every breath you take

by arahir

Summary

Keith takes a swim, gains a secret admirer, and finds something to live for.

There's a cut on his bottom lip, a row of tiny lacerations that smart when he pulls at them to get a better look.

He doesn't notice the bruise on his upper arm until the next day. He catches the edge of it at the corner of his eye when he's pulling on a fresh shirt: blue lines, like stripes, but when he turns and twists to see how they ring his arm, he realizes what they look like.

The lines are like fingers. It's a handprint.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This is at a much different pace and style than most of what I write, but I hope you enjoy it anyway. Also a special thanks to stardust, steph, curleddoodle and clari who are always inspirations and whose mermaid art was mmmm //chefs kiss

and... i am so sorry for the title. it does not fit the fic but it does... it does.....

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The cliffs seem like a good idea, in his defense. They say at the top of the hill, there’s a spot you can watch the sun meet its reflection and Keith wants to see it at least once in his life. He’s been living on the beach a month when he decides to brave the climb.

The shack is quiet. No one goes so far out. There’s one paved road that goes to the local fire training station, but Keith’s beach is a dirt road drive of more miles than any tourist wants to make time for on the one day they allotted for the peninsula. It’s on a white sand cove with tall rocks and one picturesque sea stack. He spent the whole first day kicking sand to see the pink beneath the white.

It’s shell, Kolivan told him when Keith asked, with something faintly amused. The entire beach, shell and bits of coral broken up by shrimp and parrot fish and waves and wind. Kolivan explained it and showed him the breakers in the distance, where the waves hit the reef. He’d shown Keith how the solar panels connect to the power and how to turn on the water and where his Dad’s old box of books was, and then he’d left and Keith was alone in earnest, with a month’s supplies and a number to call if anything happened—and a promise he’d be back in a few days to check on him, anyway.

Quiet is what he wanted. He tells himself it’s a good thing as he lies awake that first night, listening to the waves heave themselves up the beach.

It’s the second time he’s been to the ocean. The desert was silent. The city wasn't, but it all paled out to white noise. The water is different. He can feel it under his hands when he sits on the beach watching it. The waves are deceptive, quiet. Their white foam edges chase up the shore, grasping and hissing before they slip back, casualties of gravity, pulling all things in after them. He has the irrational fear that if he’s careless, if he lets them lap at his feet, they’ll pull him in, too,

Don't turn your back on it, Kolivan said, one of his tidbits of parting wisdom.

Keith had laughed, but Kolivan had frowned and insisted. It doesn’t matter how well you swim; if the current grabs you, you can’t fight it—and Keith is new to the ocean, for all that it feels familiar.

After a month, he's getting the gist. Sometimes when he's sitting on the beach, there's a sense like the ocean is holding its breath for him. And sometimes when he walks up from the dock, he gets the cold, phantom drip of water down his spine that makes him feel like he's being watched.

But it's quiet. No one comes out so far.

The cliffs above the sea are white chalk and steep, but there's a trail from the shack that he can pick his way up, lined in tall grass and little glassy flowers that cling to the rock with long tendril roots.
He likes hiking. There's a studious care to it that means he can't think too deeply about anything but where to put his feet, and he's good at that. Or—he was.

He goes up to see the sunset. His dad talked about it once, the way the sun met its reflection in the waves and how if you were lucky and if the sky was clear and if you didn't blink, sometimes you could see the sun on the waves and then through them. Green fire, and the most beautiful thing he ever saw.

By the top of the hill, he's more than out of breath, but it's old news. The sun is dipping toward the horizon when he starts; by the crest, it's low and bloody. He clears himself a spot in the rock and grass to watch and wait and breathe. He focuses on the sun and lets it burn against his eyes.

The light starts to fade out on the horizon, a hemisphere of perfect light that glitters in the water. It sets without fanfare, a little, slow death. No green, but he didn't really expect it and the disappointment doesn't bite. It was worth it just to stretch his legs.

It was worth it to try.

The downhill is what gets him. It’s always harder and he always forgets.

The desert was more forgiving. You could pick a trail there in the dark by starlight and moonlight, but after sunset the fog starts rolling in, thick as soup. He measures his steps, tries to remember the path down but his breath is starting to sting in his chest. Later, it will feel like a dream.

He doesn't realize he's off the path entirely until he can feel the flowers crushing under his feet. He used to be good at this, he reminds himself. He used to be good at a lot of things. He can smell the salt, feel the spray of it on his cheek like a kiss.

And then he feels it in his chest: an ache, old a horrid. His next breath stings on the inhale.

He missteps. The ground crumbles under his foot before he can catch himself and the shock isn't the fall but that he keeps falling, like misjudging the height of a step, that moment of suspension before the hard landing.

But it isn't. The ocean is what reaches up to catch him. The cold of it shocks the last of his breath out. He's a good swimmer, but not without air, and the waves are unrelenting against the rocks. He has an instant to register the cold shove of water against his body in the dark and then whites out in pain as his head cracks against the rocks.

Breath and thought leave him utterly, except that it’s funny in a distant way that he still wants to fight it.

And then reality shifts. He feels lips on his. A mouth, wide and hard, and air flooding his lungs. He tries to pull back but there’s an arm around his chest and a hand buried in his hair, keeping him pressed in tight, forcing air into his lungs. There’s still water in his throat—he pushes back with the last of his strength and breaks the surface, gasping for air, coughing.

He blacks out then because he still can’t get air and it’s that old familiar burn, a tightness in his chest, ruining him.

It abates with agonizing slowness and he realizes he's on hard land—the dock. There’s the grain of wood under his cheek, rough and worn, and a hand petting him with frantic care, pushing back his hair and tracing his face. He rolls and coughs, but when he looks to see whose hand is on his back, the touch disappears and there's nothing there but open sea.
He lies there on the dock, feeling the water cool on his face and the dragging sting of air in and out of his lungs and tries to remember what happened. It feels like something he'll forget, like a dream he's half woken up from and already losing. By the time he drags himself up and back to the shack, it's gone.

There are no obvious injuries, but his body drags.

When he checks himself in the mirror under the single bulb light, there's a cut on his bottom lip, a row of tiny lacerations that smart when he pulls at them to get a better look. It’s not bad, but it stings when he brushes his teeth. He makes it to the shower without blacking out again and then it's all he can do to pull on his warmest clothes and crawl into bed.

He doesn't notice the bruise on his upper arm until the next day when he catches the edge of it at the corner of his eye when he's pulling on a fresh shirt. Blue lines, like stripes, but when he turns and twists to see how they ring his arm, he realizes what they look like.

The lines are like fingers. It’s a handprint.

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Kolivan picks him up that day. The firehouse’s training station is on the road between the shack and town proper—though it's not much of a town at all. No one's ever explained to Keith why they need a fire station with full-time staff, or why it's miles from town, but he's not going to question a free ride.

“We have some old clothes if you want them,” Kolivan says when he climbs in. It's never a how are you. Keith appreciates that. Kolivan always has little suggestions instead. That place looks like it's falling apart, he says, and then shows up a few days later with a spare can of paint. They're good to him.

He fingers the tear in his shirt. “It's fine.” It's the only shirt he had with sleeves long enough to cover up the evidence of his nighttime adventure.

Kolivan glances back to him pointedly. Years since Keith's Dad passed, and he's eight riding shotgun on some dirt road again. “I can fix it,” Keith amends. A few stitches are all it needs. He’s horrible at it, but he can manage. And he doesn’t need more station shirts; if he wears any more clothing stamped with their logo, people will start assuming his the station’s mascot.

This is just the last survivor of his wardrobe pre-shack. He moved in at the start of summer because it was the only place he had. It seemed better than the alternative. He leans into his seat, staring out the window at the beech trees and grass and lets the sun and fresh air ease him to sleep.

Kolivan wakes him when they get to town with a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Ostensibly he's there to help carry groceries, but it's a thin excuse when Kolivan looks like he could carry Keith under one arm along with the rest of the load. He sees Keith eyeing the pile of apples and throws one to him. “I'll get it.”

“I have money,” Keith says.

Kolivan doesn't deign to reply. The store doubles as the town's sole gift shop and there's a display of books and little glass figures along one wall. Most of it is tacky. No—all of it is tacky, but there's a
book of local myths written for kids on a shelf by the checkout. The cover catches Keith's eye. It's stylized, drawn in blues and greens and curling lines: a mermaid luring some poor fisherman into the sea with pretty eyes while the man's ship runs aground.

"You want that, too?" Kolivan asks. He's not making fun; everyone under the age of 30 is the same age in his eyes, Keith's realized, and they all go in the category of child-to-teenaged entity. He offered Keith a set of abandoned sandcastle making supplies when he'd first moved in—the kind meant for toddlers.

Keith almost said yes.

He's staring at Keith out of the corner of his eye, now, frowning. His eyes flick down to Keith's mouth and back up. The marks around his mouth look worse than they are, and there's a bruise to match, puffing the edge of his lower lip. It doesn't look like anything unless you get close and Kolivan isn't.

Keith reaches across him to grab the book and leaf through it to distract them both. It's children's rhymes. The art inside doesn't match the cover, to a ridiculous degree. Keith holds it open to a page where two buxom mermaids are striking magazine poses. "Really? Who buys this?"

"You'd be surprised."

"What? Do you guys have a copy?"

Kolivan pulls the book out of his hand and sticks it back on the shelf. "The sea is deep," he says sagely, as if that's a common saying that everyone knows. Keith isn't from around here, but it isn't. No one says that.

"Is this like when you guys tried to convince me there were penguins?" Keith huffs. It almost worked. Antok even pulled out photos.

"There are," Kolivan says carefully, "just not here."

Keith squints at him. He didn't answer the question, but Keith isn't going to press it. He isn't sure he wants one. It'll give Antok an excuse to razz him the next time he comes to the station for their pity pizza.

The drive back is as quiet as the drive out, but Keith doesn't fall asleep this time. Kolivan unrolls the windows and goes slow so they can enjoy the air. Everything is in flower and it makes the air smell like honey. He catches Kolivan glancing at him and tries not to sound petulant when he asks, "What?"

Kolivan shakes his head.

When they pull up to the shack, he reaches to the back seat and rummages around for a moment. Keith knows what he’s going to do before he does it and has to resist snapping at him.

"Here." Kolivan sets a bulging bag of groceries in his lap.

This is an old fight. Keith sighs and gears up for the argument. "I don’t need you to—"

"I know." He closes the truck's door with a slam and leans out the window far enough to throw out an, "Eat more," behind him as he pulls away.
That's his summer. Brief pauses for cliff adventures and occasional trips into town or pity meals at the station aside, it's him on the dock, reading or watching the ocean or picking his way over tidepools. He needs time. That's what the doctors said, in so many words. There are worse ways to live.

The beach stretches for miles. He walks as much of it as he can. The tidepools keep him occupied for a full day. Most of his time is spent on the dock, reading. After Kolivan drops him off he grabs an apple and the wrinkle-covered and dog-eared tome he's been working his way through and heads out. It's a short walk: straight out the door and down the old wood stairs to the beach. There's peeling white paint on everything; it was a beautiful home once, though he was too young to remember it.

His hip smarts on the walk down, some other bruise making itself known. It distracts him until he’s almost to the dock, and then he glances up and his breath catches in his chest.

There’s something there, glittering against the wood. Keith can make it out as he gets closer: a line of sea glass, pebbles of blue and green and amber laid out in a row along the edge.

Keith stops. It’s his dock. No one else uses it. No one else comes this far out. His mind scans through every possibility and comes up blank.

Keith picks them up, rolls them between his fingers. They’re smooth in his hand, like little, frosted stones of perfect glass. They’re lined up one every few boards, all the way to the end of the dock. He starts gathering them, making his shirt into a makeshift basket. It’s only when he gets to the last one, perched on the final board of the dock that it occurs to him what he looks like: a child following a trail of candy, right to the spot where something can grab him.

The handprint on his arm, the picture on the stupid book in the grocery store… He almost doesn’t pick up the last one, but then he realizes he’s being ridiculous and grabs it before he jumps back from the water with reasonable speed, not at all scared. Not at all.

It’s the only one that’s white. It looks like a little shard of ice, frosted and glittering. He turns it back and forth in the sun, watching the reflected light play against his hand.

Later, he sets them on the windowsill in the kitchen. It’s the one that faces the ocean and gets the most sun in the afternoon. They cast a little rainbow over the floor.

He falls asleep tracing it with his eyes.

The next morning feels different. The beach is always quiet, but it's never alien, never strange.

There's a low, cool breeze running in through the curtains, the light through them casting shapes against the threadbare old sheets. When he checks in the mirror, the bags under his eyes are mostly dispelled and the bruise on his arm has faded to a dull yellow, and he feels good, for the first time in a long time—good enough to do more than sit on the beach and read and heal.

There's nothing on the dock, nothing on the water when he steps out but there's still something odd in the air that he can't place. Like the wind skittering through his hair, or eyes on his back. But no
one comes out so far. No one but him.

There are tide pools in the rocks at the far end of the beach that he's been meaning to check out since he saw them on top of the hill. It seems like a good way to pass the time and while away the day. Time is, as always, his greatest enemy.

The first shell he finds by accident. It's resting at the bottom of a pool, nestled with anemones and little crabs. It's spiral and spiked, the same bright spectrum as a sunset. He picks it up, shakes out the water and sand, and then closes his eyes holds it to his ear to hear the rush of blood in his head mimic the sea and almost missed the discordant splash of water against the rocks.

When he opens his eyes, it takes a moment to distinguish the difference and then he sees it: another shell resting on the rocks a few yards out.

It was a wave, he tells himself when he picks it up and turns over the pearl-white half-moon in the sun, but he can't believe it.

The persistent sense that he's not alone comes flooding back.

He puts both shells in his bag and decides to call it a day. There are a hundred innocuous things to think about, like buying a guidebook next time he's in town or one of the laminated sheets of shell pictures and names they keep at the kiosk by the door—

When he turns, there's another along the path he picked to get there.

His breath stops in his chest.

There's a natural explanation, but the bruise on his arm still hurts when he forgets to take care and he can see in the distance the spot on the cliff where it gave way under his feet. He didn't pull himself out of the water.

The next day he goes back and finds nothing. There’s no sense of being watched, no errant shells nestled in tidepools for him to find, and maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was chance, but when he trudges his way back to the dock, there's another line of sea glass glittering at him from the end of it. His heart thuds in his ears like the rush of waves against the piles of the dock and he knows it's not in his head. The shells and glass are solid and real and he is being watched.

There are no tracks on the beach.

“Hey,” he says to himself, and then repeats it, louder as he runs to the dock.

Nothing but silence, and then almost imperceptibly, there’s a sound contrary to the waves, the splash of something slipping into water. Under the dock, he thinks and falls to his knees so fast they scrape against the rough wood of the dock. He braces himself on the edge and ducks his head under. Nothing, again, but bars of light glittering through the slats of the dock. The water is clear. It shines down to the sand below and there’s nothing there.

The sense of being watched rushes back in full and hits like primal terror. He raises his head, slowly, and then he sees it yards out like something out of a horror: the top of a head, floating in the water.
A dead body, he thinks for a moment with terror singing through him, but then it rises, slowly.

It’s a man with oil-sheen eyes and pale skin and short slick-dark hair that looks like it was shorn off. The silver strands at the front stick across his face and then Keith realizes what he’s seeing isn’t human—not close. His tail rolls in the water behind him, a momentary shimmer of black scales and silver lacing. He smiles; his teeth are longer than they should be, narrowing to lethal points. He’s beautiful and terrible.

Keith can’t form thoughts past the fear freezing him to the dock. The man—the creature—cocks his head and then ducks under the water a little, until he’s submerged up to the line of scar over his nose, before he rises back up. It’s a shy, nervous gesture—one an animal would make.

“Did you like them?” he asks.

The voice is guttural. His breath makes a soft *whoosh* as he speaks, like the wind around the edges of the shack’s warped screen door at night, and Keith realizes the raised marks below his ears are gills and he’s breathing through them. He cocks his head again, as if Keith is an object of fascination as if Keith is the anomaly here.

The shells. The glass. The feeling of being watched and the mark of a hand around his arm and the line of pin-prick scabs over his lips. He raises a hand to his mouth and the creature’s smile widens. He slides through the waves with the ebb and flow, a few feet at a time, until he’s close enough that Keith can see the size of him at a distance was an illusion. The creature is massive, bigger than any human.

“Did you like them?” he repeats, voice a touch smoother.

Keith’s mouth works for a moment, but he can’t find a reason not to answer. “Yeah,” he hears himself whisper.

The creature’s eyes go bright and he smiles wider. That’s—a lot of teeth. That’s more teeth than a person has. That’s more teeth than anything needs.

“I found them for you,” the creature says. His voice ghosts and echoes in the space between them.

It’s not a dream. Nothing in him could conjure anything this beautiful or this terrible. His arm and hip still ache and the feeling of the sun beating down is too visceral. The sting of salt in the air, the sickly sweet smell of the ocean, the back-and-forth flicker of light on the water and the creature’s tail swirling below. No. Not a dream.

He’s close enough to touch now. He’s been moving closer by little degrees and Keith should run, but there’s something hypnotic in his eyes.

The creature reaches out and grabs the edge of the dock. The motion is sudden, but the way he moves is so fluid, Keith doesn’t flinch back. His fingers are unnaturally long; there’s webbing between them, black as the tips of his fingers, and then he pulls his other hand out of the water and Keith can’t stop himself from a little shudder and intake of breath.

It’s covered in silver scales and tipped in long claws that click against the wood. He should be running—he should be gone. The primal part of him not mesmerized is screaming at him to get away from the water as the creature readjusts his grip on the dock. The spiked appendages bite deep enough into the greyed wood to splinter it.

