Numb

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Summary

Shiro doesn't need a slave. And yet, here he is, taking responsibility for the life of a beautiful boy, just because he couldn't stand the thought of leaving him at the slave market any longer. This purchase won't change his life much, right?

Notes

Hello everyone!
This is my first work in this fandom.
I'm very happy to be here!

Mostly, it's a study of Shiro suffering through a life he wouldn't have chosen himself.
This work is not particularly dark, but still, it's a Slavery AU, there are mentions of non-con and rape. Also, a lot of angsty, painful and uncomfortable moments. Also, the feels. Be careful!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter Notes

Here is some information about this universe, for the better understanding of the plot.

1. In this universe, slavery is mostly descendant, but you can become a slave from a free person, as a result of a court decision. You can't become a free person from a slave - it's forever.
2. There are countries where slavery is forbidden and countries which support it. The slavery-friendly countries are in a majority.
3. Every slave is marked with a chip with a unique number.
4. Owners are not allowed to take their slaves overseas. To flee a country with a slave in tow you'd have to remove the chip from under the slave's skin, which is complicated and dangerous for their life.
5. The owners are only allowed to punish their own slaves. Touching another's property without permission would be considered extremely rude, and, of course, there would be a fine for doing so, especially for hurting other owners’ slaves. Of course, if some owner’s slave is being disrespectful to another owner, the rude slave’s master is expected to punish their wayward slave as a polite social gesture.
6. The owners are not allowed to kill their slaves (there’ll be a very big fee for killing one). If someone buys a slave, it’s his responsibility to provide the slave with food, water and shelter; otherwise, the slave has to be taken away from the owner by the state. The owners are not allowed to make their slaves work more than 10 hours a day. They are also obliged to give the slaves one holiday a week. Everything else is allowed.
7. To look at a slave as at a human being is considered weird in the owners’ circles.
8. The age of consent in the country is 16. People are legally considered adult when they reach 18. When it comes to free people, then, for an adult, having sex with a minor (under 16) is a crime, having sex with a person between 16 and 18 is a crime only if and when said teen reports to the police since it's considered that people over 16 are able to give informed consent already. When it comes to the slaves, their owners are allowed to have intercourse with them when they reach 16.

His new slave is pale, dark-haired and very pretty. He’s well-built despite his slim shape, and his eyes hold the most beautiful shade of purple Shiro has ever seen. He’s too young to be taken to playrooms yet (if you are not a miserable pervert), but he’s definitely old enough to realize what his position in this world is. He’s not very pleased with it, obviously, and his acting skills seem to be quite poor, from what Shiro could gather watching the slave in his cage before the auction. The boy has looked wary, sullen, barely compliant enough not to earn a punishment.

According to the slave’s file, the boy is sixteen now. From the file, Shiro has also learned that he’s been born a slave. His mother managed to get away from her owners, though, leaving her child (an infant then) with his father. When the slave had been twelve, his father had died in an accident. After that, the boy has been transferred from a settlement in the desert to a standard boarding school for slave kids, where he’s stayed up until coming of age. His grades in school have been high enough at times to assume he’s quite clever; on the other hand, his generally inconsistent academic results may only mean disciplinary problems. Anyway, for the umpteenth time during the last decade, Shiro is grateful that in his country the slaves at least receive basic school education. What would he do with an illiterate boy?
At the moment, the slave is kneeling on the wooden floor just outside his study. Thanks to the two-way mirrors that Shiro has ordered to replace the walls separating his study from the corridor with, the boy doesn’t know he’s being watched. It doesn’t seem to matter, though. He holds himself perfectly straight. Alone, in a new place, undoubtedly tired and worn-out from a stressful day, the boy shows perfect control, not taking his perpetual grim gaze into account.

He is dressed in simple pants and a t-shirt, both offensively orange, sandals on his legs. Shiro has been immensely relieved to see that after demonstrating him nude on the podium, the organizers haven’t dressed him in something provocative and revealing before handing him to Shiro. Shiro is aware that he should’ve already invited the slave in, where a throw cushion brought specifically for him is waiting on the floor, to spare his knees. He should’ve already fed him, talked to him, explained the basic rules and ordered him to rest. But Shiro is somehow lost in thought. He didn’t need a slave.

He went to the auction to accompany his friend Matt who looked for a companion for his little nerdy sister. They’ve found not one, but two companions at once, both boys. If Katie were his sister, Shiro would’ve rather looked for girls, but Matt had an explanation. Matt has chosen the first one, a broad-shouldered, heavy dark-skinned boy because he was the only person there who could hold a conversation about science with him (of course, Matt was sold). The other one, a shy, lean and also dark-skinned boy came as part of the package with the first one (in Matt’s eyes, at least; because Matt couldn’t just separate two close friends). As the purchase has been confirmed, Matt went into the office to sign papers, leaving Shiro to his devices. Out of boredom, Shiro started to wander around the premises. His feet brought him to the cages where the slaves who were expecting to be auctioned next were kept.

And then Shiro has seen him, the purple-eyed boy. 

From the way the boy was squirming on his ass from time to time it’s been obvious that he’s been disciplined recently. Yet, his gaze was stubborn and determined. The boy wouldn’t be swayed, no matter what life would dish at him. Shiro suddenly had a vision of the same boy in five years, starved and beaten half to death, but still not broken. With his fierce will, he would undoubtedly end his days at a fighting arena of some kind or worse, in some toxic mines. If he wouldn’t get killed by one of his owners before that. Then, surprising himself, Shiro realized that he didn’t want that for the boy. The idea of being interested in a slave’s destiny startled him, mystified him even; there have been times when he wouldn’t shy away from grand gestures, but those times were long gone. Hell, during the five years he’s been home again after returning from captivity he’s calmed down enough to admit that he’s gone to war in order to run away from the reality of a slavery society he couldn’t change. What a hopeless idiot he had been back then… Even if only free people could serve in the military, it didn’t mean the cooks or the cleaning staff were free as well. He hadn’t helped himself in the slightest with his “flight”. His cowardice has backfired, though; now Shiro is broken and indifferent and has one arm less than your average human.

But even after his less than glorious comeback, even after the time he’s spent secluded in his house thinking that nothing will ever be the same for him (how could it, when even Allura and Matt seemed foreign and not trustworthy enough), even after he’d thought he’d never care much about other people ever again, Shiro couldn’t ignore all the people out there who were unlucky enough to be born into slavery, no matter how hard he tried. Shiro could do as he pleased inside his mansion: keep servants instead of slaves, ignore the events where you were supposed to bring a body slave with you, befriend people of equal tastes. Whatever he did to hide, the harsh truth always waited just around the corner. Like today, when his best friend decided to solve his little sister’s socializing issues by buying her a friendly slave.

Maybe, this trip would’ve gone without complications if not for this boy. Shiro would’ve come to the auction house, wait for Matt to be done, congratulate him on the purchase and go home. Shiro would’ve felt uneasy for days but that would’ve been it. But no, no such luck. Something has brought him to that pretty boy, and during the short time Shiro was walking along the rows of cages, the boy has managed to show him a glimpse of a vibrant personality. After that, he wasn’t just a random slave anymore; Shiro couldn’t walk away forgetting about his existence and have no guilt
trips afterwards. If he left the boy there, he’d maybe wouldn’t be able to meet his eyes in the mirror anymore.

When the auction started, Shiro was the only bidder, and the boy appeared shocked that anyone was interested in him. The nasty auctioneer looked at Shiro as if the latter has suddenly grown two heads. He even forgot to keep his usual subservient sneer plastered to his pampered face for a moment. A strange guy; should’ve been happy to get rid of a troublesome charge.

Shiro knew that he has acted impulsively when buying the boy and yet, he wasn’t sorry about his decision. His friends were telling him he’s become very cold, unlike his previous self. From Shiro’s point of view, being a prisoner of war and losing an arm in an experiment would make that to a person. This is his attempt to do a good thing for once. Or a semi-good thing? Whatever. Surprisingly enough, the slave didn’t struggle or fight while being taken to Shiro’s estate; Shiro has expected him at least to look his new master in the eyes with venom, maybe even spit at him. Instead, his new slave was all downcast eyes and trained motions. He looked a little unsure when Shiro has told him to sit in the back seat of his car, though. Has he expected to ride in the trunk or in a special van, with bars on the windows? Shiro even had to show the boy how to use the safety belt, which has been slightly awkward with his one hand. But they’ve managed.

The drive to the mansion was eventless. Shiro used this time to plan his next actions. Keith (he has to memorize the boy’s name as soon as possible) sat still and stayed silent, his gaze in his lap. Upon arrival, Shiro ordered Keith to follow him. He purposely forgot to leash him and led the way to his study, Keith walking two steps behind him. When they came to the door, Shiro ordered Keith to wait for him there, and Keith immediately kneeled in front of the door. Shiro could hardly suppress an annoyed sigh. This new slave was being such a bother from the start.

This is how they ended up where they are now: Shiro at his working table and Keith on his knees in the corridor. Shiro is nervous; he shouldn’t be, right? He has nothing to risk here. Shiro takes a deep breath, steels himself and calls for Keith. The boy comes in and obediently positions himself on the pillow in the centre of the room as Shiro points at it.

Shiro stands up, leans on the side of his massive table (left from his dad, of course) and starts talking in his smooth, calm voice. He is used to hearing that his way of speaking is reassuring, soothing; he himself finds it faceless and boring. He starts with an introduction of sorts.

“My name is Takashi Shirogane. I expect you to call me “Sir” or “Master”, whatever you’ve been taught. I’ll be honest with you: I don’t need a slave, not really. But in a household like mine, there’s always something to do. You’ll be assigned to Mr Fennell, my chief assistant. He’ll be in charge of your schedule so that any of my workers who require help can book your time. You’ll be expected to be working for them from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, with a lunch break, of course. You’ll receive your assignments from Mr Fennell every morning. After 9 p.m. you have free time. I allow you to walk freely in the house and the garden; the public areas, of course. Sunday is a holiday. Is everything clear so far?”

“Yes, Sir,” - comes a reply. The boy tries very hard to be polite, which is oddly pleasing.

“No one is allowed to punish you or touch you in any sexual way without my permission. If something like that happens, you tell me. The property is being constantly monitored, I will learn eventually, so it’s in your best interests to inform me first. One more time. If something bothers you, you tell me. If you have questions, you ask me or Mr Fennell. Do you understand what I mean?”

“Yes, Sir,” - answers Keith without hesitation. - “I am to tell you or Mr Fennell if something happens to me which you don’t approve”.

“That’s the gist of it, yes. Now, next. Saturday will also be a not-working day for you, for special reasons. I don’t know whether you’ll cause trouble and will require to be kept in line like most slaves do. I don’t care either way. You’ll receive a maintenance spanking at the hands of Mr Fennell every Saturday. We’ll test your limits so that he’ll use just enough force to remind you of your place. It’s in case you don’t earn yourself additional punishment by breaking my rules. After you’ve received your spanking, I’ll expect you to spend the day in your room, reflecting on your behaviour. This clear?”

“Yes, Sir”.

This time Keith sounds pensive.
“Since it’s Saturday and I haven’t introduced you to Mr Fennell yet, I’ll handle your first discipline session myself, here and now.”

Keith’s posture straightens and his shoulders tense. Otherwise, he doesn’t let his apprehension show. For a moment, Shiro fights with an impulse to just let Keith be, but a resigned voice in the back of his mind says that these spankings will be good for Keith on the long run. He does need to know his place to survive in this world, after all.

“Before we start, do you have any questions?”

“Yes, Sir. May I ask for a small favor, please?”

It’s unexpected to receive a request so early on, but Shiro has just ordered Keith to tell him about his trouble, so he has to hear him out, at least.

“What is it?” - asks Shiro, trying to sound kind instead of irritated.

“I have a butt plug inside me, since the auction. If it’s OK with you, I’d very much like to remove it before the spanking starts. Please, Sir.”

A plugged slave, fresh from the auction, is hardly news, and Shiro should’ve foreseen that. He doesn’t want Keith’s first discipline session in his home to become something sexual. Also, relieving Keith from the plug is a convenient excuse to watch Keith closely in an embarrassing setting and catalogue his reactions for later use.

“Let’s go to the enclosed bathroom where you can take care of your problem,” - suggests Shiro.

“Yes, Sir.”

Keith sounds relieved, not frightened. Still, Shiro feels like a rotten person. Maybe, he is one.

They enter the bathroom and Shiro orders Keith to take the plug out and wash quickly. He watches Keith undress, gingerly take the toy out of his hole and then quickly, but efficiently shower. The boy isn’t concerned by his nudity in the slightest. He’s obviously comfortable in his skin, and Shiro with his stump of an arm can only admire such an attitude.

The experience ceases to be amusing fairly quickly. Seeing the plug (and the size of it) makes the thing with buying another person all the more real for Shiro. He recalls that Keith is sixteen. He puts two and two together, and the image of hundreds of other teen slaves bought and fucked right off the bat today makes Shiro vaguely nauseous.

To distract himself, he asks Keith how his day was as soon as he’s finished with the shower. This seems like a nice idea to him. There are no visible scars on Keith’s body, and his squirming has been caused not by remnants of a whipping as Shiro has feared, but by an imperceptible toy in his asshole. That’s why Shiro doesn’t expect anything out of the ordinary from his story. He just wants to listen to Keith talk, again, to gauge his personality better. At first, Keith starts describing a standard auction related routine, and Shiro relaxes a little at the sound of his confident voice. It’s good that Keith is like that; taking responsibility for another broken person would make his life hell. And then...

“And then they had to plug me,” - Keith stops, unsure.

“Was it a problem?” - Shiro immediately curses himself for asking.

“I just hate this feeling when they shove a toy up your ass as if you’re a bottle of wine that needs a stopper.” - Keith’s answer is unexpectedly bold.

“Yeah, and?” - prompts Shiro, against his better judgement.

“They haven’t been very pleased with me anyway, so I’ve given them a run for their money. They had to tie me to a table to get things done...”

...Shiro’s ears ring, and he can hardly see his surroundings. He hasn’t had a flashback for eternity, but now he’s experiencing it full force: he is in that camp again, strapped to an operation table, helpless and scared to death. He still has his right arm, but it won’t stay like that for long... There are some sounds cutting through the fog in his mind, and he feels a warm body pressing to him. It helps a little. But only a little: Shiro still experiences all the pain and fear he’s experienced five and a half years ago. It’s excruciating, to revive all those memories. Mercifully, as it has happened during his previous flashbacks, Shiro blacks out, unable to handle the stress.
Pretending to be OK

Chapter Summary

Just Shiro having a nice weekend.

Chapter Notes

Hello again!
I'm very happy to receive positive feedback so far! Thank you!
I'm back with another chapter.
You haven't believed me that Shiro's weekend actually turns out to be nice, have you? ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro comes back to himself in his own bed, surrounded by a well-known scent. Is it a detergent his maids use? It might be. Waking up in a familiar environment makes him feel safe. His vision is a little blurry, though, and he blinks several times to try and take in his surroundings. He still feels foggy.

Mr Fennel’s voice brings his consciousness online at last.
“You’re back, finally,” - to an outsider his chief assistant may sound as calm as ever, but Shiro knows him long enough to notice that he’s on edge. Why so, wonders Shiro. In the meantime, Mr Fennel continues speaking:
“You’ve been senseless for two hours straight. It’s the longest since the end of the… crisis five years ago. I’m proud to tell that the guard who monitors the cameras’ feed has reported to me in less than a minute after I’ve received the signal from your alarm button…”
Shiro can’t really get what his closest servant is talking about. His head starts to ring strangely while all that blurriness still surrounds him. He tries to listen more attentively, suspecting that something is not right. Only after Mr Fennell mentions a “slave”, it all comes rushing back: the scene in the bathroom, his flashback, the remnants of his fear… Someone has caught him when he’s been falling, someone has held him, a warm and steady presence behind him. Keith!!
Shiro sits up abruptly, which makes his head spin, and asks in a frantic voice:
“Keith! Where is he? You haven’t done anything to him?”
“The slave, you mean?” - specifies Mr Fennel dryly. Is Keith the reason Mr Fennel is so annoyed? It can’t be.
“His name is Keith,” - pinpoints Shiro stubbornly. He hopes he doesn’t pout.
Mr Fennel doesn’t change his tone of speaking:
“About this Keith. I’ve left him in his assigned room. By the way, it wasn’t very nice of you to inform me about acquiring a slave via text message while I’ve been out of the mansion on business. The news of you buying a slave after all these years of refusing to even consider such an option has been a shock in and of itself; now imagine how unnerved I’ve been after having to give directions to the servants over the phone…”
Shiro has to stop this useless rant. There are problems and Problems. Mr Fennel’s concern about not being up to the mark is nothing against the distress of being forced to witness your new master collapse in front of you on the first day in your new home. If Mr Fennel doesn’t shut up soon, Shiro is going to lose it. His worries are concentrated around Keith. He’s barely met the boy, and he’s failed him so completely. His own inadequacy crushes him, and Mr Fennel is still talking a mile a
And not a word about the poor boy!
“You haven’t touched him, Steve?” - growls Shiro, beside himself. “Have you at least given him a meal while I’ve been out cold?!”
“Who do you take me for, Takashi?!” - Mr Fennel’s voice rises in pitch, as it does when he is truly angry. It makes Mr Fennel sound like a petulant teenage boy. Finally, he’s showing his true emotions. “It’s not his fault you’re like that! And I’m not an imbecile! I know you well enough not to touch your things without your explicit permission! Of course, I’ve fed him! I take care of your possessions!”
“He’s not a thing, you ass!” - shouts Shiro.
“I don’t care about him at all, I care about you!” - screeches Mr Fennel back. His screeching is truly awful. Shiro cringes, Mr Fennel makes a face, and both men fall silent. Slowly, but surely, Shiro’s anger starts to fade. He eyes Mr Fennel warily. This tall, bony man has worked for him since he’s been sixteen (like Keith now, remembers Shiro absently). Mr Fennel knows him inside and out. He’s Shiro’s closest person now (sorry, Allura, sorry, Matt). Mr Fennel is a good man. He doesn’t wish Keith harm.
Mr Fennel’s only problem is that he needs a lot of time to form emotional connections with other people. It took him three years before he could talk to Shiro about things that interested him for real. Being distant is good for being “the main butler” of the household. As Shiro’s chief assistant, Mr Fennel commands his whole staff, and he needs to stay unbiased. But on the overall - since Mr Fennel is the person with whom Shiro spends more time than with anyone else, his closed-off personality has a negative influence on Shiro’s state of mind. Being around Mr Fennel makes Shiro more suspicious of the people around him, which only enhances Shiro’s anxiety and means that his trust issues get worse.
At the same time, Mr Fennel is the closest approximation to family Shiro has at the moment. Shiro steels himself and makes the first move.
“I’m sorry for yelling at you, Steve,” - he says, sincerely. “But I don’t want you or anyone else here to talk about Keith like he’s less than a human being.”
“Duly noted, Mr Shirogane,” - replies Mr Fennel sarcastically. A simple “sorry” won’t pacify him, then. Shiro sighs inwardly. No matter how loyal he is to Shiro, his butler is such an arrogant bastard. “Fuck you, Steve.” - says Shiro. “Fuck you and your attitude.”
“That’s what I get for taking care of you and your… Keith in time of need.”
Why would he say Keith’s name through gritted teeth every time? Such a jerk. Shiro swears, if he’ll ever make edits to Mr Fennel’s job description, he is going to change his job title to “chief ASSsistant”. Aloud he says:
“Thank you. I appreciate your help, Steve, I really do.”
Shiro thinks for a second, then adds: “But still, fuck you.”
“You’re welcome, Sir.”
At least, Mr Fennel’s voice is back to normal. His squealing was hurting Shio’s ears. They bicker some more, and it helps in easing their nerves until Shiro is able to ask questions normally again. Still, this conversation has exhausted him.
“Tell me again how you’ve found out that you have to come to the bathroom by my study,” - he asks tiredly. Mr Fennel instantly perks up at the prospect of being listened to.
“The panic alarm has been activated. I and the head of security received the signal and hurried to your side. Thank god I’ve returned to the estate already! We’ve found you in the said bathroom in the arms of your naked… Keith.”
You’ll learn to call his name properly, thinks Shiro vindictively.
“I and my colleague paused for a second since we’ve never seen Keith before. He, apparently, couldn’t take it. He yelled at us to, I quote, “fucking move” and help you. He didn’t want to take his hands off of you as if he’s sensed that you need to retain bodily contact to get back to conscious sooner.”
Shiro is impressed. With Keith, not with Mr Fennel and his colleague.
“If I saw you pausing in the doorway I would’ve yelled at you, too,” - informs Mr Fennel.
“Oh, I have no doubt you would, Mr Shirogane,” - Mr Fennel’s tone drips venom. “Anyway, I didn’t have time to bother with your slave, so after we’ve picked up your unmoving body I’ve sent him to his room with one of the guards. I let him dress in his orange ensemble, and I’ve ordered to give him leftovers from the servants’ meal.”
That sounds reasonable.

“Good. Sorry for making assumptions,” - says Shiro. He feels a little lighter, but mostly he is just tired. His head stopped ringing, but it’s started to ache mercilessly instead. This is one of the “greatest” days he’s survived lately.
On the contrast, Mr Fennel looks as calm and composed as ever.

“Actually, I’ve also watched the feed from the camera in your bathroom, you know, the 15 minutes before our arrival. Your paranoia has been useful for once.”
Oh yeah, as if Mr Fennel will ever get over Shiro’s order to install cameras in literally every room of his house. Shiro barely contains himself from pointing out that no one is really interested in a video with Mr Fennel relieving himself, so he should calm the fuck down already.

But enough small talk for today.

“Let me watch the feed myself.”

Mr Fennel looks very disappointed at the prospect of losing the chance to criticize and ridicule his boss a bit more. But he obeys, knowing that his time is up, and leaves.

As soon as the door closes behind Mr Fennel, Shiro opens his laptop, logs into the security control system and finds the right video.

There, Keith is towelling himself in front of the shower in the bathroom. He stands, his body half-turned to Shiro, while they talk. He looks at ease. Then, Shiro starts falling, and Keith is there in a blink of an eye, catching him, holding him in his arms while Shiro shivers. It looks so intimate Shiro can hardly breathe. It’s a good thing there’s no sound on the record, decides Shiro.

The next second after catching Shiro, Keith notices the alarm button and hits it. Shiro mentally thanks Mr Fennel for being considerate enough to position the buttons on the waist level during the renovation of the mansion. Otherwise, Keith couldn’t have reached the button from the floor without losing contact with Shiro.

Less than a minute later Mr Fennel and the head of the security burst in. They do freeze for a moment, just as Mr Fennel has told him, and Keith shouts at them, indeed. After that, the men drag Shiro out, while Keith stands and watches. Then a guard comes into the bathroom, Keith dresses in the clothes from the auction and heads out, led by the guard, acting passively, as if he’s lost all of his energy. He still wears the collar he’s had on in the morning when Shiro has first noticed him. They’ve made Keith stand naked in front of those rich bastards in nothing but this primitive collar. Shiro wants to reap the damned band in pieces and burn them to ashes.

He needs to go see Keith, as soon as he manages to stand up from his bed without stumbling to the ground.

His phone chimes from the nightstand as a text comes in. It’s Mr Fennel.

“I’ve told him you’re OK and ordered him to go to sleep. Do you really wish to wake the child up?”

Mr Fennel’s new job title will be “asshole”, plain and simple, realizes Shiro. He’s right, though… Shiro falls asleep before he can press the “Call” button against Mr Fennel’s icon on his phone.

The next morning is not nice to Shiro at all. He feels much better than yesterday, but still takes time to check the cameras just outside of his room and read through security reports of the last night. Luckily, it’s Sunday, and he never plans anything serious for Sundays. Yesterday he went to bed at 10 p.m. which means Keith had to be sleeping around that time too. Following a strange impulse (he has too many urges lately; what's happened to his dull, predictable self?), Shiro loads the feed from Keith’s room (Mr Fennel has really renamed it as “Keith’s room”, how nice of him). He starts watching at the 9.45 p.m. mark. The room is dark already, but Keith obviously can’t fall asleep. He tosses and turns in his new bed, then stands up and starts pacing. After measuring the small room with his steps a dozen times, Keith sits on the floor at the bed and curls up in a ball. He might scream
silently in his hands, it’s too unclear in the infrared vision. Then he stands, shakily, and walks to the adjoining bathroom. Shiro changes the feed for the next room. In the bathroom, the light is on and Shiro sees clearly that Keith is hard between his legs. So, that was the reason for his insomnia. Shiro isn’t surprised or affronted: Keith is sixteen, after all. He intends to stop watching, to lull himself with the illusion of giving Keith privacy, but he hesitates a second too long and… Keith doesn’t do anything with his dick. Instead, he just turns the shower on and stands there, his arms hanging loosely by his sides. Shiro can bet the shower is ice-cold. Is he disgusted by his new surroundings so much?
Or?
Shiro curses under his breath. He hoped he won’t ever have to give Keith a sex-talk. Damned slave schools and their rules of conditioning.
What have they done to Keith to teach him such an untypical behaviour (for a teenage boy, that is)? How could he live there for so long without taking care of his needs? How did they handle it? Shiro doesn’t want to find out, honestly. Maybe, he’s wrong and Keith is just a prude. He closes the videos and calls Mr Fennel. Gives him detailed instructions concerning Keith, rules for him, his clothing, his working schedule, his food, his punishments, and such. Mr Fennel asks several questions, for example, does he have to knock on the door and whether he’s allowed to come in if Keith hasn’t reacted. Shiro says definitely yes to the first and to count until ten then coming in for the second. He is sure that he will be obeyed. That’s the odd thing about his chef assistant - he will argue and mock Shiro every time possible but Shiro knows he can trust him with anything.
Mr Fennel reports that he’s fed Keith breakfast and given him a tour of the property, introducing him to the staff. He’ll have to explain the rules regarding Keith to everyone later. Again, Shiro has no doubt that every maid, every guard and every gardener won’t dare to touch Keith now. Shiro feels relieved.
He thanks Mr Fennel and decides that he doesn’t need to meet Keith after all when everything has been taken care of so well. Guilt stirs somewhere in his guts, but Shiro is an expert at ignoring his own feelings.
He spends the day, surveying his collection of cat and robot figurines, rearranging his favourite books on the shelves in his study and reading through every report he’s failed to read during the last week.
He doesn’t download the feed from Keith’s room anymore. The sex-talk will have to wait for a little as well.

When night comes, Shiro ends up unable to fall asleep. His room seems to be so cold and unsafe Shiro has to turn on the lamp on the nightstand. He feels silly sleeping with the lamp on, but it’s better than staying awake all night and listening to the sounds of the wind in the garden.
Shiro closes his eyes… and sees his first day of his service in the army. He’s being introduced to his superior officers and fellow soldiers. It’s been a rough time for their country, and he was able to finish a speed course to go serve in the military as soon as possible. Shiro is optimistic; Shiro feels needed. He wants to do good things, to protect someone, to defend his country… He wants to feel like he’s a good person again.
His squad officer smiles at him, not unkindly.
Shiro rises awake with a shout. The last image has been his officer with his head sliced off, pain in his glassy eyes; it’ll be forever etched into Shiro’s memory.
He needs fresh air.
Shiro dresses quickly, takes his smaller backpack (yes, he doesn’t come out of his house without his all-purpose kit, documents and two phones; Shiro doesn’t care what people would say - Mr Fennel approves of him) and leaves through the balcony door. There’s a built-in ladder hidden behind the ivy, which sheathes half of the mansion. Shiro is on the ground in record time. The summer night air is chilly and fresh, it smells of grass and peonies. Maybe, he could sneak out to the outer fence and assess his guards’ work personally? Sounds like a plan.
Shiro turns to walk to the tree line where he’s sure he’s going to stay unnoticed if he moves carefully
enough when he sees a lonely figure sitting in the grass under a cherry tree and watching the sky. Is it who Shiro thinks it is?..
Taking a Walk

Chapter Summary

Shiro takes his so needed break and goes for a nice, long walk.

