”
“Yeah, you do,” she says to him like he’s being insane. “You used to say anyone who wore them was a giant prick, no exceptions. That was your thing. No ring Keith.”

He tsks, rolling his eyes.

She leans up to grab his hand in hers and inspects it closer. “...Wow... Is that real? It...it really does look like a wedding ring.” Her eyes flick back up to his and he holds them. She licks her lips, trying to form the right question. But then that same hurt crosses her face, extinguishing her thoughts and she just sighs, letting go of his hand.

“Pidge...”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to tell me.”

“It is a wedding ring,” he says quickly, snatching up her hands before she can pull them away. “Technically. But...but I guess its function now is kind of like a promise ring. Only...” he lets out a small sad laugh. “Only, there probably won’t be an engagement or a wedding, so... It means a lot to me...maybe more than an actual wedding ring. It’s a gift from someone important to me...”

“I’m sorry,” she says, wrapping her small hands around his. “I don’t mean to force you to tell me anything. It’s beautiful, Keith. Really.” She avoids his eyes still, but he can see her trying. See her attempting to process it in a different way than she’s used to.

“Goddammit,” they hear from up above. It’s Matt. Kitchen issues. Rover comes running down the first two steps anxiously to get Pidge’s attention and then runs back into the kitchen, leading her.

She sighs heavily. “He’s a disaster. I’ll be right back.” She pats Keith on the head like he’s a docile cat as she passes by and climbs the stairs, yelling, “what’s your problem? We can hear you from all the way down there!”

Keith sighs, letting his head fall back as he closes his eyes.

“So. No rings, huh?”

Keith turns in surprise, a small smile already on his face.

“Hey,” he says, opening his arms for Shiro.

Shiro had been sitting on the seat behind Keith, so close, just out of sight.

“How long have you been there?” Keith hums as Shiro straddles Keith and then lays out on top of him.

“Since you were still sleeping. I only left for a few minutes. You wrinkle your nose in your sleep a lot, did you know that?”

“Yeah, a little bird told me I talk a lot in my sleep too.”

Shiro chuckles and then leans into Keith’s ear, murmuring lowly, “you used to moan my name a lot.”

“Stop it!” Keith laughs, using one hand to press onto Shiro’s and the other to cover his own blush. “I had no control over that.”

“Trust me, I got that.”
“God… I’m so embarrassed. I knew you knew. You have the worst poker face.”

Shiro laughs warmly into Keith’s neck. He pats Keith’s head fondly. “Pidge takes really good care of you, doesn’t she?”

“I dunno about that. She spoils me.”

“Mm, I like that though. You need to be a little spoiled.”

“Not this much,” Keith laughs, gesturing toward the plates and the soft blankets strewn all over the place.

“Just the right amount,” Shiro smiles.

Keith clings to him like a koala, reaching up to kiss him warmly on the mouth. “About the ring,” he says between kisses. “I wasn’t a ring person before, but you changed my mind.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I’ll never take it off.”

Shiro looks down at it, gently gracing his fingers over its shine. It possesses Keith’s ring finger, sitting there proudly, claiming its spot.

“How are you feeling?” Keith asks.

“Alright.” But he’s distracted, still looking at the ring. Shiro licks his lips. “I know you’re not going to want to hear this -”

“-Oh, boy.”

“Let me just say though… Of course I want you to keep the ring if that’s what you want, but even then, you don’t have to. But, say I disappear and don’t come back, please don’t feel obligated to do something crazy like...like abstain.”

“Abstain?” Keith deadpans.

“Yes. Like... If you meet someone else... I want you to give them a chance.”

He gives Shiro a small smile. “...Thanks, Shiro,” he whispers. “But I’m not taking the damn ring off.”

“It’s your choice, of course. It’s yours now. But just know, if you do, and you’re worried I’m somewhere watching, it’s okay. You have my full permission and approval. I’ll love you no matter what. And I know you will too, regardless of where you put the ring or who you’re with or if you get married to someone else. I’m happy for you. Live your life, that’s what I want.”

“Are you done?” Keith hums, brushing Shiro’s hair back with his hands. “Noted,” he whispers, pressing a kiss to Shiro’s nose. “I think you’re crazy to think I could ever love anyone else as much as you, but...I hear you and I appreciate the sentiment.”

“I just don’t want you to be alone. Not ever. You’re so special; you deserve the world. You deserve someone to be here for you always...”

Pidge comes back downstairs, Matt and Rover following behind. They’re both holding their own plate of breakfast foods. Keith shifts up so that he’s not in any sort of weird suspicious posture, but
Shiro is still tucked safely at his side.

Pidge gives Keith the honor of controlling the remote and he turns it to a marathon of Daria because why not?

He enjoys the morning, letting the rest of the world fade away. He doesn’t think about the dull aching in his leg, even as he has it elevated, doused in pain medication, and completely immobile. He doesn’t think of Zarkon. He doesn’t torture himself over where Shiro’s body might be or how time is running out and Shiro’s starting to look tired again.

He takes this tiny slice of a moment, surrounded by friends...but some more than friends, and lets it merge with him. Lets it become a piece of his soul.

He loves these people. Here, in their warmth, he can be happy.

But morning flies by too quickly and then suddenly, it's almost afternoon and his phone is ringing loudly, cutting into their quiet space.

It’s Acxa. “Hey,” she says when he picks up. There’s hesitance in her voice. “...You went to the school last night...”

He hums lowly.

“...Keith, I’m so sorry. I- I didn’t think when I told you about that. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Acxa. Really. I don’t know what Pidge told you guys, but the ground was just wet and I fell into a ditch, it was stupid. I’m alright as I ever am.”

“I just...” She heaves a sigh and then clears her throat loudly. “Anyway, Mom says you won’t want to talk to her, so she had me call you. She says Pidge already knows, but she wants you home before the hour’s up.”

He grunts. “...Yeah. Sure.”

“Keith?” She hesitates. “...Prepare yourself, okay? I know how you get when you feel cornered. I just think...” She pauses, voice lowering. “...I don’t know. Last night was bad... Mom and Dad...especially Mom...they were a mess, Keith. I don’t think you understand. I wish you could’ve seen.”

“I know, Acxa. I knew the second I left out the window that there would be serious consequences.” He sighs, looking over at Shiro. He still thinks it’s worth it. No matter what, it was worth it.

“Oh, Keith,” she says lowly. “I’ll see you here...”

“Mmkay.”

He hangs up and looks to Pidge. The knife is still in his backpack. It’s time to come back to reality. “Your dad still isn’t home from work?”

She shakes her head. “No. Sometimes he has really long shifts.”

But she doesn’t ask why he’s asking.

Keith bites his lip as he scopes out her face, and then he turns his gaze up the stairs, wondering. He looks to Matt. “...Does he normally stay out this long?”
“Sorry, Keith,” Matt says lowly, shoving his mouth full of food.

“With this Haggar business,” Pidge murmurs. “You know how she’s not cooperating...”

Keith nods his head slowly and runs a hand under Rover’s chin who has his head laying happily in Keith’s lap. It’s not like he can just barge through their house and check to see if they’re lying about their dad not being home. ...He supposes he can just call when he’s at home. He’ll just do that. He doesn’t need to fight with Pidge and Matt.

Matt drives them.

When they reach Keith’s house and he forces himself to his feet, Matt turns and stops him.

“Hey, you have my number, right?” Matt asks, poking his head out of the car window to look at Keith.

Keith shifts, tossing a look to Shiro. He feels uneasy the way everyone’s talking to him and he can see Shiro feels it too. “Uh, yeah, why?”

“Just...if you need to call me, for any reason, I’ll come pick you up or drive you or whatever. I’m not going home yet, so I’ll be really close. And you won’t even have to draw me any weird illustrations or pay gas money; I just don’t want you walking around town by yourself. After what happened to Shiro...if something were to happen to anyone else close to me again, I just...” He watches Keith and gives him another nod of his head. “Call me, yeah?”

Keith arches his eyebrow, looking over to Pidge, who presses an uneasy smile back. He looks between the two of them, growing more suspicious by the second. Nobody in this entire town can lie well apparently.

“Okay, what gives...? What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. I just want you to know. You're basically part of our family. Anytime you need me: Matt’s Katie and Keith taxi cab right here, at your service.”

“...Right...” Keith says. “Thanks, Matt.”

“Yep. See you, Keith. See you, Katie.”

As he drives off, Keith turns to Pidge. She deliberately leans away, her face pinched in discontent.

“...Okay,” Keith says, pushing himself forward. There’s something in his gut that feels like weighted intuition. He doesn’t want to go inside and see, but he pushes the door open anyway.

Pidge catches his arm before he can get inside.

“Keith,” she says. “Keith, wait. I just want you to know that you’re my brother. You’re my brother and I love you. Okay? And everything I do I think is for the best, alright?”

He takes one look at her and he can’t ignore the feeling pressing up in his chest anymore.

“Keith,” Shiro whispers, reaching out to him, but he doesn’t even stop for him. He slams his fist into the front door and it bangs open, hitting the back of the wall with a loud crack.

“Oh, my god,” he spits at the sight inside. “Oh, my god.” He whirls on Pidge. “Pidge.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, turning her eyes away from him and shrinking back.
Inside, it’s obvious. Krolia, his dad, and Acxa are all sitting on the couch, letter in their hands. Hunk and Lance are sitting on the other side of the room on the chairs, looking awkward and fiddling their thumbs. They’re all turned to him, stunned as the door swings on its hinges. There’s a hole in the wall where the door hit.

Keith can’t help but let out an incredulous laugh.

“No,” Keith states, pointing his finger at Krolia, who he knows was in charge of this. “No. What the hell is this?”

“Keith,” Krolia whispers, rising to her feet. She goes to move forward to him, but Keith’s dad grabs her arm and holds her back.

“Krolia, don’t,” his dad says softly. “Give him space.” Desperation rises in her face before she can reign it back.

Keith expected her to look bad, maybe she wouldn’t have gotten much sleep last night worrying over him, or maybe she would’ve been crying. But she looks so pale, so sick and afraid and...she doesn’t even look like his mother anymore, but someone weaker, someone frail, and that makes him angrier for some reason. There is real weariness there, pulling down at the strength in her face. She has always been strength itself. Always.

He knows why she’s so upset, but he’s afraid to face it. After everything, it’s come to this. He has the knife in his bag, but she’s standing in his way again, the life drained out of her because of him.

“I’ve been worried about you,” she whispers again. She holds out her hand to the seat beside her on the couch. “Please. Just for a few minutes. You don’t have to say anything,” Krolia says. “Just sit.”

Keith thinks he might run. He doesn’t know where, and suddenly, Matt’s offer makes sense. Matt thought he’d run too. He has the phone in his pocket. He knows the number. He can just...go.

Shiro stands tall beside him, looking over them all. “Don’t run,” he says lowly. He places a gentle hand on his back. “This is a different sort of challenge, but you’ve never been weak... You can take this. I’ll be with you. We can just sit down and listen; that’s what they want. But if you run now, they’ll keep pursuing you and pushing and it will only make things so much worse. Don’t run, Keith. You can do this.”

Rationally, Keith knows that makes sense, but he can’t breathe. It feels like they’ve all been conspiring behind his back, getting together in the shadows and laughing about him. Talking shit about how crazy he’s been. How unlike them he’s been. They’ve categorized him as someone different than them. They probably think he’s just like his aunt and they’ll try to convince him that Shiro isn’t real. That everything he feels about Shiro, everything he’s learned about him is a lie.

No. No, he can’t.

He knew this was coming, but here? Now?

“Keith,” Shiro says again, sharper this time. He catches him by the arm. “I know you. I know you can take this. Let’s get it over with. Together, okay? We both know the truth.”

“We’re all friends here,” his dad says softly. “Everyone here loves you.”

“Then why,” he says, voice shaking, teeth bared. “Why couldn’t you just talk to me like normal people?! Not just...do this shit.”
“We’ve tried, Keith,” Pidge says beside him, gently placing her hand on his arm. “You won’t let anyone in.”

“I’ve told you,” he wheezes. He wants to run. He feels trapped. “I will tell you.”

“Eventually’ won’t cut it this time,” Pidge says. She points to the floor at their feet. “We can sit right here, in the doorway if that’s what you want. But please, just listen to what we have to say.”

“You have a speech prepared too?” Keith laughs, but he’s horrified. He’s been so focused on Shiro...he feels blindsided by all this at the same time that he knew. He’s just not prepared. “You knew about this all last night, didn’t you?”

“Keith...Keith, listen to me...” She’s trying hard to keep a cool demeanor, but her voice breaks despite herself and she’s biting her lip so hard it’s starting to bleed. She clings to his arms tightly, her small hands shaking as she stares up into his face. She frowns up at him bravely, holding his gaze. “This was partly my idea. If you had seen yourself last night... If our places had been switched and that was me, sprawled in that ditch in the side of the road by myself in the dark. That look on your face... It was like...blank but so full and overwhelmed and god, Keith, I thought when Matt and I went down there that you'd already be dead. I was so scared. I’ve never seen you like that. I’ve never seen anyone like that, and it had to be you! ...Keith, what would you do if it was me? I feel like this is my last shot before you wind up in a grave, just like Shiro. I can’t take it! Not you. We’re all so scared! Keith... Keith.” She’s full out crying now, sniffling and leaning her face into his arm.

It’d be one thing if it was just Pidge. It’s not just Pidge though. It’s a roomful of eyes all trained on him, thinking of how strange he’s been behaving. He hates it. He’s always been the odd one out, the one who needs special attention. He can’t stand that it’s only getting worse.

But Pidge is here. Crying in his arms... And Shiro’s by his side.

“I’m here too, Keith,” Shiro whispers beside him. “You’re not alone.”

He thinks maybe he should listen.

“Oh, he whispers, and he’s a little stunned to hear himself say that. He swallows hard, still staring down in confusion at Pidge’s crying figure. He doesn’t know what to do with all this info. “...Alright.”

The knife is in his bag.


“I’m not agreeing to anything.”

He lets her guide him over to the fireplace beside Lance and Hunk. Lance gives a little awkward wave and Hunk smiles. They have letters too.

“God,” Keith whispers, looking away from them and to Shiro. “You all think I’m crazy.”

“Keith, it’s not that -” his father tries.

“Tell me then. Tell me what this is about. Why would I need a fucking intervention? What’s wrong with me?” He crosses his legs and lets Pidge help him on the rug looking up at all of them. “Why?” He presses again. “Why an intervention?”
“Keith. Honey,” Krolia leans forward, hands out like she wants to reach for him. “We don’t think anything is wrong with you. We just think that maybe you’re exhausted with this whole Shiro thing -”

Keith shakes. His voice is low and sharp. “It’s not a thing. And Shiro is not just some -”

He catches Shiro’s eye who gives his head a brief gentle shake. “Patience,” he whispers. “All you have to do is listen.”


“Yes,” Krolia says. She settles carefully into her seat across from him. She stares down at him with so many complex emotions in her eyes. She’s tense, like she’s ready for him to snap at any second. Ready for him to fight.

“I’m not on drugs,” he says. “I’m not addicted to anything.”

“You need help, Keith,” Pidge murmurs lowly, picking at her fingers.

He turns to Lance and Hunk. “And you guys think I need help?”

They squirm. “Uh. I mean, I don’t...think that’d be a bad idea?” Hunk shrugs.

Keith turns to Acxa, who can only hold his gaze for a few seconds before she has to look away, guilt on her face.

“Maybe it’ll become clearer after the letters,” Krolia says.

Krolia watches him, waiting for Keith to settle and relax. “I’ll start then,” she whispers, flattening the paper out in front of her and, with one last look at Keith, she begins to read. “Keith,” she says gently. “When I was in labor, delivering the both of you, your dad and I thought we were only having one baby. Acxa was born first, just like we expected and we were so happy. ...And then you came too. We had no idea. You were this little miracle baby, a big surprise, but so so small. I cried then. We all did,” she laughs. “Because it was such a wonderful surprise. Twins. A boy and a girl. How perfect could that be? And when I was holding you both in my arms, I just... I just knew...you both had my heart. From that very moment. I’d love you both for as long as I’d live.

“Then that time, with Zarkon -”

“-Don’t,” Keith says.

“From the beginning, I’ve seen myself in you. Every step of the way. We had our problems trying to raise you, just like my parents did with me, but we never loved you any less. We just wanted you happy. We wanted you to thrive in a way that was right for you. We wanted you to be free to express yourself in the right ways and running was your fit. But then, after the accident -”

“-It wasn’t an accident,” Keith whispers.

“I...I want to say, Keith. That maybe we were a quick to assume things. You just wanted us to believe you. We should’ve been on your side.”

“But you weren’t,” Keith says. “You weren’t and you just let me rot like this.”
“Keith,” she says, pain on her face. “That’s not -”

“What?” He shrugs, looking up at her. “You think apologizing for how things went down back then can make up for putting me away now?”

“We’re not -”

“-Oh, so you’re not just going to put me away like Aunt Aiphos?”

“No.”

“Then what is this intervention for? Hm? Just to read letters to me? There’s no gold at the end of the rainbow here? Why did you hold this? What did you expect from this? Where are you going to send me?”

She holds his gaze, her face forced into effected calm. “We just...want you to agree...”

“I don’t,” he says firmly. “I don’t. I don’t agree with you,” he says to her. “Or you,” he points to his dad, “or even you,” he says to Acxa, who closes her eyes with guilt against him. “You can’t apologize for the first time this happened and then turn around the next and say I’m still crazy. You can’t - do - that!”

“No - Keith. Please, listen. It’s not like that. You’ve always been sensitive, Keith, ever since you were a child. You’re the most empathetic creature I’ve met and it’s so sweet... But the pain in this town has been palpable lately. It’s getting to you. That’s what we think. Not that you’re crazy. Not that you’re messed up.”

“You’re lying,” he says. “You’re lying. Just tell me where you’re going to force me to. Where Aunt Aiphos went? Everyone left her there, alone, until she died.”

“Keith...”

“I’m not crazy! I’m totally lucid right now, aren’t I? Aunt Aiphos couldn’t even tell the difference between fiction and reality.”

“And what do you think Shiro is, Keith?” She asks gently.

He recoils as if hit.

She looks down quietly at the paper in her hands. “Keith, I’m so tired,” she breathes. “We can’t do it this time. We can’t watch you tear yourself apart from the inside out. The medication and the therapy almost didn’t work last time. You need this, honey. Please, trust us.”

For one tense moment, he just stares. His voice shakes as he says very carefully, very slowly, animosity building in his throat with each trembling word, “Why should I trust you when you’ve never trusted me a single day in your life?!” He shakes his head, staring at all of them incredulously as he pushes himself up. “You all sit here...judging me...when you’ve never even tried to understand. This conversation is ridiculous. I’m going upstairs. And if anyone follows me, I’m going to throw myself out the fucking window.”

“Keith,” his mother gasps. Everyone goes silent. Even Lance is pale, his nervous smile totally wiped from his face.

“...Keith...” Pidge breathes.
Immediately, he realizes what he said and how they took it.

“...I wasn’t serious,” he says softly. “I didn’t mean that... But I’m tired. And my leg hurts. I’m just fucking exhausted. I just want to rest, not...not this. I’m sorry you all think there’s a problem. Beyond no one fucking believing me about Shiro, everything’s fine. So just...” He takes in a deep breath and tears himself from Pidge’s side. “Leave me alone.”

“Keith,” Pidge breathes, her hand reaching out for him.

“You too,” he says, taking his first step away.

Her eyes go wide with the depth of her hurt and she’s still for a moment, frozen to the spot. But then a fire bursts in her eyes and she reaches forward, grabbing his arm and tugging him back so hard he falls on top of her. “No!” She yells in his face. “You’re being a brat! All we’re trying to do is help you!”

“Pidge,” he warns lowly. “I can’t take this right now.”

“I’m not leaving here until you tell me what’s going on! It’s been long enough, Keith. I’m your best friend. We’ve been through everything together. But after what happened with Shiro...”

“- Stop it -”

“It’s like you’ve found a new best friend.” Her voice is dark and accusing as Keith’s stomach drops like a block of ice. “I’ve heard you. I’ve heard you talking to him. You can’t deny it. I heard you, just last night, on the phone after you dropped it. You were arguing. And then, early in the morning... Keith, you’re not alright. You’re not alright.”

Keith’s mind is blank. “You heard us?” He whispers in horror. “Last night? You were asleep.”

“No... No, I was, at first, but then I -”

“How much did you hear?”

“Keith, I...”

“How much did you hear, Pidge?”

“You were just talking to yourself, Keith...! What you were saying is hardly the point! I... You need help. Ghosts aren’t real!! He’s not there. He’s dead. He’s gone, Keith.”

Panic already has Keith in its grip, squeezing his senses tightly. He’s winded again. He’s drowning.

“Keith, it’s okay,” Shiro’s whispering, pushing himself up to kneel in front of Keith. To place his hands on Keith’s thighs and hold him tight. “Calm down. Breathe.”

“Shiro,” he wheezes, reaching out for him. Sometimes it’s so easy to fall into the world Keith seeks refuge in, just him and Shiro, just the two of them. “She heard.”

“Shh,” Shiro shakes his head desperately and grabs Keith’s hand, forcing it back to his side. “Don’t say my name, Keith. Don’t.”

“Keith,” his mom says, voice stiff as she tries to keep it calm. “Can you see him? Do you see Shiro?”
“I...” What do you say to that? Keith looks up at all their faces. From Lance and Hunk’s, to his family’s, to Pidge’s...

They all think he’s crazy. They’re all worried. It’s gone way too far.

He looks to Shiro.

There’s no sitting down to listen anymore. There is no easing their minds. It’s too late. He should’ve known. Everything he touches turns to dirt.

He tries to run, but he trips in his hurry and falls to the floor. He cries out as his leg twists beneath him.

“Keith.” Shiro goes to help him, but his dad is already there, pulling him up to his feet. Shiro stands there, helpless.

“Don’t touch me!” Keith shouts, pushing against his dad so hard that Keith stumbles backwards, falling right back down into the stairs.

He grabs tightly onto his leg, grimacing at the pain.

“You’re all just...” He’s breathing hard, trying to clear his head, but all he can feel is pain, physical and mental. He lets out a small crazed sob. “No one ever believes me. Not with Zarkon then. Not with Shiro now. No one believes me. All I ever wanted...was for someone to just believe me. And you just don’t. You just ignore it and hope it goes away. You just ignore me and hope I go away.”

He’s just met with silence. It fills the whole room, expanding all around them. Even Pidge can’t say that she believed him because she didn’t, not really. She knows this. She knows Keith knows this too, despite all her superficial support. It had helped him then, but not now. Now, they just want him gone. To “heal”. To let them live in peace without his craziness.

“Please. Don’t. Follow me.” He says one last time. He throws himself up at the wall and tries to cling to it for support. Pathetic.

“This is it then,” his mother says, standing. He thinks it’s the first time he’s ever heard her voice tremble so out of her control. “If you’re not going to listen to us, we’re going to send you to that home for awhile so...so you can recover and - and you get no say in the matter - !”

He shoots her a dark look over his shoulder. “Don’t pretend like you were ever going to do anything differently. I’ve heard you setting it up for weeks now.”

He can’t walk, he’s shaking so badly. All the weight in his arms is too much. He has to lean against the wall for a moment.

But he can’t hold himself. He slips to the ground and just falls, panting.

“Keith...” Everyone’s looking to him, Lance standing, Hunk holding his own hands together tightly. He feels like a freak.

He thinks of his aunt. The one they put away. And he feels horrible for ever laughing about her.

He presses his hand to his forehead and bites his lip to keep from crying. “I can walk,” he says to his dad as he steps up behind him, brushing past Shiro who can’t help as he is.
Keith’s dad picks him up into his arms as if he weighs nothing.

He hates this. He hates how everyone has to carry him around like a child. He’s an adult.

“You can’t walk, Keith,” his dad says patiently.

And he realizes he can’t. And he wonders what it seems like to them when he says, voice as certain as it was just now, “I’m not crazy,” because they feel, with total certainty, that he is.

His mom. His sister. His friends. Pidge.

He closes his eyes and lets himself be carried. He can’t resist the current even if he tried.

His dad gently sets Keith down in his bed and he lets out a wounded choke. He’s not sure if it’s a sob trying to bubble up or a gasp or... He doesn’t know.

He’s just so tired suddenly. If the house were to catch fire, he wouldn’t be able to move from his bed. His energy is gone. He can’t even move his eyes, he’s just...so...fucking...tired. The whole world is pressing down on him with all its unforgiving weight. He can barely breathe.

“Are you okay...?” His dad asks gently.

“Yes,” he manages to whisper. “Just leave. Please just leave.”

And he does. A few hours pass and he thinks he can hear Lance and Hunk finally leaving downstairs. But they’re saying goodbye to Pidge, so it means she’s not leaving with them. At least that’s two less letters he’ll be forced to hear. That makes things easier.

He stays on his bed completely lifeless, Shiro sitting beside him, staring at those little stars on his ceiling. He doesn’t think. He doesn’t feel. He just...is.

“...Keith,” Shiro says after awhile. “I am so sorry. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t come to you...”

He knew Shiro would say that. It’s such a Shiro reaction. Keith just shakes his head, unphased.

“No. If I had the power to go back in time, to put myself right back in that moment when I first saw you, I’d call your name louder than before. I wouldn’t care if the whole damn school hears. I’d never abandon you.”


Keith hums. He can’t even think of any of it or he’ll be sick.

“I’m grateful to you for never second guessing me through all of this. This could’ve easily gone a different way.”

Keith musters a crooked grin. “What can I say? I’m pretty stubborn.”

“Yeah,” Shiro says, smiling over at Keith, his expression raw. “Pretty and stubborn.”

Keith snorts and then pats Shiro’s chest as he pushes himself up. He shrugs his bag off his shoulder and crawls to his chest at the base of the bed, shoving it at the bottom. He hasn’t drawn in so long, he thinks it’d be a nice change in pace. He doesn’t want to think about this anymore, not when there are more important things at hand. Shiro’s what matters. This time is important.
He grabs his phone and stares down at it.

"...Should you really call him, Keith? I mean...with everyone going on... I just think...maybe it's not a good idea."

Keith runs a finger over his bottom lip as he thinks. Lowly, he says, "you mean no one trusts me anymore. My word is shit."

Shiro stares at him sadly. "I just think maybe you should consider waiting."

Keith thinks. And thinks. The decision feels so heavy in his mind. He takes a deep breath. "We have no time." And he dials in the number.

But he doesn't answer... Keith tries not to let it hurt him.

"Maybe he's busy," Shiro whispers as he looks at the tightness in Keith's expression.

"...Maybe." Keith sniffs and tosses his phone away. "I'll try again in a bit..." He grabs his portrait sketchbook and falls back down on the bed, distracting himself by sketching out Shiro again.

"...This week has been hell."

Shiro makes a small affirmative grunt in the back of his throat as he watches. "More like the whole month. ...I’m so tired."

Keith looks over sadly, rubbing his fingers across those dark spots beneath Shiro’s eyes before snatching his pencil back up. "...I can’t even imagine, Shiro..."

Shiro smiles up at him. "...This might sound like a really strange thing to say, but I’ve never felt so lucky in my entire life than I do in this moment, right now, beside you."

Keith is quiet for a moment. He says softly, holding Shiro’s gaze with his, “I hope, when it’s my time, that I can find you in the afterlife. I’ll make my way back to you.”

Shiro grins. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Stay put,” Keith says. “I’ll find you.”

Shiro chuckles. "...If there was some strange time travel-y option to go back in time and redo all of this, I wouldn’t. If time dumped me right on that long empty road, Ryou stubbornly refusing to listen to my embarrassing crush on you, I’d still walk forward, even knowing what lies in wait.”

“Don’t do that,” Keith laughs. “Just turn back around and come find me. We can walk to my house together.”

Shiro laughs too. “Good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“And you’re the one with the scholarship to an Ivy League school? Who approved that?”

“Shh,” Shiro chuckles, pressing his face into Keith’s chest and trying to tickle him.

“Stop. I was kidding,” Keith squirms, wrapping his arms around Shiro’s neck like a chokehold.

“Okay, okay, I yield.” He laughs as he catches sight of Keith’s drawing, amusement lighting his eyes. “I thought you said this wasn’t a porn sketchbook,” he chuckles.
It’s of the night before, only hours ago. It’s intimate. It’s the both of them, together. Keith sputters, flicking Shiro’s nose gently before letting him go. “This isn’t porn! I’m not even showing anything!”

Shiro opens his mouth to retort, but he cuts it off halfway. He takes in a deep breath and lets it out, his whole body going into a forced state of calm. “…I’m getting a wave of sickness. Just to warn you.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers as he puts his sketchbook down and shifts it out of the way. He scoops Shiro up into his arms and gently runs his fingers through Shiro’s hair. He soothes him as gently and calmly as he can, a knot forming in his own chest as he thinks about what this sickness can mean.

He forces the thought away and hums softly to Shiro.

Shiro slowly comes around, eyes a bit wearier, but still smiling. “You should be a professional singer.”

“A singer, an artist, both are a booming successful career it sounds like.”

Shiro snorts without much energy. “I think I’m okay right now.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers, still stroking Shiro’s hair gently. He keeps humming, soothing both of them.

“I was thinking,” Keith says softly. “Rivers and leaves…you mentioned it, what you were seeing. Do you still see it?”

“Mhm.”

“I was trying to think of the places we have around here and I had a thought. Sometimes I like looking at scenic blogs online.”

“-Ah, like one of those hipsters,” Shiro chuckles lazily.

“You’re funny. But I…what if it is leaves? Crown shyness. Do you know what I’m talking about? Where the treetops grow around each other, but never quite touch. They look like rivers…”

Shiro blinks his eyes open and considers it, staring up at Keith. “…Maybe.”

“Look,” Keith says, going for his phone in his pocket. It’s hard with Shiro on top of him, but he manages it. He pulls up an image of it. “Like this?”

Shiro blinks at the image. “…Yeah…kind of… You think we have that here?”

“…In the miles of forests all around us in every direction…” Keith hums, looking up at the ceiling, breathing out shakily. “…Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Shiro hums, leaning his head back down onto Keith’s chest. Keith starts running his hands through his hair again. “…Yeah. It’s a nice resting place, isn’t it…? The forest.”

“Stop that,” Keith whispers.

There’s a gentle knock on the door.

His eyes dart up to it and he feels his claws come out.
“...Patience,” Shiro murmurs to him, voice still zenned out beneath Keith’s touch.

He clings to Shiro tighter and battles the frown growing on his face. “What?” he says sharply. “I’m busy.”

“...It’s Pidge.”

A bit of the tension unknots itself from his stomach, but he shifts uncomfortably. He’s not sure how he wants to deal with this yet.

He sighs, unraveling his arms from Shiro and pushing himself up. Shiro rolls out onto his back with a small sigh, leaning his face against Keith’s leg.

“...You can come in,” he says, trying to keep the wariness from his voice.

The door opens with a little squeak. “Hey...” She pokes her head inside.

“Hi.”