He pulls himself closer. There’s something sinuous in the way the muscle ripples under his skin. Keith is within reaching distance now, frozen like prey, but the creature sets his elbow on the dock
and leans his cheek on his hand lazily. His eyes are so dark and so bright.

“Who are you?” the creature asks.

It’s Keith’s question. It’s Keith’s dock.

He’s too quiet for too long. The smile falls off the creature’s face. “I’m Shiro,” he enunciates with care, as if it’s hard to speak and he thinks those two syllables might be too much for Keith to understand. It’s a sweet name for something that could kill Keith with a whim and a touch.

“Keith,” he replies faintly, by habit more than anything else. *What are you,* he wants to ask, but the question dies in his throat. It doesn’t matter. It could be a hallucination, something brought on by lack of air. He could be in the shack right now, dreaming this—but the glass was real, and the marks on him are real, too.

The creature’s eyes are flickering back and forth over him, pupils like pinpoints in the grey, lips parted. “I’ll bring you more,” he says with conviction, still searching Keith’s face, and then he slides his hand off the dock and slips back into the water with soundless grace, sinking under it, not taking his eyes off Keith even as the waves cover his head.

Keith stares at the spot where he disappeared for minutes after. Every flicker of dark on the waves looks like his tail, and every glitter of light looks like his scales, and if he moves he’ll lose what he saw.

Keith goes through the rest of his day wide-eyed, pulse pounding at every small sound, but for nothing. He goes back twice to check and see if the claw marks are still there in the wood of the dock. They seem so unassuming in the sun and breeze, and then he bends and angles and sets his hand to match where Shiro’s fingertips dug in and realizes that even splaying his hand out as wide as it will go, the span of the marks dwarfs him by inches.

The next morning, there’s a line of shells where the glass was the first time. It’s early and the sun is still rising over the hills. Keith stares down at the fragments and loses a minute imagining the creature’s—imagining Shiro’s massive hands sifting through sand, picking them out, one by one.

Keith gathers them up and adds them to the collection on the windowsill without thinking about it too hard.

If it’s some fever dream, some byproduct of his night swim, at least it’s a nice one. At least it's harmless. But the shells are always there in the morning and when he shows one to Kolivan on their next trip to town, he picks it up and holds it to the light and there’s real wonder in his eyes. It's real, and he’s sure. Nothing’s felt so visceral since the desert and his bike and the stars drawn by a computer across the cockpit windows in the simulator. All of that is done now and gone like a dream.

The figure waiting for him at the end of the dock is real.

Keith can only see his head peeking up above, the shock of white hair sticking up a little in defiance of gravity and water. He smiles when Keith gets closer and then ducks out of sight.

When he gets there, all that’s waiting is a shard of opalescent shell. It's polished and fine and this is
something Shiro thought he would want. This is something Shiro found for him.

“You can stay,” he yells at the water, shocked at how desperate he sounds.

It takes minutes, but his shoulders rise above the water slowly, inspiring the same primal fear as before; Keith has to wait a moment and breathe before he can speak again. There’s too much to ask. He doesn’t know where to start.

Shiro watches him, the same small, smile on his lips. His mouth twitches, the smile widens, and the teeth aren’t that bad, really. Keith can get used to it.

It becomes a regular thing. Keith goes to the dock in the mornings with his book and breakfast and waits for the familiar feeling of eyes on him. He comes and goes in a breath and he always brings something.

Keith keeps all of it. The glass he leaves on the window to catch the light. The rocks he lines up on the edge of the bookshelf in the bedroom. The shells he spreads on a plate on the table.

Later, he thinks better of it and collects them up in his hand, spreads them out on the kitchen table while he eats the pasta Kolivan foisted on him. He finds twine in a drawer in the kitchen and knots it around each fragment of white and calls himself silly with every twist of his fingers. The result is shoddy and ridiculous and he wars with himself for only the briefest, most requisite minute before he slits it around his neck.

It’s something special. It’s something just for him.

The third day, Keith wakes up to a fish on the dock.

It’s singular and huge and for once, Shiro is waiting unprompted. Keith doesn’t know enough to identify what kind it is, but its blue scales glitter in the morning sun, in horrible fashion. There’s a rent across their perfect shimmer and Keith didn’t know fish could bleed. He didn’t know fish could be that big.

Shiro is leaning on one elbow on the dock next to it, smile blinding and wicked. “Do you like it? I caught it.” Keith could tell.

“I… I don’t think I can eat that much.”

Shiro frowns. “I can.”

The thought is horrific and endearing in equal measure. Shiro makes his scaled hand into a claw and flexes it in the sun as if he needs to prove it.

He’s preening. He’s showing off. Keith covers his mouth to smother the manic little smile trying to sneak across his face. “That’s cool.”

It is, somehow. It reminds him off the thrill of seeing an engine opened up, all the strange, alien pieces coming together to form a thing of pure power.

Shiro glides closer in the water. The reflex to flinch back is still there, but he fights it. The grin on Shiro’s face mirrors Keith’s so he gives up trying to hide it and admires the light on his skin and scale.
The tide is in; he doesn't have to reach far to set his hand on the dock. He lays it there, palm down, like an offering. Keith feels like a child with a new toy, the way the urge to look at something shiny is perennial and consuming. It's inches from his thigh and his fingers are long; if Shiro wanted to grab him, there's no need to be coy about it. He could have had Keith a dozen times over, but the most threatening thing he's done is turn Keith's shack into a cliche seaside curio shop.

Keith reaches out, hesitates for a moment, and then presses down. He draws a finger from Shiro's wrist to the knuckle of his ring finger. The scales feel cold, like metal and polished to a mirror finish. His nail clicks over them with the clear click of coins falling together.

Keith wants to know how it would feel in his hand, on his hand. He wonders if this is what left the mark on his arm, and then wonders why the thought doesn't scare him.

“It's different…”

Shiro's other arm has scales over the back, webbing between the fingers, but it's darker and closer to human.

“It was a prize,” Shiro says, the answer to a question he didn’t ask and can’t begin to parse.

The hand under his turns palm up and then Shiro's fingers close around Keith's hand where it's hovering. He draws Keith forward, urging. “Come in with me.” His hand is bigger than Keith thought it would be, and stronger, too. The tug is gentle, playful. “Are you scared of the water?” he asks when Keith doesn't answer. “I'll help you.”

That's not it. Shiro's hand tightens. He could hold Keith's wrist in the same grip with the smallest shift. Keith draws a breath and Shiro releases him with visible reluctance.

“I won't hurt you. I don't eat your kind,” he says, low and strange and soft. He makes it sound like a personal choice, which is far from comforting. “If I did, I would have had you the night you fell in.”

It's an admission. It’s the first time he’s had confirmation that Shiro saved him, though he knew. Of course, he knew. The memory comes back to Keith in a rush of water and terror. “I didn’t fall in.”

Shiro stays in perfect stillness, bobbing up and down in the water, watching him. Keith doesn't know how to explain the fine points of human health to someone who's only just learned they can’t eat a hundred pounds of fish in a day. He doesn’t know how to explain it, and he doesn’t want to be something damaged in Shiro’s eyes. He looks down and watches the way the light reflects off his foot under the water and the shadow of Shiro’s tail below, black and flickering.

“I didn’t fall in,” he repeats, quieter.

He did, but it's nothing Shiro can fix.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter 2

Thank you all so much for your patience and kindness the past week!! And in general! It's meant the world to me, truly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two days later, Shiro's added another ambiguous shell to his collection and something that's unmistakably the jaw of a shark, as long as Keith's arm. *You don't have to bring me anything,* Keith chides him, but Shiro smiles and ducks under the water up to the scar on his nose and it's a closed discussion. It's a look he's learned means both *yes Keith,* of course Keith and the opposite. Keith forgets it's Friday until he hears Kolivan's truck grinding down the dirt road up on the bluff.

They're in the middle of one of those heady, midday-heat naps. Shiro pulled himself up on his elbows to talk and watch Keith read and the waves and warmth lulled them both to sleep. He used to live for it at the Garrison—for finding some quiet spot in the desert and sun to spread out on their off days.

This is the first time he's done it with a friend. Shiro is too big to fit on the dock properly. Half of him is still in the water, drifting back and forth with the waves. Keith isn't fully asleep. The waves and heat are a heavy sedation. At some point, Shiro hooks an arm around his waist and presses his face to Keith's stomach for a pillow, and Keith lets himself pretend it's the accident of some dream that his hand ends up in Shiro's hair. It's a lazy day and even though he knows he's flirting with a sunburn, he can't bear to get up—until Kolivan shows up.

Shiro tenses against him and Keith marks the sound of a vehicle crunching down his gravel driveway a few seconds later. “Stay down,” Shiro says and braces his arm over Keith like he thinks he's going to have to fight the truck in hand to hand combat.

He hadn't realized it was so late. Keith shakes himself awake and slides out from under him, dangling his legs over the edge of the dock to work some feeling back into them. “No, that's Kolivan. It's fine.” It won't be if Kolivan sees, but Shiro is quicksilver and he'll be gone in a breath. “It's dinner,” he clarifies. All he's really mourning is the loss of warmth, he tells himself.

Shiro relaxes a degree, blinking up at him. His bangs are all stuck up from where his face was nuzzled against Keith—and where Keith's hand pushed his hair into disarray. There's a cool spot on Keith's shirt that he realizes, with something not as close to disgust as it should be, must be drool.

“Dinner?” Shiro asks, a little plaintive.

It's not clear how he means the question. “It's… eating. We eat together.”

“You can eat with me,” Shiro says, working up a real frown. He slips off the dock but only far enough to rest his chin on Keith’s knees.

That's debatable. The appeal of raw fish is still nebulous, at best. It’s certainly not more appealing than the alternative. “They're friends. And they have pizza.”
“Pizza...” Shiro says slowly, looking at Keith like he thinks it's a word he made up. The pout is still tugging at his brows and Keith is close enough to see the depth in the rubbed out charcoal shine of his eyes.

“I'll bring you back a piece,” he promises and his body is operating on someone else's muscle memory because he reaches out and brushes his fingers under Shiro’s bangs, over his forehead. He's sun-warm and beautiful and Keith wants to see if the skin under his hand tastes like salt.

It’s an odd compulsion. He shoves it away and heaves himself up instead, ignoring the spots in front of his eyes and the way his breath catches. It's a beautiful day, the other side of too hot, but only just. He hasn't felt so good in months.

“Bye, Keith,” Shiro says from the water, sinking backward.

“Bye Shiro,” Keith mimics back and then tries to tamp down his grin before he gets up to the house and Kolivan sees.

Kolivan’s already out of the truck by the time he gets there. Keith lets him in the house without thinking about it or remembering first that he’d had a recent remodel in the style of every tacky gift shop within two hundred miles.

It doesn’t go unnoticed. Kolivan stops inside the door, eyes unreadable. “You've been going out more,” he says charitably.

The shark jaw is too big to hang off one of the nails in the white-washed slat walls, so Keith has it propped on the counter by the sink. There’s an old green-glass bottle sitting by the television Keith hasn’t bothered to turn on since he arrived and particularly fetching piece of driftwood leaning against one wall. Shiro’s collection of odds and ends has light glittering off every windowsill and most flat surfaces in the place.

Kolivan doesn’t say anything else, but his eyes settle on Keith and draw down to his neck where the double chain of shells and knotted twine rests over his shirt. His expression is unreadable. “Didn’t know you were the type.”

It is a little much. Keith fights the urge to push the necklace under his shirt. It's private, personal. The way Shiro looked at him when he saw it made him feel like he was in the water again for a moment, sinking in the push and pull of waves, and it’s something he’s almost ashamed to cherish as much as he does. Keith shrugs and lets that be his answer, but Kolivan doesn’t let it drop.

“You've been feeling well?”

He has, and even if he hadn’t, collecting shells isn’t a symptom. The knee-jerk snap is on the tip of his tongue, but he stops himself. Kolivan has done so much and asked so little. “Yeah,” Keith says instead. “Really well.”

It's true. Maybe Shiro is a distraction, or maybe the clean air and sun are finally working. Maybe it was always that easy.

The drive to the station is quiet and long, only because the road twists and winds uphill in the slowest fashion. Everything takes time in this place. The old truck groans through most of the journey,
eucalyptus trees flashing by the window, trunks white as bone. The station is for training more than firefighting, but near as Keith can tell it just means they get to sit around and drink beer and tell bad stories. There are grass fires out by the town every once in a blue moon—he’s seen the smoke from one rising up over the hills and saw the truck barreling down the road, but never worse. Sometimes they get called out to the hills and mountains when they’re needed, but it’s still the right side of summer and there hasn’t been anything big in months.

The station’s not quite run-down, but it's but not new, either. It looks like someone was trying to go for stylish wood-siding and rustic appeal but hit more in ballpark of a barn. It’s nestled between the trees and He remembers to hide the necklace under his shirt before he goes in, to spare himself the worst of it. Kolivan catches him doing it out of the corner of his eye and snorts.

Everyone knows him—or acts like they do. It's some borrowed affection, passed down from his Dad second-hand, but Keith doesn’t mind it. The inside of the station is friendlier than the shack and newer. They're several drinks into the night by the time they arrive, but they saved Keith a spot at the long table, right in the middle of the row.

Antok goes to hand him a beer as he sits down and then pulls it back as he reaches for it. “Wait, are you old enough to drink?”

Keith grabs it out of his hand. He's still fast when he needs to be; defense was his best class at the Garrison outside of piloting. Antok laughs and lets him be and Keith lets the conversion sink into the back of his mind, drinking absently, only taking in half the conversation. It's good to be around people. He got used to it at the Garrison and took it for granted.

There’s an uneasiness there. He doesn’t know how to say the right thing or order his thoughts so they’ll make sense to other people. His instructors tried to couch it in kind terms. He was abrupt or private or needed to put himself out there more. Now he knows what they meant. A hundred little mistakes pile up in his mind at night before bed and in every absent moment, a checklist of all the ways he’s messed up before and all the ways he might again. The only thing he hasn’t yet is Shiro.

They get along. He forgot what that was like. Shiro is an exception in his life; this strange, perfect thing, just for him.

“That's pretty, Keith,” Thace says from across the table.

Keith looks up, confused, and then realizes he’s pulled the chain of shells out from under the collar of his shirt and is running his fingers over it absently. Every eye at the table is focused on him. His mouth works on an excuse but none comes to mind and he knows every moment he can’t form a snap-response is going to make it worse.

The best lies are the truth, he reminds himself, blood going out of his face. “I found—”

“She's been going out more,” Kolivan answers for him. It shuts down the table before they can get going. Keith has to resist the urge to audibly sigh in relief.

“Oh?” Thace's eyes don't leave the necklace. “Meet anyone interesting?” He's smiling. There's no trick in it, even though Keith's heart kicks into overdrive. Thace gives it a moment and then laughs at his own joke before he reaches across the table and ruffles Keith's hair. “I'm glad you're doing all right.” Thace has the kind of warmth Keith used to dream of having again, but in a half a dozen families it never panned out. “If you're getting bored out there, we could always fix up that bike.”

Keith shakes his head. It was his Dad’s—sleek red at its heyday, but chipped and rusted now from years lying fallow at the shack. The sea air isn't kind to beautiful things. The bike almost runs
anyway, but the problem isn’t the engine—it’s the person piloting it. No—driving it, he reminds himself with a kick. Blackouts don’t make for good piloting or driving. They learned that the hard way.

He gets to listen to the same argument he's heard three times before—the only thing worse than a fishing story is a who lifted more in training story and they're all full of both—while he puts away another beer and really three more pieces of pizza, ignoring Ulaz’s quiet *I don't know where you put all that.* By the end of the night, he ends up asleep on the old couch by the wall, sandwiched between Antok and Kolivan. It’s almost midnight before Kolivan rousts him.

“You can sleep here, if you want,” he offers. Keith almost agrees, but there’s a string tying him to the shack, looped around his second rib; he can’t stay away now. He almost says so, but it’s only because he’s warm and the alcohol is still in his blood. He stops himself. The sentiment is too personal and Kolivan won’t understand, but he wants to tell someone. He wants to talk to someone about it. The compulsion hits him again halfway there when they crest the ridge and can see the moon over the bay through one window and the lights of the distant city hazing the sky through the other.

Kolivan hears Keith’s intake of breath before the question he doesn’t know to form and glances at him.

“Do…” Keith swallows, tries to think of a way to say what he wants without saying too much. “Have you ever seen something you couldn’t explain? In the—” he gestures to the view through the windshield before the truck bends around another turn and the moon and water disappear and then has to put his hand over his eyes, dizzy from the change.

Kolivan is quiet for so long, Keith thinks he isn’t going to answer, and then he says less an answer and more a mutter, “Your Dad asked me that once.”

He falls asleep waiting for Kolivan to say more.

The shack feels unaccountably cold after the station. The memories he has of childhood are written in every quiet corner and it’s a frustration because he can’t remember more than a voice and an image, but the yearning for it still swamps his chest.

There’s a moment, caught in the silence of the room where he wants to go to the dock and knows he shouldn’t. It's late and he's being stupid, but something in him is thrumming and his inhibitions are shot. He walks down to the beach like he’s walking through a dream and waits by the water. The sand is still warm under his feet and the moon is bright even half-full, the sea almost still below it, caught between tides. He almost falls asleep there waiting, the last of the alcohol pulling him down.

Part of him thinks Shiro will know and be there. Part of him is sure, like Shiro is some thing summoned from the space between night and day, a thing he didn’t know himself well enough to dream of wanting, made just for him.

He never shows. Keith drags himself up to bed and tells himself off for a fool every step of the way.
The ocean is empty in the morning. Not empty in true, but in the way that counts.

He can see birds out in the surf in the distance, a tiny sailboat miles and miles out, but nothing else. He waits an hour before he decides he’s being ridiculous and that the nervous energy pulling his limbs tight and stealing his breath needs somewhere to go.