Chapter Notes

Hello, dear readers!

Here’s another chapter of this slightly angsty story. Shiro is going to fret, and worry, and doubt himself. Nothing out of the ordinary!

Oh, and I also wanted to add a little playlist. First, the song which I was listening to while starting this story: Archive, Bullets. Second, the song that associates with this fic: Linkin Park, Numb. Third, another song with the right atmosphere: Blue Stahli, Ultranumb.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shiro is good at crawling and approaching stealthily; poor Keith doesn’t stand a chance. A few seconds - and he is being dragged into the bushes, kicking, but not screaming. Not because he doesn’t try to, though (yes, Shiro has put a handkerchief into Keith’s mouth when Keith has initially gasped in surprise at the feeling of Shiro’s arm around his torso; no, Shiro isn’t sorry one bit). Despite having to shut Keith up, hold him and drag him with his only arm, Shiro manages just fine.

At the same time, it becomes clear that, while being bony and clearly tired from the long day, Keith would be hard to tame for someone who’s not Shiro. Shiro is impressed with Keith’s instincts and his will to survive. Keith’s heart beats like crazy, he struggles, tries to bite Shiro, uses every trick he knows to get free. Actually, it’s not the reaction Shiro would expect from a slave. Slaves are taught to be pliant, to accommodate to whatever treatment they’re subjected to, aren’t they? Either Keith has been an indolent pupil, or… His mentors just couldn’t crush him.

When Shiro deems their position in the bushes secure, both of them safely hidden from the view of the cameras and the patrol guards, he uses his palm to gently guide Keith’s head to turn, so that the startled boy would see his face, albeit still securing Keith’s limbs in his grip. Thankfully, it’s not completely dark, what with the heavily lit pathways of his well-groomed garden. When Keith looks Shiro in the eyes, his heartbeat starts to slow, and Shiro exhales with relief. Emotions flicker on Keith’s face. First - relief, then anger, then hurt; Keith’s face is so expressive when his eyes glow in agitation. Alarming, the emotion that wins, in the end, is mortification. Keith goes still and averts his eyes. Shiro decides it’s a good moment to take the cloth out of Keith’s mouth.

Why does Keith feel so mortified, exactly? Because of being caught or being overpowered? It’s not like Shiro can simply ask, unfortunately.
He holds Keith tenderly from behind and murmers in his ear: “What have you been doing there, boy? Not trying to run away from me?” Keith shakes his head violently; not a sound comes from him - Shiro knew he’s clever.

All of a sudden, Shiro feels adventurous like he hasn’t in ages.

He whispers conspiratorially to Keith: “What am I going to do with you? I should tell Mr Fennel. Let him whip you properly on your first Saturday discipline session.”

At that, Keith sighs, barely perceptibly, but very, very sad. Shiro suddenly feels much less amused. How can he even joke about whippings like that? It must be not funny at all for Keith. For Keith, the rules are not a game. He must know that he’s forbidden from leaving his room after his curfew. That’s a very basic, very clear rule, and Mr Fennel has for sure announced it openly.

Shiro tries to imagine what Keith might be thinking right now. Maybe, that he is new here and already makes a bad impression by his master. Maybe, that punishments will start with this one, and there won’t be an end for them.

Who’s even decided it was a good idea to let Shiro take responsibility for other people? It’s obvious that he’s a mess!

But back to Keith’s situation.

Truth be told, it looked like Keith’s sneaked out for the same reason Shiro has: to breathe the night air and to look at the stars. It shouldn’t be a crime.

Keith should have asked first, barrels in the voice of reason.

He should have, agrees Shiro. But it’s so stupid that Keith has to ask permission for stargazing in front of his house!

While Shiro is having his heated inner conversation, Keith stays limp in his hold. He doesn’t shy away from him, neither makes he any attempts to run.

He looks so hopeless that Shiro finds it unbearable. Shiro needs to do something, now.

The silliest ideas always struck Shiro at times like this.

“Hey, are you listening?” - says Shiro quietly.

Keith flinches, obviously being lost in thought, and nods slightly.

“Good. I want to offer you a deal. What do you say?” - almost purrs Shiro.

“What kind of deal?” - whispers Keith back warily. Clever boy.

“You’re going to accompany me on my walk in the night,” - answers Shiro. “For that, I won’t give you away to Mr Fennel.”

Keith turns fully in Shiro’s embrace and eyes him suspiciously.

Shiro lifts his hand up in a gesture of surrender.

“Just a walk. With me. Now. No tricky part!”

Keith looks like he doesn’t believe a word, but after contemplating Shiro’s offer for several seconds,
he agrees:

“Mr Fennel will have a thousand of reasons to whip me by the end of the week anyway. But a walk sounds good.”

Despite Keith’s pessimism, Shiro grins happily. It’s going to be one hell of a night.

They crawl out of the bush and cross the alley slowly, crouching, hiding in shadows and pausing at every background noise. Keith is surprisingly agile and follows Shiro without missing a step.

As soon as they reach the trees, Shiro relaxes a little. He turns to Keith intending to praise him for being careful, but a slight gleam catches his eye. Something glints in the moonlight. A-ha. It’s the buckle of Keith’s collar. That very collar from today morning.

Shiro points at Keith’s neck and extends his hand, palm up. Thankfully, Keith thinks quick. He looks slightly confused, but still takes the offending item off and gives it to Shiro. Shiro would rather take the collar and tear it to pieces until there are only crumbs left. Again - it would be hard to achieve having one arm only. Luckily, there’s a lighter in his backpack. He lays the collar down onto a piece of rock, crouches down, lights the collar up and watches the cheap black leather burn, cringing and stinking until there’s only the buckle lying on the ground among the ashes. Producing smoke hasn’t been a bright idea, but hey, hopefully, no one would notice. Shiro smiles at Keith, standing up from the ground. His smile may be a little creepy, but Keith either doesn’t care or doesn’t let it affect him. He watches Shiro calmly and waits for his next instructions.

Shiro signals to follow him and starts to thread through the trees towards the exit from the estate, Keith right behind him. There will be a lot of hindrances before they’ll be able to leave the property, and Shiro tries to concentrate on that instead of on his thoughts about Keith’s unlucky destiny.

Strangely, but after burning the collar he feels as if a weight has been lifted from his shoulders. It might have been foolish to destroy the most common symbol of slavery in front of his own freshly acquired slave, but Shiro doesn’t let this fact get to him and spoil the mood. He’ll think about it tomorrow. Or never.

They press themselves to a side of the main control tower which crowns the outer ring of the estate’s defensive walls. How they’ve managed to reach it here is beyond Shiro’s comprehension. He’s supposed to be too rusty for that, and Keith has no training, but still, here they are, eyeing the last precipice.

“How are you going to let us out undetected, genius?” - mutters Keith, eyeing the many cameras and dancing spotlights. What a bratty boy. No surprise he expects not to be on friendly terms with his overseer.

By the way, Keith hasn’t called Shiro “Sir” even once since they’ve met in the garden. It feels very wrong to let him (think about the future, Shiro!), and very right at the same time.

“I’m the owner; I can overrule any security code,” - hisses Shiro. “And, this is important: don’t do a thing yourself when inside, just follow me. If someone uses the video feed…”

Keith simply nods.

“I have the situation well in hand!” - adds Shiro unnecessarily.
Keith’s gaze is so full of sarcasm, doubt and something aching to pity for Shiro’s mental ability, that Shiro wants to prove himself no matter what.

“Watch me!” - he orders and goes to town.

Seems like having only one arm while impromptu storming your own mansion’s control tower is much less comfortable or fun than doing similar things with both arms. Also, Shiro’s code doesn’t overrule every other code. A talk with Mr Fennel is due, it seems.

Thank goodness, Keith stays away from the main action, as he’s been asked to.

They almost get caught while Shiro is stealing a patrol car.

The stolen car stops just a few meters away from the gate, and the engine doesn’t get rolling until Shiro enters his code once more. Apparently, his security team has accidentally stopped all available cars and couldn’t restart them with their codes, otherwise, there’s no reason why no one is following them.

The car stops entirely close to the city’s border, and no matter what Shiro tries, it stays dead. His security service may have deemed Shiro’s code corrupted and nullified it. Should they even be able to do so? Shiro and Keith stumble out of the car, and Keith glances at Shiro for directions. His lack of doubt about Shiro’s sanity is flattering, but it begins to worry Shiro at this point.

Shiro sees two ways of action now: 1) call Mr Fennel, explain everything and get his car restarted; 2) be silly and wander off with Keith. First, he chastises himself for even considering the second idea. Then, he thinks: I’ve promised Keith a walk, haven’t I? Just like that, Shiro pushes all the negative out of his mind and waves at Keith to follow him as he marches ahead in the direction of the city.

The silence is eerie as they walk and it’s dark except for the rare lanterns on the sides of the highway. Shiro feels like he’s been dumped out of his reality and dropped off in a different one. It’s not a bad feeling, but a very strange one. He doesn’t have the urge to talk, so he doesn’t, hoping that Keith also enjoys the night, the silence and the stars, like Shiro does. For Shiro, this is the closest to an escape attempt he’s ever dared to allow himself. By tomorrow morning (or, more precise, today morning, since it’s 1 a.m. already), Shiro is going to be back to his fortress of a home, immersed in daily tasks, bound hand and foot by his responsibilities. But for now - his anxiety isn’t flaring up, he doesn’t feel threatened to be out in the open - he can use his chance and live a little.

They walk on foot side by side for 20 minutes, until they see a small 24/7 cafe. It looks quiet and empty, which is good; also neat and clean, which is even better. Despite Keith not asking any question about their more than screwed-up promenade, Shiro starts feeling unsure. Seems like his nerves finally catch up with the situation.

Shiro can tell that his thoughts are spiralling out of control, but can’t do anything about it. The idea of sneaking out from his own estate has been ridiculous from the start. But taking his slave with him has been risky and dumb. What if someone asks about Keith being without a collar in public, then what? Yeah, sure, Shiro has his ID-card with him, and Keith’s chip has been connected to Shiro’s profile after Shiro’s purchased him. A question from authorities won’t cause trouble for Keith, it’ll just cost Shiro a fee. But actually being cornered and pointed at as a slave in public… Sounds too humiliating even for someone as stoic as Keith.

Why did he have to destroy the damn piece of shitty leather before buying Keith a new one? Has he hoped that just doing that would turn Keith free? That it would let Shiro drop the nonsense act he’s...
had to engage in since Keith has appeared on his doorstep? That he could stop trying to be the slave owner that rises up to the societal expectations and not a complete asshat to Keith at the same time?

Shiro doesn’t want to hurt Keith at all. Shiro doesn’t want to humiliate Keith or force him to do anything he doesn’t want to. Shiro doesn’t want anyone in the world hurting and/or humiliating Keith. Not only Keith but all those...

A light tap on his shoulder brings Shiro out of his reverie. They’re standing in front of the cafe’s doors.

OK, Shiro can absolutely handle this.

Nothing bad will happen if they just come in and eat, right?

Shiro guides Keith to a booth in a corner of the cafe and makes him sit by the window; the booth has a clear view of the other tables and the entrance, of course. A waiter comes to them and Shiro orders for both of them, Keith keeping quiet all the while.

As the waiter returns to the counter to make their food, Keith huffs a little laugh.

“What’s up?” - asks Shiro, smiling uncomprehendingly.

“Just a thought,” - answers Keith then grins up at Shiro and elaborates: “Now that we’ve escaped together and I’ve seen how it goes, I am fairly certain I won’t manage to run away from your mansion on my own. Even if we imagine for a moment that I’d somehow had the chip removed and stand a chance at surviving outside.” He smiles, his eyes crinkling with laughter: “Thank you for sparing me the effort.”

Shiro wants to play the Captain Obvious and point out that running away is a bad idea in any setting. He also thinks that, even though Shiro technically knows how the chip is being removed, he wouldn’t advise anyone to try getting rid of a chip on their own without it being absolutely unavoidable. The last piece of info should never see the world, actually.

Shiro settles for a neutral: “You’re welcome, Keith”.

They lapse into a comfortable silence until their food arrives and dive in as soon as their burgers appear on the table. They’re both hungry, and at that, Shiro hasn’t tasted greasy food since before the army, so he wolfs his portion down in record time and sees that Keith has done the same.

Shiro is older, votes for the healthy lifestyle and has all the authority here.

“One more burger?” - he asks.

After their bellies are full and the mood is good, Keith says:

“That’s the best food I’ve ever eaten.”

He nods to himself, for good measure.

Shiro can’t help but laugh outright.

“Oh yeah? I can safely make burgers a reward for good behaviour, then?”
Keith’s eyes light up in a very unhealthy fashion, and Shiro dissolves into laughter.

Keith joins the fun after a few seconds, unable to stay calm in the face of Shiro’s craziness.

They laugh until their stomachs ache and there are tears in their eyes.

Shiro soberes up first. He calls the waiter over one more time and orders two milkshakes. Then, he does what he should’ve done all along: checks his phone. A shitload of missed calls from his staff and Mr Fennel personally. Also, there are texts from his chief assistant. The last one says: “If you’re interested in coming home, Mr Shirogane, please give me a call. Your schedule for Monday has been cleared. If you don’t show up until 7 p.m. though, I’m going to raid the city.” Shiro shudders at the thought.

Keith looks at him from the corner of his eyes with a sliver of concern. Shiro smiles to placate him, and Keith smiles back a little. It is a real, genuine smile, and Shiro is happy to see it. Maybe, that’s just what laughing together makes to people.

A customer comes out of the restroom, and Shiro indicates at the door with “WC” sign with his gaze. They seem to understand each other well without words now because Keith looks there and nods. They take care of their needs one after another (Shiro not leaving his backpack alone for a second and getting antsy while letting Keith out of sight.

As they’re seated again, the waiter brings their drinks.

Shiro would like to stay in the comfortable silence for longer, but seeing the bathroom has reminded him of the video of Keith he’s watched. His admission is going to ruin whatever trust they’ve built, and still, this issue needs to be addressed.

“Keith…” - he starts tentatively.

“Yeah?” - all of Keith’s attention is on him, suddenly, and this is kind of overwhelming.

Shiro lowers his gaze to the table and says:

“You should know that there is a camera in every room of my house. There’s one in yours, too. And… I’ve watched you in the evening you’ve arrived. I won’t say I’m sorry because…”

“I haven’t done anything then!”- almost shouts Keith. He catches himself immediately and continues in a hushed tone: “I know how a… how I should behave, even when I’m alone.”

Keith is still considerate enough not to break Shiro’s cover. Shiro just wants to slam his head on the table.

“You should know that there is a camera in every room of my house. There’s one in yours, too. And… I’ve watched you in the evening you’ve arrived. I won’t say I’m sorry because…”

“Keith, look… I can’t promise I won’t monitor the feed from your room ever again; I’m a paranoiac and I need all the control I can get. But I certainly promise that I won’t look at what you’re doing unless absolutely necessary”.

Keith says nothing, so Shiro goes on.

“There must be some rules you’ve been taught to follow at your… school, I suppose. Since I’m in charge of you now, I want to alter some of them. About the situation the day before… You didn’t need to take a cold shower, it’d be fine if you… took the matter at hand?”

Keith has that look in his eyes again; the one that makes Shiro feel like an idiot. He’s also blushing slightly.
“You can always hide under the covers!” - finishes Shiro quickly, embarrassed.

Keith giggles at that, and Shiro wonders, not for the first time, what a nice sound Keith’s laughter is.

“I will take you up on your offer, boss,” - says Keith. He’s taking to it surprisingly well. Has there been any trust to speak of in the first place?

Shiro wants to come up with some cheeky retort when a stranger appears to their booth. Did Shiro really lower his guard so much that he hasn’t noticed him coming?

“Excuse me, gentlemen, may I join your table?” - the newcomer asks, smiling falsely at Shiro.

Shiro hasn’t ever seen the man, but he has a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder what Keith thinks about all that.
Something like: "My master is just a little bit crazy, but he seems reliable nonetheless".

And what do you think? Please tell me!
Learning New Things

Chapter Summary

Shiro and Keith have a very annoying conversation with the stranger. Shiro has to face his inner struggles again (and again).

Chapter Notes

Hello, dears!
I had a rough week and haven't been able to come up with the new chapter sooner.
I hope it's not a mistake on my part to publish it at 3 a.m.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shiro blinks slowly, but the vision doesn’t go away. A tall, handsome man about Shiro’s age stands in front of their table, wearing a stylish coat over a soft cotton shirt and navy slacks. To Shiro’s point of view, he’s overdressed for a cafe in the outskirts. Extremely overdressed. Long white hair in a loose ponytail and an expensive watch on his wrist only add to that impression.

What disturbs Shiro the most, are the eyes of the man. At first, he can’t quite grasp, what the problem is. And then it hits him that the stranger’s eyes resemble Keith’s a little - they are of the same beautiful shade of purple Shiro’s never seen on anyone else, the colour is duller, maybe. This small similarity is offsetting.

Whatever the case, the look of these eyes doesn’t resemble Keith’s at all. The man is definitely trying for polite and friendly, but he overdoes it just a tiny bit, which makes his smile too saccharine, and also plants the seed of doubt in Shiro.

Shiro can say that Keith is taught as a bowstring - a fact that only enhances Shiro’s suspicions towards the newcomer. He can feel Keith’s thigh pressed to his, they’ve moved closer during their fit of laughter. It’s good to have a point of contact when they can’t communicate openly. At least, Keith is dressed casually and not “slave-like”.

Shiro feels trapped. He’d rather refuse to let the man sit with them, but… He looks like the type to press for reasons when being rejected, the type to gather attention to himself in order to reach his goals. Shiro contemplates just leaving immediately, but making a dash for the door would look plain dumb. The best variant is to let the man join them, talk about whatever it is he wants to talk about, then go their separate ways.

Hopefully, Shiro will be able to see this through, avoiding any drama. So much for having a bonding time over burgers!

He feels a light kick in the sheen - is Keith getting impatient or does Shiro take too much time to think? The second, obviously, since the stranger standing over them can barely quench his impatience.
“Yes, please, take a seat. I’m Shiro, this is Keith,” - says Shiro as calmly as he can.

The man smiles widely and sits down on the bench opposite Shiro and Keith. He continues talking smoothly as if intruding into others’ lives is a common thing for him:

“Nice to meet you. My name is Lotor. You may be asking yourself what I’m doing here all dressed-up. My reason is nothing interesting, to be true. I’ve needed to tank my car, that’s why I stopped at the gas station over there. From the station, I saw this cafe. It’s been a long road, so…” - and Lotor shrugs innocently.

He doesn’t look like a man who’s been on a long journey; his clothes are immaculately clean and pressed neatly.

“The same story here,” - Shiro finds himself saying. He doesn’t lie, technically, and still, he feels on edge. He’s never been very good at lying, really - too conscientious for that.

“I don’t really know what to order here. Maybe, a milkshake too? I can’t imagine eating one of those,” - Lotor indicates at the burgers on the panel over the waiter’s stand, - “They look like they are made of cancer-causing chemicals and fat.”

What a nice guy, Shiro thinks irritatedly. Shiro doesn’t smile at the obvious joke, neither does Keith.

“Sorry if I offended you!” - quickly adds Lotor, obviously having expected another reaction.

“That’s OK. Everyone has a right to have their tastes,” - says Shiro. It sounded a little… didactic, but what could he do with himself? He’s been a boring person since middle school.

“True, true!” - laughs Lotor. His laughter is just like his smiles, saccharine and unnatural. “Even my personal slaves prefer different types of cosmetic products to tend to me.”

Ow. His slaves, plural. That’s an unlucky thread for their conversation.

“That’s only logical. So, you do let them choose?” - inquires Shiro conversationally, from the lack of better ideas. He needs to stir the conversation away from that topic, and fast. But how? Who knew that social skills can get this rusty over the years?

“Of course, there is a selection of cosmetics I’ve personally bought that they have to use to care for my skin and hair, but yes, I do let them choose from that selection. Making small choices helps to lift the slaves’ spirit. They feel like they have more control over their lives, it lets them feel comfortable in the psychological sense. You just have to demonstrate them the worse case scenario- where they disappoint you and their lot becomes miserable. This way they’re more inclined to appreciate what good things they have in their small uneventful lives, learn to be grateful to their Master.”

That’s worse than Shiro could’ve expected. Keith is doing spectacularly, considering how angry this man’s words make him (and Shiro can tell: Keith is seething with rage right now). Hopefully, he’s not as easy to read for the stranger as he is for Shiro.

“You sure appreciate the luxury of being a slave owner.” - Shiro says the first thing that comes to his mind, not knowing how else to react.

“Don’t you, Shiro? I’m lucky to be at the top of the pyramid. It’s been proved that the slavery system is good for the economy, as there’s no need to pay salaries to too many people, there’s no unemployment, there’s not much competition. Everyone has a secure place. You were going to ask me about the slaves, I’m sure. My views are conservative. Isn’t it nice to always have a roof above your head, food and clothes? Slaves don’t need to care about a thing, only how to do their assigned
work best. We help them with birth control, with delivering their babies, with teaching their kids, with treating their diseases…”

“Only if you consider the slave worth saving. Only the ones who are still able to perform may hope to get cured.”

It’s Keith. It’s Keith, he’s talking despite Shiro’s warning, he’s interrupting a slave owner, and oh, Shiro needs to put an end to this.

Before Shiro can press a special button on his sports watch and thereby signal to Mr Fennel to give Shiro a “fake-emergency-call” immediately (Shiro’s sociopathy when he’d first got back from captivity demanded such little plays, and the button stayed on his watch since that time), Lotor narrows his eyes and replies, watching Keith intently:

“But of course we only need functioning slaves. That’s another trick of the slavery society which influences for the economy well - only useful people continue on living, and the broken ones don’t make us spend our money on them.”

Thank goodness, the “emergency-button” still works and the call from Mr Fennel comes through before Keith has a chance to reply and mess the things up even more. Shiro takes the call (after pinching Keith’s thigh; the hot-headed brat doesn’t even flinch but definitely notices).

“Hello, Mr Fennel. Is everything alright? Oh, my car went missing on the radars?” - Shiro puts on a sheepish smile (which is not very hard to imitate; he’s really been a worrisome employer today), - “I guess I’ve played with the car’s panel a bit too much. Did I mess it up badly this time? Oh, woah, sorry! It’s not my fault you always buy me the cars with the most complicated electronics!”

A pair of meaningless phrases and they end the call.

Lotor smiles and offers:

“The servants, aren’t they precious when they worry about us?”

Shiro can hardly master an answering smile this time. He mutters something in lieu of a reply and stands up, Keith repeating the action.

“Sorry, but I need to be home soon. I still have to complete a couple of errands before that so I have to hurry.”

Lotor stays seated. He beams at them and says:

“Thank you so much for keeping me company. And, Shiro, your new slave looks much nicer in real life than he looked at the auction house. Despite having only one slave, you must know a way with them.”

Shiro’s brain freezes for a moment. Why did this jerk spy on him? What are his intentions?

“I do, thank you,” - says Shiro in an even voice, waves goodbye and goes to the exit. He doesn’t need to look back to know that Keith follows.

Shiro is not surprised to see their abandoned patrol car in front of the cafe, with a driver, no less. It’s already 7 a.m. The night has been long, and frankly, they should head straight home, but Shiro doesn’t want their little endeavour to end with Lotor and his scheming. That’s why, when he and Keith climb into the backseat of the car (Keith doesn’t fumble with the safety belt anymore), he greets the driver and tells him an address in the city commercial district. As expected, Keith looks
stiff and anxious next to him. He looks out of the window, biting his lower lip, his fists clenched in his lap. Unfortunately, there is no partition between the driver and the passengers in the back seat, and Shiro can’t comfort Keith verbally or by touching his shoulder, for example. It’s a surprise he feels the urge, though.

Shiro can’t wait to reach their destination. In his impatience, he counts street corners and turns on their way to calm himself, when Keith says quietly:

“He could’ve been still alive, I think. Maybe. I don’t know. They’ve said the accident has been lethal, that they wouldn’t have been able to piece him together. But… how do I know they haven’t lied to me? If he were a free man, he would’ve had a chance. He would’ve lived, even as an…”

Keith shuts up and lifts his wide eyes at Shiro.

What word would he have chosen to describe Shiro? An invalid? A disabled person? An amputee? Keith looks scared and sorry. What is he scared of more - of hurting Shiro’s feelings or of angering him? Which is worse?

Shiro is just tired of this shit. He doesn’t care whether Keith will call him what he is - a useless dependent person with a permanent injury - or use polite, socially acceptable language. Neither will give Shiro his arm back.

And oh, there’s a thing that just begs to be said aloud: Shiro lives, and Keith’s father (Keith could only have talked about his father, couldn’t he?) is dead. It’s so true - free persons who are of no use for the economy anymore, don’t always have to die after an accident. Shiro hasn’t met Keith’s father, but he’s fairly sure that this man should’ve been a very strong person. He can see it from Keith’s personality alone. To help Keith become the person he is, as a slave? That should’ve been quite a task.

Actually, life isn’t very fair. It’s unfair to free persons either, it just goes easier on them than on the slaves in some aspects.

Knowing this doesn’t make Shiro feel better.

Shiro also knows that he should support Keith now. Offer him some words of sympathy. Hug him? No, that might be too much. Just a few kind words would be appropriate.

Instead, Shiro comes up with: “I’m not angry,” and then he just sits there, wallowing in self-hatred.

He can’t look in Keith’s direction, where a slumped figure is leaning heavily onto the window. Keith is alone, and very young, and suffering. Shiro is almost a decade older, has experience in life, and can’t calm the whirring in his own brain when it’s needed.

Suddenly, a hand touches his left shoulder, and Shiro jolts violently. They’re lucky to have stolen this sort of car, because of its high roof - hitting his head wouldn’t be nice for Shiro; maybe, there is a limit to Shiro’s trouble of one day. Keith immediately takes his hand away, as if burned, and Shiro feels guilty again.

“Keith, I’m OK. Just tired,” - he says. Keith nods, wide-eyed and sad.

Gosh, the kid has just shared one of his most painful memories, and still, it looks like he’s sad on Shiro’s behalf. Shiro only wants to disappear.

But right at that moment, their ride comes to its end, and Shiro has to go out of the car and into the shop.
“Keith. We go to a special place now. It’s a member only shop the owner of which also has a nightclub in this same building. It’s open 24/7 because some of her clients are crazier than the others. It sells different types of gear. You’ll see.”

Shiro wishes Keith was following him to this place because he wants it, not because he is a slave. Then, it could be fun.

Banning such thoughts from his head, Shiro exits the car, and he can hear Keith opening and closing the car door on his side too. Shiro comes to the front porch, and Keith follows. His footsteps are so light, Shiro strains to hear them in his overworked state. They enter the shop after Shiro gets his ID checked by a security guard. There is a small entry hall, with tables and plush seats and fancy flowers. It looks like a saloon, and it’s blissfully empty. Shiro leads the way to a door on the left. After exiting the saloon through that door, they first go along a dimly lit corridor with lilac walls, then enter a spacious room in rich green and blue hues. The colours are not—corresponding very well with the goods on the shelves, but it’s Romell, she’s her own mistress.