“Your parents are outside so I thought I’d try to sneak in here. I... I want to apologize for earlier,” she says, taking a step inside and shutting the door behind her, but she doesn’t move forward. “I came here today thinking I could follow this whole plan to keep things easy for you and then I...got upset and just...yelled, like an over-emotional idiot. Not one of my finer moments. These past few weeks have been bad for everyone and I just... I said things I didn’t mean to throw at you. I’m sorry. It was a lot to unload on you.”

“...You can come in,” he says, trying to keep the wariness from his voice.

The door opens with a little squeak. “Hey...” She pokes her head inside.

“Hi.”

“Yeah? In the whole wide world?” She musters up a crooked smile. “You’re not mad?”

He thinks about it. He really does, and he realizes he isn’t. “...No.” He pats the bed beside him. “I get it. I get everything, I do. I’m sorry too... I know I haven’t been easy to deal with lately.”

“I think the situation sucks,” she allows as she sits beside him. “And you’re doing your best. We all are...”

“Right,” he heaves out a sigh.

She looks around his room like it’s different to her, unfamiliar, even though it’s the same room as always. She nods to his window. “You took down the boards.”

“Oh, yeah.” He rubs at the tip of his nose and chuckles softly. “Had to sneak out somehow.”

“Oh...”

There’s not much to say. They don’t fall into their easiness together. Pidge sits on the edge of his bed like she’s not sure if she’s really welcome. It reminds Keith of Shiro when they first met, and now he’s the one curled around Keith, head on his pillow.

She licks her lips uneasily. “I wrote out a thing...”

“...You too, huh?”

“I know. I know it’s horrible and I know it makes you squirm and cringe on the inside, but I really want you to hear it. But...if you want to wait, then that’s okay too.”
He leans back, letting his eyes fall to Shiro beside him, who gazes peacefully back up. He’s no longer frazzled and scared. He can do this.

“Okay,” he says. “...But if I need you to stop, please don’t continue. I...I feel like I’ve been barely able to hold it together lately.”

She nods quickly in agreement. Then smiles. “Like a safeword?”

He lets his head fall back with a groan. “Pidge.”

She chuckles a bit, giving him a warm look with a glint of hope in her eyes, that familiar ease beginning to build in the air between them again.

She shoves her hands in her pocket and takes out a page, hand-written. She fiddles with the edge nervously and he feels all the expectations that come with this letter. He thinks of his mom and how she said some shit about a residential care home or something and he can’t even spare a bit of his brain to think about that. That’s a worry for tomorrow, but, with this letter in Pidge’s hand, she’s trying to make it a worry for today.

He lets out a small winded breath that almost feels like a laugh, pressing his fingers to his mouth again, running his fingers along his jaw. Fidgeting.

He feels Shiro’s hand on his leg and he closes his eyes, tries to remember that no, he’s not being attacked and yes, he’s totally, completely fine in his home, surrounded by people who love him. He can do this.

“Oh,” she cringes anxiously. “Okay...”

“My first memories,” Pidge begins. “Are of you, Keith... Mom and Dad would take me over to your house and try to get us to play together, but you’d be climbing all the tallest trees and hanging off their branches like this inhuman kind of creature. I thought you were so cool. I thought there was no way you’d ever look at me - I could barely walk straight on the ground. I’d trip and fall in the mud in preschool and everyone would laugh. I was reading before anyone else knew the alphabet and everyone else would grab my books and tear them apart, or toss them back and forth to each other and I was so short I couldn’t get them. They were all the same... ...Except for you. You were the coolest of them all and you...you protected me. You’d toss me onto your back and just run. Remember that? The field behind the school, through all the weeds that were almost taller than we were.”

“Yeah,” Keith laughs. “You weighed nothing.” Somehow, it was always golden when they’d run, after school, in the afternoon. The fields of wheat would irritate his skin as he pushed through it, but god, that was freedom. Back when nothing could touch them.

“You’ve given me so much shelter, more than you know. Not just by protecting me, but by being by my side, being my friend. You said last night that you wish you could be a better friend to me, but you are. You’re my brother. And we’ve been side-by-side since my earliest memories.

“You mean everything to me, Keith, and I want to see you happy. If that means you...you find someone you love and want to get married to, then I have no problem with that. Do it. I want you to. But... Keith... I.... Right now is just...” She swallows hard, shoving the paper into her lap and frowning. “You’ve been different lately. I wish you could see it. I’m so worried you’ll do something you regret.”

“What do you think I should do, Pidge?” Keith asks softly, watching her face for her reaction and
thoughts.

“...I looked into that home that your mom was talking about. I checked it out very carefully. It looks really nice. Like something you and I might want to go to for a vacation sometime. And it’s pretty close. I’d bet I could get Matt to drive me a few times through the week.” She rocks back, pressing her lips together. “...It wouldn’t be that long. And whether or not it’s exhaustion that’s getting to you or...or something else...I just think. I don’t know. It’d be good to give it a shot.”

He’s not mad hearing it this way. He just closes his eyes and takes a long weary sigh. “Pidge. ...I think it’s ‘eventually’ now.”

She blinks at him. “...What?”

There’s nothing else to lose. Shiro looks up at him to, but he’s smiling softly, encouraging.

“Can I say something before I get into it?” Keith says to Pidge. “You too. You saved me too. I wouldn’t have been able to get through the shit with my leg without you... You’ve been there for me at every turn, even now, no matter what you believed, when I’ve only repeatedly caused you trouble. I know I’ve put you through hell. I’m sorry. And thank you. You’re my sister too and that will never change.”

“Thanks, Keith,” she whispers, grabbing his hand in her small strong ones. She smiles up at him, looking more encouraged by the moment.

“...And now...you’re going to think less of me.”

She shrugs. “I dunno if that’s possible.”

“Funny. Very funny.” He takes a deep breath and bites his lip. “I don’t even know where to begin,” he sighs.

Shiro runs his hand against his back in soothing circles. “Maybe at the beginning?”

“...This is going to sound crazy,” he mutters lowly.

He hesitates. He just wants things to be okay again.

He wants Pidge and him to fall into their easy friendship again. He wants his parents to just return to their daily business, not worrying over him, not looking at him with that shifty-eyed fear that’s in their eyes now. Even Acxa didn’t tease him today. He just wants the world to right itself. He wants Shiro to arrive on his doorsteps, intact and whole, smile on his face, alive, and tell him he’s alright. Everything’s alright.

He hopes it can start here.

His phone rings in his pocket, startling the both of them. He blinks down at it. Pidge is the only one to call him and she’s right here.

He looks at the screen. “I don’t recognize this number,” he says, looking to Shiro who peeks over his shoulder.


Keith’s eyes fling wide. “What if it’s -” It stops ringing.

“Call him back,” Shiro says, leaning forward, brow furrowed.
He remembers Pidge watching him and he turns to her. “Just a second. Can you wait just a moment? This could be important.”

She looks down at the phone with a frown on her face. “Might as well. I’ve been waiting this long already.”

“True. Good. Thanks.”

“Oh, I keep forgetting,” Pidge stands, reaching into her bag. “I realize right now is probably not a good time to be giving you a knife as a gift, but...here. I kept forgetting to give it back and if I don’t mention it now, I’ll forget for another few weeks. I didn’t mean to keep it captive this long. Where do you want it?”

“Oh,” he hums happily, a bit of relief unwinding from his chest as he realizes she trusts him this much. He hadn’t expected it honestly. “Thank you. Anywhere is fine.”

He slips onto the other side of the bed, facing away from her as he calls Lotor back.

It rings. And rings. And rings...

And then it picks up. "Hello?" Keith says into his phone. "Lotor?" But there’s just silence. He and Shiro exchange a look.

"Maybe his phone's out of range...?" Shiro murmurs lowly.

“Dammit,” Keith hisses, hanging it up and dialing the number in again. “He just called. Where could he be? What could he want?”

He expects Shiro to come up with a rational answer, or breathe out in disappointment. But what he hears sends chills up his spine.

It whips out of Shiro like it startled him too. “Keith.” There’s fear there, icy and brittle.

Keith turns. Shiro’s beside him, looking back, staring straight at Pidge.

She didn’t put the knife on his dresser, like he assumed she would. She had gone into his chest, in the bottom of it, where she knows he keeps his knives, hidden from everyone else. His bag is wide open.

She knows too much about him, even his hiding places, and he had somehow forgotten that.

She’s standing by his bedside, holding the bag with Zarkon’s knife inside. Her other hand is pressed to the open pages of Keith’s sketchbook, the one he left on his nightstand, the ones of Shiro’s face.

She’s just standing there, her face blank, staring into the pages.

“Pidge,” Keith whispers, shoving the phone away.

She licks her lips. Says very quietly, very carefully, like she’s afraid anything she says will set him off: “what is this, Keith?” Her voice is trembling.

“It’s not what you’re thinking. I- I told you not to look in there...”

“They’re private, you said...” Her breath is choppy and uneven, skittering through the air.
He swallows hard. “They’re just drawings.”

Very delicately, she brings the page up and flips to the next. And the next. ...And the next...
Shiro with his eyes closed, face content as he rests, relaxed on Keith’s bed. Shiro, sitting out the window seat, legs crossed, bright grin on his face. Shiro, playing a video game. *Keith's video game.*

Shiro, pensive, as he stares up into the sky. Shiro, looking only at him.

Everything about Shiro that Keith loves, sketched into the pages of his most private sketchbook. He has never poured more of his soul into anything else. It’s different than his usual artwork and he can see it and he knows Pidge can see it too. It’s sitting right in front of them all, open and exposed. Keith’s heart spread bare in front of her.

“Pidge,” he says again. He knows what it looks like to her.

“You didn’t...you didn’t even know him,” she says, blinking quickly, body stiff. “He... You can’t *draw people* without a reference. Not like this... How are they so detailed...?”

“I didn’t -”

“How, Keith?” She bites out.

“What - you just - ? You think I...what? I killed him and dragged his body into my room? Set him up as some sort of sick *fucked up* reference? You think I could do that?”

Pidge’s eyes flick up to Keith’s in horror. She shakes her head slowly. She’s so pale. “…Did you?”

“No! No! How could you even think that?!”

“How do you explain these drawings, Keith?” She screeches, pressing her hand to her mouth. She reaches down and jerks to the next page and the next page and god, he has drawn so much of Shiro, he doesn’t even remember doing so many. Shiro in the Jeep beside him. Shiro, kissing his leg tenderly. Pidge is horrified. “Why?! How?! Tell me!”

“He just - I just -” He goes around the bed, seeking her out, desperate to get her to believe him. “Let me explain. I was just going to tell you! But it...it sounds crazy, I know it does. Promise me you’ll listen. Promise me you’ll try to hear me out!” He goes to grab her by the arm but she stumble backward, away from him, fear in her eyes.

A moment hangs between them where they both realize themselves. The rift that’s there between them that neither has ever known before.

“...You killed him?” Pidge asks. Her voice is choked like she’s one second away from running.

“No...” He closes his eyes tightly. “No. Pidge, just. Just let me explain, please. Hear me out. Okay. Okay.” He forces himself to sit, breath trembling in his lungs. His fingers are buzzing. He’s so afraid she’ll just leave without giving him a chance to explain. But the explanation is so...

Shiro presses his fingers to Keith’s back. “It’ll be okay, Keith,” he breathes, but his voice is tight with pain. “It’ll be okay. Just...stay calm.”

Keith nods. “Alright... It started the day he disappeared. I didn’t know him then, you’re right. He was just *missing* at that point. After school, I was walking to go meet up with you, remember
that? We were supposed to all meet up. And I hear someone flipping out. Like...crying and calling everyone out. Completely hysterical. And I look up...and it’s him. It’s Shiro. He’s got blood all over his shirt. He’s stumbling through the crowd, trying to get Ryou’s attention, but Ryou’s completely ignoring him. Everyone is. No one is paying him any attention. No one can see him but me.”

She’s shaking her head, hands clasping her face. “Like a ghost? I don’t...”

“Yes. Yes, exactly. So I called out to him, but then Ryou heard me and thought I was just fucking with him.”

“...You dropped your crutches then...”

“Yes. You brought them for me later. Shiro followed me out, but he was just as confused as I was. We just figured he was dead and was some ghost seeking peace - I don’t know. No one else could see him, he couldn’t touch anything or anyone. But he was afraid to be by himself so he stuck to me. He wanted to figure out who did it. Who killed him, so I started looking into it -”

“-Keith - I was right there in the field with you - I didn’t see anything.”

“-No! Please listen! Let me finish. I started looking into it. That’s when I went to Lotor. I thought maybe he got jealous -”

“-No one else could see him? Why just you? That’s -”

“-Please! Pidge! And at the graveyard! How do you think I got out of the grave? It was a six foot climb. I can’t use my leg!”

“I don’t know, Keith! I don’t know! Maybe you just climbed! Maybe you thought someone else helped you, but it was a hallucination! I didn’t ever see you in there!”

“No! He was there! He saved me! He pulled me out!”

“You just said that he couldn’t touch anything!”

“Not anything but me! He can touch me. But that’s it.”

“Keith! Can’t you hear how you sound? Your story is all over the place!”

“I’m panicking! You’re not listening!”

“Keith...” Shiro heaves, holding his gut and shaking his head. “Keith, I...”

The power goes out with a loud bang. The glass from his light behind them shatters overhead and Pidge screams, stumbling backward into the wall.

“Shiro?” Keith whispers. Where he had sat he is no longer. Keith turns, looking around the room, but he’s gone. “Shiro!” He’s nowhere.

“Keith, stop it.” Pidge whispers. “Stop it, he’s dead. You're scaring me...”

“...He takes the energy from the light sometimes,” Keith whispers to Pidge desperately. “So he can stay. He’s fading. It keeps getting worse... I don’t think he has much longer.”

There are tears in Pidge’s eyes as she watches him.
“I promise you, Pidge,” Keith chokes out desperately. He tries to keep his voice in check but it isn’t working. Shiro’s gone. Pidge is stepping away from him like he’s the killer. Her eyes keep flicking down to his mother’s knife she accidentally left on the bed beside him, like it’s going to be used on her. It shakes him to his core that she can even think that about him. He stumbles forward, hands out. He feels like a dying man begging for water. “I’m not lying. I’d never hurt you. I’d never hurt him.”

“He’s not real, Keith,” she whispers, shaking, hand drawn to her chest.

“He is. I know he is. My aunt, she could see ghosts too, maybe I’m like her....”

He realizes too late that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Keith. She was insane. She fed her dolls with syringes. She used to try to kill you.”

He tilts his head back and groans, the sound guttural and lost. “God. Maybe to spare me from a lifetime of this...”

“Oh, Keith...” She’s crying. She presses her hand to her eyes and shakes her head. “Oh, god. Okay. Okay. Say I believed you. Say I did. And I don’t. I don’t believe in ghosts. But say I did... You...you said he could touch you. And pull you out of graves. ...So - so, show me. What about now? Can he now?”

He closes his eyes. Dammit. Dammit all. “He’s...not here right now... But when he comes back...”

“Oh, Keith...” She’s crying. She presses her hand to her eyes and shakes her head. “Oh, god. Okay. Okay. Say I believed you. Say I did. And I don’t. I don’t believe in ghosts. But say I did... You...you said he could touch you. And pull you out of graves. ...So - so, show me. What about now? Can he now?”

“Keith.” She presses her lips together tightly as she chokes on soft sobs. “Keith. I love you. You know that. I’d do anything for you... But...but even if everything you say is true...why do you have the luxite blade? Why is there blood on it? Why are you hiding it?!”

“How did you get it from Zarkon?”

“How did you get it from Zarkon?”

“Yesterday, during the game. I snuck into his office.”

“And he just had a murder weapon sitting in his office at school? Keith, my dad searched the place. He took your words very seriously. He searched everything. The house, the backyard, the basement, his office at school, the field, the bleachers. Everything.”

“Well, he didn’t search well enough! The damn knife was sitting right there in the top drawer, right on top of everything else. And Shiro was in that shed in his house. I saw him with my own two eyes.”

“They were leaves, Keith! My dad saw it! Why would he lie?”

“Zarkon switched it out!”

“In the two minutes it took my dad to get there? You were right there by the shed! How did you not see? What’s happening?” Pidge cries. “Ghosts don’t exist! That’s fantasy, Keith! And this knife. And the blood. And this sketchbook. All of these pictures of Shiro like you’ve known him since forever! These are - these are intimate images, Keith. And you didn’t even know him!! And now you just...you’ve gone insane over him lately! Talking with him, always looking to him when
there’s nothing there. I see you! I see you all the time. You’ve done it several times since I came in here just today! Little cues. It’s so...”

“What! What is it? What do you think of me? Don’t hold back!”

“Here. Here, Keith. I’ll tell you,” she says, pressing her hands together firmly over her mouth as she thinks. “This is what I think: I don’t think you meant it. I think...I think you made a mistake. And Shiro got hurt. And you got scared. And the regret is eating at you. I think your mind is making excuses for itself to protect you. It’s trying to find a bad guy and it’s easy to blame Zarkon after what you went through in your past. But I think you know. You know everything. So tell me the truth. If it was an accident, we can help you, Keith, but if you pretend and lie then there’s nothing we can do! You were on that road the day it happened. You’ve already admitted to that. You were acting so strangely that afternoon, even before Shiro’s mother had reported him missing. Texting me a bunch. And that drawing. Protection of a loved one. You never draw stuff like that. No one knew but you... Am I right? And all this evidence, right here, in your things... Keith. Keith, you can see what I’m seeing, can’t you? Did you kill him? Did you hurt him on accident? What happened? What did you do?”

“Nothing!” He screams. “I didn’t do anything to him! How could I? I love Shiro! I love him!”

He’s met with deathly silence. The words sink into the room around them and there’s just this muted hush that presses up and over him. Tears stream down Pidge’s face. And she closes her eyes.

It didn’t work. He can scope out the regret weighing her down heavily, the horror, the grief. She’s mourning him already. She already knows what she has to do.

And Keith can’t convince her.

No one ever believes him.

She’s shaking. She walks up to Keith and places her hands gently on both of his cheeks, looking up at him with her warm brown eyes, looking carefully into his. “Keith, I love you.” She whispers. “That will never change. I love you.”

“Oh, God,” he whispers. He’s crying too. “I know, Pidge... I know.”

She runs the edges of her fingers across his face, smearing the tears from his cheeks. “...I’ll give you ten minutes,” she breathes. “Ten minutes before I tell my father everything I’ve found here. ...Run, Keith.”

“Pidge, please.” He cries, shoulders wracked with sobs. The sting of rejection is like an all-consuming fire. He scrambles for a way to change things; his time is running out, the last trickle of sand through an hourglass and then it’s over for good.

“Run.” She cries, pointing out the door.

It feels like there are no other options.

Shiro’s still gone. Pidge was his last hope and even she doesn’t believe him. He stares at her for one last moment, such raw hurt and longing there.

“Go,” she whispers.

He closes his eyes, turns around, and runs.
Chapter End Notes

This last scene between Keith and Pidge was the very first scene I wrote for this whole story. All I wanted for this story...was this one scene...haha.

Chat with me on Twitter?
But Keith can’t run. ...It’s funny how he keeps forgetting that.

He has ten minutes and nowhere to go. He can’t drive. He can’t jog, he can barely even walk. As he forces himself forward, trying to make his body work, the pain rises up within him so terribly that black clogs his vision.

It’s useless. In a pursuit, he’s already lost before he’s started, even with the extra time Pidge has given him.

He’s outside, in the cold open air. Winter’s chill is here. There wasn’t time to get his shoes or his jacket; the knife in his pocket was just an afterthought. His core is freezing already, bare stiff feet slopping through mud. The rain is heavy and stings at his skin, just as heavy as the black clouds overhead, suffocating him. The rolling of the thunder overhead presses down through the atmosphere and crushes his headache deeper into his spine.

“Shiro,” he breathes through the rain hitting his face. It gets in his mouth. Everything’s drenched and soggy. He rubs his arm over his face in an attempt to see, but the rain just keeps dumping down from the all powerful sky. “Shiro...”

Shiro is nowhere.

Besides the long winding empty roads, the forest and its pathless grounds are all that’s left. The trees loom above him, watching him down below, the darkness of their belly a hiding place, promising to keep shared secrets. He pushes his way into the thickness of the trees and tries to find a way.

But what is he hoping to find? A happy ending? Magical reprieve? What does he think will happen if he does evade Pidge’s dad? Even if he could make it somewhere free of prying eyes, he doesn’t have money, a car, any means to survive. He’s still a minor... His best hope is to find an empty cave and die in peace.

...Is that what Pidge wanted for him? A fresh wave of tears throttles him as he thinks it.

To die alone. Just like he’s always feared his entire way here, in the end.

Like Shiro, maybe. Cut in who knows which ways and tossed in a bag.

Keith slows, gasping in the grey of the rain, mud splattered up his pants to his shirt. He’s so tired. His body, his spirit. Everyone’s given up on him. Even himself.

He leans against a tree and looks back, but everything just looks the same - dark tall trees drowning in rain. He’s lost. The only way left is forward, but he doesn’t know how to get there either. Maybe there’s nothing there for him.

His foot catches a tree root and he has no instinct to catch himself. He lets his knees take the brunt of his weight and then he’s down. Dead weight.

“Shiro,” he whispers one last time with one last puff of breath. Maybe the water will rise and just
drown him. Maybe hypothermia will reach her hands up from the earth and take him first. He won’t even have to move.

*It’s a nice resting place, isn’t it...?* Shiro had said only less than an hour ago. *The forest.*

And it is... It is.

It feels like, since the moment he was pushed down those stairs, his life forever changed, he’s just been stuck here, just stagnant, waiting to die beneath the tree cover of this quiet town. He had resigned himself to it. But then Shiro came along and he thought... He thought -

He doesn’t know what he thought.

It was good for awhile again. He’s so glad to have had that, to have felt Shiro’s warmth and gentleness for these past few weeks. It’s just their run together is finally over.

He closes his eyes.

“What are you doing?” Shiro’s voice rushes over him like a wave. “*You’re just going to give up and die?*”

Keith’s eyes flash open and he turns to stare up into the light, in awe.

Thunder flashes through the sky, cutting through trees and washing the forest out, but when Keith’s vision returns, it’s him, it’s Shiro.

His face is twisted in distressed anger. His teeth are bared. Keith didn’t realize he could look like that... So fierce, like if anything were to attack him, it’d be incinerated on sight, little bits of cinder floating on the wind.

“No. Not now. Your time’s not up yet,” Shiro says firmly, reaching down to grab Keith by the wrists. He drags him up to his feet. “How’s the leg? Should I carry you?”

“...No,” Keith whispers, shaking his head slowly, still staring at Shiro in a daze. He lifts his trembling hands to Shiro’s face. “...Hey.”

Shiro holds them tightly, looks down into Keith’s pale face. “Keith... Come on. Hurry...”

“You’re here,” Keith breathes.

“Everything will be fine. I promise you. But you have to try. For me. *Please.* You can’t just - *give up.* That’s not the Keith I know.”

Keith lets out a small sad chuckle. “I guess not,” he whispers. They take a few steps, Shiro’s arm around his back, but the cold is clawing up Keith’s joints and into his muscles. He can hardly move.

“Ugh -” He trips, legs buckling. He lands hard on his elbows, arms jarring as water splashes everywhere, getting in his mouth. He looks behind himself, knee deep into a puddle. “All this fucking rain...”

“Are you okay? There are puddles everywhere. They’re deeper than they look; we have to be careful.”

Shiro helps Keith sit, hand going to his leg to feel. His eyes slip up to Keith’s and he holds them for a moment. Keith can see all the desperation and denial in Shiro’s eyes, and beneath it, the
truth. Keith’s not going to make it much further. This is it.

“It’s okay,” Keith breathes, using shaky arms in Shiro’s hold to push himself up. “I can still walk.”

“Keith...”

“Pidge thinks I did it,” Keith whispers, leaning into Shiro, drawing strength from him. His breath catches and he tries not to cry, but his voice cuts off as he speaks anyway and he presses a hand to his mouth, feels how it warps and twists. “She thinks I killed you.”

“I know,” Shiro murmurs softly, cupping Keith’s head with his hands. “I heard. I was there. Keith... Keith, I - I won’t last much longer. I hardly managed to come back this time... From here on out, you might be on your own. But I don’t want you to ever give up, do you hear me? Keep pushing, just like you did for me.”

“It was all for nothing,” Keith says, voice cracking hopelessly over the crashing of the thunder. It shakes the trees with its might, blotting out all other sound. “I pushed and pushed and we never found you. And what was the point of it all...? You’re going to die... I’m going to jail. To jail for murdering you...” He can hardly breathe beneath the thought of it all. “God... Shiro... Your parents...everyone thinking I hurt you... I can’t live with that... I can’t live like that. I can’t do it. Not without you.”

“It doesn’t matter what the others think, Keith. We both know the truth, you and me, and that’s what matters. Not the lie. Keith, you tried your best. You did wonderfully. I’m so proud of you.”

“It’s over. ...It’s over. You’re dead and I’m going to jail...” He laughs, low and bitter in his throat. “Where’s the wonder in that...?”

Another crash of thunder shakes the earth and Keith trips again, slamming into a tree.

Shiro gathers him up in his arms, bringing him against his chest and holding him for a moment, both of their chests heaving. They’re both exhausted beyond their limits. Shiro turns behind them, eyes searching through the trees for another way, for something else.

“There’s nowhere to go,” Keith laughs, no energy left in his limbs to heave himself up, so he stays there, sagging. “There are no options left.”

“I don’t believe that. This can’t be it. This can’t be the end, not for you. Zarkon’s already taken my life. He doesn’t get yours too. Not in any form.”

“Not over your dead body?” Keith bites out sharply, a bitter laugh on a breath. “I knew. I knew you were somewhere alive still, but I never could find you. I’ve loved you more than I’ve loved anything and still, I - I couldn’t do it... I’ve killed you. ...We’ve lost, Shiro. We’re finished. Please, let’s stop... I have to stop. My leg feels like it’s splitting in half. I can’t - This whole runaround has just been that. It’s been useless. ...Just like me.”

Shiro grabs him with his hand, tugs him so Keith’s facing him. He holds his weight. “No. No. You’re far from useless. Good just radiates from you... You’ve tried so hard. ...Good things have to come from this, Keith. They have to. We’ve just got to keep going. I know they will. I know. We just have to keep fighting.”

“Where? ...Where,” Keith breathes, desperation welling inside of him as he sees the hope being blotted from Shiro’s eyes.

“We’ll go to Ryou. He’ll take you in. He believes you.”
Keith’s already shaking his head before Shiro finished. He bites his lips and clenches his eyes shut tightly. “No. This town is so small. Everyone knows everyone. I said all that shady shit to Lotor and your friends about being with you... People will know. They’ll start talking. They’ll rope him in too. Think we conspired together to kill you. We can’t go back. We can’t drag Ryou down with us. You know that...”

Shiro turns his head, desperation welling in his eyes as he looks this way and that, seeking a way out, any way out. There is none. This is it. The end of the line. They can run all they want, but there’s no resolution.

“Keith. We can...” He grits his teeth, face pinched as he struggles for something, anything. “If we just -” He shakes his head. The rain just keeps pouring. “Keith...”

Keith reaches out shakily, stretching each individual finger out for Shiro’s. He curls them around his lukewarm skin and hangs there, closing his eyes in peace. “I love you, Shiro. I love you. This is good. Right here, like this. This is fine.”

“No,” Shiro breathes, pressing his other hand to his face as he lets out a small sob. “Not like this. Not after everything.”

“I’m okay,” Keith whispers, sagging down to the floor in a muddy puddle with a soft groan. He keeps his fingers clinging to Shiro. “Sit with me. Please. I can’t go on. ...I can’t.”

Shiro’s still shaking his head, lips pressed together. “Keith. No. You deserve so much better than this.”

Keith’s really truly alright with it. He angles his head back against the tree, letting out a small weary chuckle. “Come on,” he whispers, nodding to the space beside him. He pats it like its his bed, like they’re just settling in to play a game together before they turn the lights off, before they both rest in the darkness, beneath the stars. “Sit with me, Shiro. I want to hold you.”

Shiro lets out a shaky breath, running a hand through his hair. His eyes dart out to the forest again and still, he’s shaking his head, just as stubborn as Keith was throughout this whole thing. “No,” he says firmly, kneeling down into the mud besides Keith. “I refuse.”

In one quick movement, he grabs Keith bodily and tosses him on his back. Keith gasps in surprise. His eyes fly wide.

“Let’s run away together,” Shiro says breathlessly, the hardness and fear melting out of his voice. It’s soft and warm, just like him, the heart of him that Keith has gotten to know these past few weeks. “We’ll go somewhere warm, where it’s not raining all the time. Someplace beautiful, that’ll inspire you. It’ll be a quiet place, sleepy and warm, where we can find peace. Just you and me versus the world. We should’ve done it ages ago, honestly. ...I’ll carry you as long as you need. Wherever you want to go, we’ll go.” Shiro lets out a small sad laugh, sniffing loudly, voice breaking. “It’s like we’re eloping.”

“Shiro...” Keith breathes out, pressing his face firmly into his back. “...Shiro...”

He tries to shout above the storm as it rages, lightning cracking through the trees. “We don’t have to worry about anyone else that way. They’ll all be fine. We can live together. Build a life together. Start anew.”

Keith can taste the salt of his tears, mixing with the rain as it drizzles down his face. He lifts his head, licks the water from his lips. “...A cabin in the woods. Dry. Warm. Let’s go there. There’s
got to be one nearby, waiting for us.”

“Yeah,” Shiro pants, repositioning Keith on his back with a small grunt. “Do you sense it? It’s close. We just need to find it...”

Keith nods and closes his eyes. Maybe if he believes hard enough, the universe will take pity. Maybe if he prays with his entire being, something will hear him.

“There,” he whispers, pointing through the trees toward their right. Everything looks the same, just that same open darkness, the way the trees stare and watch and keep quiet.

Shiro follows Keith’s direction. “Yeah,” he says. “I feel it too... We’ll get there soon. Really soon. There’ll be towels there. I’ll dry you off. And blankets and a bed. A fireplace.”

The wind screams above them and Keith shivers, clinging tighter to Shiro, pressing his face into Shiro’s back.

Shiro stops for a moment, looking around them. “...Where are we...? What are we -?”

“- Home,” Keith says firmly into Shiro’s ear. “You and me. We’re going someplace safe. Someplace warm.”

Shiro stands there, dazed. “We are...?”


He does. He tilts his head back, letting the rain fall on his face. Keith watches him as he presses his lips together tightly. “...I can feel it.”

“Yeah. We’re almost there... Let me down. I’ll walk with you.”

“No,” Shiro murmurs. “No, I’ve got you...” He blinks out into the darkness of the forest and turns, walking with newfound determination. He stumbles over the roots hidden through the inches of water collected on the ground. “Keith... Keith, I feel weird... Talk with me...”

Keith raises his voice even though it shakes. “It’s close, Shiro. And then we can rest. We’ll close the curtains and turn off any clocks. We’ll sleep for as long as we want. No one will be able to complain we’re staying in bed past noon. Just you and me, bundled in blankets with a roof over our head, safe. We won’t have to worry about anything.”

“Yeah...” Shiro slips and sags onto a tree for balance, cringing against a groan. His whole body trembles with something. He’s fighting an invisible force that Keith can’t help him with.