The bike is something, but he hasn’t touched it in months and it still reminds him of a dozen things he wants to forget. His Dad’s loss still bites at the oddest moments. There’s enough else that needs doing, anyway. The shack is on its last legs so he busies himself trying to put things in order. There’s a shed of tools and he’s not exactly handy, but it doesn’t take a full four years at the Garrison to learn how to nail two boards back together. It keeps him busy while the sun slips across the sky.

Shiro has a life. He must. Keith should have asked before. It’s none of his business, but he would have asked if he’d thought about it, if he thought it would be welcome, if he’d known how. Shiro isn’t some thing to be marveled at; he has quirks and wants and needs and Keith doesn’t know the first thing about his life beyond their dock.

He's made a home in guilt by the time Shiro shows up. He's not expecting it, so the eyes on his back don’t register immediately. Hammering the warped boards on the steps back to a semblance of order doesn’t take much out of him and it’s as good a way as any to work out some of his newfound regret; he almost doesn’t notice, but then he feels the cold-sweat creep of a gaze down his spine.

When he looks up, Shiro is at the end of the dock, head on his hand, watching him lazily. He slips off the dock as Keith gets closer, eyes tracking his movement like a predator. It sends a familiar shiver up Keith’s spine, but it’s not bad.

“I didn't think you'd come,” Keith says.

Shiro looks—sheepish. He rises out of the water, one hand braced on the dock, and Keith sees. There's a rent in his side from hip to rib. It’s violent red but bloodless, long and straight and brutal. It’ll scar, Keith thinks distantly, and even as he stares, there are other lines. They’re light against the grain of his scales, little marks of disorder criss-crossed over his body.

Shiro follows his gaze and lifts his arm to show the wound better. The edges part and it’s deep. Keith makes a little involuntary sound. He should be panicked, but it’s a fascination. Keith wants to trace it and see it’s real—that Shiro could take a hit like that and pretend it’s nothing. His hands are shaking, he realizes.


Keith’s mouth falls open but there’s no hierarchy to his thoughts that he knows what to ask or say first. The light feels over-bright bouncing off the water and Shiro’s arm. Somehow this, of all things, is the least real. He can’t shape his mind around it. Shiro moves closer in an open offer that Keith doesn’t know how to refuse. He lays his hand right above the mark, along his ribs. His skin is cold and rough and hard, not human at all, and Keith’s hand looks too small against him. Something is pounding against his tough; he can’t tell if it’s his heart or Shiro’s or the waves lapping against the dock.

“You fight...” Keith says and tears his gaze away from the wound to stare at the hollow of Shiro’s neck, trying to contend with the little thread of fear at having Shiro so close, an odd twin to the fear that Shiro is hurt. He has to do something. Shiro’s done so much for him and he can’t let this be.
“Stay here,” Keith orders and slips out from under his gaze.

He sprints back to the house, ignoring the little disgruntled sound of surprise Shiro makes behind him. He grabs his knife off the counter and one of his ratty shirts off the chair he tossed it on, knocking a little display of shells off the shelf next to it in his rush. There’s a first aid kit under the sink in the bathroom, too. Halfway back out the door he thinks better of it and grabs a couple old, stained sack towels, too, and then because he's already been there so long and a promise is a promise, he goes for the tin wrapped pizza in the fridge as well.

Shiro is waiting for him when he gets back, looking more amused than concerned, but a little of both.

“Here.” Keith tosses him the pizza. Shiro catches it like he's unsure if it'll explode as soon as he touches it, but it's a risk he's willing to take if Keith is the one throwing it.

Shiro doesn't speak. When Keith looks up, he's staring at the package in his hands. “You unwrap it. It’s pizza.” Shiro cocks his head at Keith and then picks at the foil delicately.

There's a way he has about eating that makes Keith think of a shark trying to use silverware. He keeps glancing at Keith while he chews eyes bright and interested and amused at the way Keith's tying together his makeshift bandage.

When he's done, he gestures Shiro closer, holding it out. “It's for—” Keith gestures at the wound he's been trying to ignore. If Shiro's in pain, he's good at hiding it, at least.

Evidently bandages and antiseptic are a new concept for him because he cocks his head before he moves closer, gripping the pilings to pull himself as far out of the water as he can, rising above Keith like something summoned. His body below the waist is a higher order of inhuman than the rest of him and it takes Keith seconds to remember how to breathe, eyes tracing the patches of black scales over his pale skin at the point of change, trying to learn it by inches rather than let the whole of it overwhelm him.

But he has a job. He regrets it already, embarrassed by how little he has to offer. Shiro flinches at the first touch of his hands and then bows over him to make it easier. The muscle of his abs tenses under Keith's fingers as they brush the edge between scale and skin. He fights the odd compulsion to repeat the motion and reaches around Shiro in a pantomime hug to start wrapping the wound, for all the good it will do. His arms almost aren’t long enough.

The bandage only ends up wrapping it by half. It's probably stupid. Shiro's been through this before and lived and he didn't have Keith there to tie him up in rags. The evidence is drawn all across him. It might make it worse somehow, for all Keith knows.

Shiro catches his hand where it's still hovering over the knot and holds it. “Thank you, Keith,” he says, and this time his voice is low and sweet and indulgent.

Keith doesn't touch. As a rule, he hasn't since his father died because a hug and a pat on the shoulder are still too close to home and no one was leaping to hand out better. He misses it in rare moments, but he never wants it enough to try and find it. He never needs it. He hasn't, until this moment. It's not the first time they've touched by a longshot, but this is the first time it's stopped Keith cold. There's a delicacy to the way Shiro handles him, like some long-toothed beast trying to carry around its young without hurting and as soon as the comparison occurs to him, it hits home. Keith’s gone docile in the face of it.

He can't figure out what he wants out of it but to be close and be looked at like that. Shiro releases him and slips back into the water before he can embarrass himself more. Keith is torn between
mourning and relief. They settle in their usual positions, Keith dangling his legs off the edge while Shiro lurks below him.

“How many of you are there?” Keith asks, because it’s been weighing at him since he realized he knows nothing about Shiro’s life. And now Shiro has wounds to show for it.

Shiro smiles at him, teeth points of white against the shadow. “How many of you are there?” he asks.

“A lot.”

Shiro raises his eyebrows and ducks under part way, smile still playing at the edges of his mouth. It’s a little nervous tick of his. It makes him look innocent and tempting and cute. Cute, as if anything like him could be. It’s a trick, some part of him still thinks, and as soon as he touches the water he’ll be gone. Keith doesn’t realize he’s smiling until Shiro glides closer, right between Keith’s legs where they’re suspended above the water in the middling tide and then loops his hand around Keith’s ankle loosely.

He treats Keith like something precious, but he never got the memo on personal space. The claws on the scaled arm tickle over his skin as Shiro moves his leg to the side, inspecting it. Keith fights the urge to pull his legs together, blush rising, but Shiro’s careful touch puts him at ease. Always smiling, always gentle.

“What's the arena?”

Shiro looks up at him, frowning. “A place for fighting.”

Keith kicks at him with his free leg, splashing water in his direction. “I know. But what for?”

Shiro rolls his shoulder in a shrug and drags his fingers up to Keith's knee to push up the hem of his cuffed pants up over it. “For winning.”

His eyes glint. He's smiling. He knows it's not a good answer.

“Do you enjoy it?” Keith tries to keep his voice level, but he's unprepared for the touch of cold scales to the soft skin behind his knee. Shiro doesn't answer for a long, quiet moment, letting the sound of the waves and Keith's breathing fill the space between them.

“I'm good at it,” he says finally. For once, he can't meet Keith's eyes. He slinks back down into the water, but he doesn't let go of Keith.

The silver arm hangs at his side. He's always reluctant to touch with it. A prize, Shiro called it. Now he knows what for, but that doesn't explain what he did to get it. Keith tries to imagine how many fights Shiro’s won to earn something like that. Keith tries to imagine the force and speed and weight of Shiro in anger, tries to weigh it against the fingers gentling their way up his thigh. He shudders at the thought and no—there’s no fear in it anymore.

“Do you fight?”

He's starting to get used to the guttural cadence of Shiro's voice. He's starting to like it. It's soothing, the same rhythm as the sound of water hitting the rocks around them.

“No. Not in a long time.” Self-defense at the Garrison and petty fights before that. Nothing meant to wound mortally. He misses it, sometimes, but it was nice to have a reason to stop and a couple years in the military were enough to calm him down. “I was going to be a pilot.”
He says it without meaning to and then realizes he has to explain ships and planes and flight and machines. He tries to give it the bare minimum and put it in terms that won't bore Shiro, but the more he talks, the more delighted Shiro looks. He keeps his hand on Keith's leg, holding without intent.

“Like ships,” Shiro says. It’s a fair analogy; better than anything else Keith could come up with, so he nods.

“Yeah. Exactly.”

Keith thinks briefly that if they stay out much longer it'll be dark, and Keith can show him the stars and point out planets and constellations, but he loses heart before that. It's hard to talk about the things you've lost, and get never remembers that until it's too late. His first night at the station they asked about his Dad and it wasn't until halfway into the conversation he realized it wasn't one he could have

He can't cry in front of Shiro, so he doesn't. He closes his eyes carefully, like the setting sun is what's getting to him. It almost works. When he opens his eyes, Shiro is a foot away, sunset light caught up in his hair. He doesn't speak, but he tugs at Keith's ankle lightly, beseeching.

Keith wants to slide into the water with him.

“I had to stop. I got sick. I kept losing my breath.” It's the simplest way to put it. Losing it, little by little, until the last time. They had to drag him out of the simulator and send him to the hospital and an honorable discharge was the best they could do for him, with regrets.

Shiro inhales softly. He doesn't need to. It's like he's imitating some human peculiarity he's trying to learn by heart. “Like when I found you.” He's less a foot distant and he smells like all the best parts of the sea. “I gave you breath,” he says, as if it's that simple, pushing closer and pulling himself up. “I wanted to save you.”

Keith would give anything to know why. There’s no special thing Keith has to give that someone else can’t; there are beautiful people on the beaches closer to the city and sights to behold. One boy on a beach isn’t worth all this—gifts and time and the look in Shiro’s eyes, like he’s a marvel and if he turns his head just right and moves closer and breathes the same air, Keith will make some new sort of sense.

He doesn't understand what’s happened until Shiro pulls away and his lips are left cold and wet. His breath stops in his chest. Shiro is still close, head still cocked, eyes still bright, lips parted.

A kiss, Keith realizes, heat racing up his spine. His first kiss, and it tastes like salt and cold water.

No, he realizes—his second. The first saved his life.

Shiro brings a hand to his lips, like Keith is the one that initiated it and Shiro is the one with cause to be shocked. Keith’s mind catches up to him in fits and starts and the one overriding thought is that he wanted it.

Impulsive. That’s another thing his instructors called him. They wrote it out on his reports as a flaw. Impulsive, but rarely wrong.

He leans forward and returns it. It's nothing—a brush against Shiro's fingers and cold mouth before he pulls away. It's nothing, and still, he knows he's ruined. Shiro pulls his hand from between them and with tedious care wraps his it around Keith's neck, pressing his thumb against the hinge of his jaw and keeping him close.
It's not what he thought a kiss would be like. It's softer, slower. He tries to deepen it without knowing how, but Shiro holds him back. They breathe the same air for a moment before he pulls away. His eyes are black as the water below him now that the sun’s almost gone.

“I'll come back,” Shiro breathes between them and then sinks beneath the water and merges with the dark.

That night is unreal. He walks back up the house and lays himself in bed over the top of the sheets. The room is cold, but it doesn’t feel like it. He feels like he did the night he left the Garrison for good; he’s done something final, something he can’t come back from, something that’s changed his life for better or worse. But it’s too late to go back on it and he wouldn’t if he could.

He has a dream about the ocean and waves and wakes up in a sweat before dawn mad at himself for it. He falls back to sleep, restless, and wakes with a different dream pulsing through him. He runs outside in flip flops and sweats and one of the oversize cardigans that he keeps tossed over the back of whatever furniture is closest. It's embarrassing in retrospect. It's embarrassing in the moment, too, but less than the fear and excitement warring in his gut.

The taste of lips on his won't leave him or let him be. He wants, as a point of obsession. The feel of Shiro’s breath against him, for him; the bone and muscle under skin and scale. He wants to be close. It's new. It's something good, and nothing has been in so long.

Shiro isn't waiting for him at the dock—but he's been there. His stomach flips and bottoms out at the first realization, and then he sees what is waiting for him and wants to laugh.

There's a pile of shells in the middle of the dock.

It's a silly gift, but the amount makes it ridiculous, and then he gets closer and sees they're different from the previous offerings. They're mussels and clams and Keith's not usually a fan, but he's willing to change that for Shiro. Still, it’s more than Keith could eat in a week—two weeks, maybe. It's going to take him an hour just to bag them all and get them up to the shack and the tiny freezer attached to the old fridge isn't going to cut it. He's not even sure if they're something you freeze. Part of him is almost annoyed, but it's a fond feeling. The image of Shiro studiously picking over the rocks is too good to stay mad at.

It does take an hour to haul it all up to the house. He shoves it somewhere cool, and then he calls Kolivan.

He picks up his cell on the third ring and Keith lies and explains his way through how he came into ownership of several pounds of shellfish and would Kolivan like some? Keith doesn't know how to cook them anyway.

The other end of the line is dead silence for a moment before Kolivan says quietly, “I'm on my way.”

It'll take him an hour. Keith heads back outside, fighting off the chill with a blanket and cup of something hot as he settles on the dock and tries not to long. The breeze is soft and ruffles his hair; he needs to cut it, but he doesn’t mind the way it drifts over his eyes. The thing in his chest is burning again.
It's somehow no surprise at all when Shiro appears. The tide is low; he has to reach to bury his hands in Keith's hair and pull his head down. The kiss bites in the sweetest way and when they pull apart, Keith is halfway down to the water and Shiro's eyes are black and heady.

He goes without a word.

Kolivan arrives sooner than he expects and alone when he gets there. Ulaz and Antok pile out of the truck after him. Ulaz has a nervous smile on his face, but Antok and Kolivan look like stone. Kolivan doesn’t speak before he walks over. Keith takes an involuntary step back as Kolivan raises a hand to his forehead. He shakes his head, the motion curt, and then he looks at Keith with something close to disappointment. It cuts deeper than it should and there’s no reason for it.

“I feel fine,” Keith says, trying to sound offended more than scared, glancing at the other two. He shoves a bag at Kolivan, shells clinking against each other, bulging under the plastic.

“Where did you get these?” Antok asks. It has the wrong inflection for a question. He sounds—furious.

Keith isn’t a child though, and they aren’t his parents. “I told you—”

“They washed up?” Kolivan finishes for him. “Keith...”

He feels red rise up his neck, the heat of an embarrassment he hasn’t felt since he was young. The fog is getting thicker and the longer he stays outside the further it’s going to sink in. He pulls the cardigan further around his shoulders. “Do you want them or not?”

“We’ll take them,” Ulaz steps in. “Why don’t you come back with us? We’ll make it a night—”

“I’m fine,” Keith repeats, done being polite. There’s a breeze starting to kick up, blowing in from the ocean. It cuts right through the thin-cloth and he should have put on a shirt or shoes or something. He steps back toward the house, not running, but putting space between them because there’s something off about all of this and he needs time and distance and to get out of the cold. “This—” he gestures at the bag Ulaz is holding, trying to steer the conversation back to waters he knows, “—isn’t a big deal.”

They’re all staring at him. Ulaz’s mouth opens and closes, his eyes wide and edged with an emotion Keith hasn’t seen before and can’t define.

“You're bleeding,” Kolivan says quietly.

Keith doesn’t know what he’s talking about, but he sees where Kolivan is looking and it’s not the fog wetting his lips. They still stings from the kiss. He raises a hand to his mouth; his fingers come away spotted with red.

“Keith.” Kolivan waits until Keith is looking at him again. “You should stay out of the water.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!! You can come find me on tumblr and twitter!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Heed the change in rating!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shiro wants one thing in particular. The longer it goes on, the harder it gets to avoid. He adds a more reasonably sized fish Keith doesn’t know the name of but tastes smooth as butter, a red striped shell he doesn’t recognize, and one beautiful, perfect pearl to Keith’s collection before Keith buckles under pressure.

“How many did you get through to find this?” Keith asks, turning the dark pearl over in the light. It’s misshapen and perfect—a pretty thing he doesn’t have a use for, but wants, too.

Shiro laughs and hides his face against Keith’s thigh. He has his hands on Keith's knees, his head between his legs, and it’s a little too much, but he’s broken Keith in slowly and there's something unwitting about his closeness.

“A few,” he says against Keith’s bare skin. He never presses it, never does more than Keith wants. He acts like everything Keith does is a gift—but he's too indulgent. He never asks for anything in return.

It's been bothering Keith for days. He pushes Shiro's head up, pushes his bangs back to expose one high cheekbone. There's a scrape there, raw and red. A fight, Shiro said when he'd asked, with a little shrug. He's been picking up cues and mannerisms and he's not as alien as he was, but it doesn't matter. Keith wants him in scales and cold water. Keith wants him however he comes.

The wound on his side is healed over, at least. Keith doesn't flatter himself that he helped it any, but it's taking all of his better judgement not to run up to the house and grab a box of waterproof bandages for his cheek—a recent acquisition from the grocery store, bought on a discount and covered in cartoon characters.

The image of Shiro, cheek plastered with drawings of superheroes and princesses makes him snort. Shiro takes the chance to press into his hand, eyes faux-innocent and large.

“What do you want to go for a swim?” His grip tightens over Keith’s thighs imperceptibly.

This. This is what Shiro wants, more than anything. Swim with me. All logic says: if Shiro was going to hurt him by now, he would have.

“It's safe,” Shiro goads in his best, softest voice, tail flicking under the waves.