Shiro expects at least a gasp of surprise from Keith, but there’s… nothing. Shiro looks back across the room, where Keith is standing at a display with colourful dildos. He looks curious and a little concerned (as if trying to decide which one Shiro would more likely shove up his ass channel; no, Shiro can’t deal with this right now).

Romell or some salesperson is not in sight. Shiro can check out his purchases on a special stand himself, so that’s not a big deal.

“Keith?” - he calls.

Keith turns in his direction the same second the first sound leaves Shiro’s lips. Immediately, his focus is on Shiro, and only on Shiro. Shiro feels sick. He’s not worthy of such treatment. He can’t endure this level of attention… But he has to, so Shiro turns away from Keith to distract himself as if to look on a display with... strap-ons (such a stupid coincidence! what the fuck is with your luck, dude! now Keith will think Shiro is disabled below the waist too!) and goes on:

“There’s a display with collars to the left from you. Choose the one you like. Don’t be afraid to touch them. When you’ve chosen, tell me.”

“Any requests, Sir?”

What the heck, so he can be polite when they’re in public!

“Choose the one you really like. You may have to wear it for the rest of your life,” - says Shiro, and shuts his eyes in shame. Just when he’s thought he couldn’t be lamer than he is already, he has to go and say this.

It takes Keith a lot of time to make his choice. Shiro is thankful - he’s needed the time to unwind so badly.

When Keith calls him, Shiro turns to look at him and can’t hide his surprise.

The collar Keith has chosen is red. Like, scarlet. It’s not the most expensive one, not by the long shot. But it is still very, very expensive. The leather is of a fine quality, nice to the touch, soft to the skin. An excellent collar, actually.

“Why… red?” - stutters Shiro.

“It’s beautiful? You’ve told me to choose what I like,” - Keith sounds defensive. For the first time,
Shiro takes a longer look at Keith clothes (it’s been chosen by Steve, so it must resemble Keith’s wishes at least a little) and indeed, there’s a lot of red. Also black, but red seems to be the main accent.

Suddenly, the world looks less solemn for Shiro. If Keith is ready to choose this kind of thing he’s at least not afraid of Shiro and trusts his word.

“Let me buy it properly and then I’ll put it on your neck,” - says Shiro, smiling slightly.

Keith exhales loudly and smiles shyly to himself. He hides his smile as soon as it appears, but Shiro catches it nonetheless. He’s much better at reading Keith than before.

Shiro buys the collar and then proceeds to mark Keith as his property. And Keith… looks happy when being collared by Shiro? Proud even?

What kind of treasures Shiro wouldn’t give away to feel as happy and proud about collaring Keith as Keith himself does.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Shiro! He needs to see his therapist!
Going into Exile

Chapter Summary

Shiro makes poor life choices all chapter long and self-destructs, slowly.

Chapter Notes

Hello again!

This chapter’s motto is:
Depeche Mode - Wrong.

I liked how it turned out, hopefully, I will like it equally tomorrow)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being a slave owner hurts more than Shiro could have expected.

So many things have tangled up since Shiro has bought himself a sixteen-years-old living boy. There’s not only the fact that Shiro is now an active participant of human trade (which he’s successfully avoided his whole life, before Keith), or the way Keith looks at Shiro without reasonable disgust as if his life is supposed to be the way it is. As horrible as it is, Shiro will have to live with that. But one particular realization refuses to leave Shiro’s head since he saw Keith in the garden under the stars: in another time, in another universe, they could’ve become friends.

Shiro and Keith return to the car and climb inside. Keith is trying not to smile to himself, and Shiro averts his gaze, settling in his seat so that he can lean on the window and close his eyes for the duration of the ride. Pretending to sleep is a good excuse not to talk to Keith, at all. It’s a good thing Mr Fennel hasn’t trusted Shiro with driving back after a sleepless night. Maybe, the blessed silence in the car will allow Shiro to nap while they ride. Unfortunately, no one would let him spend the night in the car if he falls asleep (he’d probably get more sleep in the backseat of the patrol car than he would in his own bedroom, but who cares).

With this intent, Shiro attempts to relax, but his racing mind won’t let him. The irritation about not being able to interact with Keith normally starts to suddenly drown out everything else in his conscious. Shiro imagines seeing Keith’s personality, devoid of the habits he’d had to learn while growing up as a slave; imagines trying to befriend Keith in a common way, just like he’d befriended Matt and Allura; finally, he imagines not feeling shame and guilt every time he so much as looks at Keith. That’s the last thought that makes Shiro see red.

He’s so tired feeling like the worst person that’s ever existed! He’s not the one who’s invented slavery! He’s so, so tired of this all. He can’t take care of himself on his good days. He doesn’t have enough strength to both keep himself from committing a suicide and figuring out how to make a slave’s life as painless as possible!

But Shiro needs to do this right. He can’t fuck up everything he tries. His last mission in the army has
been a failure big enough to warrant him living hell of shame and sorrow for a lifetime, Shiro doesn’t need other mistakes to pile up at the top of that one.

The car comes to a stop smoothly, and Shiro tries to blink himself awake. He’s been thinking like mad, he hasn’t got an ounce of sleep in the car despite his hopes, why is it so hard to open his eyes then? Keith looks at him with concern but backs down quickly when he catches Shiro’s unfriendly gaze. He turns away from Shiro and obviously waits for Shiro to exit the car first. Shiro suspects that the protocol is for Keith to come out first and to open the door for his master. To hell with it, thinks Shiro angrily. They won’t comply with this rule. The mental image of Keith waiting for Shiro’s next move and following him without question at all times makes Shiro feel strangely comfortable. He could get used to it.

Shiro’s mind is groggy when he gets out of the car. The lights above the porch seem too bright for his tired eyes, the sounds of the retreating patrol car hurt his ears, and he’s still irritated because of his Keith-related musings.

Shiro genuinely likes Keith. Even in this state, he can gather up so much.

He doesn’t want to part ways with Keith just yet. That’s why he orders Keith to accompany him to his bedroom. Tragically, the “liking-Keith-part” doesn’t stop Shiro from behaving like a pig.

Seems like Shiro’s exhausted body starts shutting down automatically upon entering the safe space of his sleeping chamber. It’s not ready to deal with staying awake for so long anymore. His mind agrees that immediate rebooting is the best course of action. Support of the function “Staying a Decent Person” gets cut off first.

Shiro tells Keith to find a place for him to sleep in Shiro’s bedroom (except for the bed); upon issuing his last command Shiro stumbles to the bed and literally falls face down on the pillows. He is out like a light in a matter of seconds.

Shiro isn’t a morning person. He had been, back in the day. Before his time in captivity, precisely. Well, he isn’t anymore. Usually, he can barely get 5 hours of sleep per night, what with his inability to fall asleep and repeating nightmares. No one can be expected to be gentle and caring in such circumstances, right? Shiro hates mornings only a little less than the time when he’s supposed to go to bed. If not for Mr Fennel’s pestering, Shiro would sit with his plans, budgets and invoices through every night, hoping that his fatigue will make him crush sooner or later and let him forget himself in a dreamless slumber.

This morning feels slightly different, though.

Shiro opens his eyes suspiciously and, at first, he can’t believe his senses, so well-rested he feels; has someone put him in a wrong body while he’s been sleeping, in a healthy one? But no, there’s only the left arm at his disposal, so the body must be the same. What is it, then? He’s forbidden Steve to give him sleeping pills with his food without Shiro knowing.

He has to get up and find out. Shiro shifts and feels that there are more layers of clothing on him than he usually wears to bed. A look down tells him that the black trousers and the black v-neck he’s had on the previous night are still on. This is enough to make the memories flood his conscious.

Has he really… escaped his own estate using elite force tactics? With Keith, no less? After that, if he remembers clearly, he’s gorged himself on burgers in a road cafe and even bought Keith a new collar at 8 a.m. (in scarlet, because his slave has very specific tastes!)
Keith. Fuck.

Fuckfuckfuck

His spartan room has a minimalist couch and an uncomfortable armchair. Other than the bed, there is not a single good place to spend a night.

Shiro bolts upright in his bed and searches for Keith with his eyes frantically. There’s not a sign of him anywhere in the room. Has he disobeyed the order and left? Not likely. Maybe, Mr Fennel has fetched him? Shiro prays that’s been the case.

He throws a look on the floor in front of the bed and notices his sports shoes from yesterday. He doesn’t remember taking them off. Was it… Keith’s doing? Oh, congratulations, Shiro: you’re turning into a proper lazy bastard who can’t even shit himself without others’ help! What’s the next phase of this metamorphose, being undressed by his slave? Or, maybe, he should start by making Keith tend to his hair, like Lotor does with his slaves? Even if his hair will fall out from Keith’s efforts, doesn’t matter; Shiro is half-grey already, he can just shave his head and be done with perfecting his looks.

Shiro has to get out of bed finally and say sorry to Keith and Mr Fennel, then excuse himself and find a high cliff to throw himself off of it. Oh, not in this order; he has responsibilities. First, he’ll have to change his will, so that after Shiro’s death Keith will become Mr Fennel’s slave instead of going to the auction house again. Serving Mr Fennel won’t be a walk in the park because Mr Fennel will work Keith to the bone, but at least he will show more self-control than Shiro, by any means.

By the way, his psychiatrist (when he’d still tried visiting one; after he couldn’t handle the kindness of his favourite psychologist anymore) always told him to stop criticizing himself too much. Maybe, it’s time to heed her advice?

Shiro prepares to stand up and play a human, but, before that, an inexplicable feeling makes him bend over the edge of the bed and look under it, his vision upside-down.

There he is, his Keith. Sound asleep, hugging the single pillow this room has. A wise choice of a sleeping place, actually, since the carpet only covers the floor under and around the bed.

So, Shiro, what are the facts? What kind of man are you?

Shiro is a person who makes other people sleep on the floor under his bed.

He should hurry up with altering his will. That cliff is calling out for him.

As if sensing Shiro’s gaze, Keith stirs, murmurs something incomprehensible and then slowly opens his eyes. He smiles sleepily at Shiro and his hand comes up to touch his collar. It’s an unconscious gesture but it looks like Keith has done it repeatedly during the night to memorize it this well.

Shiro gets a vivid mental image of Keith lying there in the dark (next to Shiro’s shoes which Keith’s taken off personally), touching his new collar and thinking that maybe Shiro is going to be a good owner, after all, while said Shiro snores away on a comfortable mattress above him and doesn’t know a care in the world.

Shiro barely makes it to the bathroom on time.

He throws up into the sink violently. Goodbye, the remains of the burgers and the happy memories he and Keith have made together; sorry, tasty food, it was not the way you’ve expected to leave Shiro’s body but there’s not much difference for you now, right?
Through the ringing in his ears, Shiro can hear Keith’s worried voice. When Shiro is done, Keith is there with a glass of water. Shiro wants to laugh hysterically and to bang his head on the wall at the same time.

Keith would’ve rubbed Shiro’s back if he was sure it’s allowed. Or hold Shiro’s hair for him if he wore it long, like Lotor does. This is the kind of man Keith is.

Shiro feels inadequate in his presence.

“Give me my phone. Please,” - rasps Shiro, after rinsing his mouth and gulping the rest of the water down.

He needs to stay away from Keith. He’s just realized it full-force. Just let Mr Fennel order Keith around, give him tasks, keep him occupied. And make him stay away from Shiro, at all times. Exactly like he’s planned in the beginning, after buying Keith. It’ll be for Keith’s own good.

It’s Keith own fault, he should’ve stayed inside yesterday night, not wander around! He’s asked for this! - shouts a squeaky voice in the back of Shiro’s head, and the irritation from yesterday raises its ugly head.

Shiro pinches his own side, hard. Enough of this shit.

While Shiro is battling his internal wars, Keith is already standing there with the phone. But of course, he is. What a good boy, always ready to serve, ready to please.

What have they fucking done to Keith to make him so compliant and unnaturally selfless? A bright person like Keith shouldn’t have to become a trained dog.

Shiro calls Mr Fennel, invites him to his room now and starts wiping his mess away, while they wait. Keith hovers behind Shiro’s back, eager to help, and it’s exhausting. It’s not Keith’s task. It’s not Shiro’s either. There are maids for that kind of work, but Shiro doesn’t want them to see (and smell) his vomit. His last shreds of decency.

Whatever. Shiro can take care of his messes himself.

No, it’s bullshit, cringes Shiro when he sees Keith’s reflection behind his back in the mirror above the sink. Shiro can take care neither of himself nor of his messes. Not to say anything about the biggest mess he’s got himself into since his return from the captivity: he absolutely can’t handle being Keith’s owner.

Shiro doesn’t say a word to Keith until Mr Fennel comes and leads him away. He purposely avoids meeting Keith’s eyes and doesn’t talk to Mr Fennel beside trivialities.

Mr Fennel looks unbothered by Shiro’s behaviour, and Shiro hates himself for the relief he feels at the lack of judgement in his assistant’s eyes.

Shiro doesn’t remember how he’s spent the rest of Monday.

Starting from Tuesday, Shiro does his best to occupy himself. The remainder of the week is spent in a blur: Shiro throws himself at any work his greedy hands can reach. But, before everything else, he does alter his last will. In the case of Shiro’s death, the slave called Keith is to be inherited by Mr
Fennel, with an amount of money to cover Keith’s basic needs for the next eighty years, at least. When the most important thing is done, Shiro starts a full scope audit of his assets; he even visits the farms his family owns in the suburbs. His employees groan under the yoke of his tyranny (sometimes, literally). Aside from that, Shiro decides to build a laboratory to test the new medicines produced by pharmaceutical companies (just for the sake of his paranoia; what if the global conspiracy of pharmacologists is real?) To fund his laboratory, Shiro has to play at the stock market which he does at night until Mr Fennel kicks him out of his cabinet. Shiro’s so exhausted when he comes to his bedroom that he only manages to undress (mostly) and crawl under the covers. Then, if Shiro has done everything right, nothingness mercifully overtakes his mind and his conscious ceases to exist until the morning comes and his alarm rings. A week passes quickly, but, at the same time, impossibly slowly: if Shiro gives himself a millisecond to think, his mind wanders to Keith and what he might be doing at the moment.

The next week goes in a similar fashion. Shiro goes on a business trip to the capital: the other shareholders of his father’s IT-company have requested a set of meetings with him long ago, but he has postponed and postponed it repeatedly. He just has to be there! Shiro spends 6 days in the capital. Black and red are the newest fashion-trend on the streets, and Shiro entertains the thought of choosing a skyscraper over a cliff. There’s no Mr Fennel in his hotel room (though the bastard calls him, a lot), and Shiro is lucky to get two or three hours of sleep before a new morning starts.

After two weeks of working (like) crazy, Shiro comes home on Monday evening and finally risks to ask his assistant about Keith.

Mr Fennel says he’s very pleased with Keith’s performance.

Shiro’s jaw drops. Mr Fennel never praises anyone.

Mr Fennel notices his shock and warns Shiro sternly that Keith can’t ever find out that Mr Fennel has called his working results excellent. Shiro takes his jaw off the floor and nods.

It turns out, Mr Fennel has usurped all of Keith’s working time, instead of letting other employees give him tasks. For now, he’s busied Keith with boring but important stuff like doing inventories or planning expenditures. He also lets Keith make drafts for Shiro’s business schedule for the upcoming week. Shiro’s jaw drops again. Never in his life has Mr Fennel trusted anyone with Shiro’s schedule (especially Shiro himself). Mr Fennel just glares at him.

“He’s the best purchase you’ve ever made. Don’t come near him, Shiro, and I’ll forgive you all your sins against me. I’m taking good care of Keith, I promise; I give his brain challenges and I don’t let him pine after you too much…” - says Mr Fennel.

“What are you talking about, Steve?!” - nearly shouts Shiro after the last phrase.

“Nothing, boss. Just telling you that Keith is a good worker, that’s all,” - Mr Fennel’s voice drips with mirth. Shiro scowls at him but says nothing.

In any case, reminds Shiro himself, he can’t strangle Mr Fennel now; who’ll inherit Keith then?

Finally, Shiro asks Mr Fennel the question that’s been plaguing him since the first Saturday after his breakdown:

“Do you punish him?”

Mr Fennel grins like a cat that’s got the canary.

“According to your orders, sir, I spank him every Saturday. His pain tolerance is quite admirable, as
well as his self-control. Unfortunately, he’s too cocky for his own good; earns himself additional strokes of the cane every single time. You can say he takes well to his discipline. The most interesting thing is that he’s getting hard from the spankings. I’ve told him it’s a natural reaction, and he doesn’t even feel embarrassed about it anymore. Which is a pity, I loved that helpless look on his face the first time it’s happened. But I’m not a brute to humiliate him for his natural responses, aren’t I? Too bad that he’s too well-trained to take himself in hand after his punishments. I could invent so many creative ways to punish him a little more for this…”

Shiro listens, but the sense of Mr Fennel’s speech evades him, mostly. Keith gets hard? From spankings? What are they doing there? He tries to concentrate on Mr Fennel’s words again:

“I’ve also taught Keith safewords. You know, just to be sure I won’t break your favourite playthi… Keith? You know what I thought yesterday? Maybe, I should return to the BDSM-scene. Good doms are always in high demand. I doubt I’ll find someone as fun as Keith, though.”

Mr Fennel pauses to think and adds:

“I’ve also had to order Keith to masturbate at least once a week. He just wouldn’t pleasure himself despite your permission. It’s unhealthy, and it was silly of him. I had to tell him you would be disappointed, and he listened to me. He uses your advice and hides under the covers every time. Such a sweet boy…”

“Stop, Steve. Enough. I know I’m the worst person ever, and I’m grateful you’re nice to Keith,” - interrupts Shiro. He suddenly feels drained from this talk. Shiro says again:

“Thank you, and please take good care of him.”

Since I obviously can’t, goes unsaid and hangs in mid-air, until Mr Fennel excuses himself and leaves, all business-like again.

Chapter End Notes

Don't be too harsh on Shiro. He's a disaster, but it's not entirely his fault? Mr Fennel does his best, but he can't take care of Shiro when Shiro won't let him.
Saving Souls

Chapter Summary

First, Shiro goes to a library.
Then, Shiro, being a good friend, visits Matt in his manor.

It all ends up in a bigger mess than before!

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

This chapter's soundtrack is:
Disturbed - Overburdened.

I'm being me: first chapters were 2,5 k words, the fifth chapter - 3 k words, this one is 4k words... I don't expect you to complain, though.
I'm so pleased with myself for keeping this work interesting for myself))) can't wait to write the next chapter)

FYI, I've added some rules for this AU to the notes at the beginning of Chapter 1. You can check them if you're interested. Thanks to Asimi_Shadowborn and her questions, I've realized there are some lacunas which can be unclear to the readers.

Have fun!

The third week without seeing Keith starts, and Shiro wants to climb the walls from frustration. He can’t get Keith out of his head however he tries. He wants to see him again and say sorry. Yet, Shiro realizes he’s been such a massive jerk to poor Keith that he can’t risk repeating it.

When Shiro is with Keith he shows the worst version of himself possible. Is it what having an absolute power over someone else’s life makes to people? Have the inventors of slavery really meant well, after all? What if their major goal was to make the society more sustainable, prevent it from self-destruction? Very likely. Also possible that they’ve been thinking along Lotor’s lines: “Oh, we’ll take the choice out of these poor overburdened people’s hands, we’ll steal their freedom but will take good care of them ourselves. As a form of gratitude, they’ll have to work for us, a little. This measure is a hard, but necessary step to reach the golden era of the humanity, blah, blah, blah, there’s a hair in my soup, slave, come, I’ll whip you bloody “.

It has been so easy for Shiro (too easy) - to forget about decency, about respect, about other person’s rights, and to start acting out, like a child who only seeks instant gratification. Oh yeah, according to the law, Keith does have almost no rights for Shiro to forget about. There are some, though, but the list is very short. Keith has a right to live, to have at least one free day a week for rest, to not work more than 10 hours a day, and that’s all. Oh, also if Shiro, as Keith’s owner, couldn’t provide a place
for Keith to live or had no food to feed him, he’d have to give up Keith to the state. He also isn’t allowed to kill Keith. But laws and Shiro’s conscious are two different things; Shiro’s never ever had a problem with differentiating one from another. Before owning Keith, that was. Shiro has never treated another human the way he’s treated Keith three weeks ago. Shiro didn’t know, couldn’t imagine, that there was so much ugliness, so much malice, so much vanity in him. He hasn’t ever felt an urge to ignore other human’s dignity like that once. What’s changed? What’s triggered Shiro?

Was it Keith’s submissive behaviour? The way he reacts at everything Shiro does - taking all the things in stride? As if Shiro could do almost anything, and Keith would consider it normal.

Shiro fears that if he interacts with Keith more, he’ll find something even more terrific and abhorrent in his own soul. Even amidst a battle, even in captivity, he’s never fallen to such depths of depravity. From another point of view… What’s so shocking here? In those two cases, Shiro’s been fighting against something he deemed wrong or unworthy; he’s known his place, the rules of conduct and such. Here, with his slave, he isn’t bound to act like a decent person by any set of rules or expectations - basically, he only is forbidden from killing his slave.

Owners don’t have to be polite to their property. Doesn’t matter what Shiro would do to Keith, it wouldn’t be considered disrespectful, cruel or plain shitty by the society standards. And absolutely nothing holds Shiro from such a simple thing as lashing out at Keith when he feels like shit.

But. Shiro’s own standards differ. This is why this whole situation hurts so much; if Shiro can’t hold himself to his own standards, then what does he expect from the other people of his social status? He’s judged other owners so harshly all his life. But does he have any right to do so, in the light of the recent events?..

Shiro knows, he’d be considered mild and calm by most owners; the things he can’t forgive himself for, wouldn’t even catch the other owners’ attention (Shiro doesn’t want to think about the things other owners get away with; it’s not really something he wishes to compare his own actions with).

Three weeks ago, Shiro has been sure that his moral compass would keep him from becoming a real tyrant. Turns out, his morals are as weak as his flesh.

Anyway, Shiro still hopes (somewhere deep inside) that he’s not lost as a person entirely, that there’s still something good about him. Maybe, one day, when he won’t feel as dirty as now, he’ll let himself face Keith again.

For now, he has no other choice as to believe Mr Fennel when the latter says that Keith is all right. He feels guilty about his ill-considered order to physically discipline Keith regularly, but he also feels insecure about changing anything while Mr Fennel swears that this works for them.

Shiro has reassessed his ideals and realigned them in his head. Even if he’s broken and indifferent, it’s a crime against himself to betray them (again after so soon).

No, Shiro won’t mess it all up again. One day, he’ll get more stable. There’s a bright future for him and for Keith; Shiro just has to believe in it. As for now - there’s only frustration and piles of work he keeps inventing for himself. That’s OK. He’ll pull through.

Shiro makes it till Thursday, and then his maddening life tempo finally starts to seem too much. He delegates all tasks planned for the day to his employees (and no, it hasn’t been Steve’s place to tell
Shiro that he’s not the only one who could do the work in this household, just this day’s tasks… are easier to share with his subordinates?) and hits the gym. After a gruelling work-out (he doesn’t do things half-assed) Shiro decides to take a walk. He absent-mindedly wanders through his gardens; they’re beautiful and miscellaneous, just like Shiro always wanted. There are immaculately organized flower beds and trimmed grass lanes, but there are also pieces of the wilderness (even if they only seem untamed), places, where plants are allowed to grow almost chaotically. All of it makes his gardens a unique place. Shiro has to reward his gardeners somehow.

Unexpectedly, his feet bring him to his library. It’s a two-storey glass building, futuristic and full of light. At 19, Shiro has ordered to build it in an attempt to brighten his life, if even a little. His parents’ death has been still fresh in his memory even after three years and not a lot of things made sense, but Shiro was unused to giving up. The library was only one of many attempts to learn how to live on his own.

The glass building is situated in a far, secluded part of his garden, that’s why not all of his employees have even heard once about its existence. It’s been intended like that from the very beginning. When Shiro’s been 19 and 20, he’s been a frequent visitor here - he loves paper books, OK? Only works by his favourite authors are collected here - the most beautiful editions, some old and rare ones. This library has been a place of happiness and joy back in the day - before his army service has started. Shiro realizes belatedly, that he hasn’t been here in about six years - he was so submerged in his crises that a thought of visiting his library for the sake of its atmosphere hasn’t ever occurred to him.

Shiro shakes off the sad thoughts and enters the spacious hall on the first floor. It is still decorated with orchids and ivies, exactly as it was then. Shiro recalls bringing Allura here for the first time. Allura has been in love with cerulean blue, and she’s had that favourite long dress of hers on, blue like the sky on a sunny day, with a wide skirt and puffed sleeves. On that day, Allura has come into the same hall Shiro is entering now, through the same doors, and she’s looked so mesmerized by the beauty of the small library, laughed so happily, that Shiro has felt happy himself just from watching her shine. Allura has said that the building structure makes the sun and the clouds seem a part of its design, and it’s simply gorgeous. Shiro couldn’t help but feel proud because of her praise; he’s worked on the project along with the designers, after all.

Shiro can see it as clear as if it’s been days ago: Allura spinning in the centre of the hall, with her skirt billowing around her legs, looking ethereal under the lights of the summer sun.

Shiro hasn’t talked to Allura, in person or by phone, for almost half a year now. She writes him texts every week, and Shiro answers each of those. Neither of them tries to initiate a real-life contact anymore. Shiro just can’t take her aggressive attempts at making him feel normal again. They don’t work, they only cause pain. But that’s Allura for you: she’s good at tackling impossible challenges, but she doesn’t do slow and subtle well.

Another wave of guilt crushes Shiro. He’s a bad friend, isn’t he?

Don’t think about Allura, Matt and Pidge, not now, Shiro tells himself. There will be a right time for that.

The happy memory goes to the backs of his mind again, for it has to stop teasing Shiro with lost possibilities, until he’s ready to look for new ones, at least.

Shiro is still tempted to flee immediately but he refuses to yield to this unseemly urge; he hasn’t been in the library for so long - who knows when the next visit will happen? Most important of all, Shiro has to look at his favourite spot in the whole building. There was a small bench in the far corridor on the second floor, hidden behind bookshelves; a recess in a recess, where Shiro would go when his mood has been too dreadful to subject other people to it (has it been him, really? a man so concerned
about other people’s feelings? Shiro can hardly believe it now).

Shiro goes up the stairs (also made from glass) and follows a well-known route through the sunlit corridors. He has to admit, Mr Fennel and his team have done a good work of keeping the library in perfect condition; Shiro will have to thank Mr Fennel for that specifically.

He makes a turn around a corner, to where the bench should stand, and sees Keith.

Keith is settled on the floor and is lost in a book, which lies in front of him on that same bench Shiro had favoured. Shiro feels his heart leap to his throat and the tips of his fingers go cold. He freezes for a second, then hastily retreats from Keith’s line of sight.

His breathing is too quick and his pulse is racing. Shiro is so overwhelmed that he has to lean on the nearest wall to steady himself.

It’s Keith, for real. He’s here, not five meters away from Shiro. He looks as beautiful as ever and is completely out of reach, just as before.