“Shiro!” Keith tries to scramble off of his back, but Shiro shakes his head once, sharply.

“I’m okay,” he pants, chest heaving. “I just...” The wind shifts. Keith’s phone, in his pocket, makes a loud pop and a crack. And he startles, ripping it from his pants before it can burn his leg. It falls into a puddle on the ground. The screen is fractured. It’s smoking.

“I’m okay,” Shiro whispers again, heaving himself to his feet, clinging to Keith’s legs tightly. “We’re going to make it. We have to...”

Keith lets out a small sob, pressing his face into Shiro’s wet skin. “I love you, Shiro. I’d choose you over and over again.”

“...And I’d choose you,” Shiro murmurs vaguely over the rain. His breath is making little clouds
in the air. “Before you, Keith, I didn’t know anything. I saw this world in monochrome. I never realized what this world truly was, I never knew how beautiful everything could be. All the love all around us, even in times when we feel completely alone... I know now. I can see it all...through you.”

He slips against the nearest tree, hand going out to steady himself.

“Shiro, let me down,” Keith begs him.

“No... Just...just a little more...”

“Shiro.”

Shiro’s head is swaying slightly, like he can’t quite see straight. His eyes are hooded, his mouth slack. He’s panting but it’s like he’s not getting any air. He just gets dizzier and dizzier, his eyes less out of focus with each passing moment. Still, he won’t let Keith go. His hand holds him firmly to his back.

“I can’t leave you like this,” he chokes out on a whisper.

Lightning flicks across the land, blinding them, and then thunder crashes, knocking Shiro around. He groans, clinging to the tree in desperation. He’s fighting even though there’s nothing left of him. He’s not letting go.

“It’s okay,” Keith weeps softly, pressing a kiss to the back of his neck. It hurts to see Shiro in such pain. “It’s alright. You can let go. We’ll see each other again soon, okay? I’ll search for you in the afterlife, no matter how long it takes. I won’t stop searching until I find you.”

“And I you...” Shiro breathes. “I...I’m...I’m fading away...” He tilts his head down to his legs. And he is. He's becoming transparent, like a ghost. His voice shakes with his horror. “No... This is it. ...This is all I have to give you...”


Shiro’s knees hit the ground. Keith slips off his back as Shiro’s hold unravels and loosens. He pulls his useless leg behind him, placing himself right in front of Shiro. He holds onto him before he can fall.

Shiro leans his head into Keith, breathing him in. “...I tried, Keith... I tried earlier...to keep things as normal as I could. To stay here with you...it’s what I want more than anything. And I think - I think it’s been you, your mark here, that’s given me that strength until now. But...I can’t keep this up anymore. Everything hurts,” he whispers, face crumpling. “Everything... It feels like I’m being eaten from the inside out.”

“I know, Shiro, I know,” Keith whispers. “You can let go. I’m so grateful for the time we’ve had. You don’t have to hurt like this anymore; I’ll find you. I promise you, I’ll never stop searching until I do. I promise.”

Shiro sobs into Keith’s embrace. “...I don’t want to leave you...”

He grabs Shiro by the face, smiles up at him through his tears. “You won’t. Not ever. You’re here, in my heart. You’ve made my world so beautiful in the short amount of time I’ve known you. Despite everything that’s happened, I’m so glad to have met you. And I hope you find peace. I’ll think of you everyday, every minute, every second for the rest of my life and after that. I know what you said earlier...but this ring is never coming off.”
“...Keith,” Shiro breathes out, reaching his hands up slowly to cling onto Keith’s face. He leans forward, letting his forehead fall to Keith’s. He breathes him in, tears still falling into Keith’s palms. “...Keith.” With the last of his strength, he lifts his head slightly, pressing a smile to the corner of Keith’s mouth. Breathlessly, he pants out, “...I don’t regret anything. ...This is all worth it. I love you.”

“I love you... I love you so much.” Keith holds the back of Shiro’s head as he cries. He doesn’t know what’s rain and what’s his tears or Shiro’s at this point. They’re pressed together so tightly.

“Let’s get married,” Shiro hums softly to the sound of the rain falling over them, soft. Quiet. “In the spring, when it’s warm. Ryou can be my best man. Pidge can be yours. We can have it in the park, underneath that tall willow tree by the pond where all those ducks gather. When the lilacs bloom.”

“...You’ll have to carry me down the aisle. My leg’s shot.”

“Mm... I’d carry you even if it wasn’t. I’ll never let you away from my side. Not ever again.”

“I’m okay with that...” Keith whispers into his ear as he gently rocks them. “I’m okay with that...”

Shiro groans, voice tight as pain seizes him, tightening its grip over his entire being. His hands dig into his stomach and he bites back a choked whimper. “Keith, augh, I can’t...”

He captures Shiro’s hand and holds it tightly.

“...It’s okay,” Keith soothes, body heaving with sobs, running his other hand through Shiro’s hair. “I love you. It’s okay. You can let go. You can let go.”

In the next moment, several things happen at once: lighting flashes overhead and thunder shakes the earth around them, the phone makes an awful garbled screech underwater somewhere close, almost like an attempted ring, and Shiro goes stiff as his eyes fling wide. He looks up, over Keith’s shoulder and breathes out a small, horrified, “Keith.” And, the next thing Keith knows, Shiro’s shoving him face-first in a puddle of mud.

The movement is followed by an explosive bang. It bounces around the forest, off the trunks of trees, scattering across their treetops. It disorientates Keith.

He spits out a mouthful of soil and pushes himself to his back, on ground not saturated with water. He lies there for one moment sprawled out and dazed, face turned up to the treetops.

He sees it.

He sees it...

Crown shyness.

Oh, God.

Oh, God.

“Shiro!” He cries, lungs bursting. “Shiro! I see it! It’s what you’re seeing! It’s here. We’re here.”

“Keith, look out,” Shiro roars and before he can even tear his attention away from the trees
overhead, he feels Shiro tossing him by the neck of his shirt up and away before another crack pierces the air.

He lands hard on his side, slipping through the water and hitting his head on the trees. He chokes as he inhales a lungful of rain.

He blinks aware, seeking out Shiro, but he’s gone. He’s disappeared. There are only two people here in this forest: him and....

A shaky breath escapes him.

It’s Zarkon. A shadow in this grey day. He looks taller and bulkier in the forest somehow, as sturdy as the trees around them.

“Shiro,” Keith whispers, voice shaking. But he can’t feel him.

“You can see him, can’t you?” Zarkon laughs softly. “I always knew you were different... Honerva believed in the supernatural; not many do. Can he sense where his body is? Is that how you’ve been doing all of this? Has he been leading you?”

The third time’s the charm. Keith can’t freeze up like before. He can’t afford it.

“Shiro was supposed to be the intelligent one,” Zarkon’s voice rolls like the thunder ahead. Somehow, despite the intensity of the torrential downpour from the clouds, he can hear Zarkon’s smooth low voice perfectly. It’s the way he commands attention. The way he’s still and strong. “I thought it’d be him giving me the problems in this, but it’s always been you who’s been the fighter, hasn’t it? It’s been you here at every turn, mirroring my every move, following each of my footsteps. It’s too bad about the leg... You would’ve made a great police officer, especially if you can communicate with the dead.”

“Zarkon...” Thunder booms. It’s like saying his name has invoked him here, a grim reaper to collect Keith’s life.

He looks down at the gun in his hand, inspecting it casually. “How did you find this place...? It was Lotor, wasn’t it?”

“...So you admit it then,” Keith breathes. “You killed Shiro.”

“Well,” he says lowly. “What do you think? You did see his body in my shed. You seemed pretty sure back then.”

Keith presses his lips together and grits his teeth. He knew it. He knew it all along. And no one is here to hear this but him. “Why?! Why him?! He’s never hurt a soul! He was your own son’s best friend! He was good. Why would you kill him?!”

“...You could never possibly understand. You’re just a child, untouched by the world. If you were to survive into adulthood, maybe then, you’d slowly start to see, day by day, the pain of living... You think you know the way of the world. You have all these idealistic thoughts and hopes. Bright eyed, like a lamb to the slaughter... Maybe one person can make a difference, you think...but then you realize you can’t go against fate.”

“What the fuck are you saying...?” Keith breathes.

“You little brats with your gifts and your talent and your hopes and your dreams...squandering it all away on the naivete of youth. You, with your running. Shiro, with his football. You didn’t
understand what you could do with it. You couldn’t comprehend what you were pissing away. You both had the world in your hands. ‘Why Shiro?’ you ask. That’s what I wondered myself. Why him? ...Why you? You were both just children. …Neither of you deserved it.”

Keith furrows his brow. “Shiro’s scholarship...?”

Zarkon chuckles lowly. “The scholarship... Did you know?” Zarkon smiles slightly. “That if Shiro doesn’t use the scholarship, it goes to Lotor? He’s next in line. …What a shame. Shiro was so young. Think of the future he could’ve had…”

There’s a well nestled behind the darkness behind him. Keith can hardly make it out through the stifled trees’ shelter, but it’s there, made of thick stones, old, with moss growing over the side.

It’s been abandoned here for who knows how long. He’s lived by this forest since he was born and he never heard of it, never even heard mention of it from anyone before.

No one knows of this well.

He found it. They were trying to seek out a home but they came here instead.

“This was for Lotor...” Keith whispers. “Did Lotor know?” Keith asks lowly. He remembers the fear in Lotor. The wide afraid eyes. The way he tried to convince Keith to stop.

“Oh, he knew.” Keith inhales sharply. Thinks of Shiro, the disbelief in his eyes as he said softly all those times, Lotor is my friend.

“But I don’t think you understand. This wasn’t for Lotor. Like I couldn’t pay for Lotor to go anywhere he wanted.” He looks down at the gun again. “Sometimes though, I just get sick seeing the world hand out gifts...when everything I worked for was taken from my hands so easily....” His voice lowers, “everyone I loved...”

Keith inhales shakily. “...Honerva...”

Zarkon is quiet for awhile as thunder rolls around them. “Lotor is...very much like his mother. He looks like her. He acts like her. ...Who do you think was the one who cauterized the wounds so Shiro wouldn’t bleed out? The one who thought he was being so clever, sneaking in antibiotics, trying to force feed Shiro, give him water. He thought he could save him, so I let him try. I let him learn the cruelty of fate as the life slowly faded from his friend’s eyes.”

“...Shiro’s still alive?” Keith whispers.

“Maybe before the fifty foot drop down the well. If, by some miracle, he isn’t dead yet, the storm will drown him out, or he’ll starve to death. I brought these bags of gravel, but it might be overkill. Sometimes it doesn’t feel right to hand out mercy like that. I thought it might be fun to see the life drain out of him slowly over time, but you ruined my plans when you called the police. It’s no matter. I’d be interested to see which happens first, but I won’t need to worry about it anymore after tonight.” He smiles down at Keith calmly, a horrible glint of malice in his eyes. “...You know what I have to do to you now, don’t you?”

Keith stares up, defenseless. He’s been here before, under better circumstances. Back when he was strong and trained everyday, as fit as he’s ever been. And even then, against an opponent like Zarkon, look how things ended for him. He’s a crumpled mess on the ground. Even without Zarkon here, Keith doesn’t think he could make it home alive.

It doesn’t matter. He doesn’t want to go back anyway. Not without Shiro.
Things are different now. He finds his fear is gone. He has nothing left to lose.

Just like Zarkon.

Keith grins, his sharp teeth glinting. “Yeah,” he says. “You’ll have to kill me. Do it then. Because if you don’t, I’m going to go back and tell everyone I can get my hands on that you killed Shiro. An innocent, kind-hearted, beloved soul who was a better man in his eighteen years of life than you can ever hope to be. I’ll tell them about how you’re such a bitter loser, a disgusting poor sport that you can’t just get better and play by the rules, you have to smite out those better than you to even stand a chance. You’ll have the blood of two children on your hands...wow, how impressive...but you’ll still never, ever be good enough. You'll have to live the rest of your life knowing that we beat you and the only way you could erase that fact is by killing us. And people will believe me this time. They will. Because your own son knows. You killed his best friend. He hates you now. And when you die, no one will mourn you, not even him. Everyone will only be spitting on your grave.”

Zarkon’s smile is soft. “Is that what you think?”

“Your friends will know the truth, your son won’t be able to forgive you, and your wife is dead... It’s probably for the best. She’ll never have to see what a monster you’ve become, killing children because you’re jealous. She would be disgusted by you.”

Zarkon’s face clicks over from calmness to something like rage. Keith doesn’t even see it happening, but his head is cracked to the side. Zarkon claws him hard across the face.

Blood is thick and metallic in Keith’s mouth immediately. He can’t focus on the sky above him.

Zarkon grabs him by the collar and jerks him up. He presses the barrel of the gun to Keith’s forehead, his teeth bared, his eyes crazed.

The metal of the gun is cold against his skin as it digs into his flesh. Zarkon is trembling, out of control. It happened so easily too.

This is where Shiro had been. Unassuming, probably smiling about something, before Zarkon set his sights on him and tried to end him.

Keith is right where Shiro was, looking up at Zarkon, death pressed to his skin.

He’s not afraid. He thinks he can feel Shiro around him. In his heart. In the wind howling through the leaves. ...He’s not afraid. Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe, like this, they can be together.

Keith laughs lowly in the face of it. “...Did I hurt your feelings, Lord Zarkon? The whole world just owes you, doesn’t it? I feel bad for Lotor. When he gets his beloved scholarship he wanted so badly, he’ll know, deep within his heart, that the only reason he’ll be there is because he’s just filling in the shoes of a person he let die. ...The last bit of Honerva...and you’ve killed him too. Lotor will never find happiness, caged like this beneath your twisted ways. You’ve made him just like you, miserable and alone. Congratulations.”

Zarkon growls lowly, staring hard at Keith.

“Do it,” Keith breathes. “Do it. Coward. You can't take anything more from me.”

Slowly, keeping his eyes on Keith, he pulls the gun from Keith’s forehead.

“This brings back memories,” Zarkon mutters lowly. Keith watches as Zarkon deliberately unloads
the gun and tosses the bullets into the puddles behind them. He throws the gun away and turns back to stare at Keith. “I remember how mouthy you were as a child, alone and on your way to becoming a delinquent, before I took you under my wing and weaved talent as a runner in you. Looks like a tiger never changes its stripes. You’re still that same unwanted boy running your mouth off and picking the wrong kind of fights? It’s because your heart’s lonely. Always has been. You just don’t fit with other people. You opened your heart up to me so easily, hurt in your eyes, saying that your parents loved Acxa more than you... Well, that’s true. And at least now, they get to keep the better twin. They probably won’t even miss you. The world will be better off without you.”

“Maybe,” Keith whispers.

Zarkon walks over to a tree and breaks off a thick heavy branch. The whole tree quakes as he rips it off. “I can’t stand brats like you. It didn’t have to be this way, you know. I had already taken away your leg. Anything else and it’d be too suspicious. I wasn’t going to do it again, but, one day, Shiro came running up to me, his face so unguarded and happy, breathing out with excitement, “Zarkon! Guess what? I’m getting a full ride scholarship to an Ivy League school!”

And something in me just... Shiro would grow up, get a perfect wife, a perfect family, a perfect job...and he did nothing for it. I just couldn’t understand it. ...Life has done nothing but take away from me, when all it does for you brats is give. The naivete of youth... You both sicken me so much. You just thought life really was going to be that easy.

“It wasn’t even going to be you. I was going to let Haggar take the fall, she was so obsessed with him anyway. I knew she was following behind him that day he was walking home. I knew if I left his bag, she’d take it and she did. And that lake where she always wanders to after school? Do you think it’s a coincidence I dumped that hiker’s body there? It could’ve ended with her. It almost did, but you had to keep coming back, didn’t you? This is your fault really. But I’m actually happy you decided to follow me. I thought your leg would be enough, but then you had to be an artist too, didn’t you? Then I started wanting your hand.”

He looks down at the branch. “It’s too bad you had to make me angry. You just know how to push my buttons, don’t you? I was going to kill you quickly. Trust me, a bullet to the head would’ve been mercy, but looks like now I’ll have to make the pain last.”

“Do it, then,” Keith grinds out. “Since it’s the only talent you have. Pathetic. Honerva would be so proud.”

Zarkon repositions the branch in his arm and swings down. But he’s big and the branch is bulky. Keith may not have his leg, but he’s got everything else. And he feels a lucky wind at his back. He pushes himself forward, out of the way and in Zarkon’s opening, and slips his mother’s knife from his pocket and straight into Zarkon’s shin. He feels it dig in deeply, jamming into the bone. Zarkon roars, stumbling back, using the momentum of the branch and hitting Keith over the head with it.

It’s a big fucking branch, the weight behind it probably more than Keith. Keith can hear the crack as it hits his skull and the strange winding dizziness, but he has enough adrenaline that he feels no pain. Before he can get away, Zarkon has the jagged end of it and he brings it down right between Keith’s eyes. The force slams his head back against a tree. Double the damage.

It stuns Keith. His senses scatter. His hand goes lax and he hears a soft splash of his knife slipping from his grip, but his vision is doubling and blood’s getting in his eyes and he can’t see where it went. He scrambles for it, but in that moment, Zarkon’s boot comes crashing down on the back of Keith’s head, forcing him face-first into the wetland. The puddles have grown from even
earlier, where Keith was sinking into the water like small pools; it’s flooded out. Zarkon shoves Keith’s face into it with the bottom of his boot, drowning him.

Keith is completely submerged.

He sputters, choking on thick muddied floodwater. He can feel himself gulping in huge lungfuls of it; the panic just makes him struggle harder, thrashing against Zarkon’s hands as they come down on him, large and strong, making Keith’s fire seem as nothing in comparison.

He knows the knife is somewhere nearby and that’s his only bet. Everything’s coated in mud, the one good thing about this day. When Zarkon thinks he has both of Keith’s hands, Keith manages to slip one out at the last second.

His hand slaps squishy ground and slippery mud. Feeling, desperately, for that blade. But it’s nowhere. He’s panicking as his need for air presses out all other rational thought. He’s desperate. He chokes in water.

He’s fading... He can feel it, this dark concrete wall in his mind. He’s just inhaling water, but he can’t stop the reflex as his mind scrambles to tell him *breathe!* *Breathe!*

All he’s grabbing is just mud and mud and more mud. He can feel the stray strands of grass beneath his fingertips and the resistance from the water as he swishes his hand back and forth through it.

He’s running out of time. His movements slow.

He feels a hand come down on his wrist firmly, ceasing his movement and he thinks, with one last small spark of denial, that he’s got to fight this. This monster can’t go free. But he’s so far gone.

So gone, in fact, that he doesn’t even register that the hand is soft and smaller and gentle. ...And guiding him.

The knife. Shiro’s pressing Keith’s hand to the knife. He feels the familiar edges of it as Shiro wraps his fingers around the base. He clenches his hand to it quickly and sends it back. It’s an awkward angle, and Zarkon sees it in time, dodging at the right moment, lessening his grip on Keith and having to roll out of the way.

Keith pushes himself up, scrambling through the water on his knees, spitting up liquid on desperate raw heaves. He holds the knife out, shaking, hacking and vomiting up water. It burns so badly. His vision is spotty and his body is stiff from the cold, but he fights it.

Zarkon stands a foot away, smiling in pleasant surprise. “So you *do* have some fight in you? Shiro didn’t fight. I was almost disappointed; all that power in his body and he just stared and sputtered, like a poor innocent lamb. He was in too much shock. I don’t even think he registered what was happening. He basically just rolled over and died.”

“...He trusted you,” Keith croaks out, clutching at his chest. “He said you were like a father to him.”

“Hmm. I recall you saying that once before too. No one was ever there for you. It was all about Acxa, never about poor little Keith. You should be thanking me, really. I became the father you needed.”

“Yeah,” Keith coughs out a wet laugh. “Turns out I just needed the one.”
“I don’t see him here now protecting his only son,” Zarkon smiles. “The one who’s been notified at the school to be high risk. The one who they were going to send away. You would think they’d worry... I guess you weren’t worth the trouble.”

Keith knows it’s true. And though he knows Zarkon’s game, it stabs through him anyway.

He’s right. Where is his dad? Where’s Pidge? No one followed him out or thought to look for him. It’s just him, alone in this forest with a murderer. The only person who came for him can’t stay.

Before Keith can gather his bearings, Zarkon is flying forward again. He’s not the football coach for nothing. He grabs Keith easily, like a little ragdoll, and tries to throw him hard into a tree.

But something catches him. He can’t see him, but he knows he’s there. Shiro takes the brunt of the hit.

You can do this, Keith, he hears, hushed, like a whisper trying to press through the veils of rain.
And he believes him.

Keith ducks out of the way of Zarkon’s fist and the tree takes the hit, bark flying as the wood splinters and part of the tree breaks apart. It groans as it falls to the ground.

Keith tries to spin around and cut into Zarkon - it’s a move his mother taught him - but she’d taught him when both of his legs worked, and he’s not fast enough. Zarkon catches his wrist with a grip that feels like it’s crushing bone. He twists Keith’s arm and grabs him again, tossing Keith as hard and as far as he can go.

Keith lands badly on his leg. He cries out, the shock of pain seizing his whole body up and Zarkon has him again, kneeling beside him and grabbing his hand, twisting it until it cracks.

Paint blots out his senses; he can’t see for a moment and he thinks he might black out like this. Zarkon doesn’t relent. Keith throws his weight desperately against him and switches hands. He feels Shiro at his back, helping him as he moves.

It’s enough. He carves the blade down with one clean slice, right through Zarkon’s exposed Achilles tendon.

It snaps - a loud crack that echoes through the forest.

Zarkon roars as he falls to the ground. He claws at Keith and manages to dig into his weak leg. The knife flings from his grip, skittering across the forest’s wet floor, only stopping its movement, with a loud clang, as it hits the side of the well.

There is a moment in which the both of them turn their heads up, looking at the knife, glinting beneath the clouded grey light.

Keith is no runner. Not anymore. If you had tried him half a decade before, healthy and fully rested, he could probably win against Zarkon.

But he’s had a day, a week, a month. Both mentally and physically, he’s been stretched way beyond his limits. He couldn’t even sit up earlier, let alone sprint. And that was before he was bleeding from his forehead and choking on the water still in his lungs, trying to cope with his hand that’s swelling already, with his leg that never cooperates.

But he has to. He just has to.
He doesn’t have his leg, but now, neither does Zarkon. Without his tendon, he’s unbalanced. Finally, finally, they’re on an even playing field.

Keith heaves himself up at the same time Zarkon shifts, pushing himself off the drowned mud.

That lucky wind is still there, all around him, aiding him.

Keith has wished so many times to just...fucking...run. He’s felt useless ever since. His friends always catering to him, slowing down specially so he can keep up, carrying him, useless and decrepit on their backs, shouldering his burden that should be his alone. And they smile through it. They always smile like he’s not dragging them down, but he knows he is.

Acxa, who just wanted a normal life, spends her time worrying for him like he is the younger brother, when he wishes he could be the one to worry and care for her.

His father, who is getting older and even more tired, is forced to carry him.

His mother, who he hurts every time he asks for pain meds, who has to know that he’s suffering. He’s always suffering.

He’s never been able to do as he’s wanted since that one day when Zarkon first showed him his true colors.

Keith will never forget the morning he woke up and realized everything was taken from him, realized it wasn’t all just a horrible nightmare, but reality. When he had the world in his palm and it was smacked from his hands, turned to shit. How he felt like there was nothing left for him since then. How he just gave up on life because he felt it had given up on him.

He’ll never forget.

But then, he won’t forget the feeling of freedom he could only ever get when he raced through the track behind the school, cutting through the wind that made him feel powerful, made him feel worth something.

Or when he’d lift Pidge onto his back and sprint through the wheat fields, hooting and hollering. Their laughter ringing through their ears.

He did that. That was all him.

That was something special to him. He loved that, starting from one place and then just darting like the wind, letting the world guide him forward to where he needed to go. Trusting that he’d see his goal reached.

When was the last time he ever felt that way? He’d given up.

But maybe he can try.

He darts forward, screaming at himself to go. To grit through the pain and push. For his family. For Pidge. For Shiro.

For himself.

He scrambles forward, Zarkon at his side. It’s half a run, half a desperate struggle, but it’s one hundred percent a race and Keith doesn’t play to lose.

Now’s not the time to play fair. He claws his nails into Zarkon, pushing off the ground to tackle
him and they both slip in the mud. They’re a tangle of limbs and thrown elbows, clawing forward into the mud, trying to pull their way through the layers of water and slippery grass, trying to get there first.

Keith does everything he can possibly do, using every bit of the ferocity and anger and frustration that’s built up inside of himself these past years, digging through the pain in his leg to push off as he kicks Zarkon between the eyes with the other. He does what he must in these times because he can’t let Zarkon get away with this. Not for something so stupid and petty. Shiro’s life was worth so much more than this...

Shiro deserved the world.

There are bloodied scratch marks through Zarkon’s face and skin beneath Keith’s nails. Zarkon tosses black hair from his hand and Keith’s scalp burns.

The knife is right there, within reach as they tumble.

Zarkon’s hand stretches out. He’s bigger. More powerful.

Keith rolls, using his elbow to pull himself up, hand reaching out desperately. The final stretch. He thinks he won’t make it - when does he ever actually make it? - when his hand closes around the blade’s familiar handle. He feels strength that’s not his own wrapped around the back of his hand.

Shiro.

He doesn’t think. There’s no time to celebrate.

He hits the ground and twists his torso, shoving his weight into the cut as he digs it deep across Zarkon’s chest.

It should be enough.

For a normal person.

But Zarkon is not normal. He roars, rage fueling him. Blood spurts from the wound all over the ground, over Keith’s face. It stings his eyes and he has to swipe his arm over his face to see.

It’s not in time. Zarkon grabs Keith by the throat with one hand, crushing his windpipe, lifting him into the air.

Keith scrambles, trying to use the knife again, but Zarkon has his wrist pinned between his knee and the well’s hard stone wall. He lifts Keith higher and slams his skull hard against the well. Once. Twice. Keith’s brain rattles and his senses scatter. Three times and Keith’s hand disobeys him. The knife slips from his grip and falls away with one sharp clang.

Zarkon, with Keith’s vulnerable soft neck still beneath his grip, reaches casually down to grab the knife, despite the blood leaking down his front or spewing from his leg. It’s like he doesn’t feel it at all. It’s like he’s not even human anymore.

“Now that was just what I wanted,” he laughs wildly. He's panting, his eyes bright and excited. “Oh... Keith Kogane... Poor little Keith Kogane. Nobody believed him. When he fell for the popular beloved football captain, he couldn’t get him to look at his crippled awkward self. So he decided, if he can’t have him, no one will. It’s always the quiet ones...isn’t it? That’s what they say. Their insanity brews in their silence.”
Keith struggles, gasping violently for air. His vision is spotting black. He’s clawing and trying to pry Zarkon’s fingers from his delicate neck, but it’s no use. Zarkon’s grip is like an iron vice. His face feels like it’s going to pop from the pressure. His blood is thrashing in his ears. He’s going to die like this. He’s struggling and kicking and twisting and pounding his arms at Zarkon, but he’s so small... He’s going to die.  

“You’ve never killed before so you didn’t know what to do with the body. You dragged him to the nearest lake by the school. You cut the prints off and buried them nearby. Put his body in the lake, tied down with rocks...  

“But you’re just a boy and the guilt killed you... You fell deeper and deeper into madness, blaming whoever you could. And when you were seen right through, you ran into the forest and killed yourself. In your agony, you dug welts into your skin and then got your own belt and hung yourself on that tree over there... Do you see it? Almost beautiful, isn’t it? That’s the one you’ll be hanging from in a few minutes. Such a tragic end to a pathetic useless life. Ah...don’t pass out on me yet.”

He lessens the tightness of his grip enough for Keith to struggle in a bit of air. The sound is more like a tear than anything else, a gurgled wheeze. It doesn’t even sound human. It’s not enough. Slowly, Zarkon grabs the sore part of Keith's leg and digs his nails into it. The pressure is like steel rods slowly pushing through the delicate flesh of Keith’s hurt leg, tearing in crawling agony through each layer of flesh, fat, muscle, bone. Keith gurgles. The rain is hushed, far far away. It’s just him and the emptiness of the forest and this blinding agony. Alone. So alone. And quiet. No one hears. No one is coming to save him. He doesn’t feel Shiro anymore. He doesn’t feel the wind.

This is just one moment of so many. These rain drops, falling from the sky, scattering through the wetlands beneath their feet, mixing into one clear collective. No one can track it. No one can see it again. They’re still.

Keith is still. Slowing, brain muddied.

“Was it worth it? You were right. You were right all along. And now you’re here - so close, yet so far away,” Zarkon mutters lowly, from a distance. “Poor weak, useless Keith Kogane. Shiro’s here. He’s right behind you. Maybe he’s even still breathing.”

Shiro, Keith thinks. His legs give a faint kick but it’s all that’s left of his strength. His fingers touch against Zarkon’s hand at his throat, but they can’t grip him. Zarkon gets the knife and, grip firm with the height of his strength, he jabs it down deep into the vulnerable inside of Keith’s hurt leg.

He knows what he’s doing. It rips Keith right back from the edge.

It’s too much. Keith screams in agony from the pain, his mind going blank, hanging loosely in Zarkon’s grasp, completely at his mercy. He wishes he could black out, but he doesn’t.

Zarkon takes Keith’s mother’s blade back high into the air and jams it in again. And again. Deeply. Grinding it. Twisting. Searching.

Keith hears it. It’s like a burst. And then Zarkon’s laughing.

He’s cut open the femoral artery. It’s over. He doesn’t even have minutes. Keith’s going to bleed out from the wounded leg he’s cursed and hated these past years. It’s literally going to be the
death of him.

“Pathetic,” Zarkon says quietly as he presses his face close to Keith’s, taking in the mind numbing pain with a small calm smile. He slams Keith hard against the stones one last time, bits of it crumbling off and falling to the ground, before dropping Keith like he’s nothing, letting him writhe in agony on the forest’s saturated swampy floor. “Useless…"

He gasps loudly, swallowing as much air as his body can take.

It’s hopeless now. You don’t fight against something like this.

It’s not just a river of blood coming from Keith - it’s exploding from his leg in time with his beating heart. It’s like a dam broken free. The knife is still jammed into him - a stopper - and even still, the blood is spurting out of control.

It’s so much. More than Keith could imagine being in a body. His head swims dizzily as he sags to the ground, still gasping for air. One hand’s on his throat, the other struggles to press against his leg to stem the bleeding. Already he can feel a strange heavy drowsiness rising up and pulling at his senses. He’s got to...do something. But he falls sideways through the air, face smashing into the ground. It’s like the strings have been cut from his body and he’s fading... He’s gone.

“Shiro didn’t even scream, did you know that?” Zarkon says, watching Keith through emotionless eyes as he wheezes and curses him with the last puffs of his breath. “He took one look at me through those dumb large trusting eyes and when I sliced his arm off, he just stared blankly. It was easy. So easy. Nothing like you. No, this was fun. But then, he’s always been eager to please, hasn’t he? You’ve been quite the opposite. Even when you know you should stay still to preserve your life, you squirm and kick and throw a tantrum. Look at all the blood you’ve lost already. You’re surely feeling it, aren’t you? You don’t have much time left at all... You’ve always been so small.” He sighs, like he’s bored, stepping through the puddle of Keith’s deep ruby blood and turning. He has to lean his hand against the tree for support, but still, he stands tall. A monster. Inhuman.