He’s a vision in the water. For a moment Keith flashes back to the book in the store, the mermaid drawn and colored to entice, leading the sailor down into the sea. That’s what they are, if Shiro were some long-haired, winsome, delicate thing and less obviously the most lethal presence in a hundred mile radius.

“I know.” He isn't scared of heights and the jump and he isn't scared of water and he's almost sure he isn't scared of Shiro. The thrill in his gut has been shifting and changing. Shiro reaches up to take his
hand and a shiver that has nothing to do with fear rolls up his spine at the cool touch.

He doesn't pull at Keith but there's a light in his eyes. He's excited. The day is warm and the clouds overhead look like something drawn in one of the children's books he found in a box in the back of the closet. Nothing about this is threatening.

“I’ll keep you safe,” Shiro reiterates, thumb drawing circles against his palm.

“I know,” Keith repeats, because he does.

Shiro’s patience is almost beyond comprehension; Keith is frustrated with himself. He’s never been more afraid than he was brave. It’s what made him a good pilot. He can jump a cliff on a hoverbike easier than he can do this, and this is simpler than falling.

Keith draws a breath that shakes in his chest. Shiro releases his hand and gives him space. Somehow that makes it easier. He’s being silly about this, he knows. It’s like ripping off a bandaid, he thinks. It was his Dad’s favorite phrase and he used it for every little hardship Keith had to go through, but he still held Keith when cried and this isn’t so bad as that.

Jump, he tells himself, but his body won’t move. There’s some foreign force holding his arms straight, keeping his hands pressed so tight to the edge of the dock he’s still sitting on, some terror that’s too ingrained to fight. The water is spinning dark below him despite the sun, Shiro’s tail whipping back and forth under the surface like nothing so much as a cat, excited or agitated. Keith’s heart is stuck in his throat over it.

And he can’t move.

“Keith,” Shiro says, even softer than before, “you don’t need to.”

His eyes are so warm. There’s no guile in them. The involuntary pull at the corner of his mouth is the only sign he’s disappointed. As it happens, the only thing Keith wants less than to get in the water is to see that expression on Shiro’s face.

Like pulling off a bandaid.

The idea occurs to him a second before he decides to do it, and then he’s all in; he pushes off the dock with a deliberate lack of grace and gets one glorious moment to appreciate Shiro’s look of concern as it morphs into affront before he hits the water, hard, sending up a wave and a rush of water that sounds like the crack of a gun going off. The cannonball was his best move, practiced in a hundred motel pools, much to his Dad’s chagrin. It’s been years since he swam, but it isn’t something you really forget. He remembers how to tread water at least, past the rush of bubbles and salt water stinging his eyes.

But when he surfaces, Shiro is gone.

For that instant, blinking salt water out of his eyes, cold sinking into his bones, heart gone still in his chest, he’s sure he’s dead. He’s sure, like dread in his gut. Every gift and kind word, every kiss—it was all a play for this moment and now he’s going to die here in this water without a scrap left to find. It’s like the hero in a story eating some forbidden food in some forbidden place after everyone warned him not to; now he’s here, he’ll never leave.

Softly, he feels arms wind around his waist from behind, under the water. A hand slides across his chest and there’s breath in his hair. “That was sneaky,” Shiro whispers in his ear, voice deep.

“Sorry,” Keith breathes when he remembers how to speak.
Shiro laughs and pulls him closer. It sounds inhuman, like a huff of air more than anything else, but it still makes Keith grin and the stutter in his chest dies in relief. Shiro pulls him back against his chest and then tips them both back to float in the water. Keith’s head lands against his chest as Shiro helps him balance.

“I thought you’d sink,” he teases, voice rumbling under Keith’s ear.

Keith tries not to sound petulant and fails. “I told you I know how to swim.”

Shiro’s hand skates up his side. “Yes, you did. You’re good at it,” he says, admiring. Keith isn’t, but the compliment is still nice to hear from someone who can’t do anything but. The feel and sound of bone and blood and muscle shifting under him is so strange. It should be overwhelming, but for the first time in so long he feels totally at peace—so soothed it’s like the feel of a body against his is a sedative.

He could fall asleep to the thud of Shiro’s heart. The water smells good and so does Shiro, but in the strangest way. Some days the ocean smells like rot and others it’s this crisp, delicate, alluring thing.

“Do I smell good?” Shiro asks, chest rising on a laugh.

Keith dips a hand in the water and splashes at Shiro’s face, his own going red. Shiro does, though. His skin, his color, the liquid shine of his eyes are all alien. The irony of a life spent chasing something this strange in some cold and distant corner of the universe when it was right here leaves him cold. A whole world under the waves.

You’re dreaming, a part of him still insists, but he’s not. In a dream, he wouldn’t be sick. In a dream, Kolivan’s dead-eyed stare and warning wouldn’t haunt him. In a dream, he wouldn’t bleed so easily.

“What's it like there?” he asks quietly to distract to himself.

The ocean wasn’t one of his childhood obsessions. They moved when he was young and then it was the road and the desert, a two year long dinosaur phase, a more grounded ambition to be a vet, and a brief obsession with firefighting. After that, his eyes were always starbound. All his knowledge about the ocean comes from the few nature documentaries caught on hotel TV and the old hardback encyclopedia he used to flip through at the Garrison—and neither had a thing about Shiro’s kind. It still feels like a dream, but one he's settled into for a long, deep rest.

Shiro doesn't answer him, not for a long moment. “I can show you,” he offers. He's not serious; he doesn't have that light in his eyes he gets when he has something new for Keith.

“I... don't think I can breathe down there.” He can barely breathe above water.

Shiro rolls, tipping him into the water slowly. “I know.” Keith still hasn't seen all of Shiro and according to all logic there's more of him below the water than above it. That's how those things work. “I can show you something else, though.” He reaches out and grips Keith’s hip loosely. It's the one made of claw and scale. He's holding like he doesn't want to entertain the chance that Keith could slip away with the waves.

It almost bites his skin, but Shiro's taken care not to leave a mark on him since he saw the bruise and scab on Keith's mouth. He'd dragged his fingers across it and then pressed a new kiss to the edge of the mark, achingly soft.

He nods and Shiro grins with every tooth.
The cove he brings them to is set back in the cliffs in its own small bay—a white beach nestled between the rocks, guarded by chalk walls and clear blue water that deepens to black a few yards out. Keith knows as soon as he sees it that this is something private, something secret.

It looks lived in and the longer he looks, the more he sees—odd organizations of rock and little piles of shells on the terraces of stone. Shiro pushes him toward shore, coming up as high as he can on the beach. Keith walks forward in half a trance, trying to pick out everything mislaid and strange. His foot collides with a shell and he reaches down to work it out of the wet sand. It's midnight violet, shades lighter than Shiro's scales, but in the same hue.

“What is this place?”

“Mine,” Shiro says, ever-forthcoming.

Keith turns back to him, some quip on the tip of his tongue, and all thought flees from him. He was right; there is more of Shiro under water than above. Even now, he can't see the end his tail, but he can see most. Shiro is resting in the sand, head propped on one hand as he watches Keith, not quite smug but more than amused. A little brush of wind sneaks its way past the protective cliffs and sends goosebumps scattering up Keith's spine.

Shiro is massive. His tail snakes and coils under the water, a uniform oil-black, but the spine of it is edged in feathery white fins. It's a bizarrely delicate addition, like lace and frills on Kevlar, but then Keith steps closer and realizes it's not by design. The white portion of his tail must not heal and scar like the rest of him; it's shredded.

He didn't realize he'd gotten close enough to touch. Shiro is watching him, intent despite the nonchalant pose, eyes following him where he's half knelt in the water, hand outstretched. It's implicit permission.

Keith keeps his touch light. It's soft; not slick or strange. It feels like nothing so much as some wave-tattered strip of silk. The ruined parts of him are still lovely.

He pulls back after a moment, trying to get his bearings, a little series of sparks dancing in front of his eyes when he rises. You’re beautiful, he wants to say because it feels like something Shiro should hear. But he doesn’t say it. Instead he explores, mentally cataloguing all the hundred thousand little things Shiro has hidden away here. He wonders how much of Shiro’s collection has found its way to the shack; if this is a slow inundation and Shiro will be half moved in without even legs to walk and see the home he's made for Keith.

The tidepools are the best part; they’re different than the ones closer to the area Keith knows. These are curated, full of little colorful crabs. Shiro leans over the rock and points out his favorites, setting them in Keith’s hand to watch them scurry, a hundred thousand little pets for him to admire and keep track of. The innocence of it is almost unnerving. There are patterns drawn on the rock in some places, nonsensical drawings that Keith realizes with a shudder could only be drawn by the claws on Shiro’s right arm.

He sits back against the rock as Shiro points out curiosity after curiosity and wonders how many years it took to build this. It’s a monument to curiosity. It’s a monument to loneliness.

“There’s something else, but we have to wait until sundown,” Shiro says, settling beside him, leaning back, elbows on the rock. He shoots one nervous glance at Keith like he thinks maybe Keith has
prior obligation or will turn into a pumpkin when the light goes—as if there’s anywhere Keith would
rather be.

“Well can’t wait,” Keith assures him, fighting the thread of aching that’s wound its way through him. He’s
surprised to find it isn’t a lie. It’s been years since he had someone to sit with like this. Sometimes
around holidays, when they knew there would be fireworks, his Dad would find some quiet cliff for
them to eat whatever late-night fast food dinner they’d managed to wrangle up and watch. This feels
different. Not better, but warmer deep down. How stupid do you have to be, he wonders, to spend
weeks watching the ocean with someone and still get excited for it?

They spend hours there, until the first blues of night are streaking over the hills.

Keith drifts off slowly to the sounds of waves and the warmth, Shiro’s arm keeping him from falling
into the water. He wakes Keith with an arm on his shoulder and then around it, lifting him and
securing him against a hard chest. Keith hums a wordless question.

“Awake? It’s time,” he roughs against Keith’s hair, voice less human than it has been.

Keith blinks awake the rest of the way and wraps himself around Shiro. When he looks back toward
land, there are lights above the cove, set high on the cliff. It doesn’t make sense until he realizes what
must be up there—the Station is the only thing it could be. Guilt wriggles through him at the thought,
but what Kolivan doesn’t know can’t hurt either of them.

It's well past sunset and cold is starting to settle in, but Shiro's body holds heat like the rocks at the
shore do. He’s not warm, but he’s warmer than the water. Keith clings closer, arms and legs hooked
around Shiro.

“Where are we going?” he asks. His voice is almost a rasp to match Shiro’s. The air in his lungs still
isn’t sitting right, but his body is pliant and oddly warm.

Shiro pulls him in closer with a hand splayed against his back. “It’s a secret,” he replies. “You can
only see it when the moon is dying.”

It’s less than a week out from the new Moon, but Keith coughs against his shoulder, an aborted
chuckle. “It doesn’t die—it’s just—”

“I know, Keith. I know about tides.” It only comes across a little pompous. “I know about the
moon.”

Keith hides his face in Shiro’s hair to smother his laugh. It sticks up ridiculously anyway, but when
Keith pulls back, the entire side of his head looks like it’s been licked by a cow. Keith rolls with it
and takes the moment to muss Shiro's hair with his hand. He can almost hear Shiro's eyes roll in the
dark. He pulls Keith off his hip and settles him lower, so Keith has to loop his arms around Shiro's
neck and wrap his legs around Shiro's waist as best he can to hang on. “Cute,” Shiro mutters.

The new position is almost too close—but nothing with Shiro really is. He can feel every twitch of
Shiro's torso this way, intimately. Keith tries to angle his hips away subtly, but Shiro grips under his
knees and pulls him close, forcing his legs wider and his hips in tight.

“The water is rough further out.”

“Are we going—like this?” The thought of being this close to Shiro the entire time is not feasible.
Even the thought is close to too much. He angles away again, but this time Shiro makes a little
annoyed sound and grips his behind with one hand, forcing him in tight. Keith can't hide it. Even
half hard, it's obvious with so little between them.
Shiro—doesn't notice. Doesn't answer. He keeps going, moving then through the water at a pace that must be agonizingly slow to him, but it ruins Keith. The hands around his thighs are gentle and big enough to wrap around him completely.

“Are you scared?” Shiro changes the position of his scaled hand, pressing it to the center of his back as a ground.

Keith presses his forehead to the muscle at the nape of Shiro's neck. “No,” he says wetly, voice weak.

If he stays still for a little longer, Keith can pull himself together. He focuses on his breathing. It's been so long since he felt desire; it's been so long since he wanted it, and longer since he did anything about it. “Wait, Shiro—”

Shiro stops cold, and then there's a hand in his hair, tugging his head back, arching his neck. He opens his eyes to Shiro's narrowed gaze. He's smart. He has a penchant for hunting out Keith's secrets and laying them bare.

“You—” He cocks his head. “Oh. Oh.” His voice rumbles through his chest in the worst way.

He rocks against Keith experimentally. It's over. Keith tries to stop the sound that crawls out of his throat, pathetic in need, but Shiro catches it against his lips. It's the only kiss Keith's ever known but he can't imagine better.

With painful slowness, Shiro slides a hand between them and presses it against the front of his thin, soaked swim shorts. He's never been touched there, never been touched like that anywhere, and it draws another sound out of him, a high, sharp breath.

Shiro pulls his hand back. “Can I?” The question is kind. There's a little regret in it, a little need. Keith still doesn't have a word for what they are. Lovers is out of some bad novel with a windswept couple on the cover. It's not for them, though it might be if this goes too far. They're more some cautionary fable about not following beautiful things into the water.

Keith nods and reaches out and takes Shiro's hand and pulls it back to him and yes, it's gone too far. It has been for weeks. Kolivan's warning comes back to him again, but then Shiro presses down and Keith shudders and pulls his legs up and all thoughts of guilt flee his mind.

The air is colder by the moment. It hurts to breathe it, but the breath in his lungs is fire between them. Shiro touches him without intent, aimless fingers pressing and wandering, feeling him out, demanding nothing and expecting nothing and that's almost worse. He keeps glancing at Keith in the shadow and capturing his gaze until Keith gives some little affirmation that yes, it's good, and yes, keep going, don't stop, there.

Around them, the water ebbs and flows. The light goes fast once it starts, but Keith feels utterly safe. Somewhere below them, the tail he saw is flickering back and forth, keeping them afloat.

The end of it brushes his leg once, seemingly by accident, and the sensation almost overwhelms him. He has to close his eyes and breathe. Between them, Shiro's fingers curl against him for the dozenth time, cloth still between them and barely touching besides, like he's trying to learn to handle something delicate and breakable. Keith is neither, but maybe to Shiro everything is. He draws the pad of one finger up and back down Keith's length, still without intent but catching on. He wants to work sounds out of Keith, make him breathe faster, make his body twitch and shudder.

Keith's pulse rushes and skips in his throat. He swallows to right it, closes his eyes, tries to breathe
through this slow, quiet burn.

“Show me,” Shiro says.

The feeling of eyes on him with that kind of want is foreign and almost too strange. He hasn't let himself think about it too deeply, but he imagined those eyes. He imagined the water. He touched himself to it, once, and then wondered for hours after what he was doing.

“Show you what?” The question is a lie and it doesn't sit well on his tongue. It trips out of his mouth, ragged.

Shiro leans in and breathes him in. “Everything.” The word barely registers, it’s so low and strange. _Everything._ He pulls his hand away and a little, desperate sound crawls up Keith’s throat at the loss of contact. His face and breath are burning. He presses his forehead to the hollow of Shiro’s neck, trying to cool himself, trying to work up courage, trying think past the steady beat of need pounding through his body. Shiro’s hand against his back is the only thing keeping him steady. It wouldn’t take much. He’s been on that edge for minutes beyond count. He holds himself still, lets himself wind down, slowing his breath.

A light flickers against his eyelids, not sparking, but faint, like the first hint of sunrise. Shiro stills against him, breath drawing in surprise. Keith's eyes shoot open because—there’s light in the water.

For a moment, he thinks his mind is gone. This, at last—this is the final thing that breaks him, and none of it has been real. A handful of blue spots glow and dance in the waves closest to him, flickering and changing. It’s impossible and beautiful.

“That’s what I wanted you to see,” Shiro says against his temple, rough as stone, reaching out to drag his long-clawed fingers through the water, making a thousand new lights appear in his wake. “This.”

The heat leaches out of Keith as he watches, ebbing away with the play of light against his face while he looks and wonders and tries to understand.

“What—what is it?”

Shiro rolls one shoulder. “I don't know.”

That answer is bent and strange. Keith blinks, breathes, shifts. Shiro has more curiosity than that. He searches and finds and hoards, organizes artifacts in a secret cove and brings Keith a new treasure every day—if he were human, if he were at the Garrison, his room would have been scattered and messy and piled in books and off-regulation posters. He would have been one of those horrible students that got an A without trying, but read the textbook anyway, just for the joy of it.

He can see it with a clarity that steals his breath. And still, Shiro doesn't know what this is. His kind must have a word for it, or a thought at least. Keith looks up at his face. The last of the heat leaves him at the look on Shiro’s face. It’s sad in wonder. The mark on his cheek looks worse in the dark. Under the skin of Keith’s thighs, he can feel lines of scar pressing into him and the edge of the bandage Shiro never needed but hasn't taken off yet.

One hand is still pressed against Keith's back, holding him close, and Keith thinks with a new chill racing across his skin: I could lose this.

“It's cool,” he says instead. It's beautiful.

“Cool.” Shiro rolls the word on his tongue like he can taste it and smiles with a hint of teeth. “It is. They look like your stars.” From down there he means. He nods to the water. It's a little offer,
something Keith can pick up or leave at will. Shiro never asks more than Keith wants to give.