When Shiro toughens up to look at Keith discretely for the second time, he notices that Keith doesn’t just sit on the cold marble - he has a familiar pillow under him. That’s the throw pillow from Shiro’s cabinet. The one Keith has used upon Shiro’s order on his first day in this mansion. The one Shiro was glad someone has taken away from his cabinet after his breakdown (it must’ve been Steve, of course, who else would it be?).

Immediately, Shiro’s brain conjures a picture of Keith asking Mr Fennel about this pillow, whether he could take it; then, Keith thinking about Shiro while gliding his hands on the pillowcase… Shame fills Shiro’s insides with hot iron; he can’t be that rotten. Anyway, chides Shiro himself, let’s be realistic. What could Keith possibly think about his master after all the things that had happened? Only that Shiro has done exactly two things right - prepared a pillow to spare his slave’s knees and bought him a nice collar in his favourite hue of red.

Why does Shiro need to read so much into it?

Most certainly, Steve simply considers it practical to use Keith’s pillow for Keith’s comfort - why not?

And that red collar - it’s perfectly on display on Keith's neck. Looks like Keith’s hair is shorter than it’s been since the bangs on his nape don’t obscure the view of the scarlet leather. As if the person who’s cut Keith’s pretty hair had the collar in mind. Again, Mr Fennel’s doing?

Keith turns a page in his book with one hand while his other hand shoots up to touch his collar, in that same unconscious gesture that is ingrained in Shiro’s memory from the morning when everything went to shit.

Shiro remembers being unable to comfort Keith after he’s talked to him about his father’s death, and he can almost feel bile rising to his throat. He’d lost his parents young, too. He can imagine what Keith feels. A few words of sympathy - what’s so complicated about that? Why couldn’t he be more supportive of Keith when he desperately wanted to?

Shiro flees the library as quietly as he can. He manages not to alarm Keith since no one runs after him. If he knew Shiro was there, Keith would’ve come to Shiro and asked him questions, of that Shiro is sure.
Shiro is almost in his bedroom when a simple thought occurs in his head: what book has Keith been reading exactly? Shiro is vaguely surprised by the level of curiosity he feels.

He could watch the cameras’ feed or ask Mr Fennel. He just wants to know a little bit more about Keith.

He could, but he won’t. He won’t spy on Keith ever again unless it’s an emergency.

A dull evening, then one more sleepless night and Shiro is ready to tackle another busy day. Or, pretends to be ready (successfully, when yawns don’t split his face in two).

He reads news on his tablet during breakfast, and one especially nerdy article reminds him of Matt. Shiro feels guardedly hopeful all of a sudden, that’s why he calls Matt until he loses the nerve and asks whether Shiro could visit him.

Matt can’t believe his luck. Shiro hasn’t entered his home since… Since the army. Of course, Matt agrees instantly.

Something goes wrong when Shiro arrives, though. The guards let his car in through the gate, show him to the parking lot, but there’s no one to meet Shiro afterwards. Has he driven too fast? Is he too early? Matt is aware they live close, though. Has he forgotten? His friend hasn’t been this erratic before. Has Matt changed so much without Shiro noticing? No, this can’t be.

There must be another reason, right?

Shiro decides to enter on his own risk. Looks like the Holt Manor has been renovated while Shiro refused to leave his estate for any reason other than his companies’ business. To his dismay, no one is around to show him the way. Shiro tries to navigate through the empty maze of new walls, fences, pathways and dead ends. Frankly, he should just call Matt, but it’d mean admitting to getting lost, and Shiro’s pride won’t let this happen.

Shiro ends up in the backyard of the main building. He grins to himself (from here he’ll get to the main entrance without problem), ready to walk the last few steps to his destination, and then he sees it.

There’s a wooden platform, about half a meter above the ground, in the far corner of the backyard, right at the edge of the inner garden. Old linden trees obscure the view from the main building windows, effectively hiding the hideous construction. A small crowd is surrounding the platform. On the platform, there’s a man receiving a corporal punishment.

Shiro needs a few seconds to make out the person, but when he does, the recognition hits him like a freight train.

It’s Lance, the slave from the auction. The package deal. He’s naked and shackled to an iron frame, and he’s getting flogged. His behind is already read and swollen with many welts. He cries out at every strike and wiggles his ass frantically, trying to evade the next lash. He doesn’t care about the onlookers, doesn’t care about the way his wrists get rubbed raw by his restraints. It’s obvious that the only thing he senses now is his pain. And oh, Lance clearly isn’t made to take so much pain.

Shiro can see Lance’s friend (the other boy from the auction) watching Lance with an impassive face from where he’s standing at the corner of the platform. The bigger guy (Hank is his name?) is also
naked. Is he waiting in line for his own spanking or has he just received one?

Shiro doesn’t want to find out, actually.

The reality of the things happening here frightens him. This is Matt’s household. Does Pidge know? Does she approve if she knows? Has it been her order or Matt’s? Their parents are always absent, always travelling somewhere. Do they know? Have they been the ones to establish this system?

Shiro has been saved from captivity long after Matt and his father had escaped. They’ve been luckier, and both have stayed relatively intact, physically (in comparison to Shiro). There were no experiments for them, no operations. They haven’t experienced how it feels, to be at someone’s mercy completely, at its worst. To feel as unsafe and helpless as only a man strapped to a table can feel when he sees a scalpel in the hand of his captor. To have no escape… Shiro stops this train of thought before he gets a panic attack.

He also can’t look at the torture anymore. He’s afraid he’ll make it worse if he intervenes directly, which means he needs Matt here right now.

The next few steps of his visit to his friend happen quickly.

Miraculously, he finds Matt very almost immediately, despite the outrage blinding him. Matt is lost in his work on his laptop. Without pausing to greet his friend, Shiro comes at him and asks, who is responsible for the slaves’ discipline in this household.

Their butler is running everything here, answers Matt, uncomprehending, his brows furrowed in confusion. He does a good job, says Matt (of hiding things from you, nerdy people, who don’t see anything not science-related, thinks Shiro bitterly). Apparently, Matt doesn’t know a thing about what’s happening in his backyard.

Next, Shiro asks about Pidge, whether her personal slaves are good for her. Matt is surprised by the question. His answering “yes” is said in a small tone. Matt seems to be afraid of the interrogation, afraid of his friend and his uncompromising tone. Shiro hates himself for being so hard on him (looks like captivity has left a trace on Matt too; for each his own burden), but he can’t leave the situation the way it is.

Not listening to Matt’s protests, Shiro drags Matt to the place in his backyard where the slaves’ punishments are still being administered (he’s still so much stronger than Matt, even with one arm).

Lance is still there.

The overseer has changed his flogger for a short whip, and Lance is screaming himself hoarse. He’s merely hanging from his bonds at this point.

Matt’s first reaction is to run away or hide. No surprise there. Just like Shiro has preferred to be blind about what surrounds him, Matt doesn’t want to see the truth.

But Matt has Shiro to help him open his eyes (and to hold him in his iron grip), so Matt doesn’t have a chance to avoid looking at his family’s sins. Seeing Matt’s lack of action, Shiro tells him sternly to go to the overseer and to order him to stop the beating. Matt does as he’s told. Matt comes to the platform, stiff as a doll, stops at the bottom of it and whispers to the overseer to finish it. Thankfully, it’s enough for the man to retreat. Lance goes completely limp when the strokes stop, and Shiro climbs the stairs to the platform to support him, while a servant (he has no collar) frees Lance arms and legs from the bonds.

Meanwhile, Matt is going into a full-blown panic attack at the feet of the platform. Fucking
awesome. And it’s also on Shiro. He should be helping his friend now, but Shiro has his arm full of an unconscious slave and, truthfully, he feels a little vengeful towards Matt who’s let this happen to Lance. Matt has earned this pain with his ignorance, hasn’t he? Which is a horrible, despicable way to think, chasrises himself Shiro immediately. Once again, Shiro’s not in a position to judge.

Still, Shiro’s sure that Keith hasn’t suffered like that in his household and, somehow, illogically, this thought calms him a little.

Miraculously, it’s the other slave (Hunk? or Harry?) who comes to Matt’s rescue while Shiro struggles with carrying Lance down the stairs and positioning him on a bench at the bottom of the platform, ass up, of course. No one tries to approach Shiro; has he scared everyone that much?

After some more hassle, the four of them, Matt, Shiro, Lance and Hunk (!) find themselves in Matt’s study. Matt is pale, Shiro is worn out; they don’t look each other in the eye. The slaves are dressed (thank fuck!), Hunk is sitting on a couch and Lance is lying on his side next to him, his back to the owners, his head on Hunk’s lap.

“Pidge hasn’t talked to them once. Refused to. That’s why I sent them to Mr Stain, the butler, he was supposed to find work for them. He is… I thought he’s good with people… To people…”

Matt is rambling. Shiro knows his friend is shocked, that he really didn’t know, couldn’t imagine what happens to his slaves. But it doesn’t change the fact that Matt let all this happen just under his nose. He is responsible for that since he’s the heir and his parents clearly don’t care about their property much anymore.

“I could buy these two from you. If you want,” - offers Shiro. He will hate himself later; now he just needs to know that these two young men, whom he associates with his Keith, are safe and sound.

“That’d be for the best,” - says Matt hurriedly, as if he thinks Shiro will take his words back if he so much as hesitates for a second. “They are the only slaves I’ve ever bought myself. I… I can’t…” - and he starts to hyperventilate.

Shiro barely prevents Matt from having another attack.

After Matt can breathe normally again, they go through the selling process online without delay (it’s fortunate that Matt has also majored in Law, along with Engineering, and he knows what they’re doing): they print the necessary papers, sign them, scan the signed exemplars, attach the scans to the slave’s files on the slaves registry page... and soon Shiro has three times more trouble on his hands than he’s had in the morning.

Mr Fennel will be excited (meaning, ready to snap Shiro’s head off).

Or not. You never know with him.

Shiro calls his assistant while he leads his two new slaves to the car. Actually, Mr Fennel is thrilled, like for real, when Shiro says that one boy, at least, should be clever.

Shiro casts a glance back across his shoulder. Lance can barely walk, poor boy, he leans on Hunk heavily so that the latter has to almost carry him. They’ve given Lance’s welts some treatment, but… He’ll have to take care of Lance’s health when they all return to Shiro’s mansion.
Shiro drives the car, trying not to look back through the mirror to check on the boys; he doesn’t need more distractions at the moment. His whirling mind is a disaster as it is.

Shiro has acted impulsively again. Without thinking the matter over, Shiro has taken the responsibility for two more lives. Shiro doesn’t like it one bit. Having one slave has made his life hell (not that he regrets buying Keith, but it’s a fact); what will owning the three of them at once do to Shiro’s life?

Luckily, Shiro doesn’t have much time to berate himself. Shiro’s car is taking the last turn to his estate entrance gates already. Mr Fennel and several servants wait for them at the guards’ post.

Shiro is relieved and thankful to see his assistant here, poised to take the matter in his hands. Mr Fennel is the only one who has Shiro’s full trust now, and it seems very right.

One thing Shiro knows for sure, though: he won’t leave everything to Mr Fennel this time. He’s going to take part in the boys’ destinies, he’s going to have a finger on the pulse at all times.

Shiro climbs out of the driver’s seat and smiles broadly at Mr Fennel:

“Are you ready to greet our new neighbours properly, Mr Fennel?”

“They’ll like it here, sir,” - replies Mr Fennel with a smile of his own, and, together, they help Hunk to extract Lance out of the car.

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey!
I hope you’ve enjoyed!
Now, what d’you all think? Is Shirchen acting like a compassionate adult or like an immature little boy who just wants to save them all (catch them all, lol)?

Also, what do you think, what book has Keith been reading? Suggestions?

Also, I’m sorry for not saving Lance right away. Shirchen needed Matt to see the errors of his ways (is Matt broken now too? no, fuck, I haven’t meant to)
Watching Movies

Chapter Summary

Lance receives much-needed care.
Shiro talks to his friend Matt on the phone.
Mr Fennel has to intervene again.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

It's 4,5 k words...
I don't want to write 8k words chapters! You don't want me to write them (it'll take forever)!
Stop me smb pls

This chapter is not as angsty as the previous one, but Shiro has another panic attack...
So)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Shiro?” - comes Mr Fennel’s voice.

“Yeah, Steve?” - answers Shiro gently. He doesn’t like to hear Mr Fennel sounding almost…
resigned. As if Shiro has somehow managed to drain even Mr Fennel’s seemingly endless stamina.

They lounge in Shiro’s cabinet: Shiro on the floor in front of the small couch, Mr Fennel on the
couch itself. They’ve just managed to take care of Lance’s ass and back (it looked like he’s been
whipped on his back recently, too, and the swelling didn’t look well) while Lance screamed, cried
and fought for his life. His resistance came as a surprise for Shiro, since before that, at the Holt
Manor, Lance has let Shiro and Matt clean his welts without a fuss after his punishment. Apparently,
the ride to Shiro’s place has been very nice. So nice, that Lance has got enough rest during it to make
two grown men (and a bulky teenager) huff and puff around him, completely losing their shit.

If Lance would’ve just used his newly accumulated energy to heal his tired body instead of fighting
his saviours...

They’ve entertained the idea of sedating him, but Hunk has almost begged them not to, saying that
Lance is afraid of needles, doctors and everything in between. Hunk was the only person Lance
would let touch him without going ballistic. So Hunk has done all the work. Later, when Lance has
(finally!) fallen asleep in their assigned room, Hunk has explained, that there was something very
wrong with the boarding school for slave kids Lance had come from. From what Shiro has gathered,
the school administration used some of their charges for the purpose of testing different medicine
equipment.

Mr Fennel has been watching Shiro so intently while Hunk has been narrating about Lance’s past
woes, that Shiro felt ridiculous. He knew that Mr Fennel has been looking for stress signals, just in case. Ha! As if Shiro got a panic attack every time someone mentioned anything medicine-related! OK, fine. Shiro has to admit, Mr Fennel has had a valiant reason to worry for him (recalling the day of Keith’s arrival at the mansion, as the most recent example). Luckily, this time, Shiro has been able to keep his fears under control. It hasn’t been much of a task, actually. Lance was in so much pain, that Shiro’s attention has been focused exclusively on him. And Shiro could always ignore his own problems better when someone else needed his help.

Nevertheless, just how fucking fast “one slave, bought by chance” becomes “three slaves who need personalized approach” if one isn’t careful!

Mr Fennel, whose question calls Shiro back to the present moment, must be mulling over the same issue.

“Are you going to bring every stray kitten you see to our home and make me give them milk?” - he asks. Mr Fennel’s tone is not accusing, just… inquiring.

“No, only the pretty ones,” - says Shiro in a dull tone. As if he himself doesn’t know how silly he acts. Mr Fennel snorts inelegantly.

“You should maybe lock me up here, inside the castle walls, so that I don’t go looking for kittens in distress?” - Shiro attempts to make a pun, but he sounds lame even to his own ears.

“No, sir, that won’t help. You’ve proven me that you are able to break the blockade if you wish to,” - unexpectedly, there are traces of irritation and even anger in Mr Fennel’s voice in response to an innocent joke. But, that’s good. That’s much better than no emotions at all.

Shiro tries to sound offended.

“How many times do I have to apologize for my one-time nightly expedition, Steve? We’ve both agreed that analyzing this event has helped to enhance our defences,” - he counters.

And that much is true. At the same time, Mr Fennel has every right to be furious with Shiro even after three weeks. Not only had Shiro woken him up in the wee hours of the morning, but he had also made him worry a lot, what with this sudden escapade to the city and not answering his phone. Shiro can sympathize. They’re very alike in this regard; both men of the controlling type. Not having his employer where he’d expected him to be should’ve been a low blow for Mr Fennel’s pride.

“As many times as it takes, sir;” - replies Mr Fennel haughtily. “You may not want to give me another opportunity to check out our security system the way you’ve done, pretending you’re the enemy. You’ve caused mayhem in the ranks of our guards; some have recognised you, some not; everyone has been shell-shocked, regardless. I’ve even heard a version that the person who burst out of your mansion that fateful evening was your clone, raised in that laboratory of yours, which is currently in construction.”

Mr Fennel sounds more like himself with every insult he throws Shiro’s way; this is how Shiro knows that he is ready to talk business again.

Shiro changes topic rather abruptly:

“About Lance and Hunk. Good that you’ve found a room for them not in the main building. I didn’t want the new boys to interact with Keith until they got acquainted with their new home first.”

“You are aware that in a normal household the three of them would’ve been put in one room? With narrow cots, no other furniture other than that, and one tiny bathroom, right?” - inquires Mr Fennel.
Mr Fennel doesn’t mean to upset him with his teasing, but, since his return, Shiro’s reactions are not always logical. His brain links together the fact that Shiro has always felt different because of his views (even if he’s kept them private), the fact that Shiro has gone to army on his own accord because he’s wanted to live in a place with no slavery for once, and the fact that Shiro’s decision has resulted in being captured, losing his arm (along with a big portion of his sanity) and becoming even less similar to the men and women of his circle in his native country. As a result, Shiro often feels naive, silly and out of place when his life choices are being discussed.

Despite knowing that he and Mr Fennel are alone in the room, and there are no armies of catcalling and whooping fellow citizens who despise Shiro for his liberalism, Shiro is starting to sweat from nerves.

What is he supposed to answer, exactly? To turn it all into a joke? He can’t explain his reasons either. Is it really wise to separate Keith from the other slaves, as if he’s treated differently from them? As if Keith is special? What if some outsider knew? What would they say? Shiro can almost hear some faceless figures coo at Keith: “Oh, Master’s favourite concubine!” making the boy rigid with fury. The image disgusts Shiro to no end.

He leaves these thoughts to himself, though.

“But Keith is used to having a separate room by now, and it would be mean to move him,” - says Shiro timidly instead.

Mr Fennel’s gaze says it all. Shiro groans in embarrassment, hiding his face in his hands.

“Anyway,” - starts Mr Fennel, as if nothing has happened and Shiro’s ears aren’t as red as Keith’s collar, “I agree with you here. Keith is stable now, and he’s very useful as a worker. I don’t want either of that to change. What if Lance and Hunk will make Keith worry with their horror stories? Not that I think that Keith has none of his own, what with the way he wakes up drenched in sweat and teary-eyed sometimes. But you know, two scared people make a mutiny, and there will be three of them.”

Ignoring Shiro’s concern, caused by this carelessly revealed fact about Keith’s mental health, Mr Fennel continues:

“I think it’d be better for Lance and Hunk to stay together until Lance recovers enough not to fear strangers. I also think that Saturday spankings, that work with Keith so brilliantly, won’t do good to either Lance or Hunk. I was lucky to gain Keith’s trust first, this is why the discipline sessions bring positive results. It won’t work with these two.”

Shiro can only blink. He hasn’t thought it over this far.

“I…,” - he begins and stops mid-sentence. What was it he wanted to say?

That Mr Fennel is right? That Shiro wants to be as clear-headed as Mr Fennel, at least sometimes? That Keith doesn’t need any punishments at all if he behaves as well as Mr Fennel brags?

None of these things matter right now, not really.

“I’m happy you work for me, Steve,” - admits Shiro instead. The time seems right to say it out loud.

“I was hoping so, sir,” - smiles Mr Fennel in reply. The smile reaches his eyes and gives him a boyish charm.

“I’m glad I’ve agreed to baby-sit you ten years ago,” - adds Mr Fennel, because he can’t let himself
be *too nice* to Shiro.

“It’s been nine years,” - corrects Shiro on auto-pilot.

“Oh?” - Mr Fennel’s eyes glint dangerously. “Want me to load up the Shirogane family chronicles?” And his hand starts to feel for his tablet, left somewhere on the couch.

“No, thank you, Mr Fennel,” - declines Shiro dryly.

Then, in a fit of childish vengefulness, Shiro says, as regal as he can muster: “You may go, Mr Fennel”.

“At your service, sir,” - answers Mr Fennel just as regally, his gaze full of mischief. Shiro can hardly stop himself from giggling out loud.

Mr Fennel exits the study with a courteous bow, and Shiro allows himself a chuckle.

“It’s been nine years,” - he mutters to the silence of the room, just to let the fun mood linger a bit longer. The action has the opposite effect: no one contradicts him, and Shiro feels lonely and drained of all power suddenly.

Being the responsible adult he is (oh, yeah), Shiro allows himself an evening of relaxation. His head feels so heavy, so full with thoughts that it seems to Shiro that his head may explode from the pressure if Shiro attempts to contemplate one more simple idea to top it all.

Bathing has always been a simple way to lessen Shiro’s anxiety.

So Shiro takes a bath, focusing on the bubbles and the sensation of warm water surrounding his body. He ignores the guilt he feels for spending his time idly and the shame he feels for having more than most other people ever will; his mind helpfully supplies him with the image of Keith, Lance and Hunk trying to fit into a narrow shower cabin at once, but Shiro bravely ignores this parody as well and stays in the water, resting. No one will benefit from Shiro breaking down again.

He almost falls asleep there. To be precise, he does, but he catches himself in time before his head submerges underwater. It’s quite a trick to perform with only one arm, and Shiro is absurdly proud of himself for managing it.

After doing the right thing and being nice to himself, just as one of his doctors has taught him, Shiro makes a severe strategic mistake.

From his bedroom, he calls Matt. Matt is close to tears, from the sound of his voice. He says, that he’s had his first serious fight with Pidge, ever. She has been shouting at him, and she’s told him he’s the worst brother ever. Why would he buy her slaves to sell them suddenly without notifying her, before she’s even had a chance to muster up the courage to talk to them, at least? Matt tried to explain what he’s seen in his own backyard and how it’s influenced his decision (by the way, the butler doesn’t work for Holts anymore, and everyone in the household is shaken and scared by the sudden changes; corporal punishments are forbidden at Holt Manor from now on), and has been shouted at some more.

Shiro sits down on the couch and prepares for a long talk.

In an attempt to soothe Matt, Shiro tells him that Pidge is still very young; she’s only fourteen, after all, she needs time to come to grips with the new information. She’s a bright girl, assures Shiro his friend, she’ll come around and will no doubt support Matt and his views.
Looks like Matt could use some relaxation time, too. He’s close to hysterics, and Shiro contemplates visiting him again this very evening, for the sole purpose to be there for Matt when he needs someone.

It’s all sad and upsetting, but it’s not the worst thing that happens during that conversation.

At the end of it, Matt almost drags Shiro down, in tow with himself. He doesn’t intend to, but when he starts telling Shiro about his own horrific memories from the captivity time, Shiro crumbles. No amount of peace and bubbles can make Shiro resistant to this kind of triggers.

He wants to just finish the call, when Matt starts on the topic, but as Matt’s voice in the dynamic talks about watching the guards take Shiro away, about listening to Shiro’s pained cries, about quivering in fear that he was going to be the next, - Shiro freezes and can’t do a thing. As if in a trance of sorts, Shiro just sits there and holds the phone to his ear.

On the other end of the line, Matt chokes on his tears, saying that he still sees one and the same scene in his dreams almost every night: how Shiro is brought back into the room, where the captives have been held, after the first experiment. In this dream, Shiro doesn’t move, is pale as a leaf, and there is a white lock on his forehead where several hours ago his hair has been perfectly black… Sometimes in these dreams, wheezes Matt, Shiro’s right arm is taken off, even if in the real life it’s happened much later than the first experiment, after Matt and his father has been already rescued. Sometimes, Matt continues in a dead voice, there is a metallic monstrosity bulging right from Shiro’s shoulder instead.

Shiro feels strange: it’s as if Matt describes Shiro’s own nightmares and talks about a completely different person at the same time. He holds onto this feeling; let it be another man, this time; please, anyone, but not Shiro. Let it be not Shiro.

A reminder chirps on Shiro’s watch (it says he needs to read a book on modern economics until the end of the week) and shakes him up from his daze.

Shiro puts the phone in the speaker-mode, lays it on the couch and uses the emergency button, conveniently positioned on the wall to the left from the couch (he’s never made the effort to find them all; there just always is an emergency button when Shiro needs it).

Matt still talks when Mr Fennel bursts into the room and takes the phone away from Shiro, giving it to some of his workers without shutting it off. The worker leaves, and Mr Fennel pulls Shiro into a hug and holds him, while Shiro shakes and shakes and shakes.

Amidst his panic, Shiro recalls how Mr Fennel would spend whole nights at Shiro’s bed after his return home from captivity. He would hold Shiro’s hand or touch his shoulder; always careful to have a point of direct skin-to-skin contact, making Shiro feel safe and allowing him to sleep. It’s taken months before Shiro could fall asleep alone...

“Steve?” - calls out Shiro weakly.

Mr Fennel adjusts him in his arms so that Shiro’s mouth is not pressed to his shoulder anymore. Mr Fennel hums, indicating his attention, and waits.

Shiro’s body has stopped quivering, at last. He breathes in and out several times, then asks:

“What did you do back then, when they’ve brought me back, torn to shreds, and I couldn’t sleep without your presence? How did you copy?”

Now that Shiro witnesses other people suffering in front of him with a relatively clear head and readjusts to the way it hurts to look at others’ misery, he remembers to worry about Mr Fennel from
five years ago.

Mr Fennel chuckles humorlessly, but says nothing.

Shiro asks again:

“I don’t remember. When did you sleep? Did you sleep, Steve? Five years ago, I couldn’t even close my eyes until you told me that you’ll watch after me. Every time I startled from sleep with a cry, you were there. Every time I needed to drink in the night, you were there.”

In the silence of his cabinet Shiro repeats stubbornly:

“You were there...”

He doesn’t expect a reply anymore, so when it comes, Shiro flinches, and Mr Fennel talks, rubbing Shiro’s back in circles, calming him:

“Yes, I’ve been there. Every night, I’ve been there. Sometimes, I fell asleep in the sitting position, so that my back was killing me the next day. More often than not, I just sat there, watching you and thinking. I didn’t need that much sleep, thankfully. 5-6 hours a day was enough for me. But with you, it came down to 4-5, and I had to allow myself to sleep during the day, for fear of getting hallucinations. I’ve never been thinking that much in my life before that time. I’ve never known what hatred means until then, too.”

Mr Fennel goes quiet, although the soothing rubs never stop.

Shiro is back to himself, almost. He has a lot to mull over; more than before.

He’s glad that Matt has talked to him. It’s tragic that Shiro can’t listen to him, can’t provide the support Matt needs, because of how much of a wreck Shiro is.

This morning’s events are also a heavy burden on Shiro’s conscious. He’s believed Matt is in control in his household; Matt’s believed he knows everything about his manor, at the very least. Both of them have been proved wrong.

Shiro believes that he knows his household well. But is it true? What if Shiro only sees the pick of the iceberg?

Shiro trusts Mr Fennel. But today, he needs a proof that while Shiro is in charge people are not whipped bloody for clumsiness (like it’s happened with Lance, according to Hunk).

“Steve? You do have the videos, right? With sound?” - asks Shiro.

He must sound back to normal, because Mr Fennel releases him in order to get his tablet. Shiro misses his warmth immediately and is glad when Mr Fennel sits down on the couch next to him again.

Of course, Mr Fennel knows what videos Shiro means.

There are three of them. They watch the first one together.

In this video, Mr Fennel does a lot of talking. He explains the stoplight system, explains what he expects from Keith. The longer they speak (and Shiro is relieved to see that Keith asks questions, a lot), the more relaxed Keith looks. When it’s time for him to be strapped to the spanking bench (luckily, this time nothing triggers Shiro; must be because Keith doesn’t look afraid at all), Keith
positions himself there calmly and lets Mr Fennel buckle the belts. They still speak when the spanking begins.