“I guess that’s it, then,” Zarkon hums. “I suppose I should be impressed you managed to struggle against me this long, but it was never going to be an actual fight. Not how you are.”

Zarkon’s quiet for awhile, leaning his head back, face upturned to the rain falling. It’s calmed now, the thunder far off in the distance, the sound almost like a whisper. He murmurs quietly, “This is a kindness, really... You and Shiro won’t ever have to know the pain of growing older in this world. Of losing everything you thought you could have. Watching it all fall away, bit by bit...right through your fingers. Your hopes. Your dreams. The one you love... You still have them in the palm of your hand right now. Without your leg, you were never going to amount to anything anyway. No one was ever going to look at you. You’d just grow up, alone and miserable, more useless by the day, wishing for this: this mercy I gave you.” Zarkon stares into the dark sky, eyes searching. “…Wishing for the end...”

Keith, the useless boy. So useless that Zarkon thinks he’s already won. He’s disregarding him, Keith’s already dead and incapable in his eyes.

It’s true - Keith’s sobbing at the pain, clinging to his leg that’s pumping his life force from him in large gushes, experiencing an agony he’s never even imagined. He’s never seen so much blood, he tries to clog the flow with the pressure from his hand, but it does nothing. The blood’s everywhere. He’s dying.

He sees his mom’s face in his mind. His father, Acxa, Matt. ...Pidge. There are so many things he
wishes he had the time to say to them.

Keith’s lost too much blood. Sleep is clawing at him, pulling him down. He can barely keep his eyes open.

But it’s not sleep, he realizes, it’s death. Its cold hands are trying to drag him into its grip. He’s going to die here, alone, in the mud.

...Like Shiro.

...Shiro. Keith thinks of Shiro. Of their dreams together. Of what the park will look like when the lilacs bloom in the spring next year...without them.

The life he wishes they could’ve had together, but they won’t.

No. If they don’t get to grow old and live their lives together, then Keith sure as hell isn’t going to let the bastard who did this to them go free. Zarkon is going down with them. He won’t do this to anyone ever again.

One of these days, he can hear Shiro whispering in the corners of his mind, a memory he cherishes, you’re going to surprise yourself. And I’ll be there, smiling.

There are no more days left but this one. And Keith wants nothing more than to prove Shiro right.

He pushes through the clouded fog of his mind, forcing himself up in one last ball of flaming rage. He feels wild, spinning through the world, hurtling across space like a meteor. As long as he just keeps going forward... As long as he doesn’t give up...

He heaves himself up, screaming as he yanks the knife from the tender muscle of the inside of his leg. He can feel whatever the knife had held back break free, like a dam releasing the last of its flood.

Zarkon turns, surprise on his face, and Keith draws it hard against his other Achilles tendon.

Zarkon took away Keith’s leg, now Keith’s returned the favor, twice over.

There’s a loud sickening snap and Zarkon falls.

Keith doesn't give him a moment to think. He stabs as hard as he can, as much as he can. Tearing through his arm, into his shoulder, over and over, he just wants him gone. Wants this to end.

Keith’s vision’s going black. With the last bit of his power, screaming in primal rage, he throws himself into the knife as powerfully as he can, stabbing up and under Zarkon’s ribs, right into his heart.

Keith feels the hot blood gushing over his hands before he can see it. Somehow it feels hotter than his own, burning him.

Keith lets out a wet crazed laugh as Zarkon’s eyes fly wide in surprise and he sags back, against the well.

“Useless,” Keith laughs weakly, stumbling.

Zarkon sways for a moment as the wind howls. Everything around them seems to go still. The leaves shiver in the breeze.
“You...” He breathes out, reaching for Keith, his fingers grabbing onto Keith’s collar and tugging him forward. His grip is weak. It slips from Keith at the last moment, fingers outstretched toward him.

The well, weakened by all the abuse, crumbles beneath Zarkon’s size and weight. His eyes catch sight of the sky and he stares up at it for a moment, eyes catching something. He whispers, words barely louder than a puff of breath, as the rain falls on his face. “Honerva.”

And then Zarkon just falls. Down, swallowed up by the darkness of the well. His body releases his spirit and he’s empty. Blood gushing out of his cold black heart.

Keith’s vision is an oil painting of mixed greys and blacks. He doesn’t have the energy or life left in him to catch himself. He feels as his legs hit the last of the stone still hanging together, and then he falls forward. He thinks of Shiro begging him to try. He throws a hand out - he does, and his fingers brush against the edge, but it’s too late. He can’t grip onto anything.

Everything goes dark and he thinks, briefly, about the circle of light Shiro talked about as it flashes across his vision. *Crown shyness*, Shiro whispers in the corners of his memory.

If you were that close, why would you be afraid to touch someone else when they’re right there? ...It doesn’t make any sense. That’s all he’s ever wanted.

And then he’s gone.

When he wakes up, he’s not sure if he’s dead or not. He’s not sure what’s up or down or if he’s breathing or hearing or seeing or -

But he’s screaming. And his whole soul is just a jumbled intricate mess of burning and sharp knives and thick metal strings tying him all up so he can’t breathe, can’t move, can’t escape this pain. He just wants peace. He wants this to stop.

“I’m so sorry,” he hears someone sobbing. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to do this. I’m almost done. It’s almost over. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Shiro! Shiro! Help me! God!”

“I’m right here. I’m done. It’s alright. Keith. Keith, come on. Hey...come on. Don’t...don’t do that. Don’t fall asleep. Wake up,” he hears someone calling to him gruffly, shaking him as the pain finally fades away... He can feel himself letting go.

It’s Shiro. Of course it’s Shiro, still fighting against fate. Still choosing to live in pain for Keith. Begging him, panic in his voice, pushed out around his tears. "No, no, no. Don’t give up. Come on, Keith. Don’t give up now. Open your eyes.”

Is that rain on his face...? He thinks he can smell the lilacs in the park. But it’s not May. It’s supposed to be cold. So why does it feel so warm...and comfortable...and...? He could stay here forever, he really could. He feels that softness grabbing at him with tiny whispering hands, so incredibly inviting and beautiful, and he thinks he’d like to succumb to it. It’d be so easy to.

There’s a voice though, calling his name in agony. “Keith! Keith, come on. Stay with me.”

“Shiro...” He tries to say, but his body is so far away now. He can’t make the connection. It’s cold out there. Cold and angry and unpleasant. Something tells him that if he travels back through
that tunnel to that voice, he’ll only suffer more. This comforting warm maternal softness he’s resting in now will be whisked away in one quick drop. And pain, there will be pain. There will be unbelievable agony and darkness and horror. He knows that...

What could possibly be worth it to leave this?

“Keith, come on,” the voice breaks. The person’s sobbing, out of control anguished gasps. “Come on. Don’t go. Not like this. Not down here. Come on, Keith. You can do this. I’m right here. We’re together. I love you, Keith. I love you. Please, come back to me! Please.”

It's cold out there. So cold. And it’s warm in here, safe, he won’t have to suffer anymore...

But...

“Shiro...?” He calls down the tunnel. His feet begin to walk forward. He can feel the comfort stretching and sticking to his feet, the strands holding him being pulled away and broken. “Shiro.”

“Keith! Keith, hey. Hey, it’s me. Wake up, baby. Come on.”

Keith reaches out through the tunnel, into the light.

His senses snap together all at once. A trainwreck of too much. There’s loud stuttering of rain up above them. The smell. His whole body is a ball of concentrated pain. It feels like he was pulled apart and taped back together by some shoddy no-good necromancer who had no idea what they were doing.

But there’s Shiro, right there, right when Keith needs him, like he always is. And Keith feels no regret.

Keith tries to smile. Everything feels shaky and impossible, but he really tries.

“Hey...” He whispers, the sound more rattle than a voice.

“Hey,” Shiro whispers, rubbing a hand over his face. His eyes are red and puffy. He's crying freely - the rain Keith thought he felt dropping on his face. There’s a smile there now, wet and wobbly. His nose is bright red. It’s the only color down here.

Keith huffs out a weak laugh. “Your nose...”

“Everything’s going to be alright. Don’t go to sleep, okay? I’m going to... I’ve got to figure something out, alright?”

It’s dark where they are. Dark with a column of light pouring in front above. Crown shyness.

“My leg...” Keith mumbles, the words pulling like taffy in his mouth. “Wrong... I feel...wrong. It’s...freezing. The blood loss...”

“I’ve put a tourniquet around it with your jacket... I had to get a stick... I twisted it as tightly as I could.”

“...A stick...my jacket... You can touch them...?”

“I’m so sorry... I’m sorry. I know it hurts. It should buy us a little bit of time... But I...” Shiro tilts his head up, toward the sky, desperately. They’re laying in sludge-y gooey water built along the bottom of the well. It smells overwhelmingly of blood and rotted plantlife. With all the blood in his body, Keith could not climb it. Shiro looks haggard himself. Already dead. A ghost.
“It’s okay,” Keith whispers, reaching out to Shiro’s face. “It’s alright. I’m not afraid. I’m so happy...” Keith feels as tears pour down his cheeks. “I get to see you one last time...”

Shiro grabs Keith’s hand firmly in his and squeezes it. “Hang in there, Keith. You can make it. Pidge. I’m going to try to get Pidge.”

“Shiro... No,” he whispers, trembling. His body’s so cold. This doesn’t feel right, none of it feels right. He’s so scared, not of dying, but of this, of Shiro leaving. Of this being the last moment he’ll see him. “I’m dying. I’m bleeding out; there’s no fixing this. I don’t want to be alone. Please. I’m scared. I...”

“I know. I know, Keith,” Shiro whispers, bending down to hold Keith in his arms tightly. “If I could, I’d stay. But there’s no time. After all you’ve done for me, let me do this one thing for you. I’m not giving up on you either... Live with me, Keith. Remember? Don’t die with me. Don’t. Promise me.”

“Shiro. Please. Please...don’t go.” He lets out a weak cough and whimpers. “I don’t have long. I can feel it.” He reaches a shaky hand out to Shiro, who grabs it tightly in his own hand, squeezing it. “I can feel it...”

“Don’t say that,” Shiro whispers, pressing Keith’s knuckles to his lips, kissing them, bloodied and icy. “What about your family, Keith? Think of your mom, of your dad, of Acxa, of Pidge... Think of all of them waiting for you right now. Think of what it’ll be like to see them after all of this, warm, safe in their arms. They’re waiting for you, Keith. Just a bit more. You just have to hold on for a bit more and you’ll get a lifetime with them, and them with you. They’ll get to see you grow up... So, please...wait for me.”

“Shiro,” Keith whispers, running his fingers across Shiro’s cheek, the blood leaving trails against his skin. “I’ll make you a deal,” Keith whispers as he shivers on the sludge beneath him. His teeth are chattering. He thinks it can’t possibly be as cold as he feels. He clings to Shiro’s body, but there is no warmth from either of them. “...I won’t give up if you don’t give up. I’ll fight if you fight. So please...please be okay... Please...”

“Okay,” Shiro whispers, nodding slowly, staring down at Keith’s face. The column of light is shining all around him, a perfect shadowed cut out of Shiro kneeling over him. “Okay.” He hunches over in pain. “It’s coming again. I can feel it. God...” He grabs onto his chest. “I’m coming back. I’m coming back.”

“Promise me you’ll be here,” Shiro whispers, pressing his forehead against Keith’s bloodied one. He closes his eyes, knuckles going white for how hard he clenches his fist in pain. “Promise me.”

Tears are flowing down Keith’s cheeks. He reaches for Shiro and whispers, “...I promise, Shiro. I’ll wait for you.”

The last thing Keith sees of Shiro is him swooping down to place a soft kiss on his mouth.

And then he’s gone.

There’s just silence and this long fucking tunnel going up, up, up. There’s only darkness and Keith and this wet sludge he’s laying on and the circle above. White. Blaring. The crown shyness Shiro mentioned.

It’s ironic almost, seeing it here, at the end of everything. They’re like the treetops, Shiro and Keith, so close, almost meshing with each other, but never quite touching. Somehow always
missing each other.

They just wanted to be together...

Maybe they could’ve had that if they were two different people. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle, but not in this life. Not the types of people they were born as. Not this time.

There’s a soft trickling of water. The quiet small sounds that keep Keith company as he drags and fades. He’s fighting. But how much fight does he have left in him? He was tired just arguing with Pidge and that seemed like ages ago already. Warm. In his house. Blood in his body. ...That sounds nice.

The light from up above is like a beacon, a faraway dream. He wants to reach out for it but can’t. It’s so dark down here, where the light doesn’t reach, forsaken by the world above. It’s all quiet up this long tunnel. No one is coming. It has to be the loneliest darkness in the world.

The leaves dance and shiver from far up above.

As Keith watches them, something clicks in his mind, but he’s slow to grasp it. He feels like it’s important. And then he realizes.

....The crown shyness...that Shiro mentioned.

Shiro.

It hits Keith’s slow dizzied mind all at once. This is what Shiro was seeing. His visions. His body.

Shiro’s here.

Keith’s afraid to look. He knows at least part of what he’ll see in the well with him: Zarkon’s empty corpse, the well filled with more blood than water. Mud. Mud is one thing...

And Shiro.

Slowly, carefully, he turns his head to look around in the mud level with himself.

The well is wide. There are pieces of the brick that had fallen from up above. Mud, soft like clay, where he was pulled up on, soft enough to feel like a bed.

And there, floating on his back, face barely peeking above the water, is a head of black hair.

It is very quiet where Keith is. Maybe the wind is howling and storming up above, but, if it is, the sound of it can’t be heard.

There’s just that soft trickling of water.

Keith shifts. There’s nothing left in his limbs. His body shakes and protests. This slow crawling, with the aid of the mud, is too much. He knows Shiro would protest, but he’s got to get there...
He’s got to find him.

“Shiro,” he whimpers, fingers shaking as they reach out through the darkness, the soft remnants of light catching the white of his fingers, the purple of his veins, the blood on his skin. “...Shiro.”

It’s him.
His real body. Keith finally has him beneath his fingertips.

He places his fingers on Shiro’s face and turns it toward him, the water splashing and echoing.

Shiro’s head falls limply beneath Keith’s touch.

He’s not the Shiro Keith’s come to know. His eyes are glazed over and lifeless. They’re two dull glass marbles. And he’s thin, dangerously thin; the bones gouging out of his body in deep shadows. He doesn’t even look like a person anymore, but a ghoul. What a ghost should look like, laying beside Keith, horrible and wilted, the life shrunk out of him bit by bit until this is all that’s left.

He’s grey. All grey. Dull and sunken in.

Keith can hear a wounded stuttering sound around them, high and guttural, but he’s too focused on Shiro’s body to realize that it’s himself.

“Shiro,” Keith cries. With shaky pale weak hands, Keith reaches for Shiro’s body, sliding one hand beneath the small of his back and rising him above the water’s surface. It’s easier that he’s floating...and he’s so thin, he basically weighs nothing.

He’s cold. Colder than even Keith. Keith presses his fingers into Shiro’s neck, scrounging desperately for a pulse.

“No.” He can’t feel a pulse, but he’s not a fucking doctor. Where do you press? How hard? He’s pushing and pushing but he can’t feel a thing. He dips his fingers in harder, a sob tearing out of him as the results are the same.

“No... No, no, no. You’re right here...” he gasps. “You’re finally here. I’ve found you. I’ve got you. Don’t be dead...” He stares down into Shiro's face. “Whatever you do...don’t be dead. You said you’d fight... I promised I’d save you... I’m here now. I’m here...” He grabs for his wrist instead, seeking any sign of a pulse, closing his eyes and praying. “...Shiro? Please. Please.” He whispers softly, “...Takashi...?”

There is no response. Of course there isn’t.

This Shiro is grey. He’s foreign. His arm is gone. His body is littered in scars. His face. ...Zarkon abused him...

Keith’s never touched this Shiro, never felt him, and he’s never touched Keith.

He looks like a different person. The body they found washed up from the lake looked more like the Shiro he knows than this one. But somehow, he feels it in his heart. It’s his Shiro. Wonderful, beautiful, and kind.

He reaches up to brush Shiro’s hair from his face gently. Shiro’s hair is hard and matted with dirt and debris. Shiro's empty eyes don't look like the silver moon crescents Keith knows they can. They’re muddy, like dirtied water.

It feels like being alone. There’s no energy to this body held tenderly in his hands. It feels the same as holding a blob of dried clay. There’s nothing.

But they’re together, at least.

He’s found him. He’s finally found him. He didn’t want it to be like this, but at least, in the end,
they can be side by side. And, whenever they’re found, whether it be in a few weeks, a few years, a few decades - maybe all that will be left of them will just be their white empty bones, plucked dry from the bugs and rodents that make their way to the end of this dark tunnel. But Keith will still be holding Shiro. And they’ll still be together. And they still won’t have any regrets.

With weak trembling hands, he wipes at the tears running freely down his face, falling onto Shiro’s cheeks. He touches a timid finger to Shiro’s temple, slowly running it down his jagged cheekbone, the strange thin feeling of the skin beneath his eyes. It’s black and puffy, but it moves beneath Keith’s finger like wet toilet paper, pushing and wrinkling dangerously, like it might crumble beneath his touch.

He moves away from that, taking everything in.

There are gouges all over Shiro’s body. Bruises and welts. Keith gently rests his hands over them as carefully as he can, wishing he could heal them, if only a little. He can’t. Keith is helpless.

Keith clings him closer to his body, letting his eyes fall down to the golden glinting ring on his finger.

They’re connected. Keith can find comfort in that.

“I love you, Shiro,” he whispers with the last of his strength. He tilts his head and forces himself forward so he can press a breath of a kiss to Shiro’s grey temple. “I’ve finally found you... I’m not letting you go. From here on out, it’s you and me.” He lets his head fall back toward the sky, looking up at the rivers between the leaves, flowing and intertwining. “You were right about the crown shyness. ...Pretty... Like rivers flowing between their branches. It’s like us... We fit together so well, but it’s like all we’ve done in life is miss each other. And even now...you’re here, but you’re not... I’m here, but I’m going...”

Did Shiro find Pidge?

But he can’t touch anything besides Keith. And Pidge doesn’t believe in ghosts. And who even knows where she is...

Keith closes his eyes. He’s still fighting that lull of sleep...or he wants to think of it as sleep. He wants to keep his promise to Shiro, even if it’s painful, even if it hurts. There’s no fight left in him, but still, he’s trying to keep that flame lit.

He doesn’t regret anything. He’s here, isn’t he? Shiro in his arms. He had promised Shiro he’d find him, and he has. He managed to keep that promise.

It’s a little late. Keith’s a little slow. Always has been since he got this leg. But he got to keep his promise and Shiro isn’t alone. That’s good.

That’s good.

They can rest together, forever.

Keith takes in one last shuddering breath. It sounds so strange. Inhuman. He wonders vaguely if it’s the sound of a death rattle.

He’s not afraid.

He thinks he can smell the lilacs. They’re beautiful when they bloom.
I literally cried the entire time I wrote this chapter. I sat down, set this song on loop, and suffered. I listened to it as I edited it too. So, if you want the full experience, listen to this beautiful song as you read, haha!
Interlude: Pidge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pidge likes evidence. Hard solid evidence. The kind you can look at and know, without a doubt, that you have your answer. It comes easily for her; she just looks at it and can feel it.

She’s always hated being wrong, hated making mistakes. How can you trust others’ opinions when they just spew out things without even thinking? Sounds like a good way to make a critical error, and then everyone’s in trouble. That’d make it her mistake too.

She can only trust the evidence. She can only trust her own answers. That’s what she’s learned.

But as far as Keith is involved...that’s where the line blurs. Keith is family. If he were sitting on top of Shiro’s chest with the knife plunged through his heart, would she be able to believe it then? She’s known him since they were babies. Probably better than she knows herself. So why didn’t she foresee this? Why would he do this?

Is this what insanity is? Something that doesn’t make sense at all? But his aunt had been insane, truly insane, and Pidge could spot that from a mile away. ...So why is it so different with Keith? Why is he always such an anomaly? It’s like whenever she tries to tighten her grip on him, he slips right away and she doesn’t know how to make anything work with him. Her head’s a mess.

She’s sitting on her bed at home, door closed firmly shut, tears still pouring down her cheeks. It’s been a little over an hour since then and she still can’t stop crying.

What has she done? Was it right? Did she just sentence to death one of the only people she cares about? She couldn’t just keep it all a secret, could she? Pretend she hadn't seen anything? She could’ve kept that secret for him, couldn’t she have?

She regrets her panic. She wishes she could take it all back, but her father’s gone, chasing after Keith.

“He has the knife,” she had cried, shoving it at her father, who had come to pick her up.

“No,” Acxa had said, hand pressed to her mouth. “That’s not his fault! It’s mine!”

But then Pidge brought out the sketchbook, so skilled it could only be Keith’s, and she showed them. The one book he kept to himself - asked her not to look into - she held it up for everyone to see, running through the pages all filled with Shiro.

Keith and his heart that no one knew, no one could possibly understand.

But still...

She’ll never forget the look on Krolia and Keith’s dad’s face, not for as long as she’ll live. The shock. The pain. Krolia had just collapsed, sunk to her knees, boneless, and Keith’s dad followed, both holding onto each other with a white-knuckled grip.

“No,” Krolia whispered, devastation winding her. “No. This can’t be.”

And Acxa, who always said she never cared about Keith - had to grab onto the chair in front of her
as she curled forward, like she’d been punched in the gut.

Their Keith.

...Pidge’s Keith.

Pidge likes evidence. What if, when she had asked Keith to show her proof of Shiro’s presence, he had started to float? What then? Ghosts are fantasy. No one has proof, only stories and Keith can tell a good story. He was always the one with the imagination. He’s never really been one for evidence.

It was all laid out for her: the knife, the sketchbook, his strange muttering to himself, nailing boards in his room, the triangle window, the burnt pant leg, the lying. Not to mention the proposal to nothing at three in the morning, speaking in small puffs of fond laughter to the air, his voice so soft, so ridiculously tender - something she’s never heard from him. Never. That wasn't the Keith she knew.

He’s been so different lately. So off. But she doesn’t feel right. It’s like she chose the wrong answer on a test. Something’s...wrong. A mistake. She’s made a horrible, terrible mistake. Only, this isn’t a test. This is Keith. There are no take-backs.

What has she done...?

There’s a soft knock on the door and instantly her red-rimmed eyes snap up to the door, thorns of protection coming out. “Go away!”

“Katie...”

“I don’t want to talk right now! Everything’s shit. I sold him out! Keith’s my best friend, and...and all this...all I just did...”

“Katie, come on... Open the door.”

“Go away, Matt! I swear to god - ”

There’s a pause and she can hear Matt’s forehead thunk against the door. He breathes in deeply and talks anyway, voice muffled. “...I don’t actually think he did it. Do you? I know all the things you found are...evidence... And they’re shocking and confusing, but I just...it feels wrong. We know Keith. We know him.” When she doesn't respond, he sighs. “Katie...come on. I think this is a good thing. He's a danger to himself right now. Dad will bring him home. When he comes back, he can explain everything.”

Pidge takes in a long deep breath and sighs it out. It trembles. “...He will never forgive me.”

“Katie, that can’t be true. He’s followed you around since day one. You guys love each other, I know you do. One thing’s not going to mess that up.”

“You didn’t see his face... The way he looked at me... I told him to leave. I told him to run. I told Keith to run.”

“...You were scared... Everyone’s been scared.”

She sniffs, rubbing at her face. “Just go away.”

“Katie...”
“Go - away! I don’t want to talk to anyone! I betrayed him! I betrayed my best friend. Leave me alone!” She says it with such ferocity that he actually listens. She can hear his footsteps fade away. There’s just silence.

She’s left to herself again. She sinks back on her bed, hands covering her face. She wonders where he is. What he’s feeling. He’s always trusted her. She’s done nothing but question him.

And then the home phone rings.

There are quick footsteps that skid through the hallway. “Katie!” Matt yells, banging his fist against her door again. “Katie, it’s Keith!”

“What?” She blinks away her tears, tossing herself from her bed and running to get it. She swings the door open, sees Keith’s name flashing across their caller ID, and snatches the phone from Matt’s hand.

“Keith! Keith, I’m so sorry. Where are you?” She clings the phone close to her face.

Matt watches intensely as she stands there, still, listening.

Her eyebrows crease. “There’s...there’s nothing,” she mutters. “It’s just static.”

Matt frowns.

She shifts the phone on her ear. “Keith? Can you hear me? I can’t hear anything... Um, call back...? Can you do that?” She’s halfway through talking to him when her cell buzzes in her pocket.

She looks down and blinks. Slips her hand in her pocket and pulls it out.

It’s Keith.

She looks at the other phone in her hand, still going.

“Pidge,” someone’s saying through the static, voice distant and garbled. “Pidge.”

Her whole body goes cold. She’s still for a moment, staring hard into the floor as she hears the person through the static choking in pain, breath heaving with effort. She looks up to Matt, who’s close, who can hear what she’s hearing.

“Help him,” the voice permeates the distance. The sound crackles in and out. “Save him.”

“Matt,” she whispers. “Who is that? What is this?”

Matt shakes his head and swallows hard. He grabs her cell phone from her hand. “Hey.” He demands. “Keith? If- if this is you, it’s not funny!”

Right as Matt says this, his phone buzzes in his pocket.

“Matt,” Pidge whips her face up to him. She grabs her cell phone back from him and cries into it. “Keith, is that you? Keith, if you can hear me, please answer.”

The voice is garbled, only half the info there. It’s barely audible, it sounds more like static than anything else.

“Hello!” Matt’s yelling into his phone. His face goes white as he listens to the voice on the other
end. “Keith?” And then, as he listens longer, face going very still, very white, his voice drops and he breathes out carefully: “...Shiro?”

Pidge’s eyes flick up to him. “What...?”

“Shiro?!” The static overtakes the voice on the other end. The sound groans and warps, arcing out of control. Matt holds the phone away from his face like it’s infected, arm trembling. “I...I can’t be sure. I -”

“Keith’s phone’s been acting up lately. Remember? Maybe it’s just...maybe it’s...” She scrounges around in her brain for a reason this makes sense, but...

She swallows hard, eyes wide. She can hear the voice on the end, still trying to push through. It’s not Keith. It’s not him.

“Shiro?” Matt cries into the phone, hand clenching at his hair tightly. “Shiro?!”

All three phones explode in their hands at once. Pidge and Matt scream, leaping back, bits of electronic debris falling to the floor.

Their phones are smoking, screens black and tainted with smoked cracks.

“What the hell...?” Pidge whispers, pressing a hand to her mouth. “What’s happening?”

Matt has her by the shoulders, shoving her into her room and closing the door. Locking it.

Silence falls over them, only their shaky breathing can be heard.

Something seems to click in place inside of her. She feels sick with the realization.

“Matt,” she breathes. “What did your caller ID say? Did it say Shiro?”

He shakes his head quickly, shoulders tense as his eyes dart around them. “No. No, it was Keith’s name, I’m sure of it. But how can he call all three phones at once? It doesn’t make any sense. And that...that voice. I...I don’t think it was Keith...” He’s shaken. Grey.

“I don’t think it was him either,” Pidge says.

“I...I think it was Shiro...” Matt whispers, face building with so many complex emotions at once. They share a long look.


“...If he was...where would he go?”

She bites at her lip. “I don’t...I don’t know. Dad has the forest.”

“The forest is huge. He could be anywhere.”

“Well, if you have any ideas, feel free to share! Something’s happening!”

As they stand there, in the middle of her room, the lights roll out dimly and then flicker back on. The t.v. buzzes to life.

“Katie?” Matt stumbles backward, hands going to her shoulders protectively again.
She tries to take a step forward, but Matt holds her back. She stares hard at the t.v. At the currents of static that roll up the screen, the volume buzzing loudly.

She's shaking so badly as she whispers, “...Keith says Shiro talked to him. That he was here and no one else could see him. Standing here, just as plain as day...”

“I thought you said Keith was crazy...” Matt breathes.

Pidge places a hand over her mouth and lets a shaky breath out. “Oh, god. Matt. ...I think...I think I made a mistake.”

The channels are flipping quickly, as if they’re searching for something without finding it and then, just as quickly, it turns off.

It’s quiet for a second where Matt looks over to Pidge and she looks to him. And then her computer starts whirring.

“Turn on the monitor!” Matt says to her.

She pushes him out of the way and turns it on, sitting in the seat. “Shiro?” She breathes, winded. She swallows hard, clenching her eyes and fists shut. “If it’s you...” Her voice trembles and she clears her throat, speaking firmly. “If it's you...and Keith is in trouble...show us. Where is he? How do we get to him? What do we need?”

Her gut clenches as the mouse zips across the desk and the browser opens by itself. A map starts loading. Forest appears, just trees upon trees and the screen moves over, sliding like someone’s there. It’s frantic as it searches and then it all just stops. Jerks back. Zooms in.

“Here?” Pidge whispers, looking to Matt. His hands are digging into her shoulders and his face is pale. “In the forest. Can you find it?”

He looks closer at the map. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s by the mountains.”

The whole house seems to groan as the electricity winds up brightly, the glass clicking, and then everything shuts off at once, powering down completely. Sound fades into pure silence and then there’s nothing.

Matt nods quickly, eyes scanning all their dead electronics. “I’ll get the car keys. You bring the first aid kit.”

“Okay, I’ll -”

Pidge’s dresser drawer opens roughly, her extra phone flinging out, clattering to the ground.

She bends down to pick it up and stares down at it for a moment. “Thomas,” she says firmly. “I’ll call Thomas.”

“The medic? But what if this is all just...” He breathes out. “We don’t know what’s going on, Katie.”

“Yeah, we do,” she breathes, dialing in the number. “Keith’s been telling us this entire time, but I just...” She shakes her head, closing her eyes. Her small trembling hands clench to her phone tightly. “...I've never believed him.”
They drive in silence, Matt darting through the trees as quickly as he can. The forest isn’t paved roads and thought-out paths, it’s difficult to navigate and it’s taking longer than Pidge’s heart can handle.

She digs her nails into her thighs and forces herself to breathe.

“How’d he get this far out?” Matt murmurs to himself. “He can hardly walk on his own...”

“Why isn’t Shiro with him...?” She whispers. “Keith said Shiro sticks by him. If he’s in trouble... You don’t think... What if it is really Zarkon? What if Keith’s been right this entire time?”

Matt swallows hard. “We don’t know anything yet...”

“What if Shiro really is alive? All this time...”

“Katie, shh. We’ll see.”

Pidge likes facts. But the world isn’t so concrete. It’s not always as easy as simply knowing. That’s what the pit in her gut tells her.

“It should be around here,” Matt says. “If the map was right.”

She sits up taller, narrowing her eyes through the trees, desperately hoping to see him, but also afraid of what she might find.

And what she finds, off in the distance, is a swamp full of dark red blood. “Matt!” She screams, pointing.

Matt stops the car, face going still. “Oh, god,” he breathes. “No...”

She’s already out of the car before it’s in park, running, her feet splashing violently through red. It soaks into her clothes.