The water is the deepest black and cold now that his blood isn’t rushing. Shiro’s hard grip on his hand is the only thing that grounds him as he dips below the waves. It’s overwhelming for a moment; he squeezes Shiro’s hand and blinks and eases into the feeling of waves pushing and pulling him.

Shiro is wrong. They’re better than stars. Bluer and brighter, moving in tandem with the waves around him. Keith wants to show Shiro a picture of a nebula and a galaxy and ask if they look familiar. It seems like something he would like, like something he would want to know.

Keith stays as long as he can, holding his breath, Shiro’s grip on his hand tightening imperceptibly as the moments pass until it almost hurts. He pulls Keith up without waiting for signal, lifting all of him at once, as if Keith weighs nothing to him—and he doesn’t, but Shiro is still gentle.

He smiles, bright eyed even in the dark, a little wild. “Like stars?”

“Yeah.”

The scar over the bridge of Shiro’s nose, the white in his hair that must be the result of some trauma, the myriad of marks on his body, the arm … Shiro is a catalog of little agonies. He remembers Shiro hands on him and heats, but then he imagines Shiro in the arena, tearing some shapeless, monstrous thing apart with the same hands. It aches.

“Why do you come out here?”

Shiro blinks. “To see you.”

“But—why?” he asks and hopes it doesn’t come out as bad as he knows it will. He's always been horrible saying the right thing at the right time. This is neither. “Why do you spend time with me?”

“Because I like you?” Shiro is the one close to snapping now.

That's not how Keith meant it. This isn't about him. He doesn't know the first thing about Shiro's life and it's becoming unavoidable. Keith knows he fights. Keith knows he wins. Keith knows he's lonely. Nothing substantive. Nothing a friend should know—and they're more than that.

Keith drags his hand over his face. He’s still warm. “But—what do you do when you're not here?”

The waves lap at them while Shiro weighs his answer, and then says matter-of-fact and so predictable Keith could almost say it in tandem, “Fight.”

Keith can't tell if he's being deliberately coy. “Is that all you do?” he asks softly.

Shiro doesn't answer. He looks away to the horizon and the haze of clouds there, visible even in the dark. The light in the water reflects and dapples over his face in soft tones. It's the first time he's been deceptive. It's the first time he's tried. Or—it’s the first time Keith’s noticed.

“Yes,” he murmurs finally.

I'm good at it , he’d said, as if that was as good a reason as any. He's not looking at Keith. His eyes are fastened on the waves, light still glittering against his eyes. For the very first time, Keith feels a new thread of unease wind through him. He draws his fingers down one of the lines of scar on Shiro’s pale skin. It's old and faded, oddly curved and curled, scrawled over his collarbone like writing.
When he catches Shiro’s eyes again, they’re resigned, as if he knows Keith is going to ask and wants to talk about anything less than that.

Keith shoves the question away, but he can’t imagine the creature that made it, and he finds suddenly, he can’t imagine losing him.

He doesn’t go back that night. Shiro keeps him close and safe and as warm as he can. The next day dawns with the same brightness. He wakes alone, spread out on the white sand under a blanket he’s never seen before that’s stiff with salt and for a moment he panics, until the memory of a voice in his ear comes back to him. *I’ll be back soon.*

He drifts off and the next time he wakes, it’s to the feeling of cold lips on his forehead and the sun is high and hot above them. Shiro kisses him awake slowly. The shell he presses to Keith’s chest is gold and polished like glass. Keith has a waking vision of his shack years from now, long abandoned, of someone opening the door and shells and glass and pearls and bone spilling out in a cascade. It would only be right.

“You slept so long,” Shiro muses as he watches Keith marvel at the offering.

“Sorry,” Keith tries to say. He has to stop and clear his throat to make it come out clear. There’s a hitch in Keith’s breath. A night in the cold was a bad idea. It comes and goes, but Shiro's presence chases it from his mind. He pushes his face into Shiro’s chest and settles there against him, surf lapping at them both. He’s still burning—half in embarrassment at what they did the night before, half in want.

“Are you—” Shiro cuts himself off, black eyes pinched at the corners. “Are you okay?”

“Nah. I'm fine.” Shiro doesn't look convinced, head cocked to one side, animal. “Really,” Keith insists.

Shiro’s eyes are dark even in the light, pupils wide. Keith thinks his must be a match. He wants to reach down and press a hand between his legs, try to keep the heat in him at bay before he embarrasses himself—but it’s too late. Shiro has a bead on him like Keith is a thing he’s hunted for weeks and finally caught.

He buries his fingers in Keith’s hair and kisses him, pulling him back into the water until they’re both floating and Keith is lost in it.

Without preamble he tugs Keith's head back further, threading his fingers in Keith's sopping hair and kisses his neck. “You want me.” He rocks Keith against him, gentle and sweet, just enough friction to get him going in full. It's not ideal; the cold is working against him. Shiro reads it and lifts him onto the rocks.

The stone under him is warm and wave-polished and sometimes he forgets how Shiro is outsized. He braces himself on the rock above Keith’s head, torso fully exposed to where it blends into black scales. There's nothing obvious about his anatomy; Keith wants to be brave and ask, but he can't work himself up to it. He's scared. He's scared of all of this, but not more than he wants it and Shiro’s gaze is darker than the ocean in a storm. A drop of water slides off his bangs and falls to Keith's cheek. It sides down to the hinge of Keith’s jaw and down his neck to the hollow of his throat, Shiro's eyes tracking its progress. He knows.
With almost embarrassing care, Shiro runs his hands up Keith's thighs and back down, petting and parting, comforting, working him up slowly or maybe trying to moderate himself. Keith can't tell, but the crease in Shiro's brow says he's frustrated. They're not compatible like this; there's so little he can do that won't ruin Keith and that's half the fear and half the anticipation.

The swim trunks come off like he's picking the ribbon off a package. Keith hides his eyes against his arm, lying back against the rock so Shiro can move him how he wants, so he can pull the wet cloth away from Keith's skin and then he's exposed completely.

One claw skates up the inside of his leg and Keith feels himself go still and pliant, need ripping through him so fast it steals his breath.

"You want me," Shiro repeats and bends for a kiss.

It's melting slow. His lips drag to the corner of his mouth and down his throat, lathing his tongue over the mark he left there. He moves down and then presses a kiss to his hip, nipping at the skin with terrible gentleness, teeth brushing enough to raise goosebumps across his hips and make him twitch.

He's hard. It's been too long since he did anything and he knows he won't be able to hold out long enough to make it good. He should have practiced. He should have tried, at least, but he never let himself imagine getting this far.

Keith digs his fingers into Shiro's hair, grounding himself. "I want you," he concedes.

Shiro pulls back to look up at him, his bangs obscuring one wide eye. "Really?"

That's another thing he's picked up. "Really what?"

He doesn't answer, but he pushes his face to Keith’s chest and stays there, unmoving, breath drawing goosebumps across Keith's skin. It hadn't occurred to Keith he could get overwhelmed. It hadn't occurred to Keith he might not know how much he was wanted.

Keith isn't good at this. He's new to all of it and he's going to keep messing up, but he can at least be honest. "You're the best thing that's happened to me in a long time."

Shiro pins him with a look. Keith feels himself heat, which is stupid when Shiro's mouth and hands have been in more places than they haven't. Whatever Shiro sees in his face makes him smile—makes him grin, wide, before he bends back to Keith chest and this time there's intent. He kisses his way down Keith's stomach and over the line of hair there and then there's hot breath over Keith where he's embarrassingly hard.

"No teeth," Keith groans.

Shiro shoots him a look. "I won't," he says, like he has a right to be offended that Keith would even ask. But there's a permanent sore spot on Keith's bottom lip that says otherwise, no matter how careful Shiro tries to be.

He's shaking half in terror and half in thrill, but this is happening and he trusts Shiro more than his apprehension. Slowly, he realizes the hands parting his legs are shaking too. Worry leaves him so fast he wants to laugh, but then Shiro presses his mouth to the inside of his thigh and he's shaking for a different reason.

It's slow the way he needs it to be. Shiro feels him out inch by inch, learning where to press and worry and how to bite without hurting and the light around them gets brighter and brighter, stealing
his vision until he's a mess in Shiro's hands. His arms are the last strong part of him. He anchors himself around Shiro's neck, hold tight enough that he's pulled off the rocks entirely when Shiro starts moving against him.

“This is how you wanted it before,” Shiro says against his ear as he guides Keith's legs around his waist and grips his hip with one hand, guiding him up and down against Shiro's bare skin in little motions. The hand is big enough to encompass more than his hip. He's too far gone to respond. His eyes are wide, focused on nothing but the tension rising in him, like something in him is ready to snap.

*It's never felt like this*, he means to say, but only gets as as far as opening his mouth before Shiro changes his grip and a cut-off cry leaps out of his throat.

Shiro turns his head, nosing at him until he pulls back enough that he can take Keith's mouth in a messy kiss neither of them know how to meet.

It ends like something snapping in him—a pull he fights and chases when he feels it rising. He breathes and breathes, unhinges his arms from around Shiro's neck and presses both palms to center of Shiro's chest, feeling Shiro’s heart pound like a drum.

He rocks Keith against him another moment. His breath is harsh and he's given up pretending he breathes through his mouth alone. It sounds wrong, but it's dear and it matches how Keith feels: overwhelmed, in the best way.

The sun on his shoulders, the rock at his back, the sea air around him; it's all tinted with light. Nothing’s felt so good in his life. Shiro is looking down at him, pupils still blown, mouth wet and dark and red. He bit his own lip, Keith realizes. He doesn't speak.

“What about you?” Keith asks around the haze flooding him.

The water is too dark; there's blackness below them and he can't tell what's Shiro and what isn't.

“No,” Shiro's pupils are blown. They look like the eyes of a predator before the kill. “I would break you.”

Keith doubts it, but a shudder chases up his spine at the thought. Shiro presses closer, nosing through Keith's damp hair, some redirected affection while he tries to come down. It seems unfair. Keith considers trying to persuade him, but his mouth finds its way to Keith's neck again and this time there's intent right at the edge of pain. He leaves a trail of little marks on Keith that stand out in the mirror in the morning, but in that moment he's too swept up in need to mind.

He works Keith to the edge twice more before they go back. It's almost sunset by then and Keith's mind is far gone. The sky is red and the sea is red and there’s some proverb about it he can’t recall. It’s either a good omen or a bad one. It seems like something he should remember. Once they arrive, Shiro sets Keith up on the dock and pushes his face into the soft part of Keith's stomach and stays right there, arms looped around Keith's waist for minutes and minutes. Keith doesn't know what's wrong or how to fix it—or if anything is, if anything can. His vision is still bright around the edges. Shiro’s hair is soft under his fingers and he threads his fingers through it to feel the slide between his fingers, wondering how it is he can lose himself in something that simple.

When Shiro speaks, it's low and rough and almost soft enough for the wind to carry it away, but Keith can feel the words against his skin as much as hear them. “I wish I could stay.”

Keith feels his the air go cold in his chest. His throat seizes up for a moment before he clears it. “You
Shiro doesn't respond. He doesn't move. Keith stills his hand. The mood is starting to seep into him, into the air around them, and even the kind light of the sunset can't dispel it. He's breathing hard, he realizes.

Finally, Shiro draws back. His eyes are half-lidded and shadowed to full black, even so close. “Will you hold onto something for me?” he asks.

As if Keith’s life isn’t already a monument to all the minutiae Shiro has entrusted to him. Keith nods and Shiro searches his face for a moment before he presses something hard into the palm of Keith’s hand.

“You can hang on to it,” he says, a little breathless, a little desperate. Keith is used to the odd echo of air rushing through the gills on Shiro’s neck now, like a second voice. It's more obvious when he's excited—or scared. “Please—Keith—I want you to keep it.”

His eyes glitter. Keith pulls his hand up, turning it over in the light, trying to figure out what kind of shell or artifact it is and then realizes at the same moment something cold drips down his spine: it’s a scale.

It’s one of Shiro’s, heavy and solid and different than he expected, different than he would have imagined if he’d bothered to. It's not black at all, he realizes when he holds it up the dying sun. It's violet, deep and clear, with the same iridescence as the shells hanging around Keith's neck.

“You'll keep it?” Shiro asks, desperate.

He wants to say no on impulse. There's something disconcerting about the light in Shiro’s eyes. It’s a match for the color of the sky, like it can't decide to storm or not and it's seething in its own indecision. But he can't say no. He hasn't, yet. He won't.

“I'll keep it,” he promises.

They aren't two pieces of the same whole.

Keith stays on the dock for minutes after Shiro leaves. He gave too much, his body tells him in a dozen little ways. He didn't give enough, he thinks, also, but greater than either little thread of regret is a satisfaction that carries down to his bones and makes him feel if he died then and there, it would be enough.

Keith adds the scale to his necklace, winding twine around it like a spider's web, until it's almost obscured by the thin brown string and he can only see what it is by the color that flashes between the bindings when he holds it in the light. He presses it against his chest as he falls asleep that night and wonders what it means and wonders what he's doing.

He wonders what this will be later. If he'll regret it years down the line or wonder if it was real, if Shiro will leave and Keith will still be right there, or something else entirely—and then he breathes and feels the catch in his lungs on the intake and knows that's it. He knows what's waiting for him.

As long as this lasts, it's his.
Chapter End Notes

[on tumblr] [on twitter]
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He dreams of the water and watching, waiting, wanting something to happen, but unsure what. In his dream, it’s still and perfect—until the dock falls apart under him and the waves leap up to meet him. Every motion he makes in the water kicks the waves higher and higher and pulls him deeper. He wakes in terror, fear-sweat stinking the room, the scale burning against his chest.

Shiro doesn’t appear that day.

The sea is unnaturally still and there are clouds lingering over his little bay, casting their eerie half-light over everything. It reminds him of the dream, so he goes inside and busies himself rearranging the all his gifts, one eye on the water out the window. By evening, there’s not a whisper of Shiro’s presence. Bleakly, he wonders if the scale was a parting gift or some offering made to console him in parting. Or maybe Shiro is busy. Maybe he’s fighting.

Maybe he didn’t expect to win.

Keith fingers the scale as he looks out the window and remembers the touch of Shiro's hands on his legs and between them and the heady, heavy feeling of a body against his, and feels alone. For the first time in years, he isn't sure he knows how to be that.

On the second day, the clouds that have been gathering and milling over the little bay finally break, but it’s not a storm so much as a mist. Keith goes out in it once to keep watch over the dock and even remembers to wear a rain slick, though there’s no one there to appreciate his care.

The rain obscures all the horizon, but still, he knows nothing is waiting for him out there. The sea is black and restless and uninviting. He can feel the rocking waves in the way they hit the dock and it shouldn’t be high tide, but if he were to slip his feet over the side, they would brush the water. A storm surge. He remembers reading about them in school, but he was always a poor student. He wanted to fly more than he wanted to read.

“Shiro?”

He has to ask. He has to try.

One rogue surge takes him by surprise, rushes up the beach and slaps the wood of the dock like it’s grasping for him. It looks less like water than oil as it slips back off the dock, leaving the wood shining and dark.

A little terror takes him then and he runs—off the dock, back up the beach and the stairs, and when he gets inside he locks the door and almost has to stop himself from calling the station. It’s not how the ocean felt before Shiro. It’s worse. Now he knows what was watching him and this doesn’t feel like watching, this doesn’t feel like curiosity. The water looks violent. The water will hurt him if it touches him, he knows it in his gut.

He lights a fire in the little pot-belly stove in the corner to ebb away the chill and damp and lights the lamp by the couch. It’s not past afternoon, but with the light on inside, he can barely see out the windows for how dark it is.

He falls asleep there on the little couch, huddled under a blanket, trying to bear away the cold.
On the third day, nothing changes. He entertains the brief thought of writing a note in a bottle and tossing it out to the sea, just for luck. It goes so far that it ends up back inside looking for one on a whim, but only finds the green glass bottle on the windowsill. It's half-filled with little cowrie shells —another gift.

There's no cork and he only gets as far as picking it up and making to tip it on the dining table before he realizes what he's doing and stops himself.

It's so quiet. The silence almost seems alive, oppressive, a thing that's stolen his voice and his breath.

Instead of throwing a bottle, he collects up all the spare paper in the house, all the fliers and old envelopes and yellowed newspaper he never had a use for and sits on the beach making little paper airplanes out of them. His dad taught him, but the memory is so old all he isn't able to recall the shape of it.

The wind is strong. He watches it carry all the little planes away one by one, little spots of bright against the grey of the sky. He wonders if they'll wash up on the shore in town or back on his own beach or if any will find their way to the deep. He wonders if Shiro will see them, or if he'd care if he did.

That night, he dreams again of the dock: the still water, the moon above dripping honey light on the ocean. This time, the dock doesn't fall apart. He leans over the edge and sees the shadow of what's waiting for him and slips into the water like he's going home.

It's almost a good dream.

On the fourth day, he goes to the edge of the waves and stands in perfect stillness until the water is lapping over his ankles and wetting the cuff of his rolled-up jeans. There's a storm in the air, blowing in from the horizon. If he had more paper to toss at the waves, he would.

Nothing comes. There's not a hint of anything familiar.

He presses the necklace to his chest with the palm of his hand until it hurts, until it leaves an indent over the center of his chest and mourns.

He hasn't spoken with Kolivan since his warning and he hasn't wanted to. Some things are better left alone and part of him is sure Kolivan will be able to see what he's done, like it's written on his face and skin. It's not shame he feels, but it's close. Closer, now that Shiro is more a memory.

It's almost no surprise that Kolivan shows up unexpected anyway.