“I can take it without restraints, sir. I won’t move even if you whip me hard,” - says Keith, a little sad, after the first, playful, spank lands on his bare ass.

“I don’t doubt it,” - replies Mr Fennel calmly. “It’s a part of your discipline. You submit to me and take your spanking, where and how you’ve been told to. It shows me that you know your place and that you don’t want to cause me any trouble.”

Keith sighs.

“What’s with all this sighing? Does it hurt your pride, to be left without any choice, any loophole to demonstrate how resilient you are?” - asks Mr Fennel, a little mockingly.

“Yes, sir, I guess,” - answers Keith simply.

“Oh?” - Mr Fennel sounds surprised by this easy admission. He still learns how to play Keith properly. His self-assured tone doesn’t waver, though, when he continues:

“I’ll tell you what you can do. Show me your strength by following my rules without mistake. Show me your strength by giving me great results in your work. Here, in this playroom, trust me to give you what you need, and don’t try to resist me. Show me your strength by taking everything I give you bravely and not hiding your pain from me. Can you do that?”

“Yes, sir,” - Keith speaks clearly; surprisingly, his voice has acquired a dreamy lilt.

“Have you put him into a headspace?” - whispers Shiro, watching the screen with baited breath.

“Yes,” - replies Mr Fennel quietly.

In the video, Mr Fennel explains to Keith that he has to tell him when the strokes become unbearable, say “yellow” or “red”. Then, Mr Fennel spanks him with his hand, hard, until Keith’s ass is dark pink. Keith’s breathing becomes laboured, but he doesn’t complain, doesn’t squirm, doesn’t fight.

From the way Keith held himself at the auction, Shiro expected something very different. It’s been nine (ten?) years since Mr Fennel started to work for Shiro, but once again, Shiro takes a new look at his chief assistant. Mr Fennel works miracles.

On the screen, Mr Fennel asks Keith how he feels after the hand-spanking, reminds him not to try to hide his noises when the serious part will begin. After that, Mr Fennel uses several instruments on Keith’s ass, all thin and stingy, from a riding crop to a cane. Keith whimpers and cries out; his ass starts to dance under the harshest lashes, but it’s obvious how hard Keith tries to stop moving again and just take it.

When it comes to the cane, Keith’s cries rise in pitch. Mr Fennel gives him plenty of time to calm down after every new burst of pain, and Keith breathes through it. The muscles of his backside contract on instinct, his ass more red than pink now. After the fifth stroke with the cane, Keith cries out loudly and says, experimentally: “Yellow, sir?”. He sounds unsure, but, of course, Mr Fennel doesn’t proceed with the next blow.

“Do you need a pause or does it hurt too much?” - enquiries Mr Fennel in a calm tone.

“I don’t know,” - says Keith. “I know I’ve taken more during some of my previous punishments and
I can deal with the pain, but…"

“But it’ll soon turn to agony?” - guesses Mr Fennel.

“Yes, sir,” - answers Keith, rather timidly.

“Will you beg me to stop?” - asks Mr Fennel, unmitigated curiosity apparent in his voice.

“Will you stop if I beg?” - counters Keith.

“No, but I like it when my submissives beg,” - now Mr Fennel sounds outright smug.

“I don’t like to beg,” - states Keith.

“I don’t ask it from you,” - comments Mr Fennel with a note of regret. “But it’s OK if you want to, one day”.

“That won’t happen,” - answers Keith seriously.

“You forgot to add “sir”, Keith. Not for the first time.”

Keith inhales loudly.

“I think, you’ve had enough of the cane for one day. Now, I’ll give you three swats with this carpet beater for talking to your overseer without respect, and then we’ll stop. The rules still apply: if it’s too much, call “red”.

Upon hearing about the carpet beater, Keith makes a valiant attempt at turning his head to look at the intimidating implement that is about to collide with his rather swollen asscheeks.

Mr Fennel graciously demonstrates, holding the wooden thing in front of Keith’s face.

“Ow. That’s new. Sir”, - mutters Keith.

He takes three final strokes with dignity, with more ease than the cane, from the looks of it.

“That’s all. You did well,” - praises Mr Fennel and pats Keith on the back.

Then, he cleans the injured areas with alcohol (there are no traces of blood, but Mr Fennel prefers to be overcautious) and applies a lotion.

Keith goes completely limp, sagging on the bench.

“Will you please untie me, sir? I could take care of it myself,” - mumbles Keith sleepily.

Mr Fennel lightly swats him on the back of his untouched thighs.

“I told you I will take care of you, haven’t I?”

Keith yelps in surprise and says, hurriedly:

“You’ve said you’ll give me what I need. That’s what you’ve said. I think so. Sir.”

“And what you need now is to let me treat your welts. The discipline session is over after I tend to the damaged areas, so just take what I give you and don’t disobey me again”.

“Yes, sir,” - answers Keith and relaxes back into the motions.
After he’s untied, led down from the bench and given a drink of water, Keith is allowed to get dressed. He is half-hard and tries to hide it first, but Mr Fennel says that it’s not a big deal at all. But masturbating is forbidden until the next day, he reminds: you shouldn’t mix up discipline and pleasure. Keith shrugs, but stops covering.

“I’ll bring you to your room. Remember, your master has told you to spend the rest of the day reflecting on your behaviour, so you’ll do just that.”

“Yes, sir.”

Keith puts his last garment on and says, sincerely:

“Thank you, sir. It’s the first punishment in my life when I feel better after it than before it”.

Mr Fennel comes to Keith, takes him by the shoulder gently, but firmly, and leads him out of the door.

“I’ve told you to trust me,” - is the last thing Shiro hears before the video ends.

Shiro is conflicted. His thoughts and feelings are at war in his head.

He’s a little angry that he wasn’t the one to punish Keith.

At the same time, he is glad that Mr Fennel has been the one disciplining Keith because Shiro couldn’t be this careful and thoughtful.

And, the most confusing of all, Shiro is jealous (!) because Keith has thanked Mr Fennel so sincerely.

“Shiro,” - Mr Fennel’s voice startles him from his reverie.

“Yes?”

“It’s a good thing that you’ve ordered to discipline him regularly. Keith prefers simple, clear things. He doesn’t like a lot of rules which bear no sense; it makes him feel better that there is a familiar pattern in a place where everything is so new. From what I’ve gathered from our conversations, his boarding school is very strict to boys. With such a backstory, I think he could’ve felt confused in the absence of punishments, even anxious. Stop beating yourself. By the way, the first session has been the harshest I’ve treated him so far. Trust me. Keith’s OK.”

“I’ve seen it. He doesn’t fear you,” - confirms Shiro in a gentle voice.

“Even if he should, right?” - smirks Mr Fennel, and then adds, seriously: “Let’s get you to your bed.”

“Steve, I’m fine. I can take care of myself,” - huffs Shiro indignantly.

“Please, don’t pout, sir. You set a bad example for us, servants.”

Mr Fennel coos and teases and threatens to tuck Shiro in.

To spare his ego, Shiro grumbles and argues while he brushes his teeth and undresses. He doesn’t want to show that he’s very glad that Mr Fennel will watch him go to bed (even if Mr Fennel sees right through him).

Mr Fennel is very pleased to have his employer soft and trusting (and under the comforter), in the end.
He hugs Mr Fennel and wishes him good night. Mr Fennel smiles briefly and turns the lights off.

“Thank you, Steve,” - says Shiro to Mr Fennel’s back, watching it retreat into the brightly-lit corridor.

Mr Fennel simply waves and closes the door after himself.

Chapter End Notes

I want to write Sheith porn.
Just porn, no hard feelings and moral doubts.
I just crave it.

And, the spanking. It happened.
Dreaming

Chapter Summary

Shiro tries to watch movies some more. Then he calls his friends and ends up planning visits to both Matt and Allura. Then he dreams.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

To be honest, this chapter has been a struggle from the beginning. I wanted to leap to the other parts of plot, but this had to be done, yeah?
4,4 k words. Fuck. I won’t return to my happy 2,5k, will I?

Anyway, I hope you’ll enjoy.

This time’s soundtrack would be:
Eleanor Rigby by the Beatles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shiro wakes up, and it’s Saturday, again.

He loathes Saturdays for some time now. What makes them so “special”?

Today Keith is going to get his fourth spanking in Shiro’s household.

Shiro has counted every single time Keith’s behind got thrashed. He doesn’t even want to lie to himself and pretend that he doesn’t care; he does, oh, how much he does.

The first one has happened on a Tuesday, thanks to Shiro’s breakdown on the previous Saturday, the day of Keith’s arrival. Mr Fennel has insisted that the owner’s directives must be followed and Shiro has allowed him to introduce Keith to the playroom as soon as he’s had the chance to sleep off their little adventure in the city. That time was the one Shiro has watched with Mr Fennel yesterday, with safewords discussion, talking and all. The second and third times have happened on Saturdays, as prescribed. Mr Fennel has even chosen a certain time - 2 p.m. He’s explained his choice of time to Shiro, and it even made sense: this way Keith had the first part of the day to himself, his precious free time, and then the second part of the day could be spent indoors “reflecting on his behaviour”, whatever that meant. Shiro thinks that if he’d spend several hours every week to reflect on his own behaviour in his youth, he’d maybe had a chance to do some things right.

But, and the thought occurs to him for the first time, he most certainly wouldn’t have met Keith at all if his life went a different path. The thought frightens Shiro to no end (again, Keith, beaten to death,
scrawny and miserable, chained in a nasty dungeon), and Shiro slaps himself to stop this particular train of thought. Keith is here now, Keith is his (however inappropriate and unnatural this fact might be) and he won’t let anything happen to him.

Anything, except for the spankings.

Shiro loathes himself, too. He has many reasons, these fucked-up discipline procedures aside.

Shiro picks the first three which pop up in his head. So, what does he loathe himself for?

First, for breaking his promise to himself to stop violating Keith’s privacy just because he can and watching that damned tape yesterday. Yes, it did make him feel better after what he’s witnessed in Matt’s backyard (Lance’s agonized cries ring in his ears, but he can’t go there, not now, and Shiro slaps himself again, on the other cheek this time, to even out the redness; he’s never missed having two hands so much before). No, watching that video still wasn’t fair to Keith, whatever Keith himself might say on the matter (a treacherous inner voice tells Shiro that he’s warned Keith that his every action may be monitored in this house; Shiro shuts this voice down mercilessly - because giving a warning doesn’t make intruding fair).

But back to the list of his violations.

Second, Shiro loathes himself for not being able to carry out Keith’s discipline himself. It is an act of cowardice if Shiro’s ever seen one.

Third, he loathes himself for intending to break that same promise to himself again today.

Shiro, the pathetic man that he is, plans to watch the other two spanking tapes.

Shiro doesn’t doubt Mr Fennel. He hasn’t ever had a sliver of a doubt in him before. Shiro has watched that first spanking video because his anxiety has required a visual proof, that’s why. Mr Fennel understood, and he didn’t comment, just let Shiro see for himself that his single (at the time of recording) slave isn’t treated with cruelty.

Right now, Shiro doesn’t have even a flimsy excuse to watch the second video.

If he can be honest with himself? He just wants to see Keith again. Keith is so beautiful, and he’s the first thing on Shiro’s mind when he wakes every morning. Even today, after yesterday’s trials, it’s not Lance with his suffering, not Mr Fennel with his lack of sleep, not Matt with his identity crisis, not Pidge and her possible struggles. It’s Keith, and what he’s up to, and whether he thinks about Shiro even a little, and whether Shiro can find a way to see him without acting strange (and without the need to talk to Keith directly; sue him, Shiro is a coward). Here’s the fourth valid reason to loathe himself (as if Shiro needed more of them).

Shiro could’ve watched the feed from the regular cameras, watch Keith at work, for example. But… Shiro is afraid of it. He doesn’t want to know more about Keith; he fears he’ll become even more greedy. Keith on a spanking bench is, at least, a familiar sight.

What a sorry loser Shiro is…

Shiro has all the means to see Keith every waking minute of every day, and exactly because of that he doesn’t even try to. He doesn’t want to think what he’d do to himself if he repeated his stupid,
heartless behaviour from more than three weeks ago. If Shiro wants to save the remnants of his self-respect, he has no right to force Keith into meeting him. Again, even if Keith wanted to meet Shiro, he wouldn’t have the means. He won’t ask for a meeting with his owner, it’d be unheard of. It’s a vicious circle Shiro doesn’t have the slightest idea how to break.

Then again, Mr Fennel is next to him all the time and they can always discuss all Keith’s issues, that’s why Keith has no reason to come to Shiro with a problem. Surely, if Shiro was standing next to Mr Fennel, Keith would still choose to talk to Mr Fennel, as he is not the highest-level authority, like Shiro is (and they trust each other, thinks Shiro bitterly).

In the meantime, his wristwatch on the bed stand indicates 11 a.m., and it means Shiro has gotten almost twice as much sleep as usual. Shiro hauls himself up and goes through his morning routines, then calls Matt to see if he’s all right (and, goddess bless his soul, his friend sounds so much better today), texts Mr Fennel (who’s an even worse case of workaholic than Shiro) with an order to take a break and rest until it’s time for Keith’s weekly discipline (the asshat calls him back a second later and gives Shiro a heated lecture about responsibilities and hypocrisy, literally telling Shiro to go fuck himself at the end of it; Shiro stares at his phone for a whole minute before his astonishment gives way to laughter). Then - and Shiro tries to fight himself, he really does - his fingers unlock his laptop, log him into his account and load the video of Keith’s second spanking.

But fate has its own ways to make people see reason (or repent). As it turns out, by watching the video, Shiro punishes himself for his insistent curiosity and intrusiveness well enough.

But it’s not the worst. The conversation Mr Fennel and Keith have is Shiro’s undoing.

In the beginning, Mr Fennel reminds Keith of the rules, and Keith listens carefully, if not a little impatiently. Keith takes his clothes off, and Shiro has a strange urge to look away to spare his modesty. Mr Fennel and Keith chat about some nonsense from their everyday life, something about the food vendors trying to trick their kitchen suppliers, and how easy it was to detect their tricks in the documentation. They don’t stop talking while Keith climbs onto the spanking bench and Mr Fennel starts working on the straps. Keith doesn’t voice his protests at being immobilized anymore, just breathes deeply in a calming pattern, centering himself. Then, quite rapidly, the focus of the conversation shifts onto… Shiro. Keith wants to know how he’s managed to displease Shiro so royally that the latter hasn’t sent for him since the morning after their escapade. Mr Fennel assures Keith that he’s not the reason and that Shiro has his own issues he needs to address.

Shiro has a gut feeling that he needs to stop this video right fucking now.

He keeps watching.

On the screen, Keith sounds small, hurt and dejected when he says: “But he’s bought me? I hoped it was because Master Shiro… Thought I would be useful for him? In some form or other? And it looked like he’s had fun that night...”

Shiro slams the laptop closed, so hard that he fears for its integrity.

Next half hour he spends on the floor by the bed, clawing onto his throat in his fruitless attempts to stop himself from hyperventilating. He refuses to call Mr Fennel or security for help. He deserves to wallow in his own misery, so he does, until a call startles him enough to snap back to reality.

It’s Allura.
Of all people, it’s Allura. The one Shiro has abandoned reducing their contacts to short texts.

He doesn’t deserve her attention, even if she calls to say she doesn’t want to know him anymore.

But not answering the call would be disrespectful to her. Shiro hits the green button on his phone’s screen and wheezes out a weak “Hey”.

Allura is alarmed by the raspiness of his voice at once, it makes her worry about him (of course, she does worry, the kind soul), and she asks questions after questions, ready to jump to action, if necessary, but Shiro whispers “I’m just tired,” and she believes him. She hasn’t seen Shiro for so long; he’s a much better liar now than he’s been while they’ve still been close. Instead of trying to pry Shiro’s mind open (she must have changed some, too), she starts talking about herself. She shares news about her last projects, about her new boyfriend, and Shiro hums from time to time to show that he pays attention. And he does, he really does; he’s missed Allura and her life-asserting energy so much - how could he not realize it until now? Silent tears fall from his eyes as he sits there and tries to memorize everything Allura has to say, to compare her crystal-clear voice with his memories of it, while simultaneously trying to stop himself from sobbing from relief. He can’t believe they can chat like that after all this time (even if it is Allura doing all the talking); he can’t believe he hasn’t lost her forever. Shiro finishes the conversation, rasping that he has to go and asking if he can come to visit. Allura is stunned to silence, and Shiro almost takes his words back, sweating from nerves, when she cheerily accepts the offer. She, too, sounds a little off; is she trying to hold back tears as well?

After saying good buy, Shiro crawls to his balcony door, opens it and positions himself in the doorway, letting the fresh air calm him down. The summer is in full swing outside, and Shiro feels lucky to be able to enjoy it like that.

He needs to make a stop and reorient himself. In all spheres of his life.

If Mr Fennel says the spankings are not a bad thing for Keith at this point in his life, Shiro has to believe him. Even if Mr Fennel is wrong, Shiro doesn’t have anyone whose judgement he trusts more.

It’s OK. They’ll live. They will all be OK. Shiro just has to find a way to make life good for all of his people and himself. He already feels lighter than he’s felt in years even if he hasn’t started acting on his new goal yet.

At 1 p.m. (is it so late already? it’s been 11 a.m. not long ago) Mr Fennel lets himself into his room unceremoniously and runs over to Shiro, who’s still sitting on the floor at the balcony’s door and counting clouds in the blue sky.

Shiro could start making his team’s life better by not giving Mr Fennel new reasons to worry.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” - says Shiro and smiles. Hopefully, there are no scratch marks on his throat. “I’ll do better next time.”

He’s taken completely off guard when Mr Fennel sprinkles him from a sprinkler bottle (where has he even found it? there are no flowers in Shiro’s room! oh, there are some on the windowsill; what; where do these long leaf plants come from?).

Shiro sputters indignantly, and Mr Fennel explains as if it’s a natural thing:

“You looked too tranquil. Had to make sure your conscience is still there.”

“By wetting me all over? Is your conscious still there?” - almost yells at him Shiro.
Meanwhile, Mr Fennel crouches in front of him, inspects his face, looks him in the eyes intently and his gaze grows more concerned with the minute. Then, a minute later when Shiro wants to start squirming under the scrutiny, Mr Fennel asks with all seriousness:

“You’re sure you’re not a clone who took the place of my owner, like in the servants’ gossip? You look almost… not depressed.”

He’s ridiculous, and Shiro’s irritation evaporates. For good measure, Shiro swats Mr Fennel’s shoulder half-heartedly. Mr Fennel’s eyes crinkle with pleasure. Shiro smiles again.

Then he grows earnest. He holds his assistant’s gaze and says:

“I’ll talk to Keith soon, I promise. Next week, maybe, sooner.”

“You’ll better. I can tell him you say hello; as you know we have a meeting at 2 p.m.” - answers Mr Fennel.

Shiro knows what this meeting is for.

“Is he going to be OK?” - he asks, unable to hide his worry.

“Yes. Keith is going to be just fine,” - is it exasperation in Mr Fennel’s voice? “I’ll tell him you’ve asked about him, he’s going to be excited.”

“No, Steve, don’t do that! It’s entirely unnecessary!” - Shiro takes the bait without thinking and facepalms upon realizing it. As soon as he stops hiding behind his hand, he discovers that Mr Fennel looks at him, pensively. His eyes seem to look at something much bigger than Shiro, something far away from their daily life, complicated and unforgiving. Then, Mr Fennel gaze shifts and his eyes search Shiro’s for something. Shiro doesn’t know whether he finds what he’s looking for, but then Mr Fennel talks again and Shiro can’t escape the weight of his words.

“You know he’s trying so hard for you, not for me. Maybe, a little for me, too, but in the end - it’s all about you.”

With that, he turns and leaves without sparing Shiro another glance.

Shiro knows he’s expected to think it over carefully. Too bad Shiro can’t imagine what to do with that piece of information.

At least, he doesn’t watch the feed from the cameras in the playroom at 2 p.m. That’s good news.

But Keith trying hard for Shiro’s sake? That’s hard to believe, to be true.

It is a good day for Shiro, on the overall. He lets himself calm down by doing some work on his laptop (OK, for fuck’s sake, Shiro admits, his workaholism is as bad as Mr Fennel’s), goes to the gym and calls Matt again. They agree to meet the next day, again at Matt’s. Matt assures Shiro confidently that he won’t see anything disturbing. Not that Shiro expects to find something as gross as during the previous visit, but, somehow, this promise is what Shiro needed to hear. Matt also tells Shiro that Pidge says hello, and Shiro mentions that he’s talked to Allura. Matt is elated by this news (he’s had a crush on Allura since their first meeting, and even their friendship hasn’t been able to crush this crush). She’s missed you, says Matt. We’ve missed you, he corrects himself. Matt sounds as if he believes that everything will be fine from now on.
Shiro has to believe in it, too.

In the evening, Shiro calls Mr Fennel and asks how it went with Keith. Instead of giving a simple answer, Mr Fennel starts to elaborate, telling Shiro how Keith has been mouthy during the week, how it’s landed him quite a number of strokes and how he’s apologized for his insolence during and after the spanking, and Shiro tunes Mr Fennel’s ranting out, thinking about nebulas and their origins (what? anything that works as a distraction from his assistants teasing is valid; not a reason to call Shiro a nerd). He comes back to Earth to Mr Fennel’s muttering: “You’re no fun,” and then they wish each other good night.

Shiro gets into his bed at 11 p.m. which is quite unprecedented. He can’t remember going to bed this early in the last years. He remembers that this is the time when Keith is supposed to go to bed too. Shiro wonders whether Mr Fennel has told Keith there are other slaves in this household already. He wonders what Keith is doing now. There’s a mirror in his bathroom; does he look at the welts from his spanking? Does he squirm when he tries to sit down on his ass? While in his room, he can lie on his stomach; will his blistered asscheeks still bother him tomorrow? They will, most certainly: Mr Fennel was all over the place from joy which can only mean he’s had the chance to play disciplinarian to his heart’s content.

Has Keith thanked him for the spanking, again, like that time?

With this, Shiro’s tired mind slips into that special headspace between dreamland and reality. Ah, Shiro should’ve taken Keith’s punishments in his own hands...

...*He’s standing in the corner of the bedroom, his Keith. He’s wearing red satin shorts which barely cover his asscheeks, and nothing else. His collar matches his outfit perfectly. Keith’s arms are tied behind his back, wrists to elbows; the rope is red, of course. The black of his hair and the red of the “decorations” contrast perfectly with the white walls.*

*Keith stands with his face turned towards the corner, his head submissively lowered. Shiro can’t see it from his position on the bed, but there are metal clamps on Keith’s nipples and a chain, connecting them. Keith doesn’t like his nipples played with, but he bears it stoically. No moving, no complaining. Such a good boy.*

*Shiro can hear the wind blowing in the garden. It starts just outside the glass door to the left from Shiro’s bed; the garden is wild and unkempt.*

“*Did I give you enough time to calm down?” - asks Shiro in his best icy-cold voice.*

*Keith can’t suppress a shudder Shiro’s tone induces in him.*

“*Yes, sir,” - but his voice stays firm, no matter what.*

“*I was going to be tender with you today. I still will. I’ll have to address your misbehaviour before, though.*”

*At Shiro’s words, Keith tenses a little, then relaxes again. He has such a good control over his body, even Shiro envies him at times.*

“*I told you that you shouldn’t leave the bedroom without my permission, boy. What were you thinking, walking out to the garden in that nightgown of yours?” - asks Shiro sternly. The said gown
hangs from the chair in the center of the room, the evidence. It’s silky, black with red accents, long-sleeved and reaching to Keith’s ankles. It doesn’t show off much of Keith’s body, but it’s definitely not a proper outfit for going out of the rooms.

“I should’ve locked you inside or chained you to the floor hook because you can’t keep up with my orders,” - continues Shiro.

Keith tenses again, then sputters quietly, as if he’s fighting his own words. He doesn’t argue, though; his back still bears narrow pink lines left from his punishment for backtalking two days ago.

It doesn’t matter much; Shiro knows what Keith would say: that he’d wanted to look at the stars at night.

“Do you understand why I punish you?” - inquiries Shiro.

“I should’ve waited for your permission to change my clothes and go out, sir. I’ve been too impatient to wait until you return to your bedroom. It won’t happen again, sir.”

Not willing to draw it out more, Shiro orders Keith to come to the bed. When the slave is in front of him, eyes trained on the floor, Shiro takes Keith’s chin in his both hands and makes Keith lift his head up, meet Shiro’s eyes. Keith’s gaze is soft and confused as if he can’t explain to himself what has landed him in the corner with the prospect of being disciplined by Shiro when all he wants is to be good for him.

Shiro searches his slave’s eyes for fear or doubt, but, as always, there is none. Keith has entrusted himself to Shiro on the day he’s been bought when he has believed that Shiro is worthy of his trust. Keith has said that he has always struggled with the concept of being someone’s property; he’s done his best to come to terms with his destiny, but the peculiarities of a slave’s life still made his skin crawl. At the same time, Keith has sometimes caught himself wishing that he’d belong to someone who’d care about him, caught himself thinking that, maybe, serving a person of his own choosing would make him happy. Being bought by Shiro has been a blessing; Keith has realized that Shiro was the person he’d gladly die for. This way the conflict between his social role, his expectations of himself and his wishes has been resolved, and Keith has happily fallen into being Shiro’s.

Wordlessly, Shiro tugs Keith’s satin shorts down. Keith’s poor bound cock springs free; it’s covered in layers of thin red rope from the crown to the base; his balls are encircled in a similar fashion. Shiro tugs at Keith’s cock a few times in a parody of pleasuring him with one hand, at the same time he cups his balls in his other hand and squeezes a little. Keith inhales sharply and then hisses through his teeth. He looks at Shiro pleadingly; Shiro responds by leaning down to lick the head of Keith’s cock. Keith whimpers; Keith almost lets out a whine when Shiro purposefully starts teasing the slit of Keith’s cock with his tongue. When Keith’s whimpers turn to pained gasps, Shiro stops.

“It’s time to free your cock and balls, isn’t it? Look how dark their colour is already, boy. It sure is painful,” - and Shiro tightens his hold on Keith’s balls again. Keith doubles over from pain, nearly losing his balance because of his bound arms, but quickly rightens himself. He pants heavily. Shiro is almost done with him here.

“I’m going to unwind the rope, slowly, and you’re going to stand here patiently, like a good boy. No jerking away, no shuffling,” - he warns.

“Yes, sir,” - says Keith. Goddess knows what it has cost him to sound so composed when Shiro is toying with his slit with a fingertip while he fumbles with the ties to his bondage.

There’s nothing beautiful or satisfying in a previously stiff cock which had been bound tightly and
then freed from restraints, nothing attractive about Keith’s angry-red balls. But the dignity, with which Keith accepts his atonement, entrances Shiro.

There’s no body hair on Keith’s crotch; he’s been prepared to being a slave just as any other slave boy before the auction. It’s convenient for such punishments. What for the ordinary life with Keith... Shiro can’t say he doesn’t like Keith being hairless there, but maybe, he would’ve preferred making Keith shave his pubic hair regularly or grow it wild. There’s no way to know now.

Shiro rubs Keith’s aching parts soothingly; there are tears in Keith’s eyes, but he tries not to let any more sounds out. Shiro pats his back in an approving gesture. He looks Keith in the eyes reassuringly: you’re doing fine, baby, he wants to convey. He wants to be tender to Keith, at least after he’s endured painful correction measures.

Shiro wants to be tender to Keith more often.