“Katie, wait for me! Be careful!”

“Keith!” She screams into the trees overhead, turning around as she desperately seeks him out. She searches through the darkness of the forest and finds nothing but the rain hitting her face, the cold chill wrapping around her tightly. “Keith, where are you?!?”

The ambulance isn’t far behind, knicks on paint and mud splattered sides. She can see the lights flashing, that toxic bright red flitting through the trees.

She sees the red catch on something shiny and silver on the ground. She runs to it, falling to her knees.

“It’s his knife! Matt, it’s his knife!”

Her eyes catch sight of the well hidden a few feet away. And she just knows.

“Keith!” She cries, scrambling to her feet to sprint to it. Matt has to catch her around the waist for how roughly she tosses herself over the edge.

“Katie! Be careful!”

It’s just darkness. She can’t see a thing.
She’s sobbing down into it, her tears falling down into the black emptiness of the well. The sound of her voice, choked and pained, bounces down and back out around them. “Keith! Keith! I’m here. We’re here. We’re going to help you, okay? If you’re down there, say something. Please. Please, Keith.”

But there’s nothing. Just the sound of her rapid breathing and panic.

Someone takes her from Matt and bodily shifts her to the side. “Let me through, Katie.” It’s her dad. He has a high powered flashlight that he shines down the well.

She watches his face closely for a reaction. The way his eyes widen and the line of his mouth hardens. “I see something,” he says, keeping his voice steady. “We need to call in help.” He rushes back to communicate with the other police.

She pushes Matt off of her and looks down herself, shifting the flashlight.

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“Keith!” She cries because there he is. His head of shining black hair, dark as a raven’s wings. He’s not moving, laying, still, porcelain pale, in a well full of thick red blood. There’s someone floating face-first in it. There’s someone else in his arms. And she knows. She just knows.

Forget the evidence. Forget the facts. She feels this in her gut. And she knows.

“Oh, god, Matt,” she cries, sinking to the ground and shoving her face in his jacket. He holds her tightly, arms around her shivering back. “They’re there. Both of them are there.”

He pushes her hair back through shaking fingers. “It’ll be okay, Katie,” he whispers. “We found them. That’s more than half the battle.”

“They’re not moving. Neither of them are moving. They’re just sitting in a pool of blood. It’s all red. ...It’s only red... Matt. Oh, god.”

He keeps brushing her hair through his fingers. He doesn’t tell her it’s okay again. He’s shaking himself.

“I was thinking,” Pidge says, narrowing her eyes over at Keith from across his bed one day after school. They were supposed to go to the park and draw, but it was raining too hard, so they’re stuck here. She’s bored. When he doesn’t acknowledge her, sparing just two measly seconds to look up from his sketchbook, she kicks his shin with her toes. “I was thinking. What kind of person do you like?”

“Me?”

“Oh, no. The other person in this room,” she says, gesturing to the wide emptiness in his room. “Yeah, you. Who do you like? I just had to sit through the last three class periods of all the guys horndogging over every living object with legs.”

“It was Chad, wasn’t it? He’s so fucking disgusting.”

“Yeah, he was one of them, but it’s like...everyone. I had to hear Andrew say he’d literally fuck a hole in the wall. A hole. In the wall. I’ve come to expect it. But you’re so... I dunno. So tame.”

“I don’t think your innocent ears could take it.”
“Yeah, right,” she laughs, nudging him with her toes again. “I’m worse than you and I don’t even care about that stuff. Just tell me. It’s not like I’m going to tell anyone and I know everything else about you.” When he doesn’t respond, still lost in his drawing, she heaves a sigh. “I’ll tell you who I like,” she tries to entice.

He snorts, flipping his pencil and rubbing the eraser into the page. “I already know who you like: computers.”

“Damn. You got me.”

“I don’t like anyone, Pidge.”

“Come on. You’re a guy. Don’t tell me there’s nobody.”

“I like you,” he hums, still not looking up from his sketchbook.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Okay, not like that. Stop playing dumb. We used to take baths together; I have the body of an eight year old boy.”

He presses his lips together in amusement and tries not to laugh.

She rolls out onto her back, kicking her feet out and trying to shove them in his face as she groans. “Pay attention to me.”

“I am. There’s just nothing to say.” He spares her a side glance and, seeing how pathetic and desolate her expression is, he puts the sketchbook down with a small tired sigh. “I’m telling the truth. There’s nobody I like.”

“Never? Not once? No one that catches your eye?”

“Pidge, come on, you know me. The idea of letting anyone close is...” He huffs out a disgruntled breath. “Horrifying. Getting close to people. Sharing secrets. ...You let anyone in and you’re immediately vulnerable... You can fit together as well as you can possibly want, but making that jump to trust, to grow and weave together... I couldn’t do that. That’s not me.”

“You trust me.”

“Yeah, well, you’re Pidge.”

“Maybe you’d flourish,” Pidge says. “You never know. You’d become all soft and doe-y eyed and you’d whisper, ‘you’re the light of my life, the star of my dreams, please, run off with me, marry me, kiss me, kiss me!’ ”

“Never in a million years. And quiet down! My mom’s going to hear and be weirded out by you.”

She laughs. “You’d be a sappy boyfriend, I know it. I don’t even think I’d be able to hang out with you anymore.”

He shakes his head, leaning back to snatch up a crumpled ruined drawing and toss it at Pidge’s head. It hits her smack on the forehead and she squawks in betrayal.

“Pidge, I don’t need anyone else,” he smiles at her warmly, completely genuine. “If the rest of my
days could be us just hanging out and drawing together, I’d be more than happy.”

“Mmhmm, that’s what you say until you meet the one.”

“Pfft. Yeah, right. But just say that did happen, I’d still want you right here, sitting here with the both of us. Or would you hate that?”

“I guess I can share you... If you’ll let me in.”

“If you’re there, waiting, I’ll open both hands to accept you. That’s a promise.”

“Of course I’ll be there. Of course.”

Keith just smiles peacefully, grabbing his sketchbook back to place on his lap.

It all seemed so simple and resolute then.

“Is that your special super secret sketchbook? Draw me,” she says, flopping onto her belly right beside Keith, shoving her face close to his hand as she grins up brightly at him. She pretends to blink up at him from under her eyelashes with ultimate amounts of allure and appeal.

He presses down a smile. “You know I can’t draw people.”

She rolls her eyes and lays out on her back. “Oh, yeah, I forgot that’s the book you draw all your porn in.”

Keith snorts.

“I told you I knew everything about you. The one thing you won’t let me see. It’s very suspicious.”

He hums under his breath an amused little laugh, putting his pencil and eraser down with a deliberate smack. Making a show of it with grand majestic gestures, Keith turns his sketchbook with a flourish toward her.

She raises her eyebrows in surprise, flicking her eyes up, ready to make some sarcastic humorous remark, when she stops.

It’s her. It’s a portrait of her, eyebrow arched, mouth twisted in a sarcastic amused grin. The perfect essence of her, right on paper.

And she thought he couldn’t draw people.

“Me?” She breathes. “Keith...that’s...that’s amazing.”

“Yeah? You like it?” He tilts his head around to inspect it, eyes scrutinizing each inch of the piece.

“It’s gorgeous. I mean it.” She stops for a moment. “But...wait... You didn’t put a sketch of my angelic innocent face in your porn sketchbook, did you? ...You did, didn’t you?”

Keith laughs, his grin stretching across his face in amusement. He pulls himself up but doesn’t respond.

“Keith! No! I can’t live knowing that!”
“I keep telling you it’s not porn.”

“You’re lying!” She’s rolling on her back, laughing. “I know it is!”

He’s still chuckling to himself as he watches her face. His eyes soften as he takes the sight of her in. “...I love you, Pidge.”

She gasps loudly, looking up, shocked for the second time this evening. “Did you just -”

All nonchalant, he places the sketchbook back on his lap and reaches over to his nightstand to grab his colored pencils. “Did I just what?”

“You just said... Oh man. I’ve got to document this or I won’t believe myself. I can’t believe this. This is the best day of my life. I’ll never forget.”

He laughs outright. The sound is nice. It’s rare and warm and soft and so full of his heart, gently easing onto his sleeve for a special moment before he realizes himself. Pidge watches on with a smile on her lips.

“You’re never going to hear it again,” Keith chuckles.

She wraps her arms around his waist in a hug and hums happily into his warmth. He allows it, leaning into her. She thinks there’s no way she could ever let Keith down. She’d let herself down before she’d ever betray Keith. That’s what she thinks in that moment before everything turns to shit.

She’ll love him forever, no matter what. No matter where he is. No matter what he’s done. Keith is her family. All she wants is for him to know peace.

Keith is screaming. The sound is guttural, ripping and tearing at the flesh in his throat. Pidge thinks that his mom can probably hear it, miles away. Sitting on the ground, Matt’s arms holding her up, she thinks she might faint. She hasn’t even seen him yet.

It’s an inhuman sound, cutting up into the dark clouded sky, sending chills up her spine. The hairs on the back of her neck stand up. They’ve sent her dad down on a rope with a rescue basket to get him, and this is good, Matt keeps telling her through quick rushed whispers. It’s good that he’s screaming, it means he’s alive. It means he’s still fighting.

But his screams sound like bleeding agony. They’re half sobs, half piercing animalistic howls and the anguish in them makes her want to scream at them to stop. It makes her want to do anything to just stop the pain for him. He’s suffered enough in life already.

Somewhere between the howling and the ripping wheezes for air, she can hear him struggling against her dad and screaming, “No! Shiro! I can’t leave him!” He’s sobbing. "Please. I need to be with him... Please... Shiro. Shiro...”

When they make it out of the well, Keith’s mostly unconscious again. The medics all scramble to grab him from her dad. His body is limp on the stretcher.

She’s never seen anyone look so white before. Colorless, like all the spirit and soul has been wiped clean out of him. Even through the mess of dirt and blood on his face, she can see what state he’s in...and she can’t breathe.
Pidge likes facts. She likes evidence. And the evidence is here again: his sheet white face, the leg still oozing blood everywhere despite how the flow has been cut off. It’s been done brutally, with a tourniquet that’s twisted in a grotesque sort of corkscrew, looking as if it’s trying to sever his leg off itself.

He’s still moving, like a slug trying to reach up toward a flower it can’t quite see in blindness. It doesn’t look like him. The movements are foreign and creepy, like a reflex after death, not him in control. She wonders if he’s dead already.

Matt can see it too. “It’ll be okay, Katie,” he whispers in that voice that says he’s being contrary to the situation. Despite everything, his tone says. Despite the evidence.

She’s been wrong before. Instead of trusting her logic, instead of trusting what her eyes see, she trusts her heart. She trusts Keith.

“Don’t give up, Keith,” she calls out to him and hopes, somehow, he can hear her. “I still need to apologize to you, so hang in there until I can, do you understand? Everyone’s waiting for you. Be as strong as we all know you can be... I love you, Keith. I love you.”

He doesn’t move anymore. He just lies there, a doll made of glass.

Her dad walks over to them, placing a hand on Matt’s arm that’s already around her shoulders. Her dad’s always been so strong, so sturdy and calm in the face of his work, but here, today, he looks almost as sick as the rest of them.

“Where’s Shiro?” Matt breathes.

“...Someone else is getting him. I’m afraid I don’t have the energy to go down again and bring him back up. Keith fought hard... For how he looks, he’s still pure fire...”

There’s blood all over her dad. Keith’s blood. Smeared and violent. She presses a hand to her face. Breathes out in soft sobs.

“Don’t look, Katie,” he whispers to Pidge. “Don’t look.”

“Will he be okay?” Her voice is so small.

He’s quiet for a long moment. “...I... I don’t... We would need a miracle.”

“He was telling the truth all along.” She sobs.

He takes a deep breath, holding the two of them gently. “You couldn’t have known... We all thought the same thing. This is not your fault.”

He looks toward the well. “Zarkon’s body is down there... Multiple stab wounds. He’s dead.”

Pidge looks up at him, at the way his tone darkens.

“...Lotor just confessed everything.”

Her eyes snap wide in shock. “What?”

“I just got the call when Matt brought you home. Lotor went to the station, desperate to get ahold of Keith. Zarkon’s been behind the entire thing; he was trying to frame Keith. They were keeping Shiro’s body in the shed, in a bag, just like Keith said. Lotor’s hurt as well...”
“Oh, god,” Pidge whispers, pressing her hand to her mouth, horrified.

“Katie...Matt... This is all my fault. I’m so sorry. I checked as best as I could but he got away from me.”

They hold onto him tightly, squeezing his hand. And they all just stay there, quiet.

The rope is pulled up. Matt tenses, leaning forward, watching.

It’s Shiro. Their Shiro. They thought they had said goodbye that rainy day at the funeral as they lowered what they thought was his body into the earth never to see him again. But now, he’s here again. Pulled up from the well. Pale face a stark contrast against the darkness around them.

He didn’t wake and scream and fight like Keith had. He’s completely still. Quiet. Like an angel that’s been cast down and lost his wings.

“He’s still alive,” Sam says. “His pulse is very weak, but I felt it. Lotor said he tried to care for him. And by some miracle, his heart’s still beating.”

Matt whispers. “Shiro...”

They carry him off too, the wheels of the ambulance squelching against the wet ground.

Sam says to them, “I’ll bring you both to the hospital. I don’t want you driving like this, Matt. I’ll have someone else drive the car.”

It’s like being in a dream world, disconnected from their bodies. They slide into the backseat of their dad’s car, arms still wrapped around the other. They don’t talk for a long while as they sit in silence, waiting. Their dad is busy orchestrating everyone out there. Pointing. Demanding. The lights keeps spinning around the trees. Pidge leans her head back and just stares at the ceiling blankly, too stunned and drained to think, too numb to cry anymore.

“They looked bad,” Matt says.

“They looked dead,” Pidge whispers.

Matt takes a deep breath. “They’re in the right place. Finally, after all this time, they’re in the right place.”

“I didn’t believe him,” she says. “If I had just believed him... I made so many mistakes...”

“Katie. You can’t blame yourself. There are so many different things we all could’ve done that could’ve changed things, each of us. This is just how it ended up. For all we know, if he hadn’t ran, maybe he never would’ve found Shiro. ...And that was all he’s been wanting.”

“Yeah,” she says softly.

Their dad opens the door and slides in, flicking on the siren. “Are you both okay?” He asks lowly.

No. They’re not. Their best friends are in the back of an ambulance side-by-side, barely clinging to life. Who knows what’ll happen... If there’s anything to be done...

A miracle, Pidge’s dad had said. She’s never been one to pray, but that’s what she does as she closes her eyes. She prays for Keith. She prays for Shiro.

Evidence... Fuck the evidence.
She’s going to do things differently this time.

Maybe Keith’s damaged...there’s no doubt. Maybe he’s volatile and difficult and some of the things that happen to him are...crazy.

But she’s going to trust in him. That he can make it through this. That he fought this hard for Shiro for a reason. That maybe, just maybe, this wasn’t all for nothing.

Pidge truly didn’t think they’d find Shiro. Not after this much time has passed. And look. Despite the odds, despite the evidence, despite her best calculated guess...Shiro’s here. They’re both together. Somehow.

Keith believed. It’s time to take a leaf out of his book...

Finally. Finally...

She believes in him.

Chapter End Notes

Some very talented artists have been doing pieces for this fic so I have been trying to organize them to show you all!! THANK YOU TO EACH AND EVERY ARTISTTTTTT!! Everyone is so incredibly talented and I am so happy. There are different pieces on each site, so make sure to check them both out!

Link for art on Twitter
Link for art on Tumblr

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 17

Keith thinks he can hear the ocean crashing as slowly, he comes to. In, out, in and out. The soft gentle flow of it is soothing as it reaches up and tickles his feet.

It washes everything away. All the pain - both physical and mental, all the trauma, all the fear - the waves find Keith on the shore and pull it from him, the sand trickling away at the edges of his weight.

He can feel both legs beneath him, both arms. Here, he’s whole. Here, he’s safe. Nothing can harm him. Nothing will fight him. So carefully, cautiously, he allows his eyes to open.

He lets a long breath out. It’s as soft as it feels, pastel colors from the gentle sky reflecting off the water in the distance, weaving through the subtle haze of fog. Flits of warm color mixed with creamy white. It’s like a dream, surreal and so so soft; Keith wishes he had some paint and canvas. He’d like to capture this moment somehow. But there’s nothing like that here, there’s only the ocean for company.

It’s lonely.

If he steps out and away from this shore, into the white fog behind, where will he go? He thinks he knows, but he’s afraid to find out.

He thinks of the way the ocean gives and takes, pushing and pulling, the ebb and the flow of its glassy surface against the sun. It’s almost like the sound of his heart - a constant cycle, the next beat always sure to come. That soft gentle flow...back and forth...back and forth. Give and take. Give and take.

Like life. It promises things. Promises to give. ...But what about when it takes? And it surely will. If Keith knows anything, it’s that life is cruel. Life is harsh. It takes and takes and takes until there’s nothing left of you anymore, and you just give way. Crumble, soul worn and weary. It’s just you, raw, absorbing every dark horror around you. ...Keith knows that all too well.

The ocean can gently wash away everything, so Keith sits there as the tide rolls around him and he hopes. He hopes it can wash away all the sorrow, all the darkness, all the grief. He hopes he’s enough.

He slowly rises to his feet. It’d be easy to stay here, but he made a promise once, just recently, in fact, and he feels it fluttering in his chest, soft as a butterfly’s wings. So he walks along the shore, feeling the way the sand bends beneath his toes, the way the soft sunlight peeking through the haze warms the ground for him, makes each step feel healing and pure.

He walks for a long time, wandering. He hopes. He keeps hoping with each step. He doesn’t know how long it’s been. Minutes. Hours. Days. He doesn’t know.

It’s not the point. He keeps going.

He doesn’t tire. He promised this.

It’s not until he sees someone in the distance that he finally stops.
Keith’s been waiting for him and there he is, standing at the ocean’s edge, looking out.

Keith smiles at the sight. “Hey,” he says softly.

It’s Shiro, just as Keith remembers. Only his eyes are clear and peaceful. His cheeks are full of color. He has both arms. He’s clean. He’s healthy.

“Hey,” Shiro whispers, emotion bleeding into his face as he takes the sight of Keith in. “Hey. What are you still doing here?”

“I’ve been looking for you,” Keith whispers.

Shiro just stares for a moment, elation clogged by sorrow, by shock, by grief. He opens his arms out for Keith and Keith runs through the wet sand, water splashing behind him as he jumps and tosses his arms around Shiro. Shiro pulls him up onto his chest and grabs him into a tight hold. “No. You shouldn’t be here,” Shiro whispers, voice tightening. “You shouldn’t be here.” But he keeps him as close as they can go.

“We’re together now.”

“...Keith...”

“Are we dead?” Keith murmurs.

“I don’t know,” Shiro holds him tighter. Keith can feel his hands trembling as he presses them into Keith’s back. “I just don’t know. It’s felt like I’ve been here for ages now, alone. I thought it was just me.”

“That’s what you thought the first time, too, when you were in the hall.”

Shiro pulls back slightly, turning wide eyes to Keith, remembering. “...And then you called out to me.”

“I’ve been walking for a long time,” Keith says. “Something just told me, if I did, I’d find you. You really think I would leave you?” Keith asks.

Shiro shakes his head gently. “...No.”

Keith rolls up onto the tips of his toes and scrunches Shiro’s hair up between his hands. He can see it, at the roots, changing. “What’s this? Why is your hair starting to turn white?”

Shiro shrugs, looking self conscious suddenly. “Why? Does it look terrible?”

“No,” Keith whispers, looking at it warmly. “Is mine white?”

“No,” Shiro says, grabbing at Keith’s hands and trying to turn his eyes up in an attempt to see.

Keith chuckles and tugs Shiro down so he can kiss him gently on the mouth. His lips are softer than they’ve ever been and Keith smiles into the feeling. “You look great... Like an angel.”

“Hm...thank you. Maybe it’s stress? I don’t know.” Shiro’s quiet for a moment as they hold each other. He says, voice a low murmur, “what are you still doing here, Keith...?”

“...What?”

“What are you sulking here for? Zarkon’s dead. Everything’s alright now. You can go home...
Why are you choosing to stay?”

Keith shifts his eyes from Shiro’s face. “I... I’m not sulking.”

“Everyone’s waiting,” Shiro whispers into the corner of his mouth as he places gentle kisses down Keith’s chin. “Why won’t you wake up?”

“Why won’t you?”

“Keith, you saw my body.”

“And you saw mine.”

Shiro watches Keith with pain cutting through his brow, biting onto his lip. “I can’t,” he says. He looks down at the mark beneath him. “I’ve tried. I can’t move from this spot.”

Keith follows his gaze down to the sand beneath their feet.

There’s a mark there, traced with careful lines. It’s familiar by now, but not in this scale. It swallows up the space around them.

“...It’s holding you here.” He didn’t understand it the first time he saw it, but he thinks he does now. And he wonders if he can dare to hope. Does he have the strength left?

He reaches his hand out, touching the tips of his fingers to the edges of the mark. Protection of a loved one. The waves gently surge forward, as if to wash away its tracks and lull it back into the sea. But it doesn’t. It just stays there.

“I think so.” Shiro lifts his eyes to Keith. “It’s okay,” he says softly. “I knew, in the end, I’d have to stay. ...But you have to go.”

“No -”

“You have to, Keith. You can’t stay here with me. You can still go back.”

“I’m not leaving without you,” Keith shakes his head firmly, turning his eyes away from Shiro’s desperate pleading face. “There's nothing you can say.”

He reaches up to pull the collar of Shiro’s shirt down, no longer covered in blood. The mark is still there. He places his hand over it firmly. “This was supposed to protect you.”

“It has. It's protected my soul. It led us to the truth. That’s all I had asked for, in the beginning. And you found it for me. You’ve done enough, Keith.”

Keith swallows hard. Shakes his head. “No. Everything. I want it to protect everything, regardless of time or space. The past, the future, every loved one. ...You. I just want you. What's it good for if not that?”

He had made this mark before he'd loved Shiro, before he’d known him. He knows him now. He'd felt it as he drew it, in his heart, burning brightly through his spirit.

Keith can feel the warmth of Shiro beneath his fingers, but that's all. It doesn't glow. It doesn't glitter. It's just....a brand.

It has all the power of any other one of Keith’s sketches. It’s just a design now. It’s used up. It’s normal. It’s useless.
“Keith,” Shiro whispers. “Everyone's waiting... Wake up.”

“Not without you.”

“Keith, I love you. I can’t stand the thought of you trapped here with me when you could move on and have a full life. Please, I need this. If not for yourself, do it for me.”

Keith shakes his head and closes his eyes. “Not without you,” he whispers. “I don’t want to be there if you’re not there.”

They’re quiet for awhile, just that gentle swaying of the ocean.

“You really won’t...?”

“I really won’t.”

Shiro lets out a long weary sigh, his hand scrounging up Keith’s neck to hold him there as he presses his face into his hair.

“Stubborn to a fault,” Shiro whispers eventually. “You won't listen to anyone. Not even me.”

Keith shakes his head again, burying his face into Shiro’s chest. “...I love you, Shiro. I won’t leave you.”

Gently, Shiro runs his hands up Keith’s spine, over his scalp, cradling his head. “...I love you too, Keith. More than anything I’ve ever loved in my life. ...Even if you're so damn stubborn.”

Keith laughs softly. “Don't pretend. You love that about me.”

“Yes,” Shiro whispers. He tilts Keith’s head back gently, looking down into his eyes. They’re as light as the gentle wind around them. He smiles. “There are so many things I love about you.”

And softly, he captures Keith’s mouth into a kiss.

Keith doesn't know how long they have together. Maybe it'll just be minutes. Maybe hours. Maybe days. But this kiss between them burns. It flares up like fireworks in the night sky, set against the stars out there in the wide open universe. The fading sparks shimmer down to the land below softly, where reality waits.

It's curls up in Keith's belly, hot and full of love. He can feel his soul twisting and mending with Shiro's.

Keith has been afraid of people. He’s been afraid of this, of being this vulnerable, this torn apart in the face of someone else.

He’s not anymore.

After everything, he knows now the kind of person Shiro is. He'd trust Shiro with his life. He'd trust him with his soul.

Without breaking the kiss, Keith jumps up into Shiro’s arms and Shiro catches him. He wraps his legs around Shiro’s waist and Shiro takes a few steps back to balance out his weight.

He lets it mesh, he lets it meld. He feels Shiro burn into him and he grabs onto it. He opens his heart to the feeling, pleads with this world, whatever is mine, let Shiro have too. Let our hearts be as one. Let our souls interlace.
Protect him.

He bites at Shiro’s lip, breathing in his breath, clinging to his hair, kissing him so hard it hurts.

Protect him.

He’ll do anything. Anything.

Shiro breaks off with a start.

“What is it?” Keith breathes, eyes trained on Shiro’s lips.

Shiro looks up to the sky. It's starting to sprinkle. The soft clouds, high as they are, are covered in splashes of watercolor, in rainbows of bright rich hues.

Shiro smiles up at them. He laughs softly as he reaches a hand out for the small drops of rain falling from the sky. He whispers, incredulous, his voice shaking, “I see something.”

Keith tilts his head up too, squinting his eyes into the sprinkles of water. And though the sky is gorgeous, clouds opening up for beams of sunlight and mist, he doesn’t think he sees what Shiro’s seeing. He can hardly dare to breath out, “Like the window? Like the crown shyness?”

“Yes,” Shiro laughs, clapping a hand over his mouth as his eyes start to fill with tears. “Yes.” He squeezes Keith's hands in his, turning his eyes back down to him. They’re bursting with happiness.

“Trust me,” he whispers. “Trust me, Keith. Everything will be okay. Wake up, Keith. Wake up.”

And the mark beneath Shiro’s feet, tenacious and as stubborn as Keith, slowly gives way to the clear rain.

Keith grins.

He can hear the ocean all around him. Pounding with the blood in his body, washing through his ears, keeping him warm. The cold grasp of death is far, far away. He doesn’t know if he even remembers what it feels like anymore. If he could describe it in the right ways. He’s glad for that.

The crashing is loud. It’s starting to get on his nerves. It’s insistent and somehow there’s this feeling starting to press on his chest, like he’s missing something very important and he needs to start searching. Needs to keep going.

Don’t give up.

...I won’t, if you won’t.

It’s like there are webs all around him, holding him back from waking. He has to push through them to get up. He has to reach up and tear them away to make it.

The ocean is crashing fast, fast, fast, jumping along to a rhythm that pressures him. He hears someone off in the distance, humming a melody gently. He holds onto it. Follows it. Lets it pull him out.

For a minute, he can’t remember how to breathe and he’s just a fish out of water, body tensing, scrambling in fear to find its way, to remember how to function by choice.
“Shh, shh,” someone whispers above him. They’re brushing his hair back gently. He recognizes the voice; it was the one humming to him. “You’re alright,” she soothes. “You’re okay.”

He feels like he’s two again, having a nightmare, needing someone to hold his hand, to bring him back to reality.

“M-mom?” He chokes out, but it’s panicked. He tries to reach her, but he can’t move.

“Keith, honey, calm down.”

He’s too warm. He’s too comfortable, just like when he saw that light at the end of the tunnel. It scares him. “I-I’m dead. I’m dead -”

“Shh, shh, shh. No, honey. You’re alive, you’re safe.” Her voice catches. “You’re still alive. It’s alright, we’re here.”

It hits him like a rubber band returning. Everything comes back to him at once - how to move, how to breathe, how to think. He blinks his eyes quickly, trying to force himself to calm down. He catches sight of his mother’s face, inches from his own and he holds his gaze there, taking in the familiarity of it. The sternness of her brow, the softness in her eyes. He lets it ground him. Lets him remember.

All the while, she brushes his hair back and watches him right back. Her eyes are so filled with love. With hurt. With relief.

The crashing slows...smoothes out... And he realizes it’s not crashing at all, but small steady beeps. He shifts his eyes slightly to the side, looking up at the heart monitor.

He’s in a hospital. It smells like one, he realizes as he starts to comprehend his senses again. Gross and sterile and it makes his skin crawl and his stomach tense up at the thought. He can see his arm littered with small tubes and needles. He’s sees his hand wrapped in a bandage.

“How do you feel?”

Horrible. Part of him wishes he could just go back to unconsciousness. That it’s not worth it like this. But he tries to remember there are worse things. He’s not in that dark well anymore, hidden away from the world.

Here, he’s warm and cared for and...

And alive. He’s alive.

His family is here, all focused on him, standing around his bed.

Acxa, who’s been holding back, looks like she suddenly can’t take it anymore and shoves her face up close to his, grabbing his hand. “Hey,” she whispers as she squeezes his hand. Her hair’s a wavy mess and there are dark circles under her eyes. She’s not wearing any makeup. He can hardly remember the last time he’s seen her in public without five layers of foundation on. She laughs in relief as he watches her. “Hey,” she says again.

“...Hey,” he whispers but the sound is butchered. His voice is raspy and it feels like he’s been eating gravel.
His dad wraps an arm around Krolia’s arm comfortably and she leans into him, sniffing, hand over her mouth and nose. He looks down at Keith, eyes so soft. “...Welcome back.”

Keith smiles back in response best he can. He’s confused and disorientated. He can hardly remember his name as he tries to reacquaint himself with these faces around him. He knows they’re familiar but it’s hard to connect them.

He doesn’t know the date or even the time, but his body feels old. Like he’s been gone on vacation for a long while and he’s returning way too late. There’s something nagging at him and he struggles to connect the dots.

He starts when he feels something wet on his skin. He shifts his eyes over and blinks up into his mom’s crying face.

She quickly tries to wipe the tears away.

“They thought you wouldn’t survive,” Krolia whispers. “They said it was too late. We thought we had lost you. All the blood...” A fresh wave of tears pours over her face. “They said you would die... They’re calling you a miracle. The doctors. The papers. ...A miracle.”

“Yeah, look,” Acxa says, shifting to grab a paper off the nightstand. She holds it out for him, but he’s tired and can’t focus. “There’s way more online. It’s so surreal. They say you’re a hero.”

“...Cool,” he breathes.

“I’ve got a famous little brother,” she smiles crookedly as she sets it back.

He huffs out a tired laugh. Groans out, “...We’re twins...”

“Yeah,” she whispers, elbowing him gently as she nods. “Yeah, we are.”

“How did you find me...?” Keith whispers.

They turn to the small figure standing awkwardly at the end of his bed. Pidge.

Her shoulders are shrugged high as she reaches for his toes and gives them a small fond jostle. Her eyes are rimmed in red and her cheeks are puffy. Her face is already crumpling as she watches him and though she’s smiling, she looks so sad. She lets out a small laugh. “Hey, Keith.”

“Pidge...” He whispers. God, she looks awful. Hurt and hollow. “How’d you know...?”

She takes in a deep breath. Nods her head to the other side of the room. “I had a little help.” She gives him another encouraging smile, her eyes crinkling as she sniffs. She nods her head again as he continues to stare at the hurt in her eyes.

He looks over, following her gaze.

And stops.

Because beneath the window, bathed in moonlight that’s slipping through the curtains, is the most beautiful person Keith has ever seen. He’s quiet and still as he lies in the bed beside Keith, but he’s awake, just watching peacefully, a soft smile on his lips and a twinkle in his shining grey eyes.