He's out on the beach when he hears the truck roll up. In the absence of anything else to do, he's taken to working little rocks and shells out of the perpetually wet sand and tossing them back into the sea. It takes him a shamefully long time to get up to the house. He has to stop twice to catch his breath and by the time he gets there, Kolivan is out of his truck and waiting. He looks poised for a fight Keith isn't sure he's got the energy to put up.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

Kolivan gives him a sour look. “You need a ride.”
He’s not usually so pushy. “No, I don’t.” Keith leans against the door as Kolivan’s eyes run over his face and down. He frowns, thick brow furrowing, and Keith realizes he forgot to shove the necklace under his shirt—Kolivan zeroes in on the new addition to it and draws a little breath, frown deepening before he starts and stops and starts again to say something, like he’s at a loss for words.

“We’re going to town.” Kolivan’s tone doesn’t leave room for an argument. Keith is torn between frustration and a little wriggle of fondness that Kolivan cares enough to insist.

Frustration wins out. “But—”

“You have an appointment.”

All disagreement dies in Keith’s chest. A numbness crawls up the back of his neck. “But I cancelled it,” he admits, sounding like a child to his own ears. It’s a lie. “I feel fine.” That’s a lie, too.

The less he thinks about it, the better it will be, and so long as he had Shiro to spend time with, he could run from the thing in his lungs and hide from it and Shiro didn’t know the difference so Keith didn’t have to, either. The truth is he never had an appointment. He didn’t make one. The doctor in town was kind his first week, but she didn’t have anything new to tell him that the Garrison doctors hadn’t already gone over in painful, painstaking detail.

Kolivan doesn’t respond. The worst part isn’t that he looks shocked, because he doesn’t. He looks resigned. This is what he expected. Keith hasn’t disappointed him; his expectations were already this low. “You don’t make this easy, kid,” he says finally.

It’s cold with the wind kicking up. The rumble of thunder on the horizon echoes over the water and through the hills, mist thickening and obscuring their edges. Keith wraps his arms around himself tighter and Kolivan traces the motion with his eyes. They've been here before.

Keith swallows down the lump in his throat. “There's something I need in town though—if you're not busy.”

It takes Kolivan a moment to gather himself and then he sighs all at once and turns back to the truck. “Yeah, sure. Get in.” The words are harsh, but he opens the door for Keith and closes it for him without slamming it, so it's not a loss.

On the way, Keith tries to make small talk and mostly fails, but neither of them are much good at that sort of thing to begin with. He gives up around mile four and focuses on counting trees and then loses track of that, too, mesmerized by the sway of them in the storm breeze. They haven’t had a proper storm since he moved there and it’s something to think about that’s not the ache below his throat.

“What is it you want?” Kolivan asks, first to break the silence as they start passing the few empty buildings that signal the outskirts of town.

“I need a book.”


“Sea stuff.” Kolivan sounds skeptical at best, but he flips on his blinker and turns in the direction of the library all the same. Keith’s only been there once before. It’s not extensive, but if it doesn’t have books on the ocean when the ocean is visible from almost every window in the place, what's the point?
It doesn’t disappoint.

The library is sparse but there are posters on the wall—maps and sea charts and a few public service announcements about reef rebuilding efforts and whales. The view is bleak out the windows—dark skies, a darker sea, and the town feels like something clinging to the edge of it.

Keith remembers the simulations at the Garrison and how, from out of atmosphere, cities became nothing but spec-smudges against the ground, stuck on the edge of the infinite blue. The night simulations were better. At least then cities had light to see them by. He wonders if this town would have registered at all on their sensors.

There are crags out in the water, breakers casting against them in flares of white. A question occurs to him for the first time.

“Why aren’t there lighthouses here?”

Kolivan is picking through one of the shelves next to him. “There are,” he answers after a moment. “Up coast, down coast.”

“But here—”

“No one comes around here, Keith.” He shoves the book he’s flipped open back on the shelf with a little more gusto than is warranted. “What are you looking for?”

Keith weighs his words to find the ones that won’t sound ridiculous.

“I saw this—thing the other night.” Kolivan goes stiff. “Like… lights? In the water? They were neat.”

The memory is tied to Shiro and his hands and his body and the way he fit to Keith. Speaking the words aloud unlock something in him, break a dam he hadn’t known he was building and it’s a shock how much he longs for that night. He’d forgotten for a minute, maybe, and it all comes rushing back to fill up his edges, pushing the air out of his lungs.

Around his neck, the string of shells grows heavy. He wants to hunch over, right there in the aisle with Kolivan watching him, maybe open his mouth and scream and exhaust some of it. There must be a way to. He can't live the rest of his life like this, but he doesn't move, doesn't blink, doesn't let himself do more than draw a shaky breath.

“Neat,” Kolivan repeats. His eyes narrow. “But those are only on the reef” Keith sees the exact moment it connects for him and winces. “Keith—”

“I was… on a boat?” It’s a poor lie. He’s always been shit at lying.

“You don’t have a boat.”

He's not quite shouting. The librarian is watching them with wide eyes from her desk against the wall. Kolivan mutters something that includes a dig at his father and genetics and apples and trees. He cuts himself off and turns away to the window, rubbing both temples with one hand, thumb and forefinger digging in like Keith has caused him a physical pain that he’ll be able to dig out of his skull if he tries hard enough. “It’s dangerous out there. And you’re not well.”

“I'm fine.” Keith doesn't mean to yell, but somehow it comes out louder than Kolivan's voice—harsher, more vehement. Somehow, he will be. Out of the dozen reasons he shouldn't comes a strange defiance: Shiro left him and his body is broken, but he's stubborn, too, and he's tired of being
something sick, something damaged, something broken.

Maybe Shiro did know the difference, after all. Maybe Shiro saw sickness in him, smelled it on his skin. Maybe that's why he left. Why be with something only half-made, and poorly at that?

Kolivan drops him back in front of the shack and Keith wonders how many more times he'll live that exact moment: the truck door clanging shut behind him, the dusty front door and cracked concrete walkway, the scrubby plants lining the road and peeking up out of the decrepit brick flower boxes under the windows. He should take the time to set them right, but he's not in the mood for fixing things and hasn’t been in days.

He picked three books. He stacks them up on the couch next to him and settles in for the night. It’s not a bad place to sleep.

The books are older than he expected. They have strange names for stranger creatures, descriptions of things that live in the deep and dark and for a while he forgets what he was looking for. How could they know more about the stars than this? He stops at a description of something with scales and spikes and bioluminescent lights along its spine. It can’t be real. Keith flips back to the title page and copyright twice to see if it’s not someone’s pet project that found its way to the reference shelf.

He's heart-sore and tired by the time he finishes flipping through them all. Sleep takes him like a lover, slow and soft.

That night, he has a dream he can't remember the edges of, but it leaves him shaking in sweat, needful and scared in equal measure. He waits an hour to see if sleep will take him again, but it doesn't. It's not late; he's been sleeping too much. His limbs are leaden, no matter how much he sleeps.

The images from the book play behind his eyes as he lies there, listening to storm whip by. Things with teeth and scales, things that slither and claw, things so like Shiro in all the ways that don’t matter. Maybe Shiro was in a fight. Maybe he lost. Maybe, Keith starts to think and then is sure, this is all he'll have in life. One sweet memory of a few good weeks that warp and twist with time like the boards of the steps he keeps hammering back into place, until he's unsure how it happened or if it did at all.

The storm can't decide which way it's blowing. He pulls on a shift and steps out into it, bracing himself against the cold and willing away the shivers that wrack him. His breath is tight, but it's been tight for days and this won't make it worse. Nothing can be worse, he thinks for a moment and then hates himself because he can't be so pathetic that he misses Shiro this much.

He should have walked to the cove. He should have walked into the ocean. He should have yelled and screamed and had done with it. This, he thinks, balling a handful of wet sand in his fist, is pathetic.

For the briefest moment he wonders what would happen if he tore off the necklace, scale and all, and gave it back to the sea—but even as he wonders he knows he wouldn't. It’s the most foolish sentiment, but he can’t imagine he won’t live the rest of his days with it. And maybe it’s all right to want something that much, to miss something that much. He’s mourned before and come out of it. The first days are the hardest. He throws the sand at the water instead.
It doesn’t hit.

The water rushes back from the little pile of sand and keeps going. The gathering storm has had it high and angry for days, but in that moment, it starts to settle.

Keith stands. He takes half a step toward it. It’s hypnotic. After so long watching the ocean, he’s learned it’s rhythms, and it’s never done this. The little hiss of water escaping sand is audible above the sound of the wind, but barely. The clouds start to break above him, full moon illuminating the beach as he follows it half in a trance and half hyper aware. One hand he keeps wrapped around the scale hanging from his neck like it’s a thing to anchor him to the shore and maybe it is. Maybe that’s why Shiro gave it to him.

They read about earthquakes and tidal waves in school. He can almost remember the warnings about them—everyone knows you don’t follow the ocean when it pulls back into the sea, but he’s too curious not to. He walks past shells and little crags embedded in the sand, heart thudding in his chest. It feels like minutes he walks but it can’t be more than a few breaths before the water stops.

It goes still and churning, waves unsure if they want to break or mill. The silence is perfect and horrible and that’s the moment he sees it.

In the moonlight, the creature is out of every childhood nightmare. Only the silhouette is visible against the waves behind it and under it. It staggars unnaturally out of the waves an inch at a time, falling back into the water over and over before it rises again. It looks like something the sea should be taking away. Keith can’t order his thoughts. It’s like watching film in reverse, the way it jerks and about unnaturally.

It doesn’t make a sound. He can’t order his thoughts enough to decide if he should run—until a gap in the fog and clouds whipping by illuminates the figure. It’s only for a second or less, but it there’s a shock of white hair on its forehead and the width of its shoulders, the shape of it, even from afar—it’s familiar. Keith knows that shape.

He’s running before the revelation fully hits, but it’s Shiro. It can’t be anything but.

The new body moves wrong, like a fawn learning to walk. It's pathetic to watch him try to find his balance and fail; Keith is by his side as fast as the sand will let him move, kicking it up and skidding through it, but it's not fast enough. Shiro falls again as Keith watches and Keith's heart goes with him.

“Hey, hey—” He steadies Shiro with a hand against his shoulder and kneels in the wet sand, trying to catch his own breath past the shock that the body under his hands his real and not some figment he’s conjured.

Shiro doesn’t try to get up again. “Keith,” he says. His voice isn’t guttural anymore, isn’t strange—it’s human and soft and broken. He repeats the name again and his head falls to Keith’s shoulder, damp hair dripping against the cotton button-up Keith threw on before he came outside. “Keith.”

The name is so sweet off those lips. Even if the voice is different, it’s familiar in every right way.

Shiro’s skin is ice; Keith unbuttons his shirt with shaking fingers and drapes it around him, pulling it tight, and then draws his arms around Shiro and holds, marveling that he can now. An arm comes up around him—hard metal against his ribs and spine as Shiro shudders and breathes.

*What have you done?* he wants to ask because this cost Shiro something. It had to.
Moving him is an endeavor. In the sand and wind, it's almost impossible. The storm comes rushing back while Keith holds him and by the time he gets Shiro up, the waves are lapping at their heels.

“Come on, Shiro,” he goads, trying to get their feet to work in tandem so they can make any headway. There's real terror running through him, part from the unknown and how strange this is and part from the sure knowledge that neither of them can handle the cold like this. It shouldn't be this cold. “Please, Shiro.”

He remembers the first time Shiro gave his name and how sweet it seemed, how discordant. Now it's a litany.

The high, panicked tone of his voice works by accident. Shiro finds some strength and stops sagging against him, which is a relief—Keith can hold his weight, but he can't carry them both through this. Their progress up the beach is so slow Keith can only take it in by inches. One step, another. He almost walks them into the stairs by accident and that's another ordeal. Shiro is breathing too hard to talk and Keith doesn't know if it's in exhaustion or pain yet.

He makes himself list priorities with every step—heat, dry clothes, first aid, questions—until they're at the top of the stairs and he's maneuvering them both inside. He beelines for the bathroom, Shiro still hanging off his shoulder but able to hold himself up at least and turns the water on high and hot.

“You need to get warm,” Keith mutters for both their benefit and pushes him under the spray of the shower gently. He looks at Keith with doleful eyes, like some poor, half-drowned animal. The irony isn't lost on Keith, but there's heartbeat in it too. The thing that writhed in his chest when he first realized what was on the beach contorts again. He reaches out a hand to drag his fingers down Shiro's cheek. The scrape that was there the last time they were together is gone, but it's Shiro.

“What did you do?”

Shiro doesn't answer, but he turns his face into Keith's hand and kisses his palm. It takes all of Keith's willpower to not strip and climb into the shower and stay with him, but Shiro needs clothes and food and if he goes there now, there's no coming back tonight.

He pulls away, but Shiro’s hand lingers on his. Shiro draws it back to his mouth and makes a small, desperate sound against Keith's knuckles. It shoots through Keith like terror and longing and it doesn't matter what Shiro did to be here, like this. It doesn't matter—and there are some things you hunger for more than food or heat.

Shiro isn't human. He's still what he was.

He presses his hand to the scale on the necklace Keith's gotten so used to wearing he forgets it's there at all and holds it there as Keith breathes under him, naked but for that one thing.

“You kept it.”

Kept isn't the right word. Clung to, maybe, like one clings to the last thing keeping them afloat. Shiro's eyes run over him, shining in the lamplight with a gleam like hunger.
He bends. Keith is used to the bite when he kisses, but it doesn't sting now. His teeth are human. Keith deepens it on his own, goading Shiro until it hurts, savoring the spot he'll be able to worry later as a reminder.

All he wants is here. You left me, he doesn't say, but his body aches with it too completely to imagine it doesn't show. Shiro settles himself between Keith's legs, leaving his own on the bed behind him as if he's unsure still how to use them, but he's still big enough that it's on the right side of too much and too close.

Don't leave me again, Keith doesn't say, but tries to make it implicit in the way his hands drag across Shiro's back and the way his nails cut half-moons into Shiro's shoulders when the cool metal of Shiro's hand works its way between them. By the time he moves lower, Shiro's fingers aren't cold anymore.

He isn't taking his time. The way he touches is strange because all his usual slowness and ease are gone. The care is still there and he’s still gentle, but there’s need in equal measure. Keith realizes it as he bucks against the hard weight of him and pulls Shiro down until he can push his face against Shiro’s chest to ground himself.

Shiro missed him. He breathes Keith’s name against his hair and Keith almost wants to laugh. He moves like he brought the ocean with him, rocking and steady and massive. He finds his strength right as Keith's is flagging. There are moments of panic and pain, but Shiro smooths the lines off his face and steadies his hips and though he's new to his body, evidently some things come easier than walking. Taking Keith apart is second nature to him already.

By the time they're both sated and exhausted, the light through the curtains is watery and bright enough to highlight the edges of his face and smile. He's tacky with sweat and his hair looks like something tried to nest in it. There's no reason for Keith to feel charmed by it, but he is.

“Good?” Shiro asks, like the bed isn't ruined and Keith's legs aren't dead where they're locked around his waist. He eases out and Keith feels the loss so keenly he has to close his eyes.

“Really good,” Keith mutters into his own hand, trying to level with the numbness that's settled in between his legs and how much he still wants it. He's wet there. Too wet. Shiro left him a mess. He feels fingers opening him, the sheets below him dampening against his skin before Shiro pulls away with a satisfied sound.

Keith's past the ability to blush. He'll clean himself up when he can move and then do something about the sheets.

He pulls Shiro down to his side and resists the urge to roll and wrap his arms around that warm body and hold him like they're back in the sea and this time he's the one trying to keep something precious safe from the pull of the waves. He makes it as far as wiping the hair off Shiro’s brow before a sound splits the silence—a stomach growling.

Shiro's eyes go wide and Keith buries a laugh against his neck. He isn't human, but he still needs to eat like one.

By the time they roll out of bed—and it's a more literal roll than it should be, for Shiro’s part at least
—it's past noon.

Food is the highest priority, but it necessitates some amount of clothing. Keith shoves Shiro in the shower first with a quick tutorial on soap and faucets and then goes through and starts opening windows because the shack is small and homely, and it turns out the ocean hid many, many sins. Shiro doesn't mind the smell and seems vaguely amused that Keith does, but it's already mostly a lost cause no matter how Keith feels about it.

The breeze blows the last of the storm in the window, wet grass and salt air and clean. It's a mirror for the feeling rushing through him, though he can't put a name to it. He takes a moment to breathe and think and try not to let it overwhelm him.

After Shiro is clean, Keith hands him a pile of hand-me-down station clothes and Shiro gives him a bright smile. “I know how these work.”

Keith feels heat rush up his chest. Shiro treats clothes like wrapping paper, but if he can take them off, logic follows that he can put them on.

“Good.” Keith pushes past him to the small bathroom, but Shiro catches him around the waist and pulls him in for a sloppy kiss as he goes.

It doesn't hit Keith in full until he's under the hot spray of the shower. He's still tired and there's a dull ache in his hips and back and chest. He cleans himself in places he hasn't had to before and by the time he gets out there's a blush over his cheeks that threatens to be permanent.

Shiro is waiting outside the door, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, one that's edging a little too close to smug.

"Your shirt is on backwards," Keith throws over his shoulder and pulls on boxers and then a ratty shirt, too, when he remembers the marks Shiro left on his shoulders and neck. He doesn't plan to see anyone, but it's the thought that counts.

In the kitchen, he pulls out a chair for Shiro, still half in a dream. Shiro gives it a moment of consideration where Keith wonders if maybe chairs aren't self-explanatory before he sits primly and glances around. The smile that breaks across his face is almost offensive. As far as houses go, the shack isn't one. It's three rooms—one of which is a bathroom—and full of mismatched furniture and odd decor. One set of bookshelves sits as monument to someone's attempts at woodworking. Probably his Dad’s. Neither chair at the dining table matches anything else in the room. Humble is putting it kindly.

And now, thanks to Shiro, it's like some strange treasure hoard. Shiro looks ridiculously pleased with himself.

“What do you want to eat?” Keith asks, voice high and rough with the burn over his cheeks. Cooking for Shiro is a daunting proposition, but it only occurs to him to worry about it the moment he's staring down the stove.