Next, come the nipple clamps. Keith must really, really hate them. His facial expression becomes borderline angry when the vicious metal toys get detached from his sensitive little nubs. It’s always the detaching that hurts the most. Keith bites his lips to hold his cry inside. Shiro wants to kiss his nipples, lick them nice and slow, make Keith forget the pain, let him know he’s been forgiven. But there’s also the spanking part in store. And, even if the punishment was over already, Shiro never pleasures Keith’s nipples. He shouldn’t mix up discipline and pleasure for his slave. But, of course, he still rubs Keith’s poor nipples lightly to help the blood flow.

Then, Shiro easily guides Keith to lie across his thighs and helps him to find a convenient position (if lying on someone’s lap with his arms tied behind his back can be considered convenient). But Keith melts in his place atop Shiro as if Shiro’s body heat makes him pliant like clay. His ass is still too bony, and, while Shiro would very much like to paddle it hard the next time Keith requires to be taken in hand, he’ll wait. Keith is his, and he’ll gain weight and muscles steadily in Shiro’s care. He’ll be as healthy and shining as nature will allow him to. Shiro won’t let anyone hurt him.

“What do you want now, boy?” - asks Shiro in a mild tone. He doesn’t want to sound stern; the harshness from before has been enough.

“To be forgiven, sir,” - answers Keith, turning his head to the side on the bed not to muffle his words.

“That’s good to hear. Will you take your spanking like a good boy should?”

“Yes, sir,” - Keith’s voice is still steady, but it’s so thick with emotion, so wet, that Shiro really wishes he could just untie Keith’s arms and draw him into a hug.

“That’s my boy,” - praises Shiro instead, petting Keith head and thighs lightly with his hands.

Keith had said his overseers would use a brush on him after most infractions, but Shiro believes his hand will be more than enough. He likes feeling the sting himself when he administers Keith’s spankings, at that.

Shiro can’t resist caressing Keith’s butt before he starts. He doesn’t stall for long, though, and, after a few seconds, blows start to rain on Keith’s ass rhythmically...

...and then the rhythm of the spanks melds with the chime of Shiro’s alarm clock, waking him.

Shiro surges up in bed, missing his other arm already; he’s hard and aching under the covers, and he
doesn't want to think what kind of man this makes him.

Chapter End Notes

So, my pretty ones, how did you like it?

I consider making a spin-off called "Shiro's Porn-Dreams". That'd be a Thing. Yeah.
Shiro works on Sunday, like the overworking man he is. He spends some time at his friends' place, gets hugged a lot. Then, his plan to laze about on Monday is crushed.

Hello, everyone!

This chapter took long. The pieces of later events kept making their appearance in my head, disturbing the current chapter! Maybe, the next ones will go easier, since I have some outlines done) It's quite a painless chapter, at that) maybe, some of you will appreciate it)

Shiro is 26. Shiro should have known already that his real personality and his own vision of his personality are two different things.

But only the dead can completely avoid making shameful self-discoveries. Shiro is very much alive. Alive, aroused and ready to flee the country from embarrassment. He knows he can’t flee his embarrassment, though.

It’s a bloody Sunday, and Shiro sits in a meeting with Mr Fennel and his staff (because they have a very full agenda on other days, right - a valid reason to spoil Sunday mornings). On the surface, it looks like Shiro discusses the prices on gasoline, the newest political issues, decides whether his northern farm needs a new fence etc. But if anyone thinks that Shiro is invested in the conversation, he’s mistaken; his seriousness is just a facade, since, on the inside, Shiro’s head is occupied with one single question: for how long a man’s cock may be held in bondage until it suffers irreparable damage. There must be a certain time period; Shiro is sure he’ll find out easily enough if he only searches on the Internet. But if he uses any laptop in his mansion then his dark secret will come to Mr Fennel’s knowledge easily, and Shiro won’t see the end of it.

So this is how the goddess-forsaken meeting goes: Mr Fennel leads the discussion effortlessly and stirs it where he knows Shiro would want him to while Shiro sits there and pretends he knows what they’re talking about.

Judging by the side-eye Mr Fennel gives him, Shiro’s attitude is not appreciated. Mr Fennel could’ve given his people the same speech and made them do things right alone, without Shiro, but he firmly believes that seeing his employees face to face is crucial to Shiro’s leadership role. Also, the employees need to meet their boss from time to time, to know that everything in their little kingdom is all right and they can do their work and have no worries.

Actually (and to Mr Fennel’s great regret), Shiro only ever sees Mr Fennel’s staff: he still can’t
handle too many persons in a room very well, and other heads of departments don’t have such a tight leash on their workers as Mr Fennel does. His employees (5 women and 3 men) do all kinds of work; Shiro doesn’t know the full extent of it - they’re his command unit, his support pillar. Sometimes, Shiro swears, all of them (including Mr Fennel) look more like secret agents than managers: what with their strict (if a bit strange) dress code (no skirts, no shorts, no makeup), silent manner, a cryptical way of speaking and absolute submission to Mr Fennel. Mr Fennel’s orders are followed immediately and to the letter; Shiro has rarely seen this level of control over subordinates even in his army days.

Mr Fennel is very polite and very cold to his team. From Shiro’s point of view, these men and women are very similar to Mr Fennel in terms of personality: they rarely let themselves feel, but never stop thinking.

There are questions at the end of the meeting, and Shiro has been able to calm down enough to answer them. After that, Mr Fennel’s team thanks him for his time, then they all bow in unison, weirding Shiro out (Mr Fennel thrives on this), and leave the small conference room silently, in perfect order.

When everyone, except for Shiro and Mr Fennel, has left, Mr Fennel positions himself in front of the door, trapping Shiro inside. Blindly, Mr Fennel closes the door behind him, locks it, then steps back a little and leans on it. His posture and his challenging gaze indicate that he won’t move until Shiro spills it all.

This battle cannot be won, muses Shiro. He gets comfortable in his seat, sighs and resigns to his fate.

“Have you ever tied a man’s dick up for entertainment purposes, Steve?” - he asks conversationally, looking at an abstract painting on the wall opposite instead of in Mr Fennel’s direction.

“And what if I did, sir?” - asks Mr Fennel in his “perfect butler” tone. “Do you need some pointers, sir? Some dick references?”

Shiro’s calm vanishes in seconds. He can’t help but turn to Mr Fennel, in time to see him making lewd figures with his fingers.

Shiro swears.

Without faltering, Mr Fennel takes a piece of paper and starts drawing a very realistic penis of average size. Shiro feels the urge to avert his eyes. He mentally slaps himself and keeps watching the process of drawing stoically. When the penis is shaded and even gains some volume, Mr Fennel starts a lection. He explains the basics of the blood flow in a man’s crotch area, talks about types of rope and other bindings; when Mr Fennel comes to different bondage techniques, Shiro gives up. There’s only so much embarrassment one man can take per day.

“Steve,” - he pleads. “Steve, no more, please. I see the error of my ways. I will ask what I want to know directly, without disrupting your work.”

“But sir, there’s this pretty pattern you will most definitely like…” - continues his vengeful assistant, undeterred. “You start with the balls; you have to separate them from each other and tie each…”

“Steve, I’m sorry. I’ll be a good employer from now on. Please, stop,” - tries Shiro.

“If you insist, sir. I’ll have to send you some educational content, though…” - drawls Mr Fennel.

“There’s no need for you to bother,” - says Shiro with a false smile.
“It’s nothing,” - replies Mr Fennel with an even falser smile, his tone syrupy-sweet. But of course, his predatory instincts tell him that there’s more to Shiro’s question.

After several more minutes of bickering Shiro admits to seeing an erotic dream where he’s tied up and humiliated another man.

Mr Fennel looks Shiro in the eyes, sighs, as if he’s bored and has expected something more interesting from Shiro’s secretiveness. It also seems that Mr Fennel knows exactly what else Shiro wants to hide from him, and Shiro’s struggles are utterly ridiculous.

“You know that violence and sex are interwoven intricately in our brains, right, Shiro? I’m surprised I have to, but I’ll still tell what you need to hear: you can dream whatever, it doesn’t matter much if you don’t act upon it. It doesn’t make you a brute overnight.”

Strangely, but Shiro feels rightfully scolded; as if he’s a middle schooler caught with his pants down masturbating in the school’s storage closet.

“And, Shiro, again, about living your dreams: if your partner is crazy the same way you are, a lot of things become possible,” - adds Mr Fennel amicably.

Upon saying this, he stands up and looks down at Shiro. “You can take my little drawing with you, sir, I don’t mind. If we’re finished here, I suggest we move to the laboratory, as planned. As I’ve said, there is still water in the basement, and fixing it may cost you a pretty penny…”

Shiro hastily crumples the penis-decorated sheet of paper in his fist when he sees a maid approaching the conference room with a mop, and almost runs after Mr Fennel.

After their visit to the laboratory (it will cost Shiro a lot of money and will postpone the laboratory’s entry into operation, but his water supply system needs to be modified), Shiro makes his way to Matt and Pidge. The Holt Manor looks vastly different from what he’s seen there the last time. First of all, the gates are guarded. Like, not as heavily guarded as Shiro’s mansion gates, but it’s already… impressive. Shiro has to answer who he is and why he’s here. The gatekeeper is so persistent that Shiro considers calling Matt already when the meticulous guard gets a signal on his comm and Shiro is let inside. There, a middle-aged woman is waiting for him to lead him to Matt. She looks nice, dressed immaculately in a navy-blue suit and oxford shoes (professional, defines Shiro approvingly). Her speech is polite and devoid of emotions, so much, that Shiro is reminded of Mr Fennel in a company of strangers. She doesn’t introduce herself.

Shiro follows the woman. They pass by several slaves; the men and women in colour-coded collars all look tense, as if they expect something to happen any moment. Something they can’t control, something that can change their lives in a matter of seconds; something that’ll finally wreck them beyond repair. Shiro is disconcerted by the ease with which he reads the slaves’ reactions and finds explanations of them. Did he recognize himself from years ago in these slaves? Has he remembered a kidnapped young man with no power except for being able to stay himself somewhere deep inside his head?

A voice (sounding suspiciously like Mr Fennel) whispers in Shiro’s mind: but you’re safe now, and you do have power. Shiro can’t exactly say that the voice lies, but, simultaneously, it’s as far from the truth as it gets. The kind of (or the amount of) power Shiro needs to get rid of his perpetual existential crisis exceeds the range of power any wealthy businessman or any landlord, even a well-known in the country one, has.

Surprisingly, but just now, treading the Holts’ fine carpets on his way to meeting his old friend, Shiro feels disconnected from his feelings; numb. He passes everything he sees and hears through his
brain, not his proverbial “heart”, for once, avoiding guilt trips and panic attacks. Doesn’t mean he feels good. He supposes that having this short time of clarity will bite him in the ass later when his emotions will get linked to his conscious again.

The woman obviously leads Shiro to Matt’s room, not his study. They walk along the corridors on the second floor of the main building, and Shiro can’t help but look outside. The platform is gone. Everything is in disarray at the place where it once has stood; looks like the pavement has been removed and the area is being reorganized. Shiro stops to take a more thorough look from the window… and then someone claps him on the shoulder. The gesture startles Shiro. Moving on instinct, he repositions himself so that his back is to the wall and takes a defensive stand. The whole action takes milliseconds. Then, Shiro sees Matt’s frightened stare, from behind his employee’s shoulder, and his awareness returns. He apologizes (Matt apologizes back, for being inconsiderate to Shiro’s needs) and they smile at each other, a little unsure, Matt still from behind the woman’s back. Actually, Shiro is impressed by her reaction rate (though it wouldn’t help her in a real fight with Shiro, Shiro thinks, disgustingly smug). The woman retreats after Matt’s assurances that he’s safe, said in hushed tones as if to spare someone’s dignity.

Then, finally, they are alone in Matt’s room. Matt hugs Shiro, clinging to his shoulders a little bit longer than necessary. Shiro has grown unaccustomed to this level of physical affection from someone who isn’t Mr Fennel, and he barely restraints himself from breaking free a moment sooner.

They discuss their latest news, their work, the new law about homeless people, until, finally, Shiro gets the courage and asks Matt about his slaves. Why do they all look like they’re sentenced to death at an unspecified date?

Matt’s eyes start to glow, and Shiro can sense that he’s in for quite a story.

 Turns out, Matt and Pidge, being the genius siblings they are, have invented a tracking system which uses slaves’ individual chips to find their exact location inside the Holt Manor. With Matt’s engineering skills and Pidge’s mastery in programming, Shiro is not surprised.

When Shiro muses aloud whether this is legal, but Matt only shrugs and says proudly: “Let them try to find a way to overpower Pidge’s spells”.

Matt didn’t want to take half-measures. The system they’ve created allows to control the slaves’ lives utterly and fully. Now, Matt shows Shiro a list of slaves names in a neat interface on his tablet, which he can sort alphabetically, age-wise or occupation-wise. When Matt clicks a name, he gets an image (or a video, if he wants) of the slave’s current location from the cameras. He can also look at the map of the manor and see colour-coded dots, where each dot is a slave.

“I’ve made a lot of innovations everywhere in the house, the garden and the working premises,” - says Matt. “From now on, I can learn more than ever about every person that lives here. I won’t let the scene you’ve shown me in my own backyard repeat itself.”

“Ever heard about confidentiality?” - inquires Shiro playfully.

Matt doesn’t look amused.

“It can’t be applied to slaves, Shiro. Not after what’s been happening here for years. Slaves don’t trust me, they won’t ever trust me, and it’s only natural. But I’m responsible for their safety, so their overseers must know that I can be watching them right at the moment, and that I won’t be afraid to punish them for breaking my rules.”

Shiro wants to tell him that he didn’t mean it like that and that he shares the sentiment, but Matt
doesn’t pause, only takes a deep breath and continues:

“You’ve seen a whipping. One whipping, Shiro. There have been other whippings. There have been rapes, abuse, overworking… There’s no way I’ll let all of that happen again.”

Matt looks Shiro in the eyes, and he’s so sure, so confident right now, that Shiro feels very, very proud of his friend. For finding his footing again in a situation like this, for trying to change what he can change, for being strong.

Matt also explains why the slaves are so scared by this new development. Not that they could do what they wanted or hide from their owners before, no. But, in tow with other reforms Matt has invented, it makes the slaves confused. A lot of slaves have been serving the Holt family for nearly a decade, and the sudden change of attitude has made them think that the owners are planning to sell them. The unknown is always a bad thing in their situation.

Matt doesn’t mention his parents and their role in their slaves woes, and Shiro doesn’t ask.

Before Shiro goes home, Pidge slinks into Matt’s room. She looks guilty and pale, but determined, when she asks Shiro for a permission to visit his house.

“I... I want to talk to Hunk and Lance. I… want to say sorry,” - she says, not meeting Shiro’s eyes.

“It’s a good idea. You can call me or Mr Fennel any time and we’ll plan a visit,” - replies Shiro.

It’s not what she’s expected, it seems. Maybe, she’s thought that Shiro will take her for a ride to his estate with him, or that he’ll tell her to come tomorrow. But there’s only so many social interactions Shiro can handle a day. Blame Matt and his ill-timed cuddling.

Pidge nods. She looks relieved even if her wish won’t be fulfilled at once.

Both siblings hug him when Shiro heads back home. It’s disturbing, weird and warm. Shiro endures it stoically. Then, Shiro drives to his mansion and tries to remember what hugs have felt like back in the day. How did cuddling other individuals make him feel? He can’t recall the exact feeling, only that it’s felt nice and not as unnerving as now.

In the evening, when Shiro quietly reads reports from his IT-company in his bed, he gets an email alert.

With the email, Shiro receives a passworded archive called “Training Materials 101” from Mr Fennel. Against his better judgement, Shiro downloads it on his notebook and opens it. Turns out Shiro now has more than 5 Gb of top-quality porn involving both sexes and any kinky stuff a person can think of. Unsurprisingly, in the leading role of every video appear artfully tortured cocks of all shapes and sizes. Well, lucky me, thinks Shiro wryly.

To be honest, Shiro doesn’t know, whether he wants to strangle Steve or thank him heartily.

He considers sending him tomorrow a dick pic in the middle of the day, as revenge. Luckily, his logic wins and he decides against it (you shouldn’t feed the troll; Mr Fennel would be too delighted to get a dick pic from his employer - what a fine blackmail material). Shiro ends up sending Mr Fennel a text which reads “Thank you, Steve, but also, fuck you”. Then Shiro quickly turns off his phone (before he receives an incoming “You’re welcome” text from pleased Mr Fennel) and clicks play on the first video.

It’s by the sheer force of will, that Shiro goes to sleep at 1 a.m. that night. It’s by the sheer luck he doesn’t dream.
Shiro’s Monday plans (read: one big Plan to stay idle for the whole day and let his mind sort out the new information; because he is the boss of himself and can do whatever on what is considered a working day) are interrupted by a quarrel between Mr Fennel and the leader of his security team. Thankfully, the men start their fight (over some goddess-damned security protocols for entering the estate by employees, as far as Shiro can tell) at a reasonable time of 8 a.m. and only dare to call for Shiro at 10 a.m. Shiro says goodbye to his astronomy books and latest reports on scouting in space he’s wanted to read through for a while and heads to his chief assistant’s study. There, he watches for 15 minutes, at least, how both Mr Fennel and his opponent try to look adult, how they talk in long, intricately constructed sentences, and pretend they can keep their personal issues at bay, the proofs of their opinions logical to a fault. Yet, it’s only on the first glance.

Fucking finally, it’s Shiro’s term to return the favour: to show Steve that he’s brought himself to a deadlock and help him out of it. Shiro makes his cold on the surface, but fuming on the inside assistant write his arguments down; the same he orders the Head of security. It’s merely a mundane task to let them calm down a bit. Then, Shiro asks what the purpose of their services to the Shirogane family is and whether the measures they propose today take this purpose into account. It’s nice to see his tough defenders flail and try to assure (themselves, first of all, of course), that, by initiating a squabble and interrupting their employers personal time with it, they serve Shiro’s best interests. Shiro enjoys the show for a while, then he tears all their theses to tatters; it’s easy when people come from a wrong place in their argumentation. Afterwards, he orders to bring coffee and sweets (black tea for Mr Fennel) and they go through all of the processes Mr Fennel and the security team run, looking for ways to improve and simplify them. At Mr Fennel insistence, they have lunch in the employee’s canteen (the talk doesn’t stop for a minute), then return to Mr Fennel’s study and work until it’s time to go to sleep.

Shiro praises Mr Fennel and the leader of his security team for their input today, and they head to their rooms (Shiro makes sure that Steve doesn’t sneak away to return to his working table). Shiro is aware that Mr Fennel’s room is equipped with a working laptop, too, but a guy can hope?

Already under the covers, Shiro sends a text:

“Hey, Steve? Wanna know what a workaholic does in his free time? Works on the tasks that are the most interesting to work on.”

“I don’t know what free time is, Sir \(_(¥)_/\),” - comes a reply.

Shiro huffs exasperatedly and texts: “I’ll teach you some day, when you’re ready.”

The infuriating asshole answers with: “The day may never come, Sir. Not in my lifetime.”

Shiro sends: “(éviter)” and lays the phone down.

He hasn’t read any of his favourite things, and still, it’s been a good day. For the first time in ages, Shiro felt whole and in control, the way he used to feel every day before his capture.

He closes his eyes and prays to feel the same way tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

So, my dear readers, are you pleased with Shiro today?
Please, tell me in the comments!
Getting to Know Each Other

Chapter Summary

Shiro has a particularly hard start of the day.
Then, Keith meets two other slaves for the first time.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

Getting this chapter done has been a struggle. I've had a stressful week and this chapter has been teetering on edge of being finished since Thursday, I guess.
I really wanted to let the boys meet each other finally. I'll have a lot of fun with them!

This chapter's soundtrack is "Forgiven" by Sylver (I've heard it and thought to myself: it's the ideal song describing Shiro's feelings! sorry not sorry)

Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s Tuesday, and Shiro feels like a truck has run him down.

It’s Tuesday, and Shiro doesn’t want to have anything to do with the outside world.

It’s Tuesday, and Shiro hates Tuesdays. Right now, Shiro hates all days that he can’t spend in his bed.

Oh, yeah, technically, he can stay in bed. He is his own master. His chosen day of rest (this Monday, huh) has been stolen cowardly and meanly right from under his tired nose. He doesn’t have to do a thing for this household, if they treat him like that!

Shiro huffs and rolls onto his other side, making a blanket cocoon around himself. He’d build a pillow fort, but... he needs more than one pillow for that. He could hide under the bed, though, and have a safe cave with a roof. Easily (he’s tried that)!

Honestly, Shiro just needs… Steve.

To come for him, to fight him for the blanket, to fish him out of the bed with threats and promises, to give Shiro a butt-kick (a metaphorical or a literal one). To make another decision for Shiro.

Most certainly, Steve is watching Shiro right now. Cameras everywhere, remember? Shiro knows that Steve appreciates the opportunities the network camera system provides, even if he grumbles all the time about the one in his bathroom.

If Shiro is right (he’s sure of it), Steve is now watching him toss and turn under the covers, weak and angry at the whole world. Shiro is sure that Steve wants to assert his control over Shiro’s life once
more. He feels big and mighty when he does that, Shiro knows. Steve has told him.

But they can go on without each other’s input; they’ve tried it: it hurts but it works. Shiro can’t always rely on Steve when his mood does another unexpected flip. Shiro is his own person, he can solve his issues himself. Steve, too. He should know that he is good enough also when he is not taking care of Shiro. Steve may be the person who has no morals, but he certainly acts more honourably than most of the people Shiro knows who consider themselves morally upstanding.

Shiro imagines Steve gritting his teeth and… not helping Shiro to get out of the bed. He imagines how Steve goes to inspect someone’s work instead and makes a working day of a carpenter or a cook a living hell.

Shiro stays in bed until noon. He doesn’t let himself be too angry at himself for that.

Instead, he praises himself when he finds the strength to leave his safety island and bravely sails towards new horizons (namely, goes to the bathroom).

When Shiro steps into his chief assistant’s office half an hour later, looking worn out, but whole, and comes up to him, Steve seems to be jumpy. Still, he doesn’t acknowledge Shiro’s presence. Sitting at his desk, surrounded by laptops and screens of the latest model, Steve doesn’t look up from whatever scene he’s watching. Steve gnaws on the nails of his left hand, and Shiro steps closer and bats Steve’s hand away from his mouth. *This* makes Steve meet Shiro’s eyes finally. Shiro makes a disgusted face, toots at Steve and shakes his head in mock-disapproval. Steve glares at him indignantly and pulls a tiny manicure set from one of his pockets. He starts filing his bitten nails without losing eye contact with Shiro. There are irritation and challenge in his gaze.

It’s then and there that Shiro knows that everything will be alright again.

They smile at each other, he and Steve: ruffled-up, tired, but not broken. This round, they’ve both won.

Happiness isn’t long-lived: it turns out that Mr Fennel has been watching a very interesting live-show indeed. He’s decided to let Keith and two other slaves meet for the first time. That’s OK, more than that: Shiro appreciates Mr Fennel being proactive where Shiro seems to stall indefinitely (read: where it comes to Keith). But just introducing the boys to each other would be boring, right? Instead, Mr Fennel has brought the three of them to a small room with no seats (like an isolation cell, thinks Shiro with a shudder; what is this room even used for?), pointed at the cameras at the ceiling and ordered them to get familiar with each other while he watches. Seems like the show has just started.

That is very Mr-Fennel-like. Shiro can accept that; the boys won’t let out anything too private in such a setting, but they won’t feel pressured by their overseer’s presence at the same time, will act more naturally and Mr Fennel will safely gain the intel about the slaves’ personalities while observing.

But why dragging Shiro into this?!

(It’s so wrong to stay and listen; it’s entirely too tempting; it’s really interesting; it’s absurdly embarrassing; Shiro wants to disappear, but he finds himself glued to the screen anyway).

There, Keith, dressed in black from head to toe except for his vibrant scarlet collar (he’s stunning;
now, after seeing Keith, even if he’d decide to leave, Shiro won’t be able to), stands in the middle of
the room, facing the other two. His posture is relaxed, on the overall, save for his arms, which are
crossed tightly at his chest. Lance and Hunk behave calmly, too. It’s obvious to any onlooker that the
two new slaves are like oil and vinegar: while Lance is overperforming in his attempt to look cool,
Hunk looks naturally confident. For a few long seconds, neither of the three says a word.

Then, unexpectedly for Shiro, it’s Keith who opens the conversation:

“Want me to introduce myself first? Or ask me something?”

“You have a nice collar,” - comments Hunk nonchalantly in lieu of answering.

Keith (Shiro has to give him credit here) acts unaffected:

“Yes, that’s true.”

Lance and Hunk’s collars are both simpler in design and light-brown, close to the boys’ natural skin
colour. As far as Shiro knows, Mr Fennel has ordered the collars of the same quality leather from the
same shop where Keith has gotten his collar. Mr Fennel is all about being fair where it’s achievable.

Hunk hums in response. Then, he asks:

“Does he really redden your ass every other day for different, mmm, how did he put it, “infractions”? This young man doesn’t beat around the bush, does he?

“No. It only happens on Saturdays,” - says Keith matter-of-factly.

Lance asks incredulously: “You don’t make mistakes on other weekdays?”

Hunk looks at his friend with exasperation. “I guess that’s not it,” - he says and looks at Keith for confirmation.

While Lance flounders and watches Keith and Hunk alternately, Keith and Hunk have a sort of a
viewing contest or a mute communication of sorts.

“I’ve heard how Mr Fennel has been reciting the rules of conduct to you here before I’ve entered. You’ll get the same punishments as I do but on other terms. I get, - Keith breathes in through his nose and his facial expression grows distant, - disciplined every Saturday, whether I’ve misbehaved or not. I get additional strokes for “mistakes”, - the last word is uttered through gritted teeth.

Lance drops his jaw. His eyes are wide and scared.

Hunk is contemplating something, quietly. He must have a big brain indeed, just as Matt has expected, muses Shiro.

“Does it mean Mr Fennel is going easy on us?” - asks Hunk in the end. “Why are the disciplinary measures stricter for you?

”I don’t know. It’s been ordered by Master Shiro on my first day here…”

Shiro’s heart stops for a second. He’s sure he stops breathing, too.

Luckily, Mr Fennel beside him is watching the boys on the screen intently and doesn't notice his brief panic.
Maybe, this nickname is not a surprise for him at all. It’s not an unpleasant form of address. Does Keith talk about Shiro like that all the time? He’s had to “put a name” on Shiro, anyway, he and Mr Fennel sure mention the owner of the estate in relation to Mr Fennel’s daily work since Keith helps him with that. When Shiro and Keith have talked to each other the last time (has it been four weeks already? or not yet?), Keith has called Shiro “sir”. He’s never ever said the word “master” aloud in Shiro’s presence. Does it mean anything, now? Shiro feels so strange: he likes the way “Master Shiro” sounds coming from Keith, but, at the same time, it is so wrong. But no, Shiro won’t go there, not this time; he doesn’t have time to process his guilt for making Keith trust him in any way while Shiro still hasn’t deserved even an ounce of trust from him - he needs to watch this scene till the end.

Turns out, Hunk and Lance are amused by the nickname, and their happy giggling startles Shiro from his reverie.

“What? Do you call him that?” - asks Hunk with a shit-eating grin.

“Did he order it himself?” - asks Lance, looking a bit baffled by the thought. “But… Mr Fennel has said our owner doesn’t interact with the slaves at all.”