“Shiro,” Keith tries to say, his whole body going alight with shock. He stretches his hand out, reaching. “Shiro!”
His body protests, jabs of pain lighting up his core and hooking into his chest, but he can’t be bothered by it. He fights through the pain like he always does, struggling to push himself up.

Shiro puts a hand up. “Keith - Keith, no. Stay still... You’ll hurt yourself. I’m not going anywhere. Calm down.”

He tries to protest, but nothing comes out. His heart is thudding. Dizziness clasps onto him. Blackness is coming in his vision from the edges.

He lets himself fall back against his pillow as he wheezes in breath. He dizzily turns his gaze back to Shiro and tries to get himself to understand.

Shiro is alive.

He’s lying on the bed beside Keith, hooked up to machines, blanket pulled up to his chest. ...He’s alive.

He still has dark circles beneath his eyes and strange shadows across his face, but he’s smiling. He’s calm and has his sturdiness back. He’s got some colors in his cheeks, a bit more weight on his bones.

Alive.

Alive.

Alive.

Alive.

Keith presses his hand over his face, trying to hold back his sobs. He doesn’t dare let his eyes close. He keeps them trained right there, right on him. “Shiro...” He chokes out. “Shiro...”

“Come here,” Shiro whispers, shifting slightly on his bed to get closer to the edge. He holds his arm out. His one arm. The other is gone. He wiggles his fingers in the gap between them, small smile on his lips.

Keith shakily reaches out, bridging the distance between them that's been so close for so long, and yet so far.

Contact.

They’re touching each other. The distance between them, always there as they grew together these past weeks, long lonely rivers through the treetops, is closed as their fingertips touch.

Warm. Shiro’s so warm. His skin is so soft.

All the distance between them, all the agony, the yearning, it’s all gone. Cast away, overcome with this.

A small sob breaks free from Keith’s chest as he looks down at their hands clasped tightly together. “Is this a dream?”

Shiro squeezes his fingers tightly, face crumpling as he tries to grin through it. “No... No, we’re both okay. We’re going to make it.”

“Both of us?” Keith breathes out. “Together?” He finally catches sight of Ryou, who’s with their parents, smiling warmly beside Shiro’s bedside. Ryou helps Shiro up out of his bed and Shiro shakily lowers himself beside Keith.
They leave, giving the two of them privacy. Keith’s family quietly takes their leave too. Keith’s still focused on Shiro, staring up at him in awe. This has to be some sort of dream. It has to be. “You’re alright? You...you were dead. I couldn’t feel a pulse. You looked dead and then - and then at the beach. I thought -”

“Yeah...I told them not to bring a mirror around me quite yet.”

Keith barks out a dry laugh that dissolves into a rattling cough that goes deep, down to his core. He shudders against it. He pulls a smile back on his face as he takes the sight of Shiro in. “You look good. You...you remember me? Everything?”

Shiro nods, squeezing Keith’s hand tighter. “Everything.”

“God...” Keith sobs, shoving his face into his hand. “This is so much. I can’t believe it. I can’t believe this.”

Shiro leans into Keith. He shifts like he wants to brush away Keith’s tears, but his arm’s gone and Keith has the other captive in a death grip. He kisses them away. “Shh...” Shiro soothes. “It’s okay, Keith, we’re together now... It’s okay. Try to calm down or they’re going to separate us.”

“God...” Keith breathes, closing his eyes and lifting his face to the ceiling. His tears are making a mess of everything, but he’s never felt this happy. This much relief. It’s so much, bursting up inside of him. The only thing keeping him here, grounded, is the hand holding tightly onto his. The warmth of his body pressed to Keith’s side.

His anchor.

“What happened?” Keith asks quickly. “How are you? How are you feeling? Does your arm hurt?”

Shiro smiles at his intensity. “Everything’s fine. You slept longer than I did... They were starting to get a little worried there.”

“How long?”

“Almost two weeks now.”

“Jesus,” Keith breathes, but it’s not himself he’s worried about. He shifts, trying to grab onto Shiro with his other hand as well, when he feels something off. His balance is weird. There’s nothing to ground him on one side.

Slowly, he looks down at his sheets. He sees where his left leg is beneath the covers. There’s nothing where the right should be.

He takes in a long deep breath.

“Keith...” Shiro murmurs.

Carefully, he pulls the sheets back. His hands are shaking so hard that it takes a while longer than it should. But isn’t that just like Keith?

There’s nothing there. His leg is gone. A good few inches above where the tourniquet had been, there’s just empty space. It’s a stump, wrapped up in a bandage.

He stares down at it. Foreign. Like some sort of joke. After all this time, fighting with it...
Hating it. Wanting to get rid of it. It’s gone.

Now that it’s happened, it’s... He doesn’t know what to feel. Shiro had loved it, Shiro had accepted it, and that had eased something in Keith’s heart. Maybe he was starting to accept it too, and now it’s different again.

He knows beneath the bandages there’s a sight he’s not ready to see.

“I’m so sorry,” Shiro breathes, voice bleeding. “It’s my fault. I put that tourniquet on you. I just was thinking of stopping the blood, I thought they’d be able to save the leg. I didn’t know -”

Keith holds his hand up to Shiro gently. He turns and smiles over at him. He doesn’t have to force it.

There’s a dark shadow in Shiro’s brow and his eyes are wide and filled with sorrow. Keith gives his head a little shake, still smiling. It’s okay, he mouths, dropping the sheets back over his little stump of a leg. “You saved my life.”

He’s not mad. He’s not even upset. Not a little bit.

Shiro watches his face closely, making sure Keith’s not lying. His face slowly softens. “...And you saved mine.” He scoots forward, laying out beside Keith, resting his head just inches away.

“I have one too,” Shiro whispers, holding the bandaged stump out.

It looks strange. Keith’s not used to it, but he smiles, reaching a shaky hand out and, very gently, he feels the end of the bandage.

They smile at each other.

“We match,” Keith whispers.

“We match... It's going to be hard,” Shiro says. “Getting used to it.”

Keith squeezes Shiro’s hand. “We’ll do it together.”

A smile breaks across his face and he nods. “Yeah. Yeah. Together...”

Shiro unweaves his hand through Keith’s and lifts it to Keith’s face, cupping his cheek gently in his warm palm. Feeling Keith’s skin beneath the tips of his fingers, his actual fingers. He stops over the tender spots on Keith’s face - the sore bump on his forehead, the scrapes and cuts all over his face, the rough bruises still around his neck. It feels warm. It feels golden. There’s no rush, time’s not running out. Keith knows he looks like a horrible disgusting mess, and Shiro somehow still stares down at him with warm loving eyes, like he’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

“I knew it,” Shiro whispers. “I knew it from the first moment I saw you. There’s just something about you... Your fire. Your heart. Your stubbornness... If it wasn’t for you, I probably would’ve just faded away weeks ago. I would’ve died. You gave me the will to fight. You gave me the hope to believe. And god, Keith, look at us.” He presses a firm kiss to Keith’s cheek, their tears bleeding into the other’s as they laugh on soft breath together. “Everyone else had given up, everyone else couldn’t find it within themselves to believe. But you kept going, Keith. It was you. Look where we are. We’re both here. We’re both alive. You did it. You found me.”

Keith lets out a soft sob. He reaches up both of his hands and brushes his thumbs against the tears in his eyes. “Takashi,” Keith breathes, looking at the scar across his face that’s healing, at the
darkness under his eyes that are lessening. At the warmth in his eyes, the curve of his soft lips. He can’t believe he gets to keep him. “I love you, Takashi,” Keith says. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Keith,” Shiro presses his forehead to Keith’s. “I love you so much. You’re everything to me.”

And he leans down and presses a firm kiss on Keith’s lips. Keith comes undone beneath his touch. Their first real kiss.

Not as a ghost, not on some distant hazy plane that feels more like a dream. They’re here, in reality, together.

Keith laughs weakly at the thought. He feels it spreading through his whole body, down to the tips of his fingers, his toes, warming his cold core. Their mouths move together as they press in closely until Keith remembers himself. “Stop,” he breathes against Shiro’s mouth. “Stop, I’m so gross.”

Shiro pulls back, but he whispers happily, “No, you’re not, Keith. You’re beautiful and amazing and wonderful. Thank you, Keith. Thank you for everything. I could say it to you for the rest of my life and it’ll never be enough, all I owe you, the gratitude I have for you in my heart... You saved my life. You brought me back to my family. You’ve given me my future back. You fought beyond your limits...and, most importantly, you brought me back you. It’s everything I wouldn’t even dare to dream. It’s all thanks to you. I’m forever in your debt.”

Keith brings his lips up into a smile, letting his neck fall back wearily. He looks at Shiro, giving his head a soft little shake. He whispers out raggedly, “You helped too... Thank you. We’re even.”

Keith clears his throat. The pain’s starting to become too much. He’s so tired. How? He mouths.

How did you do it? How did you convince Pidge?

Shiro grins happily, rolling a bit more to his side so he can squeeze more of Keith's hand. “…I dunno, honestly. I was in such a panic. All my thoughts, all my focus was so concentrated on you. Getting you help. Have you ever heard of those stories of the old grandmas lifting cars off their grandkids in a state of panic? Maybe it was something like that. It was like something in the air. Some current I’ve never noticed, never felt. Maybe it was the adrenaline, maybe it was the weather, maybe it was just knowing you were there, waiting, and this was all that was left. But it was almost easy transferring energy to empty containers like electronics,” he chuckles. “Maybe I was a little manic with desperation. I tried to call Pidge through her phone, but it just scared them I think. And then I turned on the t.v. to find something to explain but I dunno why I thought that’d actually work.”

“You could watch some infomercials,” Keith laughs.

Shiro places his hand gently on Keith’s collar bone. “Don’t talk. Your throat...”

Keith nods and then gestures for him to continue.

“So I pulled up Google Maps on the computer and showed her your location.”

Keith laughs again, outright. “Google Maps?”

Shiro watches Keith fondly. “Okay, you. It worked, didn’t it? She and Matt went to you right away.” He’s quiet for a moment, his eyes going dim. “...She found you. She saw everything.”
Keith doesn’t even know what he looked like after everything. He can’t even imagine what that must’ve felt like, being in Pidge’s place, looking down into a nightmare.

“...She was really upset. Then...and now. We’ve been trying to talk with her, but she won’t listen. She thinks it’s her fault. She feels like she betrayed you.”

“So Pidge,” Keith breathes out a sigh, closing his eyes. “I’ll fix things.”

“I know you will,” Shiro whispers.

He murmurs tiredly, “What’d you tell everyone? What do they think happened?”

“The truth.”

Keith shoots him a sharp look and Shiro just shrugs. “My parents couldn’t make sense of why Ryout went from wanting to strangle you to wanting to kiss your feet in the span of a few days. He backed me up. Pidge did too.”

“And they just...believed you? Just like that?” Keith chokes out the words.

Shiro shakes his head. “I don’t think they know what to think. But how else do you explain you? How else would you explain me? A miracle? I kind of think my parents were so tired, so relieved, that they would take any story as long as they get to keep me...”

Keith’s glad. “And mine?”

“I feel like they’re the same way. I’m sure they’re waiting to talk to you about it.”

Keith shakes his head and closes his eyes.

“Not now,” Shiro murmurs, brushing Keith’s hair back gently. “But when you’re ready, they’ll be there.”

Keith hums.

He squeezes Shiro’s hand as he shifts around him a little, trying to get comfortable. “...Why am I so tired? Why aren’t you?”

“I’ve been awake for a lot longer.”

Keith’s smile grows. “...It’s not a race,” he chuckles.

Shiro chuckles. “No. It’s not. We have all the time in the world.” He’s quiet for a few moments. “...But if it was a race, I’d be winning.”

Keith laughs weakly but then a groan overtakes him.

“Oh, no more laughing for you. Rest, Keith,” Shiro whispers as he presses a kiss to his temple. “I’m not leaving your side. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I stay awake?”

Shiro runs his hand soothingly across Keith’s cheek. “You almost died, Keith. You were in a coma for almost two weeks. You had lost almost half the blood in your entire body. After that, you went into hemorrhagic shock. Your heart rate shot up, your blood pressure dropped. Your organs were beginning to shut down... Obviously, they had to amputate your leg. He broke some
bones in your fingers. They were talking about the medication you’ll have to be on, but I...I forgot the names. You’ll have to ask them. I do know we’re both pumped full of antibiotics right now. That you had sepsis. We were sitting in a cesspool of bacteria and with all your open wounds...and it’s better now, but it still could be dangerous. You actually were awake a few times before, but you weren’t really lucid. You were a mess.”

Keith grunts. He’s tired just hearing it.

Shiro’s quiet for a moment as he pulls the top of his gown down, revealing marks on his chest that are barely there, a little lighter than the rest of his skin, like scars from long ago. Keith almost can’t see them; he has to squint, but even before he sees it, he knows what it is. Still there, even on Shiro’s own body. “I also think you helped my soul back into my body... That was real, wasn’t it?”

Keith reaches his hand up, placing his fingers against the lines. He breathes out in wonder. “…On the beach...?”

“…Another thing I owe you my life for,” he whispers against Keith’s hair. “All that...all those things you did...”

Keith lets out a soul-weary sigh.

“But you made it,” Shiro says firmly.

“Mm... So did you.”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Yeah, I did.”

“…You’re happy, Shiro?”

“Yes,” Shiro whispers in the air between them. “Very happy. We’re both alive, both together... You’ve given me my future back... I never even dared to dream ever since that day I woke with all the blood on my shirt, that day at the school. ...And now, I’m here, beside you. There’s nothing more I could ever want. Nothing.”

“I love you,” Keith whispers as sleep pulls him back. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, Keith... Sleep, now... You’ll feel better soon.”

Keith does, their hands clasped together. He can rest now, fully. He knows Shiro’s okay, can feel him warm in his hands, safe. No impending doom, no worrying about him fading away. He’s here. A true rest. Letting go of all the shit around him. Content.

They made it. They’re home.

“Ugh,” Keith coughs out into his arm. He pushes his tray of food away and out of his face, face pinching in distaste. “This food is disgusting. I’m not eating this.”

“Keith,” Acxa sighs as she picks at her nails over her phone. “You won’t get better if you don’t eat it. Then you’ll just be stuck here longer.”

“You try it. It tastes worse than dog food.”

“You’ve tried dog food?” Ryou asks in amusement from his place by the window.
Shiro snorts into his plate that he dutifully eats from. “How am I not surprised?”

“Lance dared me and I won.”

“I don’t think a dare is like a thing you can win against someone with, Keith,” Acxa raises an eyebrow.

“Please, Acxa,” Keith begs, clasping his hands together at Acxa. “Please, can you go to the burger place off Pine Hills? I’m begging you. Or, better yet, break me out of here, will you? I want to go home. I want to go home so badly. I miss my bed. I miss Red. Acxa, please.”

“No way. Mom and Dad will kill me. The doctor said -”

Keith groans dramatically and tosses himself back onto his pillows. “I’m going crazy here.”

They all roll their eyes and chuckle to themselves. It’s how they know Keith’s feeling better. It’s a good thing, really, all his complaining.

His voice is slightly better. Raspy and like his throat is made of sandpaper, but it no longer feels like he’s jamming a metal pipe in his throat. So he grumbles about it.

“Ryou,” Shiro begins to ask and Ryou’s already rolling his eyes knowingly.

Ryou pats his hands on his legs and pushes himself up. “Okay, okay. You want the usual? Keith, what do you want?”

Keith sits up quickly, eyes brightening. “Yeah? Really?”

Acxa snorts. “I know his order. I’ll go too. Keith’s stir craziness is making me go crazy. I’m not going to make it if I have to stay here any longer.”

“Then you know how I feel.”

She gives him an amused look and nods Ryou out. “I’ll drive. See you in a bit.”

“Can you get my portrait sketchbook too?” Keith calls.

He hears Acxa groan as they round the corner and make their way down the hallway. “Thank you, Acxa!”

“Ryou’s such a good brother,” Keith says. “You hardly had to ask.”

“Nah, he’s only doing it because he likes you.”

Keith smiles because he knows it’s the truth.

It hasn’t been horrible in the hospital. At any time, he can joke with Shiro, he can tease him, he can laugh with him. The only times he can’t are when Shiro’s busy with the doctors or sleeping, and even then, Keith’s content to watch his healing face.

It’s been wonderful, really. But he just misses the peace of his bed. Of sleeping throughout the night without nurses coming in and out. Of feeling normal.

He knows if they pull the window’s curtain back, there’ll be the news vans waiting, the cameras out. All ready to talk to the boy who was locked away for a month and the one who saved him despite all odds. The ones on the brink of death, who lived only because of a so-called miracle.
But neither of them want to talk about that. They haven’t really, not even between themselves, not since they’ve woken up. Whenever anyone tries to bring it up, Keith shies away. He knows he’ll have to talk about it eventually, but he just...

He dreads it.

Shiro doesn’t seem to want to talk about it much either, so it’s alright. Everything’s alright. Keith just hasn’t been able to check his phone for how much attention they’ve been getting - somehow they even managed to find his secret artblog he hasn’t shared with anyone he knows - and he really, really hates it. All the attention... They have to have police stationed outside their room and that makes him uncomfortable.

And although he does complain about it and glares over at the window on occasion when he hears people shouting for them, inside, he’s still grateful for it all. They’re alive, they’re alive. He couldn’t ask for more. He didn’t think they’d make it out of that dark cold well. The tunnel up was so long and daunting. This is heaven in comparison.

There are things he still wants though. Pidge hasn’t visited him since he first woke up. Matt comes by almost everyday and offers an apology and gifts from Pidge. Flowers some days. Art supplies others. Keith just looks down at them, frown in his brow.

“Give her time,” Matt murmurs lowly. “She wants me to tell you how sorry she is. We all are. But she’s been in a really bad place. We’ve all tried talking with her, but...”

Keith texts her. He calls her. But maybe she still hasn’t fixed her phone. Maybe she’s just ignoring him.

But she was patient waiting for him throughout all of this, so he can be too. If this is what she needs.

He looks over to his side, where he knows Shiro is. Their beds have been pushed together - their town’s so small and the nurses know Shiro and dote on him, so Shiro’s right beside Keith, grinning brightly at him, cheeks full of hospital food.

Keith smiles back and scoots close to him, slipping his hand up Shiro’s gown, feeling bare skin.

“They’re finally all gone,” Keith sings lowly under his breath, feeling around so Shiro catches his meaning.

“I’m eating,” Shiro chuckles, smile patient but firm. “And what if someone walks in? You should eat too, you know. You need your vegetables, Keith. You can’t just live off of hamburgers.”

Keith lets out a soft laugh but keeps his hand against Shiro’s bare stomach. He lets himself drift for awhile. That is, until he hears the sound of the t.v. clicking on and a soundtrack filling his ears, familiar by now.

“Nooo,” he groans. “Don’t tell me you’re watching what I think you’re watching.”

He hasn’t even opened his eyes but he can hear Shiro chuckling. “I won’t tell you then.”

He grunts, opening his eyes. His face is pressed deep into his pillow, pushed up right against Shiro’s. Their faces are inches apart. Keith pulls back, glaring at the t.v.

“No,” he groans, letting his face fall back into his pillow.

“I’m telling you. This movie is the best.”
“This has got to be some cruel joke.”

“No. Not at all.” He watches the screen and chuckles a bit, but the more he thinks about it, the more the laughter fades from his face. The blue light from the screen settles over his features. “I like it,” he says eventually, voice thoughtful. “They’re like I was - lost and trying to find their way back home. Even though the odds were so impossibly high…”

Keith shifts at the change in tone, propping himself up higher so he can look into Shiro’s face. “...Yeah. But they were never alone,” he murmurs, grabbing onto Shiro’s hand. “They had each other... And they supported each other and carried each other’s weight and...in the end, they made it home.”

Shiro’s smile grows as he looks up at Keith. “Just why I like it.”

“Yeah, but we’ve seen it like five times this past month though.”

Shiro snorts and laughs, shaking his head. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I’m not. I’ve had this song stuck in my head for ages.”

“Okay. There are like three channels here and the other two are infomercials. This is the lesser evil.”

“Why is it I don’t believe you? Give me the remote.”

“Well, good morning to you too, Mr. Grouch,” Shiro laughs, snatching the remote up before Keith can grab it. He holds it out of his reach. “Don’t I get to choose? At least this one movie? Please? I haven’t been able to touch a remote these past few weeks and I finally can.”

“That’s true,” Keith grumbles, giving up and snuggling closer into Shiro’s warmth. And he is warm. There’s none of that cold clamminess from before, or the empty dull lifeless eyes. As he presses his ear to Shiro’s chest, he can hear the sturdy thumping of his heart. It’s Shiro. He looks amazing, even though he’s different and will always be different. He has his scars now, the white hair that’s growing in at the roots. But he will always be gorgeous to Keith and Keith can’t imagine a world in which anyone would think otherwise. Especially since he’s starting to get that golden glow back.

Keith lets himself laze in the sun that peaks through the curtains and Shiro’s warmth, looking up at him and basking in it. And then he remembers, “Hey! You were the one always choosing the movies though!”

Shiro presses his lips together tightly as he tries to hold back a laugh.

“Oh, you’re awful,” Keith laughs, narrowing his eyes dangerously. He lifts himself up on his arms and crawls over Shiro, pressing his forehead to his like an animal battling for grounds. “You’re supposed to be nice. I’m seeing your true colors...”

“I am nice. This movie is a gift.”

“I want to watch something else!”

“Okay, okay, fine! Have mercy! You earned it, you earned it.”

“Thank you,” Keith smiles cheekily in victory. He grabs the remote and turns to change it, but he blinks suddenly, dropping it just as fast. “Ah -” Keith hunches over into Shiro’s arms, gritting
against sudden pain.

“You okay?” Shiro worries, placing his hand on Keith’s hip to steady him.

“Yeah,” Keith breathes out sharply.

“Keith, come on, stop messing around. Sit. You don’t want to exacerbate your wounds. You still have a long road to recovery.”

“Shh,” Keith hushes him. He takes a moment to himself, centering. When he opens his eyes, he says, face serious, “the real concern right now is why you keep watching Homeward Bound. It’s not even that good.”

Shiro snorts, tossing his head back and pulling Keith down with him. “It’s the nostalgia. Sue me.”

“Hand over the remote, mister.”

“Never. I’ll never hand it over. Not until you can recite this movie word for word with me.”

“Shirooooo.”

“Keeeeeith.”

They giggle together, voices rumbling in their throats.

“You know,” Shiro says, hand carefully going down to Keith’s stump of a leg. “We’re almost balanced this way. With you losing a leg, me an arm. Combined, we’re like one whole person.”

Keith frowns for a second. “...But we would have three legs and arms,” Keith laughs. “What kind of person is that?”

Shiro looks toward the ceiling as he counts. “...Ooh. Right.”

“Ivy League?!?” Keith cracks up. He’s laughing so hard that he’s crying. He lays out on Shiro’s chest and laughs helplessly until he’s in tears.

“Always here to entertain,” Shiro laughs with him, grabbing onto Keith’s laughing form and holding him tightly to his chest.

“Oh, my god,” Keith says, trying to combat the giggles. “Owww, don’t make me laugh. It hurts.” His face is all splotchy and there are still tears in his eyes as he looks up into Shiro’s face. “You are such a dork. I’m going to be scared for your future employer.”

Shiro laughs and tweaks Keith’s nose. “You’re such a stinker... It’s really not that funny.” He reaches up and rubs the tears from Keith’s face gently, warmth on his face. “It was an honest mistake, okay?”

Keith laughs again, lowly, lips pressed together firmly. “Okay.”

Keith smiles at Shiro in the small distance between them. He’s so bright. So radiant. It’s hard to believe this is the same person he found down in the well. He presses a kiss to the corner of Shiro’s mouth. His actual mouth. The laughter fades from Shiro’s face and he breathes out shakily, melting into Keith’s touch.

So warm... Keith basically purrs over him, gathering Shiro’s face up in between his hands and raising him up to meet Keith, where he kisses him deeply.
Shiro melts beneath Keith’s touch, his hand coming up to gently rest on Keith’s wrist as he opens his mouth for Keith, let’s him do as he pleases.

Keith’s wanted this.

Keith sneaks his hands beneath Shiro’s robe and Shiro groans softly into his mouth.

“Wh-whoa,” Pidge says from behind them. “Uh... Um... Should I come back?”

Keith disengages from Shiro, who grins up at him with that knowing twinkle in his eye. *She’s here.*

Keith turns, taking in the sight of her. Her posture’s tight and she’s biting at her lip. There’s a little divot in her brow as she watches him for his reaction. *Pidge,* he breathes.

“No, uh - seriously, I can, uh... I’ll come back.”

“No, don’t even think it. Come here. Come sit.” Keith’s breathless, trying to figure out how to crawl backwards with one leg carefully enough he won’t hurt himself. Shiro has his hand on Keith’s hip and helps him shuffle backwards until he’s seated carefully beside him.

Cautiously, Shiro slips off his side of the bed, grabbing all the medical equipment hooked up to him and rolling it with him. “I’m going to go to the bathroom,” he says, a divot in his brow as he concentrates on walking. It’s slow and painful looking, but he’s doing it.

“Want help?” Keith perks up at attention as he keeps watch on Shiro’s every movement, like there might be a need for him to dart from his bed and throw himself over Shiro to save his life.

Shiro chuckles. “How are you going to help when the nurses have to half-carry you out?”

“Acxa said she’d bring the crutches! I just don't like the ones they have here.”

Shiro snorts. “Next time, then. I’m fine. I’m really just giving you guys a moment.”

Keith laughs, watching him go fondly. “Okay. Thank you, Shiro.”

He looks back to Pidge and turns his full attention on her, grinning. *Hey,* he says.

She looks up at Keith shyly, taking a hesitant step closer. She presses her lips together tightly before saying, “I brought carnations, mullein, and sage. They each mean good health. They’re lucky. I figured if anyone needed it, it’d be you.”

Keith laughs. “Thanks.”

“A-and then these, they’re blue hyacinths. They’re for making peace...” She holds them out to him in one abrupt motion. She stares at him, her eyes sad, like a kicked puppy. “And I, I need to do that. I won’t blame you if you’re mad. ‘Mad’ can’t even begin to cover it... Maybe you hate me, and I deserve that. I wish there was something I could do to take it all away. I’ve tried to think of a way for so long, but nothing comes to me. Keith, I’m so -”

“-Pidge -”

“-No, listen to me. I...I need to say this. We’ve been best friends since the dawn of time and you were right...I never once believed you when it mattered. Crazy things are always happening to you, but that’s no excuse. I should’ve been there for you without question. You held out your hand to me, asked me to trust you, and I just turned around and spat in your face.”
“Pidge...”

“No, I... That’s exactly what I did. You’ve always been so lenient with me. You’ve always trusted me, always been there for me. And then I went and lied to you about the window... I withheld your knife from you. I-I thought I was helping you. And then I took the one sketchbook you asked me not to touch and I showed it to everyone. And I branded you a murderer. And I told you to run away when I knew you could hardly walk... I didn’t think,” she says softly, closing her eyes tightly. “I thought I was giving you a chance, some sort of mercy, but I was so dumb and you...and now you... You almost died. You almost died. And not just in a ‘wow, he was super sick’ sort of way, but any longer in that well and that would’ve literally been it. And then I’d be at your funeral, seeing your body being lowered in the mud...because of me.” Her face starts to crumple as her voice breaks. “…Seeing you there...the blood all over the forest...seeing you pulled from the well like some ragdoll. ...You were so pale. So pale. And the way you were screaming...do you even remember that?”

He shakes his head slowly, eyes holding hers.

“Oh, god, Keith.”

She’s ugly crying, tears running down her face and fogging up her glasses. She has to slip them off her nose and wipe them.

“Pidge -” Keith says softly.

“This is all my fault. He fucked up your hand. You don’t have your leg anymore. You hated it before and now I’ve just made it worse for you! Your organs are fucked up. You'll never make a full recovery. You’ll have to take even more pills for the rest of your life and I know how you hate them.”

She shoves her face into her arms and sobs into them without restraint.

She chokes out her words. “When they brought you here they kept saying to prepare ourselves. That these were most likely the only moments with you we’d have left and to say anything to you that we needed to say before- before... God, Keith, seeing you like that... I’ve never seen anyone like that before. And you. It being you...because of me. I’ve been having nightmares about it every night. Keith, I’ll never forget this regret in my heart. I’m so so so so so sorry.”

“Pidge -” Keith says, voice low.

“-No. No. Don’t do that in that voice. Don’t forgive me. I don’t deserve it. Don’t do that - Not this time.”

“Pidge -!”

“-Be mad at me! Hate me! Curse me out! Something I deserve! I could’ve killed you - Killed you! Your leg -!”

“KATIE.” Keith yells loudly above her panic.

She stops yelling, but she’s sobbing, glasses dropped to the seat beside her. She leans forward onto the side of his bed, collapsing her weight into her arms. Her head hangs as tears fall on the sheets pulled over his form. “I’m so sorry, Keith,” she sobs. “So sorry. About Zarkon those years ago. About Shiro now. I should’ve believed you. You’ve been telling the truth all along and I didn’t see... I was too wrapped up in myself. In my own ‘cleverness’. But I’ve been the biggest idiot. Please, there’s got to be something I can do for you. There’s got to be a way I can make this right.”
“Hey,” Keith whispers. When she doesn’t respond, he pushes himself up, reaching out to her. He grabs her wrist in his hand and gives her a small shake. “Hey, Pidge, it’s okay. There’s nothing for me to forgive. I was the idiot. I had all that evidence in my room like a complete moron and didn’t tell you a thing until it was too late -”

“- Don’t,” she whispers, trying to pull away. She can’t look him in the eyes. “We both know you told me on day one, when you were scared and needed help. And I just laughed it off...”

He hesitates and looks down. He doesn’t know how to make this right. He knows how she feels. Torn up and helpless. He knows how much it hurts. “...Okay, then,” he says finally. “If you want to say it’s your fault, then sure, it’s your fault. It’s true.”

She looks up at him from beneath her eyelashes, eyes full of guilt that she accepts.

He continues, “It’s your fault I ran into that forest. It’s your fault I had the knife. ...It’s your fault I found Zarkon...where he almost killed me.”

She closes her eyes and takes a shuddering breath in. She’s calmed down. She swallows hard. “I know,” she whispers. “I know.”

“That also means it’s your fault that I found Shiro. It’s your fault that he’s at the hospital, recovering. It’s your fault that his life is saved and his family won’t have to mourn him. ...I won’t have to mourn him. It’s your fault that we’re all together now, safe and happy. It’s all your fault.”

She hangs her head and sobs silently, letting him squeeze her hands tightly. Her nose is running. Her face is crinkled. She’s a huge mess.

“Pidge,” he whispers. “Don’t cry. My leg is such a small price to pay. I’m not bitter at all. I’m not angry, I’m not sad. I’d give my other leg in a heartbeat for this. I’d give my life for it. For him. For you. You can’t blame yourself. You thought I had killed an innocent person; it was brave of you to stand up to me in the name of what was right especially because of who I am to you. If you had let me go just because I was me, let me kill someone as good, as pure as Shiro without any consequences, Pidge, I wouldn’t have forgiven you. You’ve always had a strong sense of justice and that's one of the reasons I respect you so much.”