He turns back and Shiro's grin has widened to something obscene. He pulls one foot up on the chair and wraps his arms around the leg, resting his chin on his knee lazily. “You—”

“That's not food,” Keith interrupts. Fine. Eggs, because they're the one thing he's sure he can't mess up. Maybe toast if Shiro cooperates. He pulls out ingredients and starts a pan heating on the stove, ignoring the eyes burning holes in the back of his head.

Outside, the sun is in full blush and it's almost like those days of cold and waiting and mourning
never happened. All of it is lost like a bad dream soothed away by a warm presence. The reality of the person sitting at his really is too grand to make room for sad things.

For the first time in days, he can breathe.

“Here.” Keith sets the plate down in front of Shiro when he’s finished and adds a napkin to his lap for good measure, before he realizes this is Shiro’s first time with silverware and a napkin might be about as effective as pasting a band aid on a gunshot wound—or a strip of a gauze over a gaping rend in one’s side.

“Thank you, Keith.” Shiro is still smiling, still polite.

Keith pulls his chair to the same side and shows him how to eat. He entertains a brief fantasy of feeding Shiro, but it would please him too much and he needs to have some shame.

Shiro nods along, eyes too intent for polite interest, as if he thinks he’ll be tested on it later.

Under the table, their legs brush. Shiro is antsy with them and it must be hard to keep still when he’s used to treading water with a dozen feet of tail. Keith gets bold, sets a hand on his knee to steady him. “Here—” Keith demonstrates etiquette and then wonders why he’s pretending he doesn’t drink out of the carton and eat out of the pan.

But Shiro nods at Keith again, picks up a fork with his metal hand—and they both watch in horror as it crumples in his grip. He drops it as soon as he takes it, but the damage is done. It looks like scrap metal. Shiro's mouth works in shock for a moment while Keith tries not to wonder how it is the worst Shiro's ever left on him is a few minor bruises of passion.

“Sorry,” Shiro says lamely.

Keith swallows, nods, and then chokes on the giddy sound trying to work its way out of his mouth.

It takes another ten minutes for him to get the hang of it. Sitting in a chair proves to be the most difficult part. He keeps shifting to find a comfortable position and in the end, Keith gets him a pillow from the couch and suggest gently that he can eat with his fingers.

A kind of joy settles into his chest as he watches Shiro eat. He keeps catching Keith’s eyes and smiling and Keith mimics it every time without meaning to, so taken with it all. “It’s good,” Shiro says earnestly, as if eggs are something mythic and delicious and not the minimum effort of cooked food. Keith’s face gets sore from grinning.

It’s perfect and strange. A little unease settles in the pit of his stomach because as much as he wants Shiro’s hands on him and as good as the marks on his waist and the ache in his hips is, it’s too different. His first question comes back to him—the one he couldn’t get out of his mind as he saw Shiro stagger out of the water.

“Shiro…”

He looks up at Keith and the morning sun catches his eye at the right angle to catch the grey in the black and goes deeper. His pupil reflects the light back in a flash of green. The question almost stops in his throat at it. Why question something that can't be explained? Why question something perfect? But he has to ask.

Shiro blinks at him and opens his mouth and the question falls off Keith's lips.

“Where were you?” It's easier than asking how he's here and kinder than pointing out the obvious.
Shiro puts down the fork he was barely using. “I wanted to be with you,” he answers slowly, choosing his words with the same care with which he's chosen all of Keith's gifts. His voice isn't guttural anymore, but it has the same deep shades under the lilting softness. It could be a growl if he wanted it to be—he could be everything he chooses not to be. “I did what I had to.”

Keith waits for him to say more, but Shiro is implacable.

“Shiro—”

“I made a deal. To be here, like this.” He looks peculiarly hang-dog, as if he thinks this is something Keith will be mad about, as if there isn't a mark from Keith's mouth peeking out under the collar of his too-tight shirt, as if Keith didn't spend the better part of a week in utter mourning without him.

“Okay,” Keith says lightly and then hates himself when, “was it worth it?” trips out after. He can't know everything about Shiro. He doesn't know if he wants to. He can keep his secrets; it doesn't make Keith love him any less.

Shiro stands. His chair scrapes against the floor, discordant in the silence but oddly domestic. He can't remember the last time he sat across from someone at a breakfast table one-on-one. “Keith. Of course.” He's on his knees before Keith's chair. “Do I need to prove it?”

His tone implies a hundred good things. He would, Keith realizes. If Keith asked, he would, right there at the table. Maybe they will, if they have time.

“How long are you here for?” he asks instead while he still has courage and braces himself for whatever answer comes.

Shiro nuzzles against his leg, the same pose he's looked up at Keith from a dozen times. “As long as you want.”

Keith feels something drawn taut in his chest give, finally. If it's up to him, Shiro will never leave.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 5

Under the waves there's a city as wide and old as time. It stretches, from the exact point where the light no longer touches, and down and down. Even Shiro hasn't seen the end of it.

Under the waves, he's beloved. He's treasured for what he can kill, and they love when he bleeds for it. He used to love it, too, with a thrill. The fight was what he lived for. They cheered at the cut on his cheek, some sign the fight might be close—or that at last, this might be the fight he loses. They wouldn't mourn him long, but they would save the stories and tell them for years. Tales of how he'd failed, and they were each of them there to see it. The thought doesn't bother him. Kindness isn't in their nature and he's lived enough years with them to know it.

He drags his fingers over the cut and thinks only of cold fingers tracing the same path. Sad eyes the color of the water, right when the light starts to leave it.

He's celebrated here, but he's not loved.

It's a new truth; one he always knew, one that never mattered enough to pull out and examine. The thought slips into him again as he makes his way down, the wrap around his waist still tight where small, gentle hands tied it there. He's had to re-tie it twice and fumbled not to slice the cloth apart with his claws. The salve spread over the wound beneath it washed away days ago, but it's obvious it's been tended to. He no longer cares if the others see. He no longer cares if she sees.

It's foolish to think she wouldn't. Someone in the city will notice the little changes in him and tell her, sneak ahead of him through shadows and hidden paths through the coral he's long since learned and forgotten.

The city is quiet. It wasn't always. There are old celebrations they still honor, revels and parties and sometimes even he's allowed out in them, but they're rare. Once a year, once in three, or by some strange passing of the moon that no one but the Witch and her ilk recall.

The palace at the center of it is decrepit and crumbling, the empty husk of some long-dead, massive thing, crowned in spikes of bone or shell. Shiro tries to avoid it if he can, but the arena lies at its center. By necessity, it's a second home. They gave him a space there, but it's gone so long untouched, all the walls of it are grown over, crusted with age. Time is hard to mark there. If he stayed under a month, it seems that years could pass on the shore. But then, he's always been forgetful.

Not about this, at least. He knows where he's going. The route is marked in him. He can forget all things, but not this.

The Witch, like the city, doesn't have a name. She was beautiful once and is beautiful still in the way of terrible things, with scales the color of tarnished silver and hair that floats about her like a net. She is fear manifest, but she's also the thing he knows best apart from violence—and now the warm body he memorized and left above the waves.

She is almost a mother now to him. The closest he's ever had.

There are no doors in the palace. Those are a human creation. He sees them in the distance, has memorized the specific thunk and echo of the one on the shack. The witch needs no doors and needs
no guard, though she has one for show. He can see them here and there, a flash of scale, a gaze between the shelves of rock, half a face lit by the glow of the coral before it slips out of view. They’re coy about him. They have been for years.

She doesn't greet him when he slips inside her cave. Her eyes are like a ship's lantern in the fog. Something in them says she knew he was coming. He wonders if they’re still here, hiding in the shadows, watching them—all her spies. It doesn’t matter now. He came because he knew she would summon him. He came because there are some things that can’t be hidden.

Her gaze falls to the wrap around his torso, but her eyes say also that she needn't have bothered to look.

“A human,” she rasps and pulls herself into the watery light that flickers down from above, so faint he almost wishes there was none at all. Her nails drag over the rock, the sound a match for her voice. Shiro forces himself to stillness. He doesn't have an excuse. He doesn’t need one. He nods, keeping his eyes downcast, as if she might see something else in them. “Yes. A friend.”


It. That's what she sees humans as—un-useful, unworthy of their time or thought. This one is though, he wants to argue, wants to make her understand. He thinks of Keith in his arms and how he smelled like sweat and sun and the blood on his breath from their last kiss. Shiro can taste him, still: the heat of Keith's body in his mouth is an addiction.

Her gaze flickers, wavers to his hand where he's clenched it tight in memory and a small fear, and then her eyes move up his body in a slow regard, as if she can see the paths Keith's hands have traveled over his skin.

“You could keep it as a thrall,” she offers.

A thrall. Some half-drowned, mindless thing, to be fed and fucked and led around like a toy on a string until its appeal is exhausted and it's discarded, or worse. They don't make good sport for the kill; too long under the water rots their will, and worse. He imagines Keith, blue eyes hazed, skin palid and bruised. The thought rises his stomach to his throat until it nearly chokes him.

She sees and grins. It doesn't touch her eyes. “No?”

No. From the deepest part of him, no. If there’s something he fears more than losing Keith, it's that. The suggestion is an insult. He's pressed his luck and he didn't have much to begin with.


He wonders if it's worth telling her he already has.

Not many of his kind go to the surface. There’s nothing up there of interest to something old. They know what humans are and their uses are few and horrid. That didn’t always bother him, but the appeal wore off years back. Now it makes him sick.

He used to go up to watch them in the surf. Tiny humans and tall humans, their odd legs and high
voices—not beautiful, but lovely. They play together and hold each other, fly paper birds on the wind, run with four-legged creatures, laugh and tease each other. They’re never alone.

Sometimes, in the mornings, one will walk or run by, a speck of dark against the sand, there and gone. But they have their cities and roads and buildings and watchers. None of them are truly alone.

None, until the boy.

It's night when Shiro first sees him. The abandoned house is the closest human dwelling to the little beach he found for himself. As long as he's visited, it's been dark and empty, but the single lamp lit in the window catches his eye as he surfaces and holds his gaze. He lets the waves push him closer to the shore, holding himself in stillness as he tries to catch a glimpse of the people inside.

The moon rises over the hills behind the house. It's high by the time he gives up, but by then the tide has pulled him near enough to see the beach properly—and the figure seated on it, so still he might have mistaken it for a rock.

It's small. All humans are, but this one more-so the way it's hunched in on itself.

He can't tear his eyes away. He slides closer to the dock, hiding under it out of habit though there's no way it could see him in the dark, even if it was looking. It's not. Maybe there's something wrong with it, he thinks. Maybe it’s dead.

He watches so long that when the figure finally stands, the shock of movement makes him jerk back with a splash.

It stares almost right at him, almost as if it can see through the water and the night and mist and it can see like Shiro can. It takes a step toward the waves, but just one. Shiro lets himself slip closer in kind, until its form is clear against the sand and he can see the way its dark hair catches the wind. A boy, maybe, with those cheekbones and that brow. It’s not how his kind keep track of it, when they care to, but as good as humans are at going in groups, they're better at dividing themselves by rank and cloth and hair—like schools of differently colored fish, he once thought.

He has to stay low; the rise and dip of waves reveal him in flashes as he leaves the shadows of the dock. Between one wave and the next he seems to vanish, but Shiro makes out the movement of his body against the path that leads up the hill, to the lit windows of the house, his steps slow and steady.

Shiro stays until the lights go off, but he doesn't see the boy again.

That's how it starts.

There are collapses of rock under the water sometimes, at the edge of the city. The shore up above them and the long slope into the deepest water starts to crack at the edge and though it hardly seems like a slope at a distance, and once it starts to slip it goes and goes. It can bury thousands in a minute, in one rush of water and rock and sand and mud. They never talk about it or mourn the lost; death is part of life and they've lived too long. Death is a freedom. In the wake, it leaves nothing but smooth, featureless slope, as if nothing different was ever there at all—and it starts with a single pebble, a sifting down of sand from the current up above.

This, he'll realize later, is the same.
The night the boy falls in the water, Shiro has been watching him for most of a moon.

The boy has his habits. Shiro has watched him sit on the sand and watched him kick his heels off the edge of the dock. He's counted the shells the boy picked up off the beach and noted their shape and color. He's watched from the water the way the boy sometimes stands at the window after nightfall, and imagined sometimes that the boy could see him, too.

It's something so secret, so private. No one misses his presence below if he's not fighting, so there's no one to tell him he can't stay and watch and while away his time. He has so much of it to give away. Affection joins curiosity as the moon shifts from a sliver like a hook to a half-shell and that's more room than he's had to make for anything in his heart in a long, long time.

The water is too clear and he's too big to hide by the dock in daylight, so he lets the surf hide him, wills himself to be something indistinct. His hair is the crest of a wave or maybe a bit of seafoam—or nothing. He's nothing. The boy sees nothing when he looks to the sea and Shiro sees everything. His quiet, his fierceness; he looks at the water like it owes him something. Maybe he looks at everything that way. Shiro wishes he could know, but it's a sureness he feels like the changing of the tide: this is something like him.

This is something alone.

He could sing the boy down to the water, but he's never been able to catch the hang of it, never wanted to try. The temptation is still there. Hunting is an instinct as true to him as knowing how to tread in suspension. He makes boons with himself, tries out ideas, and even tries speaking above water for what feels like the first time in his existence. It doesn't have to be the water. Shiro could secret him away to his cove and—

And what? And nothing.

Some things are better left untouched. His hands are for crushing, tearing, cutting, and ruining. Touch for any other purpose is as strange to him as the sound of his own voice against the water. No —the boy is like the baubles and rocks he finds and collects and secrets away. This is like the little creatures that click-click-click about the rocks on the shore. This obsession is nothing and brief and it will pass in a week or a year or ten with no one the wiser.

The night the boy climbs the cliff, all of that falls away. All his promises, all the ways he imagined he didn’t care. All of it, nothing.

Shiro watches his progress from the water. He watches the boy climb, step by step, and memorizes the care in the way he moves, and the grace. Humans aren't graceful, but under the water Shiro's tail starts to slide past itself of its own accord like it's trying to mimic the cadence of the boy's legs as he picks his path, step by step.

He stops at the top and clears himself a space to close to the cliff’s edge, his small figure perched there, golden in the light until the fog obscures him. Everything is silent in the fog. Shiro's heart thuds, over-loud in the quiet. He tries to still it, to listen for the sound of footsteps as he starts back down.

It never comes.
Instead, it's the slip of the cliff that deafens the quiet and the crack as the mass of dirt and rock hits the water. It's chaos, but even by night, even under the murk of the waves, Shiro’s eyes can make out the boy’s form held in suspension as they rain around them in slow motion.

He’s never felt slow in the water before, but now the time it takes to reach the boy makes it feel like he’s swimming through mud. He almost is—by the time he reaches the body, it’s a blind grab.

Humans don’t know the water. They play with it, but they don’t live it, and they can’t breathe it. The boy needs air, but his chest is still and his face is white—though even as Shiro watches, red mingles with the water, snakes down from his black hair and draws lines across his face as Shiro pulls him into the air and cradles his head.

Breath is easy. It’s the one thing Shiro has to give him.

He bends and presses his mouth to the boy's lips. They're soft and sweet, like the flesh of something rare and young on a feast night. Shiro breathes once and then repositions his grip, ignores that it's like a kiss and that he wanted that without realizing it, is realizing it now in this moment, and ignores the taste of metal as it blooms in his mouth.

Blood. He's never touched a human before and they're soft. This is something he can hurt without meaning to and he always means to, always—but not here, not now. He pushes air past the blood, pulls it up from his own chest and feels the boy’s ribs expand against him once, twice. On the third time, when Shiro’s heart is starting to speed, he comes alive. With weak hands he pushes at Shiro and coughs. Shiro holds him fast, feeding air into his body until there's life in him again and Shiro can force his own limbs to loosen their hold.

He's full of fight. It dies in shudders and in the wet rattle of his breath as Shiro holds him tight against his chest and returns him to land. The beach is too dangerous to lay him out on, but he entertains the thought of crawling up on the sand with him and wrapping around him until—until what? Until he wakes and sees what saved him? The waves will overtake him anyway, and now there's blood in the water. A night like this brings out all terrible things from their deep hides.

Instead, he sets the boy on the dock and runs his fingers over the boy’s pallid skin. His dark hair sticks across his forehead and cheeks as he still struggles for air with shallow, wet breaths.

Beauty is a strange thing. Shiro knows it, like he knows danger, like he knows when something in the arena will give him a fight. He knows it on sight without always knowing why, but the danger of it sings to something in his chest. Lethal things are almost always beautiful, but the boy is different. This creature can't hurt him, can't match him. It takes Shiro a moment to recall that there's more to existence than killing and being killed.

The boy coughs weakly. Shiro lays a hand over his chest, feeling his ribs rise and fall. They're delicate. Everything about him is. It would take the slightest pressure to cave his chest in, or the slip of his fingers to puncture his skin and bleed him dry. The thought is so abhorrent he makes himself pull away and slips back into the water.

Every breath the boy takes sounds like a little song, almost louder than the lapping of the waves. Shiro waits under the dock, holding his own as the boy's slows and steadies. He stays until he can hear the boy rise, watches as he drags himself off the dock, and then Shiro has to pull his claws out of the wood where they've dug in almost deep enough to splinter through it.

The light goes on in the house, no brighter than a candle in the fog. Slowly, the panic ebbs out of his chest.
In all his days and nights of watching, not once does Shiro see him smile. He doesn't see the boy speak or cry, doesn't see him laugh or frown. It shouldn't matter. Human lives are ephemeral, bright things and he's spilled the blood of a hundred older, wiser ones.

It matters. Somehow, it matters. Like the panic that pounded through his chest, this small thing consumes him.