After the last phrase, Keith mask slips for a second, and he looks hurt and confused. It’s only a tiny gesture, but to Shiro, it feels like he’s been dumped in cold water.

Oh, yeah, Mr Fennel hasn’t lied when he’s said that Shiro doesn’t interact with the slaves; Shiro literally runs away at the sight of his slaves, like the coward he is. But he has interacted with one particular slave; he has interacted with Keith.

He hasn’t thought about Keith’s feelings, again; or, to be more precise, he’s ignored the knowledge of Keith’s possible struggles after being left in the dark. Even Mr Fennel’s remarks couldn’t make Shiro change his mind and go find Keith. For a month, Shiro couldn’t make himself talk to Keith, and, of course, Keith couldn’t find a good reason for that. That should have been so obvious to Shiro (and excruciating for Keith). Actually, Shiro has even watched a video where Keith has asked about him. Gosh, Shiro is an ass. Such a complete prick.

If he looks at his behaviour closely… He’s given Keith a lot of attention in the short span of two days, has collared (!) him personally, has taken him on a trip… and then he’s disappeared. Keith is a person who is obviously unused to being treated with care. He’s looked at Shiro with so much trust, though, as if Shiro has somehow become an exception from his “don’t let the world fool you and make you trust it” rule… And then, Shiro has abandoned Keith (like, maybe, many people before him have done). Utterly and completely. With good intentions, no less!

In the meantime, Hunk teases Keith about being Mr Fennel’s favourite, “his personal helper”. He tries to get a rise out of Keith telling him about a very detailed list with the exact amount of strokes he and Lance should receive for every specific infraction. If Hunk’s expected Keith to get defensive or to start mocking Mr Fennel’s thoroughness with him, he’s miscalculated. Keith takes the information in stride. With a straight face, he advises Hunk to learn the list by heart, then, during the discipline sessions, count every stroke meticulously; if Mr Fennel’s hand ever falters and the punishment doesn’t correspond with the list, Hunk has to call Mr Fennel out on being imprecise and demand an apology.

Hunk, bless his soul, only nods solemnly.

Lance is clearly uncomfortable at discussing spankings and doesn’t participate in the others’ fun.

It’s a pity Shiro doesn’t have time to catch Mr Fennel’s reaction at Keith’s suggestion.
Shiro is very impressed with how Keith deflects any possible threats to Mr Fennel’s honour, calmly and without a trace of doubt.

Shiro finds out that he really admires the subtle way of messing with people Keith prefers. Among other things, he announces in a self-assured tone that he’ll be sure to plan an avalanche of working assignments for Lance and Hunk, cause it’s actually one of his tasks as Mr Fennel’s helper.

“The Housekeeping Department, you say? There’s a lot of things in the Shirogane household that’ve been waiting for a hard-working professional,” - says Keith.

They banter a bit more, but Hunk crosses the line when he asks Keith about whether he has marks on his ass after his latest Saturday spanking since it’s only Tuesday and they may be still visible. At that, Lance gets fed up with Hunk’s rudeness and says that Hunk will see plenty of ugly welts on Lance’s behind in the evening when he’ll cover them with a balm anyway so he should shut up about such things and just leave Keith alone.

After Lance’s words, Keith’s gaze becomes wary and concerned. With the straightforwardness typical for him, Keith asks whether Mr Fennel has put those marks on Lance. Shiro knows the truth, but Keith doesn’t yet, and he can’t blame Keith for asking. He needs to know.

“No, the... previous owner;” - chokes Lance. Hunk grips his shoulder in a gesture of support.

“That’s… horrible, - mutters Keith. Does he regret asking? His eyes are turned down, for the first time during their talk. Shiro supposes that this may be a part of the slaves’ culture; kind of. Being sensible and respectful towards the other’s trauma (it’s a thing that Hunk lacks, then).

Thankfully, Hunk decides to change the topic. He starts babbling about some of the kitchen workers and, when Lance and Keith relax a little, he mercilessly attacks Keith with his inquiries again.

In a sultry voice, Hunk says:

“They’ve said, back on the market, that you’ve been raised in a “seducers’ school”, is that so? Must be good to know all those things…”

Before Hunk can finish, something happens with Keith. As if a switch has been flipped, his whole being changes in front of Shiro’s eyes. Keith softens his gaze, lights up a filthy little smile, makes his moves effortlessly alluring and advances at Hunk. Keith reaches Hunk in three smooth steps; while walking, he sways his hips in tact with a melody only he can hear. He comes up at the taller boy, leans closer to him, glances at Hunk coyly from under his lashes and asks sweetly: “What things, Hunk?”

Keith is the embodiment of sin right at the moment. Hunk is blushing, Lance’s jaw drops. Shiro… Shiro is really hard in his pants. And Mr Fennel… Well, he grins like a cat who’s got the canary.

In the meantime, Keith drops his act as suddenly as he’s started it, shedding the lover boy’s role as if he’s never worn one. His gaze becomes hard, as usual, he calmly retreats from Hunk’s personal space, turns on his heels and walks towards the door. At the threshold, he pushes a special button. Shiro barely notices how a signal goes up on a panel at Mr Fennel’s right. It seems that Mr Fennel opens the door after getting the signal, and Keith walks out of it, waving his hand back at his new acquaintances and looking back at Lance and Hunk.

After that, Mr Fennel tells Shiro: “Now it’s my turn,” and goes to the “isolation cell” (as Shiro keeps calling this ugly little room in his head). Upon entering through the same door Keith has just left, Mr Fennel starts talking proudly (he still looks too smug for his own good):
“Well, boys, Keith has some work to do. I must give you some, too. So you’re not bored to death here, you know,” - by the last sentence, Mr Fennel’s tone stays playful, but there’s also something dangerous in the air now. Shiro feels goosebumps erupting on his skin. Mr Fennel continues: “So bored that you ask Keith about his past. I’ve told you I’ll be watching. Just for your information, he doesn’t work here in the capacity he’s been taught in his boarding school. Though I’m sure he’d be perfect in this role if he had a wish to. Form now on, consider this topic forgotten and don’t touch it anymore.”

While Lance and Hunk promise hastily they’ll never ask Keith about his school, Shiro remembers his dick and positions it more comfortable (and less obvious) in his pants.

On the screen, Mr Fennel drills Lance and Hunk on how they should treat Keith, the employees, the guards, the chiefs of the departments and, also, Shiro, may they be blessed with his presence.

Shiro looks at this side of Mr Fennel he knows and doesn’t really like. He’s cold, distant and has no compassion. Both slaves are unnerved by his manner of speech and holding himself; they obviously try to gauge Mr Fennel’s reactions on how they answer his questions, find a way to please him. If Shiro could, he’d simply tell them that there’s really no way to please Mr Fennel except for doing your assignments perfectly and being well-mannered all the time. Mr Fennel is not interested in flattery, not interested in sexual advances, not interested in idle chatter: he’ll listen to you politely and remember what makes you tick and what you think gives you an advantage for later. If he ever communicates with other people, it’s on his own terms (whether these people know this or not). Hunk has given Mr Fennel plenty information today; Lance has also shown enough of himself. That’s what really pleases Mr Fennel - being the most knowledgeable one and have the real power over other people’s lives. Playing the game called life at its finest.

That, and also taking care of Shiro and, now, Keith as well. What have been his criteria for choosing to befriend Shiro instead of just working for him, Shiro will hardly ever learn (for now, he doesn’t contemplate Keith - let himself think that he’s gotten in Mr Fennel’s graces by proxy).

When Mr Fennel returns to the control room, he finds Shiro deep in thought. He busies himself with his laptop, waiting for Shiro to come out of his trance and ask what he wants to know. He doesn’t have to wait too long.

About 5 minutes later, Shiro calls Mr Fennel and, when the latter turns to him, asks in his serious tone, looking Mr Fennel in the eyes:

“What had made you agree to babysit me ten years ago, Steve? Why this job? You’d be the best lawyer in the capital by now, if you took time and studied. Or a speculator. Or… whatever, Steve. You can make people do what you want, you could’ve chosen anything and rise to the top in any field. Why me?”

Mr Fennel makes himself comfortable in his seat and offers:

“You know how they’ve kicked me out of the hospital despite my excellent performance. I guess I’ve never truly told you why...”

Chapter End Notes
I hope it's been interesting to you!
Please, tell me what you think, your feedback is very important to me!
Listening

Chapter Summary

Shiro learns a story from Mr Fennel's youth.
He also learns something he wasn't expected to learn.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

This chapter has been half-ready for a long time now, and the work on it has gone quickly.
I quite like the way it looks now.

OK, in Shiro's country you can drink alcohol and go to clubs since 18 y.o.)
I hope you'll enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Listening to Steve narrate his story feels a bit unreal.

Not that Shiro has ever thought that Steve’s life hasn’t existed before he has come into Shiro’s room and introduced himself. Steve has been ten years younger than now, which makes… 27? Or 28? He hasn’t changed much, only his facial features have grown even sharper and more angular with age. Here he sits in front of Shiro, as uncompromising and fearless as ever, and tells a tale about the youth of a man Shiro won’t have a chance to meet.

Shiro is so used to see Steve as his right-hand man; his pillar of support, his close friend, the single constant in his shitty life; so used to Steve being self-assured and level-headed. Turns out, there’s been another version of him: the Steve who’s been worried about the opinions of others a lot, the Steve who was so lonely and isolated that he literally didn't have anyone he could talk to about what matters. Shiro has always known that Steve and his family have not ever been very close to each other; for Steve, there was no trust and care Shiro’s parents have gifted Shiro with so freely. Where Shiro got encouragements and congratulations, Steve got sneers and snarky comments about teeny-tiny flaws aimed at spoiling Steve’s victories for him. Where Shiro got reassurances and pats on the back, Steve got pitiful stares and questions like “You just can’t ever do anything spotless, can you?”

Where Shiro learned how to rely on other people, Steve learned how to pretend and play his game better. While Shiro was well-loved by his peers and his elders, Steve could barely understand people around him since they’ve lived by other rules than Steve’s family and there was no one to translate for him. Steve has learned to mimic them, eventually, but not to empathize.

Steve's time at college hasn’t changed much for him.

And nothing has prepared him for his first job, at a hospital. Being raised the way he was, Steve
couldn’t guess what his colleagues thought of him at the hospital, so… it’s not a big surprise he hasn’t stayed there for too long.

Shiro knew some of this before, of course. But not the very beginning, in any case. He can’t help but feel sorry for Steve. Hopefully, Steve won’t notice the sadness in Shiro’s eyes.

“I've decided to become a nurse to spite my father, - says Steve. His tone is light, a little sarcastic. As if he, too, hasn’t expected to see someone so naive and helpless in his own past. - “He wanted me to be a surgeon. A refined, well-paid job for a noble young man. I wasn’t opposed to the idea, but, foolish as I was, I’ve decided that this was it. This was the time to change things. Living all my life the way my father has dictated was unimaginable, and I’ve risen against him. Instead of becoming a doctor, I've become the next best thing - a nurse. A similar path, but definitely a too plain one.

My father has been furious after I've told him what I'm going to study - just as I've planned. What I haven’t planned was that he’d disown me because of my insolence. That was a low blow for my self-esteem back then, a serious miscalculation on my part. I wasn’t ready to stay on my own so early in life.”

Shiro hums knowingly. His parents have never given him an opportunity to learn how to spend money with care - he’s always had enough pocket money to buy himself, for example, a new laptop or branded clothes if he wanted to. Right after their death - let’s say, Shiro has discovered a whole new world, where home economics was deeply interwoven with his family’s earnings, and all responsibility fell on his shoulders. However, it doesn't sit well with him learning that Steve mostly regrets that he wasn't able to outsmart his father - not that they've grown apart.

In the meantime, Steve continues:

“I had to find a job, and soon. After almost a month of fruitless attempts and one-night stands with people who were sure I was there for sex while I just needed a warm bed, I landed at a nightclub, as a barman. I found a room, rented it with another three guys. Soon, though, I've found a less mundane and better-paid occupation; there were now college fees to consider, you know. I’ve become a Dom for hire. Don't laugh so openly, Shiro. Have I worn heels? And what if I have? Want me to come to work wearing stiletto-boots?”

They spend a couple of minutes teasing each other. Feels like Steve needs this pause to steel himself for the main event.

“You know me, I don't do any work less than perfect. It's been like a bolt from the blue when they've told me the patients are displeased with me, that they would ask for any other nurse if only to get rid of me, not to be subjected to the ‘pitiless ice queen’ anymore. The funniest thing was,” - and Shiro can hear the strain in Steve’s voice, - “that the administration of the hospital couldn't find a formal reason to fire me. So they asked me to leave on peaceful terms, offered me money for filing my resignation notice… I had an impulse to start a war with the administration over this, but, in the end, I
took the money and left. My college fees have been paid by that time. My personal records have been impeccable. I could’ve looked for another job without hurry; maybe, I could’ve started at another hospital, pretending that I am a different person, trying to be… warmer on the surface? But even then, I knew it would mean setting myself for failure. Having nothing better to do, I’ve been clicking through job offers on the Internet, when a letter from your estate has come. The butler (“That’s one way to call the executive who’s ruled the Shirogane Mansion and a large piece of other property at the time,” - thinks Shiro, amused by Steve’s pettiness) looked for a ‘baby-sitter for the young heir’ (this nickname is less fun already; to Shiro, it sounds awfully close to home)’.

Steve continues:

"That was you. But you didn't need babysitting. At 16, you've been more capable than the people who were supposed to take care of you. Don’t argue Shiro, I know what I’m talking about. And the most exciting thing was… you didn't shy away from me. You've accepted my identity and never showed me that I make you uncomfortable. I’ve seen no antipathy, no resentment, no anger from you just because I was not the same as the rest. What absolutely drew me to you was that, unlike me, you knew what you wanted from life."

Shiro frowns. What does Steve mean by that? He’s been lost and scared. Certainly, he didn’t know what to do! A desperate teenage boy, who’s become an orphan in a span of two days? First his father, immediate death. Then, a day of looking at his mother's struggles. Shiro remembers so well how he’d spent a night in the corridor of a hospital; how he’d hoped that his mother, at least, would make it, would win by the death. All in vain.

But, maybe, Steve means something else?

Even at his lowest, Shiro knew that he should do something about what’s happened. He knew that, as soon as he’ll be the real owner of his home, he’ll make his employees take perfect care of their cars, that he’ll only hire trusted professionals, that he’ll support any initiatives the local police department will invent in order to prevent drunk drivers from stealing lives on the road. Just thinking of it, that a small mistake by his parents’ driver plus meeting a drunken bastard on a highway have robbed him of two his precious persons, makes Shiro shiver uncomfortably. He still prefers driving himself, when he can.

Steve waits through Shiro’s inner turmoil and continues after Shiro’s nod.

“I haven't taken you seriously in the beginning. You’ve been so earnest, so hard-working. I’ve thought it was a mask, at first. A mask would be easier to understand for me back then. But no, that’s what you were: an honest to god good person. I wasn’t aware those existed in real life. You've been very lonely, too. You did have support. You've had friends, even if your relatives didn't acknowledge your existence after your parents have perished. Unfortunately, it didn’t help much. You’ve never let your friends close enough to be able to help. You were afraid to let go and grieve your loss. You’ve frozen in your denial and stayed lonely and devastated.”

Steve takes a deep breath and says:

“I’ve decided to help in the only way I knew back then (if I’ve learned something during my work as a barman, was that drunk people can’t lie to themselves). I’ve been a disaster,” - says Steve with an untypical air of self-chastising. “I've taken you to a bar and made you drink until you've got completely shit-faced. Oh, you've been so angry. And hurt. Angry at me for cheating with your cocktails and ensuring that you get very, very drunk. Angry at your parents for leaving you. Angry at the stupid, useless drivers. Angry at your living relatives who’ve acted as if you were a nonsense that didn’t matter anymore. Angry at your friends for being so friendly and supportive of you while you envied them for having both parents. How could they even come close to understanding you!”
When Steve glances at Shiro, Shiro has his face in his hands.

“Oh, I see you remember,” - Steve says with a knowing smirk. Shiro doesn't need to look at Steve to know that the latter gives him a way to avoid stirring the painful memories too much.

“Bits and pieces, Steve. It's been a hard evening. I’ve tried to fight a waiter?”

“No, but you’ve tried to break the bar stand with a stool. For a drunk, you’ve been very methodical.”

Shiro raises an accusing glare:

“You’ve watched me acting up instead of stopping me right away.”

“It’s been quite amusing,” - weakly defends Steve. “You’re cute when angry. And I’ve thought you needed an outlet.”

Shiro only shakes his head in resignation. He adds:

“The thing that I won’t ever forget is the epic hangover I’ve had the next morning.”

“Have you even touched the alcohol after that?” - asks Steve with feigned sympathy.

“Finish your story, Steve,” - says Shiro menacingly.

In a wink of an eye, Steve grows somber and says:

“After that stupid party, we’ve had our first fight. I’ve been a bit hangover myself so I’ve shown my real face and shouted some at you. You’ve been stunned, at first, then you’ve grinned and announced that you like the snarky me much more than the uptight-boring me. I wanted to make a biting retort but it occurred to me that this was the closest thing to accepting the real me I’ve ever got.

And I decided to give you a chance. I haven’t regretted my decision. Soon, it’s become the way it is now - you are the leader and I am the follower. Because I trust your moral compass.”

“That’s sappy, Steve.”

“It’s the pot calling the kettle black, Shiro.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Steve.”

Wednesday is very lazy and uneventful in comparison with the beginning of the week (which hasn’t been too hectic, either). So much, that Shiro is slightly unnerved by the utter peace and quiet filling the estate. If he’s being honest with himself, his household runs so smoothly that Shiro rarely ever has to really get involved (he does it nonetheless but he and Mr Fennel know that it’s more to keep Shiro’s mind busy than anything else); his companies experience a stable, safe phase now - which means there are not many executive decisions for Shiro to make (literally none since Monday). There are issues of future strategy and such which can be exploited as a reason to stay busy at any time, but… Shiro has used this excuse too often lately.

In simple words, Shiro has almost nothing to do.

By Thursday, the workload doesn’t increase and Shiro’s anxiety reaches its peak. It’s so much easier to have a problem you have to solve, to be already in trouble, without expecting something horrible to jump at you at any moment. Because it can’t be this good and peaceful forever - not with Shiro.
There’s always a price to pay for being too careless, too comfortable. This calm sets Shiro’s teeth on edge.

Mr Fennel is really busy with the leakage in the laboratory’s foundation and doesn’t have time to entertain Shiro. Neither does he allow Shiro to intervene.

When night arrives, there’s no progress (read: no new trouble at the house). Shiro’s business is in order, the mansion is in great condition (save for the laboratory), the slaves are well taken care of, everything is fine. Shiro has difficulties falling asleep and when he does, it is to get drown in a slough of half-nightmares.

It’s 6 a.m., Friday, and Shiro is very busy.

His cellars are huge, and he has only checked one-fifth of those cellars for signs of unauthorized underground passages by now.

Shiro knows he’s being ridiculous, but he just has to be sure. A tunnel under his house would be a horrible threat to the security. He knows that there are cameras, and monitoring devices, and different scanners installed everywhere, but - hello, paranoia! - this time Shiro has to see everything with his own eyes. The guards address Shiro once, asking whether he needs assistance; Shiro politely sends them away, swearing that there’s nothing for them to worry about. Shiro just wants to get a feel for his own house. Shiro prays that no one and nothing will alert Mr Fennel. Goddess knows, his assistant needs his sleep.

His wayward brain decides that Shiro’s done enough to feel safe again after another hour of going through room after room, checking corner after corner, floor panel after floor panel.

Thankfully, Shiro is still alone under the view of the cameras when he can finally go back to bed, calm again, which means - Mr Fennel is still asleep. It was a narrow escape, thinks Shiro.

It’s about 7 a.m. when Shiro, sleep-deprived, red-eyed and achy, stumbles on the top stair after climbing up the stairs from the cellar to the inner yard. He literally faceplants into a flower bed (not a stone pathway, thank fuck), and doesn’t want to move a muscle. By a sheer force of will, Shiro sits up and cleans his face and upper body with a handkerchief (it’s nice to always have useful things within reach; for once, Shiro feels the urge to praise himself, not to scold).

He’s still sitting on a patch of fresh green grass, gathering his strength to move to the bedroom, when he hears footsteps. Soon, three people enter the inner yard. They argue in hushed tones, and Shiro immediately recognizes Keith’s voice. The other one is Lance; his whines sound familiar even when Lance tries to be subtle. The third one must be Hunk, he definitely has a deep voice like that.

The voices and the steps come closer and Shiro freezes on instinct. No one should see him, no one should know he’s there… Shiro barely stops himself from going down that lane and entering his battlefield-headspace. Anyway, for better or worse, now the three boys are walking just a few meters away from Shiro, and he can hear everything.

Seems like Hunk and Lance try to rile Keith up (again, Hunk?!).

Shiro absolutely can’t reveal himself. There’s Keith. No, what he means is he’d scare the slaves to death if he was to appear from the bushes suddenly. He can’t do that to them, right?

“You totally have a crush on him,” - says someone, apparently, Lance.
“I don't have a crush on anyone," - answers Keith defensively.

Even Shiro can tell it's not true.

“Yeah, yeah, keep telling yourself that, lover boy," - teases the third voice. It should be Hunk.

After that, the three slaves move out of hearing distance, leaving Shiro alone in his hiding place.

Shiro’s mind is in a state of panic. Who is it, the person Keith likes? Is it Lance? Hunk? Maybe, thinks Shiro with horror, it’s Steve?

Chapter End Notes

So, my pretty kittens, what do you say?
Is it Steve?
Hoping

Chapter Summary

Shiro has a nice talk with Allura.
Then, he does some thinking and makes up his mind to finally talk to Keith.

Chapter Notes

Rejoice, my dears, it's another 4k words chapter.

It was my birthday yesterday, and I've almost finished this chapter. Wanted to post a chapter on my birthday) nah, didn't happen
Anyway, here it is. Some may say that things finally start moving, but I wouldn' be so sure.

I'll be on a journey for the next week, so, no updates for a week or more!

Have fun, and I want to give you a link to a song which also makes me think about Shiro.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rqf3J4ZOPCw&index=13&list=LL_cyTXSAXQrWHgMn6NdAvNw&t=0s

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At lunch, Shiro still feels like he’s chewing dirt from the flower bed. It’s rather unpleasant, to be reminded of the talk Keith and the other slaves have had in such a crude way. Shiro eats alone (Mr Fennel wanted to join him, but Shiro has declined because he had a lot to think about), and it is lonely. He feels stupid for thinking about Keith’s “crush” too much. But he can’t stop; anyway, why is he even so interested, so invested? Doesn’t Shiro’s brain have better things to do instead of imagining Keith’s (most likely non-existent) love life?

Shiro sighs and leaves his fork on the table. He’s fed himself enough to survive till dinner.

He walks to the gardens and finds a solitary place under the trees. The weather is fine; there’s one more summer month ahead and, according to the forecasts, the beginning of autumn will be quite warm, too. Shiro relaxes and listens to the sounds of nature: the murmur of the wind in the leaves, the gurgle from a nearby fountain, the warbles of some birds in a nest above him. Shiro tries to tune into the harmony surrounding him, but it doesn’t happen. Unfortunately, the peace of his gardens only reminds him of how restless his own soul is. He is able to forget about his trouble for a short while sitting here, losing himself in the solitude - but in the end, he has to come back to his room, to his work, to his slaves, to others’ slaves (whose life he can’t influence; he has to remember that he can’t buy every slave he meets), to Mr Fennel’s searching eyes, to Keith (who he still hasn’t talked to). Shiro sighs and closes his eyes in exhaustion. Why does it all always come to Keith, since day one of his stay here?

Is Shiro, maybe, invested for real? Like, perhaps it’s Shiro who has a crush on Keith, not the other
way around? As much as Shiro wants to dismiss this idea as ridiculous from the very start, he doesn’t. To clear his head, Shiro imagines talking to Allura (back in the day, they’ve given each other advice on their love interests; thankfully, they’ve never seen each other as potential partners), telling her about Keith and the way they’ve interacted so far.

Shiro would say: “Allura, he has the most beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen. They’re purple, you know? Like deep space. So gorgeous! I really want you to meet him…” Shiro stops and takes a breath. He wants Keith to meet his close friend. It may be a sign of a budding friendship, nothing more. You want all your friends to get along well, don’t you? That’s true, for sure.

Shiro continues his imaginary monologue with Allura: “We’ve been to a small restaurant one night. We’ve eaten burgers and talked; it’s been fun.” Shiro doesn’t let himself delve into the memory deeper - no mentioning Lotor here, in this context. He only wants to tell Allura the good things they’d done together with Keith. He doesn’t say “I’ve bought him a collar in his favourite colour and Keith seemed happy to wear it”, as well.

The next thing his imaginary Allura hears is: “I’ve had a dream of him. In the dream, we’ve been together and, I think, we’ve been in love. It’s been a bit weird, of course, but Keith looked at me with so much adoration…” In his dream, his slave Keith has also been his slave, but he was happy about it. He was happy to have become Shiro’s slave. Honestly, the more Shiro talks, the stranger his monologue gets.

Shiro stops his little mind game at that. Let dreams be dreams. It’d be unfair to assume that Keith would be happy to be Shiro’s slave in the bedroom, to pleasure him sexually and to be punished in such a perverted way. A dream is a dream, but Shiro would be a fool to use such fantasies in reality and to believe in them. He can’t let himself romanticize his relationship with his slave; it’s a storyline suitable for bad fiction, not for real life.

At the same time… He recalls the things he’s felt the urge to tell Allura about Keith: Shiro doesn’t even know how he did that - how he managed to talk with so much positive about anything. He tries hard not to let his depressive moods win, but it never is easy like that; on the opposite, thinking about Keith, talking about Keith, even in his mind, makes him feel lighter, happier.

He has altered his will for Keith’s sake (gosh, leave that alone, Shiro).

Seeing Keith makes him feel nervous, but in an almost good way; it’s like Shiro asks himself: what if? Like, maybe there will be some positive development between them? Because if it’d happen, it’d be awesome. It’s like his sixth sense is telling Shiro that being close to Keith may turn out to be even better than he can imagine.

Let’s count the facts.

He asks Mr Fennel all matter of questions whenever he’s worried about Keith.

He feels very sorry for being an ass to Keith. He really wants to make it up to him.

He thinks about Keith every day.

Does Shiro have a crush?

Shiro doesn’t want to talk to Mr Fennel about his musings; in the end, he isn't sure. Keith has been kind to Shiro, Keith has been fun to spend time with. Shiro hasn’t been attracted to anyone in years; he shouldn’t confuse a possible result of his mood swings with having a crush.

Actually, does having a crush have any impact on his life? Knowing for sure that you’re falling for
someone and not knowing are two separate things, of course. And yet, would Shiro dare to behave differently if he was sure he likes Keith?

Shiro answers himself firmly: no, he wouldn’t.

It’s quite pathetic, especially, when he is almost sure that he likes Keith.

Illogically, but the thought that he wouldn’t have changed his behaviour calms Shiro down a little. On the sunny side of things: Shiro can finally stop fighting himself and enjoy the good things that come with liking someone romantically. It’s strange to find comfort in a love interest he can’t pursue, but beggars are not choosers.

What’s really disturbing - he has to talk to Keith and apologize, whatever his verdict on his feelings to Keith may be.