“Yeah, but -”

“Pidge,” Keith says, squeezing her hand tightly in his. The ring Shiro gave him is there still, glinting in the light. He can see her eyes catch sight of it and acknowledge it. She presses her lips together as she absorbs what he’s saying. As she trusts his words to be true. He says firmly, “I love Shiro. I know it sounds crazy. I know none of this makes sense. But he and I just...we fit together so well.” He chuckles softly, sniffing as his eyes begin to well with tears despite his best efforts. “I love him so much. It’s like we were born to be together but I thought we’d never have the chance. And now...? God. I know it sounds insane. I’m sorry. If there was another way to get you to understand... His time had run out. I literally thought he was going to disappear on me and I’d never see him again. I didn’t know what I was going to do. When Zarkon said he’d kill me, I almost felt relief. I... Pidge. It was Shiro who found you, but it was you and Matt who believed it and came for us when we needed you most. You didn’t let me down. I never in a million years thought that I could be here, with you, with him... Losing my leg is nothing. It’s nothing in comparison to everything else. And honestly, out of all the things on my body to lose, that was the shittiest appendage anyway.”

She laughs breathlessly, looking down and nodding slowly. After a few moments, she says lowly, “...It was a good leg.”
“It held in there for a long time. But I'm alright with this, as long as I get to keep all of you...”

He can see the wheels turning in her head, the way she processes info.

“I mean it Pidge. I mean every word.”

She turns her eyes up to him hopefully. “...You're okay?”

He nods. “Yeah. Yeah, I've never been better. I'd do it all again, I swear to you.”

She hesitates. Says quietly like she can't dare to hope, “...Still friends?”

He smiles warmly up at her.

Keith is not one for ‘I love yous’. He thinks some things are better acted out than said. He had told her once before that he'd never say it again. But for Pidge...for Pidge, he'll make an exception.

“You’re still my sister, Pidge, and I love you.”

He can see as she realizes it. As it hits her. The light in her face blazes and she rocks forward onto the tips of her toes, face crumpling again. She throws her arms around him, small hands grasping to his back tightly. “Keith. Keith. Thank you, Keith.”

He holds her tightly, arms around her tiny shoulders. He loves Pidge. He loves her. “You believe me now, don’t you?” He whispers hopefully. “About the ghost stuff?”

She pushes back and looks brightly into his face, her eyes wide with bursting excitement. “Oh, god, you have to ask? Yes, of course I do! You should’ve seen it. I almost peed myself.” She leans in quickly, brushing away her tears and tossing a glance at the door. She murmurs with a deeply amused glint in her eye, “I think Matt did. All the electronics in our house just went haywire! The lights were flickering on and off! The t.v. just came on like it was by itself. And when he looked up the location on the computer the power just - boop - went out completely. But it wasn’t just the electricity. I couldn’t even fix our phones. We all had to get new ones. And my computer’s shot.”

“Aww, Pidge -”

She whispers lowly. “-Don’t tell Shiro, though. He’s already asked. I told him everything was fine.”

“You’ve talked with him? Isn’t he amazing?” He looks up for her approval, stars in his eyes.

She rolls her eyes, face amused with mock strained patience. “Yes. He’s pretty nice.”

“Yeah? Not the typical jock jerk that you thought?”

“Okay. No, he’s not. He’s sweet and funny and good-looking and -”

“-Hey, back off, he’s mine.”

“And,” she continues, getting in his face and pinching his nose, a hint of mirth in her eye, “totally completely stars-in-his-eyes in love with you. I’ve never seen someone have it for someone else so bad...well, until just now, at least.” She smiles down at him, her face softening. “And if anyone deserves that, Keith, it’s you.”
“Yeah?” Keith breathes out, rubbing the back of his head. “You know,” he says softly. “Without everyone...we never would’ve found him.”

“Without you, Keith...” she says softly.

“I’m grateful to you, you know.”

She sighs, reaching over to run her hands over the welt on his forehead that just won’t seem to go away, over his eyes that are still bloodshot, down the yellowing bruises on his neck. “...You’re such a good person, Keith,” she says, smiling gently. “What did any of us do to deserve you...?”

Keith laughs, the sound light and free. He leans back, still holding onto her hands.

She nods him over. “Scoot. I want to sit next to my best friend.”

“What an honor.”

“I mean Shiro,” she grins, teeth sharp and mischievous just as Shiro walks back into the room.

“Hm? Did I hear my name?”

“Mm,” Keith hums happily, lifting one arm for Pidge to sneak beneath and holding the other out for Shiro. “My two favorite people in the whole wide world.”

Shiro smiles, slipping back into bed and cozying up to Keith. “Are we a family now?”

“Mmhm. We’re adopting Pidge, our tiny angry gremlin. She can be our second mother.”

“That sounds nice,” Shiro hums happily as he leans his head into Keith’s shoulder.

“Pidge, Shiro won’t let me watch anything besides Homeward-fucking-Bound.”

“Such language!” Pidge gasps, emulating her best motherly tone. She lowers her voice back to normal. “...Why Homeward Bound?”

“I don’t know!” Keith tosses his head back in agony. “It’s not good. Literally any other movie. It’s not even funny anymore.”

Shiro and Pidge snort at the same time. Shiro says, “Okay, fine. I already told you that you win. I think I saw the Minions on after that infomercial about bread knives. It’s that or the news. We can watch them talk about us and show our faces for hours of enjoyment.”

“Oh, god,” Keith whispers in horror. “I think I just figured out the one thing you’re a nightmare about.”

“Everyone has that one thing,” Pidge hums knowingly.

Shiro laughs loudly, the sound booming from his chest. “I’ll give you that. No one will ever go to the movies with me, but you’re going to have to, so you’d better get used to it now.”

Keith gurgles dramatically, even though he’s secretly very very pleased that Shiro is already thinking of going to the movies together.

“Pidge, what’s Keith’s?” Shiro looks around Keith to Pidge.

“Keith’s one thing?”
“Tread wisely, Pidge,” Keith warns.

“Oh, Keith’s perfect. He’s an angel. Very very sweet, full of heart, a great artist. You’re going to love him.”

Keith nods, humming in approval.

“It’s the temper,” she whispers over Keith’s shoulder. “Run for your life. But I’m sure you know all about that by now. Five minutes with Keith and…”

“Hey…”

The nurse pops his head in, looking in carefully. “We have quite a few of your friends here. How are you both doing? Feeling up to some more visitors?”

Keith and Shiro look at each other, both nodding brightly.

“Look who I found,” Acxa sings as Matt, Lance, and Hunk walk in cheerfully, eyes bright and excited. Ryou trails behind shyly.

Matt takes in the sight of Pidge curled into Keith’s side and his face eases into a warm smile. Keith and him exchange relieved glances. “Um…what’s going on in here? Looks like a slumber party that no one invited me to.”

“They’ve adopted me,” Pidge says to Matt. “I’m their mother now.”

“Is that how adoptions work?” Matt says.

Lance and Hunk are behind them, hands in pockets and shoulders shrugged high. Hospital visits are always awkward, but Lance’s eyes light up with glee as he catches the bump on Keith’s forehead.

Keith shoves his finger up at Lance and says, a quick harsh, “Don’t,” before Lance can even get the first syllable out.

Lance laughs and holds his hands up in surrender. “Hey, bud, I wasn’t going to say anything! You look great. Seriously. I couldn’t believe when I heard what happened. Miracle boy, they’re calling you. It blows my mind every time I see it on the news. I can’t wrap my head around it honestly. Our little Keith, some big time celebrity now.”

“We’ve been wanting to visit for ages,” Hunk says, “But the hospital wouldn’t allow us. Was it that bad?”

“Honestly, I don’t really remember,” Keith says, rubbing at his forehead bump self consciously. “I was pretty drugged up.”

Shiro reaches over to stop Keith from messing with it. “Probably for the best…” he murmurs.

“Here,” Acxa says, tossing a bag to Keith that smells heavenly.

“Thank you, Acxa. Thank you, Ryou.” He digs through it like a savage, cramming his face full of fries. “What are you wearing?” Keith asks her when he gets a proper look.

She’s sporting a jacket about three sizes too large for her. Acxa grins and carefully unzips it. As she does, a tiny head pokes out the top.
“Red,” Keith gasps, pushing the burger back into the bag and holding his arms out for her. She jumps from Acxa’s jacket and into his arms, pressing herself happily against him, purring. “Oh, hey, girl,” he breathes as she pushes her tiny soft head into the palm of his hand. It looks like she’s smiling. “How’ve you been?”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure cats aren’t allowed in hospitals,” Lance says.

Acxa waves him away. “In our shitty small hospital, there’s hardly anyone else here. It’ll be fine.”

“Oh, my little jailbird cat,” Keith kisses her tiny head and rubs at her cheeks. “I’ve missed you.”

“I brought you guys cookies,” Hunk says, holding out a bag. “I think they’re good for the healing process too, right?”

Pidge gasps, stars in her eyes. “Can I have some?”

Everyone settles in, sprawled around the room and on their beds, munching on cookies and chatting.

Keith rubs the bump on his forehead again, looking at Shiro. “Is the bump really that bad?”

Shiro smiles warmly, leaning forward to press a kiss to Keith’s forehead. He grabs his hand away again and twines his fingers through Keith’s to keep him from messing with it. “No. You look great. Really.”

Lance leans around the edge of the bed to shake his head vehemently and mouth silently, “really bad”.

“Oh, my god,” Keith claps a hand over his forehead. “I knew it. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be,” Shiro laughs, grabbing Keith’s wrists and pulling them back. “It’s cute. I like it.”

Keith watches his face for any blip of a lie. “...Yeah?”

“I wouldn’t lie, Keith.” He places a soft kiss to it and Keith glows happily.

Lance gags in the background. “Is this what we’re going to have to endure if we stay in here?”

“Yep,” Acxa says, rolling her eyes. “Get used to it, just like the rest of us.”

“You think this is bad?” Ryou says softly, smiling crookedly at them all. “You should see them without the crowd. Sometimes I have to get up and leave.”

“What? We’re not that bad...” Keith protests.

“Come on, Ryou,” Shiro says, holding out what’s left of his arm for him. “You know you love us.”

Ryou grumbles and looks out the window. He’s shy in front of everyone.

“Come on,” Keith laughs, gesturing him forward.

“Everyone?” Hunk asks, bouncing up. Lance hops onto the end of Keith’s bed and crows excitedly, “Everyone!”
“Watch out for Keith!” Pidge grudges.

“And Shiro,” Keith says.

And they all pile on.

It really is like a slumber party. They all bundle up onto the bed, somehow finding a way to cram everyone on there. They sit on top of each other, careful of Shiro and Keith, of course, watching the ending of Homeward Bound. Much to Keith and Shiro’s surprise, Red steps over onto Shiro’s belly and curls up there, leaning her head on him with trust. Shiro is very gentle, very careful not to break that trust as he tries not to breathe too hard.

When the nurses come in, they won’t be happy. They’ve been so lenient on them, and they’re kind of crossing the line with this. But that’s okay. After awhile, Acxa takes out her phone and starts taking photos and Keith doesn’t even care about the state he’s in or how grungy he looks - hair shoved up in a messy bun, littered in half-healed spots and welts. He hasn’t had a real shower in ages. He probably smells. He’s tired, his throat and leg and hand all hurt, and every time he moves - which is often - the needles in his hand tug and makes him squirm all over. And of course, that damn unicorn horn.

But Shiro’s weight is firmly pressed against his side, Pidge snuggled up on the other. Everyone’s in high spirits, smiling and laughing at the stupid movies Shiro tries to force them to watch. There’s no talk about Zarkon. No one gives Keith a worried look, questions in their eyes about his sanity. He doesn’t have to watch out the window for crows.

It’s just them, a group of friends in high school, happy.

None of them are perfect - they’re human, after all. Wonderfully, blissfully human. Keith loves each and every one of them. He loves them in all their hesitancies, all their imperfections. Even when they make mistakes, even when they’re hurt and they fight, they find a way back to each other. Even if they’re lost... They don’t always agree, but they don’t always have to. Something’s changed in them. They’ll be there for each other no matter what.

Keith loves them. He loves them all so much.

He’s the happiest he’s been...ever.

It’s the best feeling in the world.

Chapter End Notes

So I feel like such a dummy, but as I was working on the "final chapter" this week, I realized, as it slowly became larger and larger, that it just...wasn't going to fit into one. SO NOW THERE WILL BE AN EPILOGUE TOO. Hopefully on or before Monday. HEY YO.

ALSO, I am in my first ziiiinneee!! (ੌ・◡・ੌ)ੌ¬☆°.°*:°° A Sheith wedding zine, Heartlines!

!! It's ~9k words about Keith getting all fiery and defensive over his BFF Shiro who's
getting bullied by his family for being single still, and Keith thinks the way to save Shiro is...to say they're engaged and throw a fake wedding together, haha. But do they have stronger feelings for each other than just frieeenddss? OoooOOoooh....

Here is a small preview of my piece.
Keith gathers his crutches, pulls himself up and out of the car, and steps into the rain that’s drizzling softly from the sky.

“Be careful, okay?” Acxa says. “Call me if you need me. I’ll actually answer this time.”

He snorts. “Thanks, Acxa. Shiro says he’ll drive me home.”

“Oh, good, because I was going to Northside and I didn’t want to come back.”

He laughs under his breath. “How’d I know? Bye.”

“Bye. Wear protection.”

“Acxa.”

She laughs. He can still hear her chuckling to herself as he closes the door and she drives away.

Keith takes a detour around the front of Shiro’s house, doing his best to be quick in case any of the residual news vans have spotted him, and heads for the back. He picks up the key from beneath the mat and unlocks the door.

“Hello?” He calls through the house.

“Hey, Keith!” Shiro shouts back. “Um...just a second, don’t come in the kitchen. I’m not ready yet.”

“Ready yet?” Keith mutters as he makes his way over to the table and sits down. He takes out his phone and starts scrolling through it, but, even after these few weeks, he still sees his name more often than not and he still hasn’t been able to get used to it. He shoves it away and then shifts the brightly colored flowers on the table in search of the mail he sees peeking out from beneath. There are so many bouquets throughout Shiro’s house that it feels like an obstacle course trying to get anywhere. Though, lately, Keith's house hasn't been much better, even though he knows for a fact Krolia has started rejecting deliveries.

Keith finally finds the mail beneath the flowers and sifts through it in search of one thing: the paper. He grudgingly picks it up. He's thankful that it's not his face for once.

It has a picture of Lotor’s somber face on it, proclaiming in bold words, KIDNAPPER’S SON TELLS ALL. THE CHOICES OF THE ONE BEHIND THE SCENES.

Keith flicks through the pages and sighs as he skims through the article. It tells of Lotor’s side...and his apologies. Somehow, in print, the apology seems insincere, sensationalized, blown up too big to be genuine. But Keith knows just how real it is. He had been there when Lotor finally had the courage to visit Shiro in his room, guilt burdening his entire spirit. Keith had tried to slip away, to give them privacy, but Lotor stopped him and apologized to them both.

“I knew the entire time,” Lotor breathed. “I knew and I did nothing. I’m as much at fault as my father.”
“You kept me alive,” Shiro said, shaking his head. “I’m grateful for you. And you were just as much of a victim too. I’m sorry about your father. ...When we were younger, I was very fond of him...”

“Me too,” Lotor murmured lowly. “But he died long ago, along with my mother. I’m sorry, Shiro...” He looked up to Keith slowly and said, “I’m grateful to you, Kogane...for doing what I wish I could’ve done in order to save Shiro’s life...

“There won’t be a funeral. And he won’t be missed.” Lotor said it, but he looked so very sad. Tired and drained and unlike the self he usually presents, but Shiro has always maintained no one truly knew the real Lotor. Keith thinks maybe Shiro's been right all along and now, he’s finally seeing the real Lotor too.

Lotor tries to distance himself, but Shiro’s heart is too good. He texts Lotor, trying to give him some sense of normalcy, and they think it helps. Over time, things have eased between them and Shiro is optimistic it can only get better. They’ve always been best friends, after all.

Without Lotor, there would’ve been no Shiro left to save. And Shiro’s right, Lotor was a victim too.

But Haggar...she was let out. She never actually killed anyone but her house was burnt down, so she and her family had to move away. And Keith is ready for her, if she tries anything. Without the book, he doesn’t think she will or even can. That puts his mind at ease.

“Okay,” Shiro breathes, coming out of the kitchen with flour all over his apron and arms. There’s a line of it spread across his face that he doesn’t seem to be aware of.

Keith presses a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. “What have you been doing?” He asks. He reaches up and dusts the flour off Shiro’s eyebrows.

“It’s a surprise.” He leans in to kiss Keith on the nose. “Close your eyes. I bet you can’t guess what it is.”

“Hmm... Surely can’t be something with flour.”

Shiro laughs softly, reaching around Keith to grab both of his hands and place them over his eyes. “Now, don’t peak,” he whispers in Keith’s ear.

He doesn’t. He can hear Shiro walking off and then coming back. He hears the sounds of a plate being set out in front of him and then feels Shiro’s arms coming around his shoulders and holding him tightly. He leans his face into Keith's hair.

“You can open your eyes,” Shiro says softly. "Happy birthday, Keith."

It’s a little cupcake, a swirl of red cream on the top and a single candle placed in the center shaped like a cat. It looks like Red, sitting tall and proud.

“I hope you like it. I tried making an entire cake last night, but it almost killed Ryou during the taste test, so I had to throw it out.”

Keith laughs, grabbing onto both of Shiro’s hands - prosthetic and skin - and keeping them close. “Shiro.”

“Try it,” he says excitedly, walking around Keith and sitting beside him, stars in his eyes.
Keith has heard rumor of Shiro's cooking skills, or lack thereof, but how could he ever resist such a face? He braves it in the name of love and takes a bite.

“So?” Shiro presses closer. “How is it?”

Keith tries to hold back a laugh. He licks the cream off his fingers as he considers it. “It’s...good.”

“You hesitated.”

“No! It’s good.”

Shiro despairs and falls into Keith’s side. “Don’t try to spare my feelings.”

“I’m not kidding. It’s very...interesting. ...It tastes like zucchini somehow?”

“Oh, my god. Ryou said that too.”

Keith laughs, pressing a kiss to Shiro’s cheek. “I really like zucchini.”

Shiro looks up at him from beneath his eyelashes, small smile growing on his face. “You’re just saying that.”

“Ask anyone,” Keith says, taking another bit showy bite. “Zucchini is my favorite.”

“You are such a liar,” Shiro laughs, but the stars are back in his eyes as he leans into Keith’s space. Keith has cupcake frosting all over his mouth and he attacks Shiro with sticky kisses.

Shiro laughs beneath the assault, kissing Keith back. He stops after a second, tasting the frosting. “Oh...it really does taste like zucchini, doesn’t it?”

Keith nods, contenting himself with kissing the frosting off Shiro’s chin.

“I don’t even think we have zucchini in the house.”

Keith laughs again, going in gently for a soft kiss. Shiro melts into it, meeting him halfway and scooting himself up onto Keith’s lap, and though the cupcake did somehow taste like zucchini, they still can taste the sweetness on the other.

They hear someone clearing their throats and they both jolt, looking over.

It’s Shiro’s mom. She’s giving them a very patient look from the entryway of the dining room.

“...Sorry, Mom,” Shiro rubs the back of his head in embarrassment as he goes to sit in his own seat.

She walks up to them, patting Shiro’s shoulder and smiling. “Hello, Keith,” she says warmly. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” he says happily. They’ve talked a few times and she’s been nothing but kind and appreciative to him. He can’t count how many times Shiro’s parents have thanked him and told him if he needs anything, they’ll be there. It’s been nice. They’re almost as sweet as Shiro.

She has a little box that she hands out to him, wrapped with care. “Takashi tells me it’s your birthday. Happy birthday. Eighteen now?”

“Mmhmm. Thank you. You didn’t have to do anything.”
“It’s my pleasure.”

He carefully unwraps it, opening the little box between his hands. Inside is a key, small and unassuming. It sparkles in the light.

“To our house,” she explains. “We were thinking of getting rid of the one beneath the mat, but we’ve all talked about it and we all want you to know you are welcome into our home at any time, rain or shine, night or day. It’s yours.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Shirogane,” Keith says softly, holding it tightly in his hand. He can feel their trust and it makes his heart full with warmth. Shiro reaches forward and wraps his hand around his, smiling in encouragement.

“You saved my son’s life...all of our lives really. For that, we thank you.” She pats Shiro on the shoulders again before heading out. “I’ll give you boys time to yourselves. See you later.” He leans down and kisses Shiro on the top of his head. "I love you."

“Bye, Mom,” he hums. "I love you too."

She walks out the door, locking it behind herself.

Keith holds the key up and grins. “Now I can annoy you anytime I want.”

“I’ll look forward to it,” Shiro promises. He crawls back onto Keith’s lap and presses a kiss against his lips. “Happy birthday, Keith,” Shiro whispers.

Keith chuckles as he wraps his arms around Shiro. “You know...it’s not actually my birthday.”

“I know,” Shiro laughs. “But we missed it. We were both unconscious in the hospital.”

“I’ll forgive you this time,” Keith hums. And he goes in for another kiss, continuing where they left off.

Keith and Shiro have been stars of newspapers around the country, of any article he accidentally comes across online. Keith is so done. It’s just been dragging on since forever.

They tell all about Zarkon, how he went for Shiro that day on the road and forever changed his life. Keith’s life. ...Their family’s lives. Ripples upon ripples upon ripples through their small community, changing paths and hearts.

They left out a bit of the truth, of course. Keith is happy no one argues with him about ghosts now, but he doesn’t want to tempt fate and try a whole country.

It took awhile for Keith and Shiro to finally recover enough to be discharged from the hospital. It was almost funny because Shiro seemed to recover faster than Keith, which Keith had somehow not expected. Keith swears it’s only because Shiro’s body was basically just sleeping the whole month, and Shiro laughs. He thinks it’s because he actually ate his vegetables while Keith only waited for the burgers and french fries. But no matter the case, a few weeks after everything, they’re both allowed to go home. Keith was able to take his first bath in peace in a comfortable warm setting, and when it hit him that he’d passed the worst of it, that he could finally sleep in his bed again, it was like the planets aligned.

It was the first time he’d been home since he ran out that stormy night, after Pidge thought he’d
killed Shiro. That was a world ago. When he got to look around his house again, for the first time in what felt like forever, he almost cried. Red came up to greet him immediately, purring against his leg in pure bliss.

And even still, weeks later, it’s unbelievably nice to be back home. He’s grateful for it everyday.

They both can’t believe it. Shiro is home. Keith is home. Shiro’s parents can kiss him goodnight. They can tell him they love him and he can return that, write those letters of gratitude out for everyone that he thought he’d never get the chance to. And he does. He writes them all out to everyone. To Keith too, who keeps it in the nightstand next to his bed, folded carefully there, where he won’t ever lose it.

Shiro’s college has been in contact with him. He’s been concerned that his arm won’t be able to keep up now, like it used to, but they’ve been gracious with him. They’re giving him a year to get used to it, and he thinks he can do it. He really does. It works out really; it gives Keith time to catch up to him. Then they can go out into the world, together.

Keith’s happy, he really is, but he misses his partner in crime. Keith misses being able to turn on his side in bed and see Shiro laying out beside him. Misses the way he could just climb up on Shiro’s chest whenever he sought comfort. He finds himself looking to the window seat several times a day, words and a smile already on his lips as he goes to get Shiro’s attention, only to realize that he’s through the forest, a few neighborhoods down. He can text him, sure, call him anytime. And Shiro always answers, even when he’s halfway through washing his hair, dripping wet from the shower or mouth full of food. Even when it’s three in the morning and Keith’s desperate and sobbing from nightmares, from memories.

Shiro always answers.

The first time Keith gets a nightmare, he’s not expecting it. With everything going on, it’s been easy to put dark thoughts into the back of his mind, so he feels like he’s on cloud nine. He’s just in his home, relaxing on his bed, curling up with Red in his arms, talking on the phone with Shiro and his warm velvety voice for a few solid hours. He feels like the luckiest person in the world. He falls asleep with a smile on his face.

But somehow, defenseless in unconsciousness, that darkness surges up from the confines of his mind and that sticky prickly feeling of fear at the edges of his gut is back again, with a vengeance.

He’s in Haggar’s room, suffocated by that awful stench. There are the candles at his feet, lit and flickering despite the stillness of the air. Their fire is warm on his face. There are marks of chalk against the floor, its powdery dust on Keith’s fingertips. And there’s Zarkon.

Zarkon digging his way up from the well, skin hanging off his bones, blood pouring from his eyes and the corners of his lips as he rises up and over the edge, focused on Keith, coming after Keith.

And he’s alone again, lost in the forest. Shiro’s nowhere to be found.

“Shiro?” Keith breathes, taking a step back, but then the puddle of water becomes a vice and it grabs at him, pulls him down, deeper, until he’s trapped.

“Shiro!” Keith panics, twisting. It has him. He can’t do anything. Zarkon’s dragging himself limply across the ground like some sort of possessed doll and Keith screams as he catches him. As Zarkon claims his leg again, in his dreams, and tries to drag him under. He rises up, clutching his unyielding hands to Keith’s throat, crushing him. He’s choking the life out of him. Again. Keith squirms and fights, but it’s no use. He can’t survive this twice.
Keith awakens with a start, his chest heaving.

His leg is killing him. He can feel Zarkon with the knife, stabbing into him again and again and he tries to choke down a sob. His leg isn’t there. He grabs at the empty space that pains him, but it’s phantom pain, a ghost, it doesn’t exist. But he feels it.

He looks to the window seat - but it's empty...

He grabs for his phone clumsily, accidentally knocking it off the dresser. It clatters to the ground, scaring Red off the end of his bed, and Keith has to heave himself off to follow it.

Shiro answers on the second ring. “Keith?” He mumbles blearily.

“H-hey.” He’s panting. His voice trembles.

He hears Shiro immediately sharpening, coming around. “...Hey,” he murmurs quietly. Keith can hear his blankets shifting.

“He... He’s dead, isn’t it?” Keith breathes. “He’s dead. We saw him die.”

“He’s gone, Keith,” Shiro says quietly.

“Because...” He swallows hard, eyes darting to the door, to the window. “Because I saw him. I saw him again. Maybe he’s come back. Maybe death wasn’t enough. He was crawling out of the well. There was blood...everywhere. I- I think I did it. I think I summoned him in my sleep. There was...there was chalk on my fingers. You’re not safe. We can’t fight against him like this, not when he’s dead. Not as a ghost. We’re helpless. He’s going to kill us.”

“Keith, shh,” Shiro whispers gently. “Take a deep breath. Come on. Let me hear it.” He waits a moment while Keith forces an unbalanced wheeze in. “...Good. Now, look down at your fingers. Is there chalk there?”

Keith holds them out, trying to see in the darkness. He shifts and turns on the light. Looks down hard. They’re shaking so hard he can’t see for awhile. “...No,” he whispers when he’s finally sure. “No, there’s nothing.”

“You wouldn't do that, Keith.” Shiro says. “You wouldn't use that side of you for bad. I know.”

He cringes and grunts as pain stabs through his leg. “I felt him though,” he breathes out, closing his eyes tightly and reaching for that gap where his leg should be. “He had my leg again. I can feel it. I can feel it. It’s like he’s twisting it up from the inside out. It hurts.”

“The phantom pain again...?” Shiro whispers. He shifts the phone.

“I killed him, Shiro,” Keith whispers roughly. “I killed him. He was a person. A living, breathing person with a soul. There will be some sort of judgement over my head for that, won’t there be?”

“You didn’t, Keith.”

“I did! I felt his blood on my hands. I plunged the knife right into his beating heart. It was warm...”

“No, Keith. Zarkon was trying to kill us both. You saved us. You saved me. And I could never thank you enough.”
Keith can hear the sound of a door closing as he tries to let that thought settle in his mind.

He runs a hand across his brow, trying to rub out the worn tension there. “...What are you doing?” Keith asks.

“Me? Talking to you. Want to go somewhere? The beach. We can go to the beach.”

“Yeah,” Keith whispers, closing his eyes. “Yeah, I don’t want to think about this anymore. Let’s go there. Anywhere but here. What will it be like?”

“Well. It will just be you and me. Everyone else is off having fun elsewhere. The sand will be warm and soft beneath our toes. We can bring all your art supplies - that plein air kit you like - and we’ll just lounge by the shore. I hear the salt water helps with pain. Maybe we can go float on the waves for awhile too.”

The knot of pain in his chest lessens. His leg that’s not really there calms.

“Actually, I was thinking we should go soon. Not just talk about these things anymore, but really go. We can do that now.”

“Hmm...” Keith hums raggedly. “Easy for you to say. You and your hotshot new arm.”

He hears Shiro chuckle warmly on the other end.

“You’ll get it soon,” Shiro assures. “It’s been looking a lot better lately.”

“...I’m glad you’re doing better, Shiro. ...Really. I’m sorry for calling so late...”

“I get nightmares about it too,” Shiro murmurs gently.

“I’m sorry,” Keith whispers. “I was hoping you wouldn’t remember.”

“...Me too,” Shiro says.

Keith sniffs, rubbing at his face. Now that the panic has receded, he feels stupid for calling Shiro over something so little. “Sorry,” he says again. “I’m okay now. Thank you, Shiro.”

“Don’t hang up,” he hums.

Keith turns to the clock. “It’s three. You need your rest. I’m tired anyway... I’m going to try to go back to sleep.”

“Kay,” Shiro whispers. “But still don’t hang up. I’m staying with you.”

A smile perks up on the corner of Keith’s lips. “Oh, yeah?”

“Mhmm. Keep me close.”

“Okay,” Keith whispers. He can hear Shiro shifting around still and, with his eyes gently closed, he can picture him lying peacefully in his own bed, sheets pulled up, head resting on his soft
pillow.

Shiro’s so good. He’s there for Keith whenever he needs him, voice gently talking him down from the edge of his panic. Keith falls asleep with his phone in his hand, connection still secured.

He’s sleeping soundly when he stirs. He’s not sure what woke him, but he looks over to the window spot by reflex.

His eyes meet two silver moons. Shiro.

He’s kneeling beside Keith’s bed, shoving his face up to Keith’s. He slips the phone from Keith’s loose grip and ends the call.

“Hey,” he says softly, brushing the hair from Keith’s face. It’s dried and stuck to Keith’s skin and it cracks softly as he pulls it away.

Keith moans softly, surfacing from sleep. When he finally blinks his eyes awake, he lets them rest on Shiro for a long moment. A smile warms his face.

“Hey,” he whispers. “It’s like old times.”

“Only this time, if your parents wake up and come in here, they’re kicking my butt and not yours.”

“Yeah, right, they kiss the ground at your feet,” Keith chuckles, rolling his eyes. He watches Shiro again, the way he’s cut out so solidly before the moonlight, and then he scoots over, patting the bed beside him. “Come in here. It’s cold.”

Shiro slips in, snuggling up close to Keith for warmth. He wraps his arms around Keith’s core and pulls him in.