Long ago, he was brought courting gifts—before his keepers put a stop to it. Coins of gold and strands of pointed teeth woven together, carvings made from the bones of the creatures he killed. Every new gift was a prize; his memory is a faded, ruined thing, but he remembers the joy of that time like a light in the dark. He adorned his room with them before he knew it was a cell, before they'd crusted over with time and silt and he abandoned the place. The gifts are a tradition. No one told him how many it would take. He brings the boy everything he has.

The rocks he unearths from the sand in the cove, glittering and clear, the color of fish and coral and his kind, too. Shiro's an oddity in monochrome black and white.

The first morning he leaves them on the dock in neat row, trying to judge by the pre-dawn light what order will look best in full sun, rearranging them one per slat until he runs out of time and dark, and then he waits. It takes most of the day, but it’s worth it for the look on the boy’s face, half-glimpsed between the slats of the dock, wondrous and bright as the sun casts off the stones and water and colors his face. His eyes are a storm. He was beautiful wounded and wet, but in the light he's something more.

When the boy asks him to stay, his voice is as clear as his gaze, rough like a yell, though it's barely more than a whisper. This, he thinks, must be what it feels like to drown—to have the air stolen from you by something beautiful, by the ebb and rush of water and the falling of your body to something too strong to try and fight.

The dock occupies his mind through all other places, like he’s been woken up from some long sleep and this place is the only one where he can be awake.

Keith tells him about stars and points them out in all their figures, the little ones that leap by only if you’re watching close enough to spot them, and the smaller, fainter ones that Keith says are ships and satellites. The world above the waves seemed like a pale thing before, a flat crust of life clinging to the edge of the world, the outskirts of a dying reef. Now it seems vast. When the boy tells him about libraries, he can see it in his mind: walls of books like the ones the boy reads to him from, stacked one on top of the other like the layers of rock around his cove. Or maybe they pave the walls like the slats of the dock.

*One day,* he thinks, and then realizes the flaw in his hope.
What made him good at killing wasn’t cruelty or a love of fighting or the thrill of a win. It was decisiveness. It was knowing a moment before anyone else what he was going to do and how he was going to do it. It was being right.

This isn’t blood or the quick strike-and-kill. This is precious and fragile and if it breaks, so will he.

Keith is stubborn. He has secrets that Shiro wants to pull off him one by one like the thin cloth he wears. Keith asks him once if he enjoys the fighting. He doesn’t know how to answer, because in the light rippling off the water, dancing on Keith’s hair and the necklace around his throat and his skin that’s starting to darken day by day, the arena feels far away—a story, and not one he wants to tell. If he can make Keith happy then he’s something more than the fight and he finds with a sudden disquiet that he wants to be more. For this beautiful, breathless thing, he needs to be more.

On a whim, he keeps Keith out in the water for a night, because in the dark the ocean is beautiful in new ways and it only seems fair to share alike when Keith has shared so much of his world. The instinct is a strange one, born on the same push that’s been steady in his gut for the better part of two moons. All of it is a show—Shiro is nothing to look at, not beautiful, but he can bring the boy all things that are.

When Shiro wakes him, his voice is a dry, cracked thing. His skin is pale. He looks like a body pulled from the water, a day dead at least.

In a way, the decision is a simple one, then. But then, it always is.

The fight can’t be lost, so he always wins. He can’t lose Keith, either, so he has to follow.

He works a scale free from his own flesh and revels in the bite of pain. This, too, he’s seen in the depths, but passing rare: a flash of color around a neck, a spark of light against the gloom, shining out from the tangle of hair that swirls around others’ faces. Nothing in the sea reflects so bright.

Courting gifts are common, but this isn’t. It’s the last piece of himself he has left to give; he presses it to the center of Keith’s small, clawless hand, as hard as he can without breaking, as if he can mold it into Keith’s skin by will alone and make it a part of him.

Keith holds the grip and nods. He promises.

It won’t mean anything to his kind, but to Shiro’s, it’s sacred. In every way that counts, they were bonded before, at the first press of lips to teeth, and even if Keith never knew it, it would have lived in Shiro for all time. This makes it real, makes it unbreakable.

Even she can’t try.

Tonight, the Witch is limned in light, a crown of corals about her head that flicker in violent colors from within. It must be the advent of some new celebration he’s missed, as dictated by her, and she must know what he’s come for, but even so, she lets him bow his head and pick his words.

There are so many, stacking up inside his head and heart, beating in his mouth and catching on the points of his sharp teeth, but he holds them all at bay.
“I want to be with him,” he says simply. If there’s some magic that can make it so, she knows it.

Like the ancient, leviathan thing she is, she shifts, and the water shifts with her. Now she can stare at him with both yellow eyes, and the halo of light above her head casts them both in color. “I told you: anything but this.”

It’s too late. Joy takes hold of his face, makes him smile, makes him want to laugh. “He’s already mine.”

She never smiles, never grimaces, but now the skin and scale around her eyes tightens. “It’s forbidden.” Disappointment etches her words, and an implication he doesn’t know how to face. Her hair moves of its own accord in the water around them and brushes the end of his tail; he has to still himself before he recoils in disgust. He wonders where her beauty has gone and then, with a coldness settling in his chest, wonders if this is how Keith saw him—if this is how Keith still sees him. She draws closer. “It can’t love you. It will leave you, one day.”

It.

A scale around her neck, on a bare rope that looks held together by the accumulation of algae and time that than by any thread. It reflects nothing. If she had a mate once, they’re long departed. Some older than him say she killed him. Some say she made a meal of his scale and bone and cast what was left to the deep. Some say she still mourns him.

A stray current touches Shiro’s tail and this time he doesn’t fight the urge to pull back. “Please.” She’s made their kind walk on land before. It’s spoken of in dark places. Everyone knows, even if they might not recall where they heard it or how long ago or why.

Hand in hand with those whispers is the warning—it never ends well. The Witch never loses a bet. It’s good then that Shiro doesn’t want to make one. He wants an exchange—something simple and short-worded, something he knows he won’t come out on top of but will get him something. A few days would be enough. A few days, and he can figure out the rest.

But she shakes her head and her words deepen. “Of course. Of course, you of all creations would have a love for broken things.” Her gaze falls to his arm and then to his scarred face without meeting his eyes, as if there’s nothing to see there anyway and he’s but some wrecked thing pieced together of scraps that she’s thinking now might have been better left in useless pieces. The memory of the arm’s loss is too old. A dream, half-remembered, one he's always forgetting. He's old, but anything he knew before the arena is gone. He doesn't know time like she does, or loss, but he can feel it stalking him in the quiet when Keith's breath is too hard and too long in coming. Time and loss are the only two battles left he wants to fight.

Shiro searches for words and manages only, “He's not broken.”

It's vehement. The game's already given away; it doesn't matter if she can hear the need in his voice now. He came to make a deal and there are no more pieces left for him to play, if he had any to start with.

“Please,” he begs instead, once more.

Her gaze falls for the first time. “If I give you this, you can't come back.” Her words are cracked and broken, as if they're as old as she is, crumbling under the weight of their own time. “I’ve made this deal before, a thousand times, boy. They always come back.”

Shiro holds himself still, trying to pick out the trick in the words, the loophole she can use to ruin him.
later, but finds none. She doesn’t need to deceive him. Hard facts are cruel enough. If he comes back, if he touches the water—

“You will, too.” Her eyes blink in the murky light, watching him. Any weakness, any break in his armor.

He swallows and asks, “You'll let me go to him? For nothing?”

One corner of her mouth tugs up in a wicked grin, sharp teeth greyed with age but no less lethal. “Oh, no. Not for nothing. Of course not.”

The first fight he wins on a whim. He’s good and the creature they pit him against is slow. These fights lost their appeal decades ago, but it’s rote now and he knows the rhythms of the fight like breathing.

All it asks of him is killing. He can do that. For this, he can do it with grace.

The light from the surface doesn't reach the arena. The walls are pitted with coves, worn away in places by age more than design, letting the bare light filter through, but not enough to do more than entice with the possibility of sight. He can almost make out the edges of the creature as it moves through the water toward him. No weapons are allowed—only his wits and the arm that still feels more alien than a part of him. It makes it easy to kill with. He sees the flash of an eye, the reflection of his own scales in it, and makes a quick strike. Luck, more than anything, carries him through.

Blood dark as ink obscures the water around them, so thick he can taste it, but it makes it easier to see movement—or the lack of it. The creature doesn’t twitch to disturb the water again. When the blood clears, he can see the stretch of it, the misshapen twist of its spine as it lies slumped on itself. Above and all around him a cheer rises, almost like the sound of waves, but higher and harder and strange.

It was never strange before.

The hair on the back of Keith’s neck would stand up to hear it. Shiro can see it in his mind's eye, clear as dawn, the way his human skin reacts to the smallest touch or even the faintest breath over the back of his neck.

Shiro doesn't need to breathe. Even above water, he could go without for hundreds of Keith's little, desperate pulls of air. It’s worth it to talk. To see Keith's eyes widen and darken at the touch of air across his skin. It was sweet, at first, to be wondered at, and later to be lusted after, but horrible for the moment in between when he was sure Keith saw him as a monster.

Now he understands. No matter what Keith sees, they are monsters. Only monsters revel in death. He hated the arena to start. By the third day, he loathes it. The roar of the crowd echoing and reverberating through the water shakes his body. They should be tired, he thinks distantly, at least as tired as he is, but they have nothing else to do or watch, nowhere else to go.

So he kills and kills, ruins and rends and ignores the accumulation of damage that’s slowing his limbs and stealing his blood. It clouds the water around him in a murk of pink that thickens toward the end. A thing with claws and spikes and more legs than any creature needs makes a strike across his tail that almost severs it. One of his own kind draws a spear across his chest. Something he never sees
but which tries to choke and bury him in its own mass of writhing limbs snaps his un-scaled arm like it's nothing but driftwood weakened by the weight of the surf.

He’s breaking, moment by moment—but the Witch never makes a deal without keeping it. He’ll have his legs and the land and everything that comes with it, as long as he can hold fast. The image he clings to is Keith’s ships, wheeling overhead as the two of them lie on the shore. A thousand days for Keith to trace them out and name them and teach Shiro all their secrets. A thousand days for Shiro to learn all of his. A thousand, at least. More.

When the last fight is finished, he hardly notices.

The final creature seems no more a threat than the last dozen he brought down, but the roar of the crowd when he goes for the easy option and pushes his arm through its great eye tells him this kill is different. It goes on and on and almost seems to reverberate back and echo off itself, making a hum. Like some human’s ship buzzing through the water he thinks nonsensically and tries to hold himself still to keep more of his life from leaking out into the water. The requisite for freedom is nothing but a nod—the Witch gives it from above with a light shift of her head, no more than a wink of the corals that sit on her head, writing pink lines through the haze that clouds his vision—and then he’s gone.

He rises and rises. All the world seems like a tunnel. He hopes when he reaches the end he knows what will be there.

Most of his kind stick to the deep. They like the dark, revel in the light they can make themselves, revel in solitude and the wide unknown, revel in the pressure that confines them. Not him. The light, the air, the land all seemed more fascinating than the world the Witch brought him to, and now, as he swims, the water seems to forbid his passage. The dark is alien. The flow of saltwater past his wounds makes him ache. As promised, they melt away with time, but with it comes a threat. In all his life, the waves have never threatened him. They entice and say land is close, the surface closer. They ebb and pull him forward, but now his tail drags behind him, an anchor trying to bear him back to the deep as it changes and melds with itself. It hurts, but no more than all of him does and has for days.

When the first surge of air bubbles pushed from above rush past him, his arm snaps back into place. The opened wound on his side re-seals next, the myriad of scratches and scrapes following it. It shouldn't take him by surprise when the openings on his neck follow suit, but it does. His air cuts off without warning and his tail is still changing, still forming something new. His arms are strong, but it's with a quiet horror he realizes that's changed, too—the scale arm is metal now, becoming solid liked the hulls of the ships he's chased and wondered at for years. It gleams dully in the moonlight that filters through the water. It drags him down and down away from the brief hint of air and soon the waves can't touch him anymore.

He thinks: this is typical. Fight for days and fight for love and win just in time to drown under the weight of what he begged for. But no. He imagines his corpse washing up on the beach for Keith to find in the morning and can't stand the thought. Somehow that's worse even than the prospect of learning what it feels like to truly drown.

Finally, the weight of his tail falls away in full. Left in its place, the legs feel like an unfair exchange, too little for what was lost, but he’s seen humans swim. They’ll serve. He makes himself kick and their strength surprises him; all at once he breaks the surface and hits sand, takes his first true breath. The air in his lungs tastes like blood.

He lies there, letting the water lap at him, gentle now like an apology, like it was never anything but. He doesn’t know where he is, he realizes as a shudder wracks his body. It's cold. That's what that
feeling is. That's why Keith shivers and clings to him in the water. It's miserable.

It's only a moment. A voice comes to him, and then soft, human hands are trying to pull him up. The smell is familiar and warm and lovely even as its tinged with some sickness he still can't identify. Shiro clings to him, the light at the end of the tunnel—real, after all.

That first night is a haze.

His new body aches and Keith is heat and softness and something else, something better. He pulls Shiro out of the shower when he's warm. Shiro tries not to fall on him when he goes. The water in the bathroom tastes like nothing and it's hot like the sun made liquid, like Keith's skin after a day in it. Still, Shiro's limbs won't stop shaking against his will. Keith pulls him into a kiss and it's good because it's the first familiar thing since he left the water. He tries not to be greedy. He tries to pull himself back when Keith breaks for air, but he's bare and Keith should be too. Shiro helps him lose his clothes—finally, something he knows how to do—as Keith pulls him back, toward the smaller room, and then turns them. Shiro feels himself start to fall, feels softness against the back of his legs, and then Keith is on top of him, pressing him back.

The cloth sticks to his wet skin, drags over it as he repositions, but all his focus is on the warmth radiating off the body against his. Every sensation is heightened. Keith isn't so small now, isn't so fragile. He pushes the wet hair off Shiro's forehead, runs his fingers through it and back over his scalp and Shiro realizes with a small lurch that this is new for him, too. This is all new.

But this, Shiro can do. Moving Keith is easier than walking and the motion to flip him is the same—though now there's no hard rock to cushion him from, no fear of water finding its way into his delicate lungs. Now, Shiro can indulge.

He raises himself up on one hand to look down at what he's caught. Black hair splayed over the sheets and over his own face, stuck there with sea spray and the wetness of Shiro's hands. His eyes are smart. He's thinking, watching Shiro watch him, mind turning on some question. He'll wait to ask, but he'll ask. It's a certainty. With the same persistence he asked about the arena, he'll want to know.

Keith jerks up against him in shock or pleasure at the slide of Shiro's hand between their bodies, his heavy touch. The question dies in his eyes.

Keith makes the most beautiful sounds. Once, he cries, but only for a moment and not for pain, and afterward his face tastes like salt, like water. It's messy, all told. Far messier than before. The water washes away so much, and he's not used to his own mass pulling at him, keeping him grounded. He's afraid he'll crush Keith or do too much, but Keith only sighs and chases for more when he pulls back, and he finds he doesn't mind the mess. Above the water, everything stays. The smell of them permeates the room all night and into morning, as the sun rises and changes the world to white. His eyes take hours to adjust; he uses each one, counts the colors in the air and across Keith’s hair. Across his own arm which looks like silver and oil in the light.

Even his dragging footsteps in the sand are there still in the morning. Keith walks him down to the beach. Stairs are difficult; there's less incentive and more to mess up than all his previous exertions. “We can go back to the room.” Shiro offers the third time he stumbles. His voice sounds wrong, so here clears his throat, though he knows it won't make a difference.
Keith frowns. There's a mark on his neck that his shirt can't hide, and his mouth is still red. “You—
oh.” He flushes.

Shiro's eyes couldn't take in the hue of it quite right before, more adjusted to picking fine colors in
the murk. Now Keith is a hundred new shades. His skin is like bone and his hair like seaweed, like a
mussel shell, like sightless-black—and Shiro realizes he's obsessed. That's what this emotion is, and
part of it is the instinct to mate and keep and make safe, but part is something else.

They settle on the sand together, side by side, staring out at the waves. He expected to feel more loss,
and maybe it'll come in time, but at that moment he looks at the water he can never touch again and
feels nothing.

Keith isn't pushed against him, but his heat comes through in the foot between them. “You know.
We could go for a swim later if you want.”

Days and days Shiro remembers, trying to persuade him into the water. He wanted nothing else but
to be close, to share that place with him. The compulsion has cleared a little now and the water is lost
to him anyway, so he smiles and glances over at Keith. “I don't.” The feel of Keith's small legs
around his waist, the power of being something terrible, the simple rush of water around him is gone
now. All gone. “I don't want to.”

It's a lie he almost believes.

Keith searches his face. He's oh so clever. Shiro loves this about him. His mouth falls open when he
realizes, and then he reaches out, fiddling with something in the sand by Shiro's foot, or drawing a
pattern.

Shiro watches him, head cocked.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I told you to stay—”

The first time they spoke. Shiro remembers because it was the first time he could recall wanting to be
somewhere at much as the somewhere wanted him. He reaches over, pulls Keith into his side. “It's
okay.” Keith is tense in his grip, a spiral of anguish cinching his limbs tight. “It doesn't matter,
Keith “

“Yes, it does.”

“You can make it up to me.” Keith looks up at him, eyes wide in hope until he sees the twist of
Shiro's smile. “Get me pizzas and we're even.” Keith pushes away from him, wipes his eyes, though
he isn't crying.

“Pizzas? Multiple? You're going to get fat.”

That, Shiro thinks, isn't a half bad idea.

Chapter End Notes

Some much belated Shiro POV to get back in the vibe! I hope you enjoy this and have a
wondrous week and better mermay! You can find me on twitter and tumblr.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!