“Wait a second...” Keith murmurs, leaning back so he can see Shiro’s face. “How’d you get in here?”

“Window.”

“Window? But I’m on the second floor...”

“Tree.”

“You climbed the tree?”

Shiro shrugs innocently.

“Shiro, are you serious?” He scowls. “Why would you do that? Use the damn door next time; you’re going to break your neck. And then what’ll I do? I can’t save you from that.”

“I’m strong. It’s perfectly safe.”

Keith huffs, seriously a bit irritated. “Please be more careful. You’re still weakened, you know that. And you’re still getting used to your prosthetic. I can’t believe you.”

“Okay. If it makes you happy, I’ll sneak in some other way next time. Hide a key beneath a stone outside?”

Keith sighs and leans his head against his shoulder. “Good. I’ll get you one.”
Keith snakes his hand into Shiro’s prosthetic one, raising it up above their heads. The ring Shiro had given him is still there on Keith’s hand, shining in the moonlight as he twines their fingers together. He thinks it’d only be fair if, soon, he got Shiro one too.

Shiro’s new arm is weird to look at, even for Keith. It’s foreign and clunky and awkward, not smooth and graceful like everything else Shiro is.

And still, it’s a part of him. Keith brings it down to his lips, pressing a kiss to it. It’s cold, but Keith’s used to that. He has the heater part of Shiro snuggled right against him.

Shiro squeezes his hand tightly.

“What an adventure we’ve had...” Keith yawns as he snuggles Shiro’s arm close to his chest and closes his eyes.

“Are you still in pain?”

“No,” he whispers. “Not anything bad. I’m okay. What about you?”

“I’m all good,” he says. “Alive.”

“Mm. Always good. How long are you going to stay?” Keith hums sleepily.

“Indefinitely,” Shiro jokes.

“Good.” Keith clings to him. With Shiro at his side, his nightmares fade.

The next night when Keith startles awake, heart pumping, limbs aching, Shiro’s already there, sitting at the window seat, his silver hair glowing in the moonlight. Keith doesn’t even say anything, he just reaches his arms out and Shiro’s there beside him, whispering, “I had a nightmare. You were dead. You were dead and I was helpless.”

Keith nods. “Me too, but about you.”

They start doing that each night, more often than not. They’ve gotten uneasy without the other and it makes them susceptible to nightmares alone. It works out for the both of them. By morning, Shiro sneaks out and no one is the wiser.

It’s one morning, a few weeks later, that Keith wakes to Shiro’s face pressed into his neck, their bodies plastered together beneath his blankets, limbs tangled. Shiro usually leaves before then, but he’s slumbering so peacefully that Keith just doesn’t have the heart to let that happen. He turns the phone’s soft alarm off and brushes his fingers through Shiro’s hair happily, thinking he’ll wake Shiro up when he absolutely must.

But Shiro is so golden, so warm and beautiful and he smells so comforting, like home, that the rest of the world melts away and Keith drifts right back to sleep.

And then someone’s knocking on the door and he’s jerking awake.

Shiro inhales sharply, pulled from sleep unprepared. Red hops away from her newfound favorite place on Shiro’s belly. He looks to Keith in horror.

“Keith, are you awake? I thought you were going to try to go to school today.” It’s Krolia.

“Shiro,” Keith hisses, turning his eyes to Shiro. “Hide.”
“Hide?” He turns his head to the closet, but it’s across the room. The door handle turns and Shiro rolls off the bed, landing like a cat to the ground, pressing himself into the side of the mattress.

Krolia comes in, leaning on the doorway, his dad right beside her.

She arches an eyebrow. “Decide not to go?”

“No, we’re going to go. I just...I forgot to set my alarm... I’ll get ready now.”

“Keith, wait,” she says, walking in.

His gut clenches as he tries not to look to Shiro to give his location away. “What is it?” He asks.

She sits on the end of his bed and sighs, turning a look up to his dad, seeking support. “We’ve been wanting to talk to you, honey... I - I know you said you’d like to wait to have this discussion, but I think it’s time. You’re doing great. There’s no need to hide from it anymore.”

Keith takes in a deep breath and sighs it out.

“Too early in the morning for you?” Krolia asks.

“...No, it’s not that. I know you’re right. I just...it’s easy to stay as we are.”

“Blissfully ignorant?” She raises an eyebrow at him. “That doesn’t sound like you.”

“No, I...I’m afraid of what you think of me. Of where we all stand. Things are alright now...”

“I know,” she whispers. “I know you’re afraid... That’s why I think it’s important we talk about it now.

“We owe you an apology, Keith,” she says quietly, reaching forward to hold his hand. He lets her. His eyes fall down to them clasped tightly together. “We truly thought sending you to the home would be what was best for you. I thought you were having hallucinations. I thought you were in real danger of hurting yourself -”

“-Mom, I know.”

She takes a deep breath. “Well...then you also know, back when my sister started having the same sort of hallucinations, I... I was young then. Practical. Not a huge imagination... I wasn’t sure which way to help her, if I should choose to believe her and risk encouraging her further into what I thought were delusions, or choose to try to get help for her... We chose the latter and I thought...I thought maybe it helped prolong her life.

“I was afraid when it started happening to you, Keith. I was afraid that, if I did something differently, if I listened to what you were saying and truly believed it, would I hurt you more than I hurt her? Would it throw you into more delusions? Sink you into it faster? I didn’t stop to listen. You would think I would’ve already learned by then...” She swallows hard, holding his hand tighter. “...With Zarkon, back then... We had gone to school together. I had several classes with Honerva, I knew her. I knew she wouldn’t just choose anyone, so, by association, I assumed the kind of man he was...and didn’t realize the kind of man you were.”

She heaves a sigh. “I’m not making sense, am I? I’ve been nervous to have this conversation too. I don’t want to blow it with you. It seems like that’s all I ever do...”

Keith watches her face, the anxiety there, the frustration with herself. She takes shit from no one.
Keith’s seen her hold her own against her bosses without a hint of hesitance. He’s heard tales of her scaling the tallest mountains, rock climbing in the harshest parts of the desert, diving deep into the sea. There’s nothing she can’t do, calm and without fear.

Except for this. She gave it all up...for this. And though her hand trembles, she holds him tightly.

She turns her eyes to him, desperation there. “I guess what I’m trying to get around to is this: ...you were really talking to him, weren’t you? Shiro. He’s been with you this whole entire time.”

Slowly, hesitantly, he nods.

It’s hard to admit it. Any other time he has, it’s blown up in his face. And despite where he wishes this conversation could go, he prepares for the fallout.

Krolia nods too. “Okay,” she says. She’s quiet for awhile as she thinks hard. She closes her eyes and nods again. “Okay. ...I believe you.”

It’s the way she says it. Firm and strong, like it’s fact. Like she’s accepted everything she ever thought he lied about as fact.

That’s all he’s ever wanted. He couldn’t even dare to hope. Everything’s been going so right lately, he was happy to just accept everything as it’s been. He’d be grateful for that.

But this. This feels like a gift he never thought his parents could give. He feels a load lift from his shoulders. He bites at his lip and nods his head. His throat tightens as emotion overwhelms him as what's happening sinks in. “...Mom...”

“I’m sorry,” Krolia whispers. “I’m so so sorry. The pain I’ve caused you... You were right all along. You told the truth about your leg, about Shiro, about Zarkon, about yourself and we turned from you. Keith, you deserved so much better than that... We’re your parents. We should’ve fought by your side no matter what, but we...I wasn’t there for you.” She swallows hard. “You’ve been such a good person. Patient. Kind. Forgiving. Despite everything we’ve done to you. That’s all you. And I promise you - I promise - from now on, it’s you and me. No matter what.”

“And me,” his dad says from up above.

“Yes,” she says firmly, the fire in his eyes burning strong. “And Acxa. And even Red. It’s all of us, as a family. Us against the world. This whole thing with Shiro...” She nods her head, biting at her lip. “I get what you mean now, when you said you just...feel it in your gut. Something happened with you and him. If you say you saw him these past months as a ghost, then you saw him. If you say he saved you, then he saved you. I believe you. Okay? I believe you. I believe everything.”

He sniffs, trying to fight the tears that overflow and pour from his eyes. “I’m so glad,” he whispers roughly. “I’ve wanted that for so long.”

“I know, honey,” she whispers back, her nose crinkling as she watches him cry. “I know. I’m here now, okay?”

“Okay.” He clings to her, fingers trembling as he leans forward to cling to her tighter. She holds him back, brushing his hair back gently. “Okay.”

He leans back, holding his arm out for his father. “Dad.”

His dad smiles warmly and kneels down beside them, gathering them both up into his arms.
“I believe you too, Keith,” his dad says lowly. “If there’s any way we can make it up, then know, you can ask.” He says so little, but he’s no less genuine. Keith can see the warmth and love in both of their eyes.

“I’m not mad,” he whispers. “I was afraid. I thought I wouldn’t be strong enough to save Shiro, but it turns out I was...” He smiles crookedly at his mom. “And you were there, in a way...all that saved me out there with the knife, I learned from you.”

She nods quickly, tears dropping from her cheeks. “Next time, I promise you, you won’t be alone again.”

“Oh, Keith says softly. “I’m going to hold you to that. Next time, I’ll come to you. I won’t try to hide anything.”

“Yes. Please do.”

“You too,” Keith says, breaking away from them. They all settle back, still comfortably close, smiling at each other. “If you start seeing things...I won’t judge.”

She chuckles a little, relief on her face. “...Thank you, Keith,” she whispers, grabbing his hand in hers again. “...My greatest fear has always been losing you. I just never imagined it could’ve been like this...”

“I’m back. A little less of me than before, but...I’m here to stay.”

She nods, sniffling. “I know you are.”

She squeezes his hand and smiles up at Keith’s dad. “Mind giving Keith and me a moment? There’s one last thing I want to say.”

“Oh, he whispers, swooping down to kiss her on the cheek. She hums into it happily. He pats Keith on the shoulder and, with one last fond look, heads out, closing the door behind them.

“I’ve been thinking about it,” she says lowly. “...I think...maybe my sister saw things. Maybe she was like you.”

Keith nods. “I think maybe you’re right.”

She watches him, her eyes more vulnerable and open than he’s ever seen them. “...You won’t believe the world beyond ours. I couldn’t even see most of it. I just saw Shiro, but still, I... I think maybe she can still hear you. And I’m sure she understands, Mom. I understood why you did what you did, even when I was upset. I still do. I barely believe it myself sometimes and I was the one experiencing it. You can’t blame yourself.”

Keith looks down at the floor, biting his lip. “...You won’t believe the world beyond ours. I couldn’t even see most of it. I just saw Shiro, but still, I... I think maybe she can still hear you. And I’m sure she understands, Mom. I understood why you did what you did, even when I was upset. I still do. I barely believe it myself sometimes and I was the one experiencing it. You can’t blame yourself.”

She watches him, her eyes more vulnerable and open than he’s ever seen them. “...How did you get to be so mature? So sweet? I know you didn’t learn it from me.”

He laughs softly. “It’s the truth. That’s all.”

She leans forward and kisses him on the forehead. “Keith. My little Keith. You’re so grown suddenly. When did this happen...?” She leans back and smiles at him, letting her hands fall to
his. Her fingers brush against the ring on his finger and she stops, looking down to it. He hasn't taken it off since Shiro slipped it back to its rightful place. Krolia takes Keith's hand between hers. “...That boy loves you.”

Keith nods and hums. “Yes. Yes, he does.”

“It looks serious...” She nods toward it. “It’s a beautiful ring.”

“I know what you’re thinking: I’ve only known him for a few months and it takes years to get to know someone, but...he’s special to me. You’ll see. ...I love him, Mom.”

She takes in a deep breath. “I know your situation is so different, more than any of us can ever understand. I definitely don’t disapprove of your relationship, but you’re still a junior in high school, Keith. Please don’t do anything dumb...”

He reddens, rubbing at his face. “I won’t,” he mumbles.

“You’ll tell me if you’re thinking of going off and eloping or running away together, won’t you?”

Keith snorts. “That wouldn’t be eloping if I told you, would it?”

“Keith.” She hums patiently.

“I’d tell you, Mom,” Keith says. “Besides, Shiro spent so long thinking he’d never get the chance for any of this, it’s his dream to get married before everyone we love. He wouldn’t want to do it without you.”

She’s quiet for awhile. “...That’s sweet,” she says softly. “He’s really something.”

He smiles. “I already know. The more you’ll get to know him, the more you’re going to love him. I know that too.”

She pushes herself to her feet. “I’m happy for you both, Keith, really. But just to let you know, I know what you’re hiding in here and I’m not mad...but if your father finds out, I cannot say there won’t be consequences.”

Keith presses his lips together tightly.

“Hi, Shiro,” Krolia says in dry amusement, eyebrow raised.

“H-hello, Mrs. Kogane,” Shiro leans forward, thoroughly embarrassed. He rubs at his hair, face red.

“I told you to call me Krolia,” she says softly. “I won’t tell your father,” she tells Keith. “I know how you help each other. But next time, maybe don’t be so obvious.”

“H-how long have you known?”

“This is my house, Keith. I know what’s going on in it.”

He smiles at her expression. She’s trying to be stern, but he can see the happiness in her face. She loves Shiro too. “Thanks, Mom,” Keith says.

She nods shortly, leaning down to kiss him on the forehead. “Thank you too, honey,” she whispers. “I’m glad we had this conversation.”
“Me too.”

They don’t say ‘I love you’ often. They’re not that kind of family. But maybe they actually do, just not with their words. Keith is still smiling when she turns at the doorway, giving him one last wave. “Have a good day at school, you two,” she says.

And then it’s just them again.

“...That was nice,” Shiro hums as he pulls himself back up onto the bed.

Keith starts to chuckle, low in his throat. “Yeah...but then I thought she was going to kill you.”

“Well...I wasn’t going to let her.”

Keith laughs, hugging him around the center tightly. “That is not funny.”

“You’re the one laughing.” Shiro hugs him back for a moment and then pats his back. “School, then?” Shiro asks.

“Uuurgh, do we have to?”

“Come on, it’s been long enough. I’m getting bored sitting at home all the time.”

Keith groans again.

“You know, back in the well, I did CPR on you. It was a very scary thing for me, so you kinda owe me.”

“CPR? Like mouth to mouth?”

“No. That’s not even relevant anymore, is it? It’s all about the chest compressions now.”

Keith laughs. “That’s devastating. They got rid of the best part.” He looks over at Shiro fondly and groans again at his sparkling hopeful eyes. “Fine. Let’s do it then.”

“When we come back, can we watch something?” Shiro asks.

“Ugh.”

“I’ll let you chooooose,” Shiro sings.

Keith turns a crooked smile in his direction, fitting the sock over what’s left of his right leg. “What if I just want to watch Homeward Bound?”

“No, you don’t,” Shiro laughs. “You definitely don’t. All you do is complain about it.”

“How about this... I’ll let you have control of the remote, but in return, you let me draw you.”

“You can draw me anytime you’d like for free. You don’t have to ask.”

“Oh, good, because I did last night, as you slept.”

Shiro looks over at Keith’s sketchbook. He can touch things now, and it’s somehow still a shock for Keith when he sees Shiro flipping the pages open.

“Ah,” Shiro hums. “This is gorgeous...”
“Yes, you are.”

Shiro flicks his gaze up, smiling at him. “Maybe I’ll choose something different this time.”

“Homeward Bound 2?”

“No,” Shiro hums, walking up behind Keith and wrapping his arms around him. “New plan. No t.v. You can draw me. I’ll just watch you.”

“That doesn’t sound very fun for you.”

“...I could watch you all day, Keith. You’re beautiful. You’re everything to me.”

“We have all day,” Keith whispers, pressing up on his tippy toes to kiss Shiro on the mouth. “And the next, and the next...”

“No rushing to get places...”

“No worrying when you’ll disappear next.”

“Or if I’ll make it back to see you tomorrow...”

They smile at each other as they realize it’s true. Their hands are warm in the other, firm and tangible. The ring is warm and secure on Keith’s finger, pressed against both their skin between clasped hands. It glows golden. “Hey...Shiro...?”

“Hm?”

Keith whispers into his mouth, pressing a kiss to his lips. “...Let’s get married. When the lilacs bloom. Maybe not this year. Maybe not the next. ...But we can decide that when we decide that. We have all the time in the world.”

Shiro nuzzles into Keith’s warmth, grabbing his hands in his. “We won’t have to elope.”

“No,” Keith whispers. “Ryou will be your best man. Pidge will be mine. We’ll have it in the park, with the swans, with the ducks.”

Shiro laughs wetly. “Our families will be there. They’ll get to see us get married, Keith... It’s really going to happen... It doesn’t have to just be a dream.”

Something wet and warm falls on Keith’s cheek and he looks up at Shiro’s crying face. Keith smiles. He reaches up to Shiro’s face and wipes them away. He kisses Shiro gently on the mouth. “And graduate together. Buy a house together... Raise our children. Grow old together. Let’s do all those things, with our friends and family along the way. There’s no rush. Let’s do them all.”

Shiro nods, crying softly into Keith's neck as he tries to breathe. “We have time for all that now...”

Keith nods too, squeezing him tightly. “Yes,” he realizes. Really lets it sink it. “We do.”

“No, you’ve gotta - finesse, Keith. Finesse. Oof.”

“I’ve got it, I’ve got it. Stop trying to cramp my style.”

“I’ll let you do you, but first, you’ve got to - ugh - at least learn the basics.” He slams his hands
against the front of the dashboard as Keith slams on the brakes. “Keith.”

“Oh, god,” Pidge despairs from the back. “We’re going to die. I knew I should’ve ridden with Matt.”

Keith tries to press down a laugh, but it bubbles up and out of him anyway as Shiro’s jeep lurches forward. “I’m sorry, this is a lot harder than everyone makes it look.”

“It’s fine,” Shiro grunts, looking up beneath frazzled messy bangs. “You’re doing better than last time. Just...try not to slam on the brakes right after you press on the gas. In what world does that make sense? It’s not just a stop or a go kind of thing, there are speeds in between.”

“I think you’re forgetting I’m kind of at a disadvantage here.”

“You?” Shiro eyes him from the side, fingers still gripping tightly to the handle in the car. “Keith Kogane? Disadvantage?”

“I can’t feel my foot! The pressure’s weird!”

Pidge says, “The jerking of the wheel is what’s making me queasy. And you have two hands.”

Keith barks out a laugh, slamming his foot on the pedal again.

Shiro buckles down. “Oh, god.”

They make it to school alive (somehow) and Keith finds a nice spot to park in...carefully.

Shiro’s slightly winded when the car comes to a complete stop. He tries to draw himself up with as much grace as he can. “Always an adventure with you, Keith,” Shiro breathes out a sigh of relief. He unbuckles his seatbelt and lets his muscles relax against the car seat, small grin on his face.

Keith leans across the center console onto Shiro’s lap. “So? What’d you think? Will I pass my test or what?”

“...Ugh,” Shiro says, pressing his lips together tightly as he chuckles.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I need to regain my balance. Let that be your answer.” Shiro grins back at Keith mischievously before reaching over and patting Keith’s leg gently. They both look out the window nervously, a hushed silence falling over them.

“I’m going ahead,” Pidge says, opening the door and hopping out. “Thanks for the...uh, I guess you could call it ‘ride’. See you out there.”

“See you, Pidge,” Keith hums gratefully.

“Bye, Pidge,” Shiro says.

They both turn nervous eyes to each other. “Ready for your first day back?” Shiro asks.

Keith wrinkles his nose as Shiro quietly points out what Keith’s forgotten, and Keith puts it into gear. “Are you? You were gone longer.”

“I feel like the entire school’s already visited me at home, in my bed. What could be more
awkward than that?”

“Uh, maybe me, having to hide out in Ryou’s room the entire time as I waited for them to leave.”

Shiro laughs, shaking his head. “I told you you could’ve come in, but you basically sprinted out the door and down the hallway before I could get the words out. They’re going to find out sooner or later.” He peeks out the window at the curious faces walking past, staring in and giving Keith a long confused look. “Sooner, I think.”

Keith casts them uneasy looks through the window. “I already know what they’re saying about us.”

“I’m not worried about it,” Shiro whispers, leaning in and kissing Keith on the cheek. He pulls back an inch, eyes flicking up to Keith’s face, soft smile still on his face. When Keith doesn’t move away or protest, Shiro presses his lips to Keith’s gently, opening his mouth with his and kissing him deeper.

People are watching. Shiro knows this. He leans into Keith more, his hand going up to cup the side of Keith’s face.

“Shiro,” Keith hums, breaking off. He arches an eyebrow, patient smile on his face. “Overdoing it?”

“Let them think what they want to,” Shiro whispers. “We’ve just been to hell and back. I couldn’t care less about their opinions. Can you?”

Keith hums, thinking about it. He never used to care before, that was true. But it’s different now. Shiro’s reputation is on the line.

And Shiro doesn’t care. Shiro just wants Keith.

Keith, with a wide grin, leans in to kiss Shiro back.

They hold hands on the way through the parking lot. Shiro holds his head as high as he ever did, eyes clear. Keith thinks it’s amazing how he can do that. He can feel the weight of their past weeks weighing on him. He knows what everyone’s thinking about as they look over, all the questions they’ll be bombarded with.

“It’s like that one Florence Nightingale syndrome,” someone mutters. “Shiro’s only with him because he thinks he owes him.”

“I heard Shiro’s deferring a year so they can go off to college together.”

They gasp scandalously. Keith scowls.

“Well, they’re not wrong about the Florence Nightingale syndrome,” Shiro leans in, poking Keith in the ribs.

Keith squawks, elbowing Shiro away from his poor ticklish ribs. “I’m pretty sure they were talking about you though. That’s not even right. That’d be me with the syndrome.”

“Mmhmm,” Shiro hums happily into his hair, sneaking a hand around Keith’s waist so that they could rock back and forth together. “Works for me.”

“Hey.” Pidge jumps at his side, looping her arm through his. It’s tradition.
“Pidge,” he greets happily, leaning over so he presses his side onto her head. “Feeling better from the drive? You looked kind of green.”

“Uh, you know, I think next time, I might want to ride with Matt. Though he keeps pestering me to learn...”

“I’ll talk to him about that,” Shiro hums, looking over. “If you’re anything like Keith, I can’t possibly let you drive in good conscience.”

“Hey!” Keith shouts.

Pidge laughs. “Wow, even Shiro admits you’re bad.”

“It’s not like a weak point,” Keith denies.

“It’s cute,” Shiro says.

“Oh,” Pidge mouths leaning in close to Keith to whisper, “And there it is.”

Keith blushes, nudging her away.

Pidge says, “You know you can get a mod for your car so you can use your left leg for the pedals and not the right.”

“And we can get a mod for your seat since your legs probably won’t even reach the pedals.”

Pidge becomes a ball of raging flying limbs.

Keith laughs, trying to ward her off. “Ow, ow, ow! Okay, okay, I was joking. It was a joke! I don’t need anything special. I can drive just fine as it is.”

“Me too!” Pidge jumps up to pull at his ear one last time for good measure and then sighs, rolling her eyes and shaking her head in amusement. “Same old Keith. It’s weird,” Pidge says, looking down at his prosthetic leg. It’s hidden beneath his clothes. It feels awkward and he knows he’s walking funny but Shiro swears he’s doing amazing, so he tries to pretend he agrees. “Seeing you walk like this. You seem to be getting the hang of it quickly.”

“They said they’d never seen such a natural,” Shiro says proudly.

“They tell that to everyone,” Keith hums, glaring down someone who looks like they’re just curious enough to approach them. “Besides, I’ve had a lot of practice not using this shitty leg.”

Pidge hums. “Still cool. I can’t wait until Matt and I finish with your new limbs. You’re both going to love them. We might be able to finish them by Christmas. This one sucks the way it was designed.”

“Pidge, I already told you that’s too much. How could we repay you?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that.”

“Oh, yeah?”

She starts to grin. “Remember when you’d toss me on your back and you’d run through those fields behind the school?”

He starts to smile too. “I might.”
“Well...” She shrugs casually. “I’ve kinda missed it.”

He tries to press down his grin for how wide it’s getting. Shiro watches his face fondly and squeezes his hand as Keith chuckles out softly, “I think I can do that.”

“Yeah? Not yet, but...one day. I mean, I wouldn’t mind if you wouldn’t mind. I’ll make sure your leg’s ready for that.”

“Yes,” he breathes as he realizes it doesn’t have to be a memory anymore, that he *can* do it. “Yes.” He turns to Shiro, stars in his eyes. “That sounds fun, doesn’t it, Shiro?”

Shiro grins brightly. “I can’t wait to see you run.”

“Yes! I’ll run everywhere! I haven’t been able to do it in so long.” Just thinking about it sparks something in Keith and he’s ready to try it *now*.

“Easy there, Keith,” Shiro chuckles. “We’ll build up to it.”

He nods, trying to center himself. “Right, right.” Keith smiles happily, leaning into Shiro’s arm, absorbing the rays of gentle sunlight.

He ignores the conflicted looks people give him as Shiro pulls him closer and presses a kiss to the top of his head.

He feels so lucky to be here. Alive. Between his two favorite people. He can see Hunk across the quad, turning, face lighting up as he catches sight of them. Lance blinks in surprise as he turns too. And Matt, he’s coming over. Lotor. Ryuu.

They don’t have to worry about anything. They’re safe, hearts so full.

Everything’s all come together.

Everyone’s here.

Keith and Pidge walk out into the field after school, dragging their drawing boards behind them, seeking out the bleachers. The sun is shining for once, though a few clouds tease them on occasion.

Keith sits, shifting his legs out in front of him and Pidge crosses hers right at his side. She tosses him an earbud and puts on some music as he heaves his board onto his lap and looks up at the forests’ thick trees and lush green. Then he lets his gaze wander downward, to the two people messing around on the grass down below.

And they draw.

It doesn’t take Shiro long to realize that they’re there. When he does, he bounces up and down on the field.

“Heyyyyy!” Shiro waves. He’s positively beaming.

Keith looks up and laughs, raising his own arm and waving madly.

Shiro runs over, snatching Keith’s pencil away from him and leaning down to kiss Keith on the mouth. He’s sweaty - it’s really bad, and he smells like it too, salty and heady. Keith can taste it in
on his lips.

Keith groans as he laughs, pretending to push Shiro away, pressing his hands into Shiro’s collarbones. “You’re all sweaty.”

“Hello to you too,” Shiro chuckles breathlessly. “Is this what’s bothering you?” he says, kissing Keith’s temple.

“Augh.”

“And this?”

He peppers kisses all along Keith’s scalp and then down his nose and over his eyes.

“Shiro,” Keith laughs, wrapping his arms around Shiro’s neck to trap him closer. He pulls him back, sending Shiro off balance.

His eyes widen and he lets out a brief, “whoa!” before collapsing on top of Keith. “Oh - Keith -”

“There,” Keith says. Shiro’s still sweaty and hot from running around and Keith holds him tightly in his arms, pressed close together. “Much better.”

Shiro lets out a breathy laugh and hums lowly as he tries to shift some of the weight off of Keith and onto his knees. “...Yeah?”

Pidge groans in agony behind them and Keith’s smile only widens as he brings Shiro’s face to his with both hands. He kisses him deeply for a moment like he’s been deprived of this for too long, even though they had just spent the last half of their class period sneaking out and kissing behind the locker room. He can never get enough of Shiro. And then he pats him on the chest.


Shiro swallows hard and nods a little breathlessly. He looks down at the drawing in Keith’s lap, a grin on his face. “You’re finishing it.”

“Yeah. You’ve kept me waiting...”

Shiro laughs.

“So go out and model for me. When you’re done, we can go out for dinner.”

“Sounds good.” Shiro pushes away to run off, thinks better of it, and then leans in to press another kiss to Keith’s nose before backing off for real. He presses a kiss to the palm of his hand and blows it toward Keith. “I love you,” he says, warmth in his eyes.

“I love you too,” Keith whispers, catching the kiss in his hand and pressing it to his chest. He blows a kiss to Shiro and he catches it too, gently easing it over the mark on his chest.

Shiro laughs and runs, waving.

Pidge is sitting there, judging them hard, mouth pulled down at the corners.

“Sorry,” Keith laughs breathlessly, grabbing his pencil back and bending over his drawing.

“God. I so called it, didn’t I? You’d be the sappy boyfriend. I just didn’t realize that there’d be two sappy boyfriends in one. I almost just died from oversappiness exposure. I’m not sure how
you’re both still standing honestly.”

Keith snorts.

Pidge rests her chin onto his shoulder and looks down at the drawing in his lap. “...That looks amazing,” she says.

"Thanks, Pidge."

“I can't believe you finally get to finish it after all these months. You're like a different person by now. Did you tell him about the award ceremony?"

"Nope."

Pidge laughs. “You’re just going to take him to the award ceremony...where, like three hours away? And just surprise him then?”

“That’s exactly right. He doesn't know it's by the coast either. He's letting me drive. I told him I just wanted to practice.”

“Oh god. Shiro's a brave man putting so much trust in you. I bet he won’t even blink when you just go on a three hour practice drive. But then...I guess you've earned it.”

“Hmm...” He starts to sketch Shiro out fondly, eyes glazed over as he smiles. There's nothing he loves to draw more.

“Aaaaand you’re gone again,” Pidge laughs under her breath, turning her eyes up to Keith and smiling at what she sees on his face: fondness and warmth, free to do what he loves. She leans her head on his shoulder and watches him at his work. “...All is right in the world.”

It is. They stay there, drawing, content, until the sun begins to set, casting a warm hue over the field, bathing them in a gold fit for kings.

There's a silhouette pressed against the sky, a crow sitting alone on a branch. It watches them for a moment, but then it hops from its perch, taking flight deeper into the backdrop of the sky, twisting into the soft fluffy clouds over the horizon.

Keith watches it go. He looks down at the mess of graphite on his hands - thinks of how it could be chalk. It could be, if he chose it.

But why would he...? He turns his eyes up to Shiro, at his goodness, at his light, at his energy. Keith smiles into it. He already has everything he wants.

They’re together now. They’ll always be together.

Keith and Pidge get to draw together again.

Shiro’s back to playing football with his best friend.

All is right in the world.

It's a perfect day.
Hey, everyone! This has been such a ride. I want to thank each and every one of you for reading this. For all the sweet comments, messages, art, fanfic, and song recommendations that I received! This has been such an amazing experience and I'm so grateful to each and every one of you!

A big big thank you to my beta, Hino, for hanging in there through this monster of a fic that just kept growing, haha. And for Clari, for being my cheerleader and illustrator (haha!) through this. Also, thank you to Fan for helping me fact check!! I appreciate you all!!

I know everyone was expecting a wedding! I want one for them too. I've been thinking about it for a long time now; I'm such a sucker for weddings... But I want to make it a wedding they deserve and I can't wrap that up in a single chapter, so expect a second part to this in a few months. There are other things I want to touch on as well. Keith and Shiro's trauma, for one. They've met Death, they're not out of this experience unscathed. But they have each other finally, so everything will be alright. <3

Here is my twitter one last time, ahah.

You are all wonderful!! I wish you all well. ＾ω＾！♡

P.S. I also have a little playlist because I'm lame like that. Bye.

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