Shiro ends up calling Allura and talking to her for an hour and a half. She has so much to tell; she has so many ideas she wants Shiro’s input for. Shiro can listen to Allura talking for eternity, it seems. He is afraid to spook their newly forming bond; anyway, this time, he talks, too. He even tells Allura about Keith, for real. Not in terms of romantic love, of course. Shiro simply mentions all three of his slaves and doesn’t pay Keith special attention when he retells the boys’ stories. Allura surprises him by saying: “It’s nice to know that no one will hurt them anymore, right, Shiro?” Shiro feels guilty immediately for making Mr Fennel spank Keith. He says so much; Allura hums thoughtfully. Then she replies: “You say that Mr Fennel does it? We both know he won’t overdo it; he’s a very reasonable man. And, Shiro, you know I don’t punish my slaves physically. I must say that most of my slaves still wait for the other shoe to drop: this woman can’t be kind for real, they think, or something like that.” There’s bitterness to Allura’s words; Shiro hasn’t heard it from her before. She’s changed. Shiro couldn’t have expected such a sentiment from the Allura he knew in his youth. The young Allura only recognised bright colours; grey areas and blind spots were meant to be explored and conquered, not taken into consideration like that. Shiro feels comforted by this revelation; he doesn’t feel as impure in comparison to his princess-like friend anymore.

“Maybe you’ll come to visit me first?” - Shiro finds himself asking. “How about Monday?”

Allura sounds sad: “Sorry, I can’t. We have plans, me and my boyfriend. We have to visit one of his farms. You’d like him, Shiro: he believes in treating all people well…”

Shiro smiles ruefully. Now, he almost can’t wait to see Allura again. It’s been too long.

“Call me as soon as you’re back, and we’ll think of something,” - he offers.

They say goodbye and Shiro walks back home. His back is a bit stiff from sitting on the ground and he is hungry. Otherwise, he feels as fresh as new.

When he enters the inner yard, he thinks of Keith and remembers that, if it’s Friday, then tomorrow is Saturday. He’d better talk to Keith before his discipline day or leave it till Monday. Shiro finds that he’d rather not wait now that he’s reached some understanding with his consciousness.

He calls Mr Fennel and asks whether Keith is busy now. Mr Fennel makes a dramatic pause saying that he’s checking Keith’s schedule. Then, he says: “Shiro, you’re my precious owner, but, please, be aware that I won’t have you being an asshole to Keith once more. You will talk in my presence.”

Shiro is a little stunned by such boldness. “Steve, do you maybe need me to remind you that I’m in charge here?”

“That’s exactly the problem, Sir. The last time you’ve been in charge of Keith he’s ended up
sleeping under your bed, then being sent away from you and...

Mr Fennel is fucking right. And, ouch, it hurts.

“OK, Steve. Name the time and place, and I’ll be there,” - jokes Shiro rather sourly.

“In half an hour, in my study. You and I will discuss Lance and Hunk’s destinies. I want to assign them to other workplaces.”

“What do you have in mind?” - asks Shiro curiously.

“I’ll tell you in half an hour. Actually, Keith will tell you. He’s told me he has some thoughts, and I’m sure he’ll offer something good.”

Shiro can’t help but feel stupid walking to Mr Fennel’s study. He will have to pretend he’s there to talk business while all he wants is to have a few words with Keith. If possible, in private. Better, in another setting. In another universe, maybe. And, isn’t it silly that he contemplates what is the best way to spend a meeting with his own slave? Shiro shakes the last thought off of himself in disgust.

Is it enough for Shiro to dismiss Keith’s dignity? Shiro still doesn’t know much about Keith, this he can admit. He has access to any information there is on Keith, yet, he can’t make himself take a closer look at Keith’s personal data. Mr Fennel, Shiro is sure, has done that. And some research atop of it, of course. And then some more. Shiro feels inadequate. He can’t even find the strength to learn the available information he craves to know because he is afraid, let alone search for more. Hell, he could ask Keith questions. If they’ve stayed in touch during the last month, Shiro and Keith would be starting to know each other little by little, maybe, he’d gain Keith’s trust, enough to get answers without being intrusive. Shiro feels another wave of guilt crushing over him: Keith, it seemed, has trusted him from the start. And what has Shiro done with his trust? He couldn’t support the boy after he’d talked about his father’s death. He’d let him sleep on the floor. He’d abandoned him with no explanation of why. Hopefully, Keith has realised that getting close to Shiro may only cause him pain and won’t try anymore.

Shiro’s thought that he’ll enter the study, get comfortable, start a conversation with Mr Fennel… But no, the fate (personified by said Mr Fennel) had other plans. When Shiro opens the door, he sees Keith already there, discussing some graphics with Mr Fennel rather agitatedly. He’s so engrossed in their topic that he doesn’t notice Shiro right away, who is frozen like a salt column at the entrance. Shiro uses this small pause to collect his bearings and step inside. At the sound of the door closing Keith perks up and sees him.

Keith’s face can be very expressive when he doesn’t pay close attention to maintaining his mask. His eyes are filled with such unbridled joy at the sight of Shiro that the latter has the urge to tell Keith something ugly about himself, so that Keith won’t ever look at him like that. Yet, it hurts when the next emotions that flicker on Keith’s face are confusion and fear. Then, Keith catches himself. His eyes get duller and his facial expression becomes friendly in an impersonal way. He swiftly stands up from where he sat at the table, greets Shiro very politely and stays standing with his head bowed slightly, with his back to Mr Fennel.

Shiro meets Mr Fennel’s eyes, gets a threatening glare and starts talking, before his nerves make him run to a toilet. He also doesn’t look Keith in the eyes, for the same reasons.
“Keith, I’m glad to see you. I wanted to say that I’m sorry. I must have given you the impression that you will work for me often and then I’ve let you in the hands of Mr Fennel and disappeared. I was unwell. You know about my… special condition.”

Shiro takes a nervous breath and looks up. Keith watches him with rapt attention, his mouth slightly agape. He’s worried about Shiro. That boy.

“I’ve been disrespectful to you the last time. I should’ve sent you to your room… I haven’t thought this through…”

“No, it’s good that I’ve stayed. You were sick in the morning,” - interrupts Keith hurriedly.

Mr Fennel tsks loudly. Keith flinches and hunches a bit on himself.

“I’m sorry for interrupting you, sir,” - he mumbles.

Shiro sighs heavily. Steve’s love of formalities, why now of all times? But, at the same time, it takes the focus away from Shiro for a second which is good.

“It’s OK,” - says Shiro. A small flash of anger at his assistant has helped at centring him, getting back to Earth. - “I guess Mr Fennel is very strict with being always polite, isn’t he?”

“He is, sir,” - and a small smile grazes Keith’s features.

Shiro can’t help but ask, remembering their conversation in the garden that night when Keith has said dejectedly that Mr Fennel will have plenty of reasons to punish him:

“Are you in his “naughty list” or not, after all?”

Keith looks between Shiro and Mr Fennel uncomprehendingly, and Shiro curses his phrasing and lack of eloquence when Keith says:

“I guess not, sir. He says that I’m useful, at least once a day. And he rarely adds additional strokes on Saturdays.”

For better or worse, Mr Fennel interferes: “Me being pleased with your performance doesn’t diminish the fact that you are cocky, arrogant and self-assured, and that you also tend to make rushed decisions. So, definitely, you’re on my “naughty list”. But,” - and Mr Fennel makes a dramatic pause looking at his properly chastised charge, - “At the same time, I think that’s not what Mr Shirogane has meant. You’ve come to the mansion expecting me as your overseer to start nit-picking on you all the time and getting angry just because you have a personality. As we’ve discussed already, you’ve been wrong. Also, once more, I don’t think that you’re a burden or a person who only brings trouble. As long as you try hard and follow my rules, you’ll never be ousted from my good graces. Still, you are naughty.”

Shiro has a suspicion that Mr Fennel means both of them with his last sentence.

What would he do to Shiro if he had the same authority over him as he has over Keith now? Shiro shudders and prays that that won’t ever happen. The mischievous glint in his assistant’s eyes shows that he has an idea about what Shiro thinks, but Shiro won’t let Mr Fennel distract him with his game now. He hasn’t said everything he wanted to Keith, who just stands there passively, listening.

“Keith.”

Keith’s head snaps up and he looks at Shiro.
Shiro steels himself for the umpteenth time and begins talking again, because Keith needs to understand:

“Keith, I’ve meant what I’ve said. I’m sorry for treating you poorly that night. I guess we’ve both had fun at some point, but then my problems have caught up with me, and…”

Shiro stops, not knowing, what to tell Keith next. This conversation becomes very awkward with lightning speed, so much so that Mr Fennel barely hides his smirk.

How does he say in short how much meeting Lotor has affected him, how sorry he is that he can’t just set Keith free right this instant, how much he wants to come back in time and organize Keith’s life in his mansion better, make it right from the start? How does he convey how sorry he is that Keith has to live this life, full of foreign orders and stolen decisions, how is it right or fair to Keith? How Shiro can’t understand why Keith is so accepting of his fate? This is all so big, and so important to Shiro, and he can’t, he can’t jam it all in a few short sentences…

His fit of panic is broken by Keith’s quiet:

“Sir, I’m not angry at all, and I’ve never been angry at you. At the same time, I’ve expected that I’ll serve you again soon, and when you’ve never asked for me, I’ve just thought that I’ve done something wrong.”

That’s exactly what Shiro has feared: Keith trying to take the fault; worse, Keith not seeing anything wrong in Shiro’s act.

“You’ve been acting according to your instructions,” - forces Shiro out; where does this regression to the military slang even come from?

“Yes, sir,” - says Keith cautiously.

“You’ve been acting according to your instructions,” - forces Shiro out; where does this regression to the military slang even come from?

“Yes, sir,” - says Keith cautiously.

“I don’t want to treat you without respect just because you’re my slave,” - says Shiro. This sentence, said aloud, sounds ridiculous, even if it’s truly how Shiro feels. He feels so embarrassed by his speech; what does it matter to Keith that Shiro thoughts are noble?

Keith eyes him pensively, his head cocked to the side. He’s cute like that, all serious, trying his best to understand Shiro.

“I’ve heard you’ve been in the glass library,” - Shiro changes topics in order to save the last shreds of his dignity.

Keith smiles immediately: “Yes, sir. Mr Fennel has allowed me to spend my lunch breaks and free time there. The library is so beautiful. I’ve found so many books about space; they were so sparse in the library of my latest school. I’ve always wanted to read more about the stars. I couldn’t even imagine that there’s so much to learn!”

Keith’s eyes positively glow, and Shiro loses the thread of his speech, admiring how lovely Keith looks when he talks about things he likes.

Anyway, soon Keith stops talking and it catches Shiro’s attention.

Keith looks sheepish. He murmurs: “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, sir. I’m talking too much. I’m sorry. I know you’re not interested in all this.”

Keith glances at Mr Fennel searching for help.
“Keith,” - says Mr Fennel with his usual calm authority. “Mr Shirogane likes science, too. He wanted to hear about your interests in books, otherwise, he wouldn’t have asked. Actually, I think there was this one book, the one you’ve started your reading at the library with… An encyclopedia about space for kids, I guess.”

Shiro has a vague suspicion about what book, in particular, Shiro might be talking about. Is it the one he’s gotten from his father on his 8th birthday?

His suspicion is confirmed when Keith gets agitated once again and exclaims: “Yes! The big green one! There’s also the Earth and the Jupiter on the cover, dressed silly. What’s about it?”

Shiro can’t stop a warm smile from spreading on his face, while Keith continues talking:

“I mean, I shouldn’t have shown so much interest in a book for kids… But I’ve never known much about space because they haven’t ever taught me much about it, even if I wanted to learn. But, there’s so much information in his encyclopedia, and it’s easy to remember, and after finishing it I was able to try and read more complex books, and that was so much fun!”

Keith stops again, wide-eyed and horrified. Shiro briefly wonders who has made Keith doubt everything he says, think that he can’t be interesting to others. Before Keith tries to apologize again, Shiro interferes. Now that he’s seen more of Keith’s reactions, he has no problem to reassure him, like Mr Fennel has done before.

“I like this encyclopedia a lot. It’s made for children, yes, but still, it contains a lot of important facts and is good for a start. I remember how I was mesmerized by the photo of Saturn’s rings. I wanted to see them that very night with my own eyes and was really disappointed when my father said that it’s impossible without a telescope.”

Shiro stops himself in time and doesn’t say that he’s got a telescope the next week after the incident. He still has it, though, somewhere in the rooms upstairs which he tells Keith.

“You could use it some night, if the evening is dark enough or Mr Fennel lets you out of your room after your curfew.”

Keith’s eyes are full of faltering hope when looks back at his overseer.

Mr Fennel looks conflicted. The way Shiro sees it, Mr Fennel is pleased that Keith and Shiro act friendly and avoid unnecessary embarrassment, but he doesn’t want to appear too generous and easy to sweet talk at the same time. In the end, the wish to make Keith happy wins, and he says grumpily:

“Good, it means now I have more leverage over Keith, not only burgers as a way to bribe him.” A second later Mr Fennel realises how that must have sounded and busies himself with his laptop, ignoring Keith and Shiro.

It’s a rare slip for Mr Fennel, Shiro has to admit. Neither he nor Keith acknowledge it anyhow. They’re no fools.

Luckily, there is a thing they’ve planned to discuss.

“About Hunk and Lance. Mr Fennel has said you have an idea where to place them,” - says Shiro.

Keith, now in his element, starts speaking confidently:

“They’ve been both working in the Housekeeping, right? Lance has been in the kitchens and Hunk helped the carpenter. So, I think that Lance may do better away from fine porcelain and knives. The
gardeners asked for help with the ponds, and I’ve thought that Lance would do great there. He’s attentive and he loves water. Also, no porcelain there.”

Shiro doesn’t really care for the porcelain and the state of his ponds. His household is as close to ideal as they get (if he’s being honest). If there is a chance that Lance would be more effective (and safer) as a helping hand in the gardening, then be it. If he likes his task - even better.

“What about Hunk?” - asks Shiro.

“He works well where he is, as a carpenter’s helper. He’s good with his hands. But I think, he’d do better as a mechanic - and your workshop needs a new worker since one of the old members has retired.”

Keith talks a bit more, Shiro asks some more questions, Mr Fennel engages in the talk when he sees fit. It’s a normal work-related conversation, and Shiro quite enjoys it. Keith doesn’t try to be overly polite or watch every word and Shiro cherishes it.

He leaves after Lance and Hunk’s destinies have been determined.

Shiro feels calmer and happier than he’s had in years. Also, he may be in love.

Chapter End Notes

I feel hopeful when everyone is concerned about Keith and believes that Shiro will be bad for him, even if Shiro is the main lead. Really, I was afraid to hear some "It's Shiro he can't be bad for Keith blabla”

Thank you all for reading! Your feedback means a lot!
Living

Chapter Summary

Three more months pass and Shiro reflects on how his life has changed during that time.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!
I'm back from my vacation and have a lot of new thoughts about this story.
It's amazing how being away from your computer heightens your desire to write!

I've decided to make a little time skip (if it can be called that). The chapter is narrated a little bit differently since no events happen right at the moment. The next one will be the same as the previous twelve: a short time span, things happening to Shiro right now)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Unbelievably, but Shiro has met Keith for the first time at the beginning of this summer only.

It’s been a long, bittersweet season, full of new revelations and old fears. It is the middle of autumn already; mild and warm, just as the meteorologists have predicted. It fits Shiro’s gentle mood. He still thinks he is in love with Keith.

It feels good, to be in love. It feels good to feel, to feel so many positive things, to have a person in his life whose sheer existence makes him happy.

All in all, Shiro is getting better, he thinks. Shiro is more optimistic than he’s been in years. Shiro feels healthy and sleeps well; his depressive episodes become fewer and fewer with each passing week. He also tries to stop himself from overstraining: when he works, when he works out, when he studies. Instead of work-related analyses, in his free time, he reads on quasars, pulsars and supernovas, and it feels great, to learn new things in the area he’s interested in, to keep up with the newest studies. For the first time since he’s finished his bachelor degree, he feels like he could go to university again and study something he truly wants to.

Shiro doesn’t regret his decision to listen to his parents when choosing what to study. Management, of course: the responsibilities towards the Shirogane family are above all else. And Shiro is glad that he hasn’t argued with them over his future path. His parents had died knowing that their son had finished school early and got accepted into the university of their choice. It feels so distant now, but it doesn’t become less true: Shiro wanted to be a good son so much. His parents had loved him dearly; they had given him all the best things, had supported him in everything. He’s told himself that if he finishes school early and gets a degree in Management, as is expected from an heir, also ahead of schedule, then he will have to spend five years (approximately) living at work and learning all there is to know about his family’s business, then he’ll become a perfect executive and build a team he could trust. After five years of stellar work, his opinion would matter and he’ll be able to do what he truly wants. This way, if all goes well, he will enrol in some program like Astrophysics, study happily and work for his family at the same time… That was his plan. Shiro wanted to make
everyone around him happy and then let himself be happy.

However, if you wish to make the goddess laugh, tell her about your plans.

What Shiro has got in reality (hated Management degree, army, depression, unfulfilling work), has made him forget about anything studying-related. Up until now. Up until he saw how Keith nearly devours each and every book he can find about space and different celestial objects. If Keith, with his zero starting level, has no doubts that he will conquer science books, then Shiro can allow himself some hope, too. Keith is very inspiring.

Keith would take his tablet (he has one for work purposes) and make a camp in the glass library every evening; he’d live there if he were allowed to. There are not so many books on astronomy in the library itself, actually, but Keith really likes reading books and articles on the tablet while sitting there. Shiro’s favourite spot has become Keith’s, and Shiro is absurdly happy about that. The throw pillow is still where Shiro has spotted it on that embarrassing day when he has cowardly fled the library. Keith would come and sit down on it at 9 p.m. and stay there until his tablet would shut down at 10:30 p.m. Keith doesn’t risk Mr Fennel’s wrath and goes to his room after that; he really, really prefers to keep on his overseer’s right side.

Keith tries very hard to do his work well, too. Everyone at the mansion has got used to him being Mr Fennel’s herald and they don’t doubt Keith’s words and orders anymore. Luckily, they don’t know that Keith is authorized to make a lot of decisions (without consulting Mr Fennel) that no one would expect to be made by a slave. Mr Fennel has decided so, with Shiro’s agreement. Mr Fennel says it’s really nice to not worry about little things (which Shiro doesn’t always see as little, to be honest), like, observing the work of the Departments Heads (read: spying and reporting to Mr Fennel), ordering transplanted plants for the new garden alley or checking whether all life support systems function. There are people employed whose job is exactly that - but Mr Fennel has never let anything happen without him knowing. He has been meticulously checking every aspect of the mansion’s life since he’s become Shiro’s right-hand man. Now, he allows himself to let things go if Keith keeps an eye on them and doesn’t ask for advice. Shiro still can’t believe it’s happening. It’s Steve Fennel, the control freak, they talk about, no less. Shiro also thinks that this much responsibility at 16 must be overwhelming, but Keith seems to enjoy it. Mr Fennel says that Keith doesn’t need a special education to use simple logic. At first, Shiro has doubted that Keith could be able to do well without much experience, but - he and Mr Fennel have found a way to make it work. They text like mad, using some set of abbreviations (is it a code?), and Mr Fennel is able to give any info Keith may need very quickly. Or he can come to Keith’s rescue when needed, also very quickly. Shiro finds Mr Fennel and Keith’s work together inspiring, as well; a little scary, at that.

Keith doesn’t exactly like the “spying” part, but he believes Mr Fennel when the latter says that only a few people can be trusted with their work and in this mansion unsupervised. In Mr Fennel’s opinion, these are only him and “Master Shiro”. It’s funny how Mr Fennel now calls Shiro by that nickname, in his face and when he is alone with Keith. It is a form of address suited for a slave, not the chief assistant of a mansion; but, strangely, Mr Fennel makes it sound so sincere and serious, that Shiro doesn’t have it in himself to ask him to stop.

Keith and Mr Fennel have a very peculiar relationship, from Shiro’s point of view. It’s not jealousy speaking (not entirely, as Shiro tells himself). In some things, Keith hangs on Mr Fennel’s every word; in some things, he argues himself hoarse, not fearing possible consequences. What is the most amazing, it’s that Mr Fennel sometimes admits that Keith is right. Keith is officially allowed to disagree with Mr Fennel when there is time to argue, but he has to stay polite defending his point of view, which is hard for Keith when he takes some matter to heart. Keith can get agitated and impatient. Shiro always wants to smack Mr Fennel upside his head when, at the end of a heated discussion, he says something like: “You’re right this time, Keith. Anyway, there is no way a civil
person would talk as rudely as you did.” Shiro finds it unfair; Mr Fennel says that if he talks rudely to Keith one day, Shiro has every right to give him a disciplinary spanking. Shiro isn’t sure what he wants more: to give Mr Fennel a taste of his own medicine or to never even think about his chief assistant with his pants down and his butt red. They both know this won’t happen, ever: Shiro is unable to hurt anyone like that and Mr Fennel’s manners and self-control are too impeccable to consider a possible slip. Anyway, Shiro doesn’t like being present during Keith and Mr Fennel’s arguments - he can’t stop thinking about Keith earning himself more strokes. But… Keith still doesn’t fear Mr Fennel; neither does he look at him with venom or ill-disguised hatred. That’s why Shiro wants to believe Mr Fennel’s swear that their Saturday routine works well for Keith.

Whatever. Saturday still stays Shiro’s most hated day of the week. Shiro can’t face Keith on Saturdays.

On other weekdays, Shiro sees Keith regularly, now that he doesn’t hide from him or evade him. Moreover, he helps Keith learning more about space. He has restricted their study sessions to an hour once a day (though he’d spend hours talking to Keith, of course; he just wouldn’t leave Keith alone for a second if he could afford it).

Keith doesn’t hate Saturdays. It must be the conditioning from his school. It is only a guess, for there’s no way for Shiro to know for sure. He won’t ask Keith, of course. Shiro still haven’t looked up Keith’s profile and he doesn’t intend to, anytime soon; he won’t bother Mr Fennel with it either. There are no other sources, which leads to an easy conclusion: let the past stay in the past. Keith says that Mr Fennel doesn’t punish him for weird or bad work decisions, only for not following the rules. To Keith, it’s fair. Shiro sometimes wants to beg Keith to moderate his words better; every time Mr Fennel scolds Keith, Shiro flinches: he feels personally responsible for every new welt which will most likely rise on Keith’s beautiful ass come next Saturday.

When they breach that topic, Mr Fennel tells Shiro not to ruin a system that works. Keith looks healthier than before; he is more friendly and open; he seems happy. Mr Fennel has once said, looking Shiro in the eyes: “Keith is becoming someone here; little by little, he starts believing in himself; he feels human again. It’s all your doing, Shiro. Be proud of him and of yourself.”

Shiro is very, very proud of Keith. He doesn’t believe there is anything to be proud of about Shiro himself, except for maybe continuing to fight for his life no matter what.

While Shiro is aware how far gone he is when it comes to Keith, he’s decided to settle with love from afar. If he wants to continue respecting himself, he should only love altruistically, never wishing for anything for himself - only for good things for Keith. It’s hard, unbelievably hard. Shiro longs to be with Keith more. Shiro longs for his touch. It seems like simply talking to Keith is very addictive. Being close to Keith is like a breath of fresh air, and Shiro firmly believes that he is able to finally pull himself together after five years of useless suffering only because he wants to be better for Keith’s sake.

Shiro obviously has every right to pursue Keith romantically. And this is exactly what stops him from making any advances. There is a chance that Keith would agree to be with Shiro because he is grateful, or admires Shiro, or fears for his life in case if he declines his master. Shiro doubts that Keith would say “no” to him. Shiro would’ve listened, backed off, absolutely, but years of conditioning may be hard to overcome for a slave. What if Keith would pretend that he wants Shiro while, in reality, he is disgusted by the mere thought of being intimate with him? Shiro gets sick every time he thinks of it. If Keith wants the same thing as Shiro (which is a relationship), then Shiro won’t be able to do it right as well. Hiding and playing love inside his bedroom seems unfair to Keith. Even in his mansion, Shiro is still a part of the society. Inside the walls, he will treat Keith like his lover, but he won’t be able to show it to the world. For example, he couldn’t sit with Keith at the
same table in a restaurant he likes (Keith would be expected to kneel on a pillow beside him), and so on. The worst of it all, Keith won’t ever be able to marry Shiro if their relationship evolves.

But these are (unrealistic) dreams for a very distant future. Not for the present time. To consider a serious relationship, not to mention marriage, Shiro needs to able to take care of himself and his partner. In the meantime, Shiro thinks that he is far from being fully recovered. He needs more time to gather his strength back.

What bothers him, is the fact that a useless, depressive owner is a bad shield for his slaves. Shiro can’t allow himself to be weak. Should anything happen to Shiro, his employees will suffer, without a doubt, but they’ll find a new job and start a new life eventually. This being said, Shiro can’t guarantee that anyone (even Mr Fennel) will take good care of Keith, Lance and Hunk without Shiro’s supervision; he has to be realistic. But still, having his friends overtake his duty of looking after his slaves is the best variant he has. He’s altered his will again: Mr Fennel (who was one of Shiro’s heirs anyway) will get all three slaves if Shiro passes away. Should anything happen to Mr Fennel, the slaves will belong to Allura, then - Matt. Shiro is aware that he stresses too much over it. He is alive and well now, after all. But who knows?.. His friends have done the same, though, without him knowing: Matt and Allura have added each other in their wills, where it concerns their own slaves.

Speaking of which: his friends are precious. To not leave Shiro while he’s been at his lowest… He can’t understand Mr Fennel’s loyalty to him, but this - this is beyond words. Shiro is happy to be there for Matt and Allura, now. The better he feels, the more stable his psyche gets, the more time he can spend with his friends, helping them, supporting them, having fun with them.

After they’ve started seeing each other again, Allura has said at an impromptu party at Shiro’s place (she was drunk on Mr Fennel’s cocktails) that, when Shiro has started to talk to her again, a part of her soul has been rebirthed. Matt (also drunk) has shouted his agreement with the statement. That was so embarrassing. Shiro has thought that he won’t survive that evening, as the only sober person present - even if he wanted, he couldn’t mix his drugs with alcohol (nasty Mr Fennel has also got drunk; thankfully, he didn’t talk much). After his friends have had enough fun, Keith and Hunk have helped Shiro with bringing Allura and Matt to their respective cars, leaving them at the hands of their drivers. Matt has burst into tears upon seeing Hunk and started to apologize, between sobs. Hunk, bless his sense of humour, has taken this in stride. But, after the guests have finally left, he and Keith have looked so tired, so fed-up. Keith has muttered: “Thank fuck that we’ve left Lance in the room”. And indeed, Shiro doesn’t want to see Lance’s possible reaction to Matt’s drunken apologies.

The culprit who’s got everyone drunk has fallen asleep at the table where he’s been mixing drinks. Keith has surprised Shiro with his insightfulness by saying: “He does trust us, after all,” before he’s helped Hunk to put Mr Fennel’s sleeping figure on his back and to escort their overseer to his room.

What a mess that evening has been! At the same time, it’s been the most “fun” thing Shiro has done in years. Everyone he loves has been there (except for Pidge); everyone was in good spirits. Shiro is ready to endure more messes like that one if they make his close circle happy.

About Pidge: she has talked to Hunk and Lance back then, after talking to Shiro in Matt’s study. Despite her initial enthusiasm, it’s taken her a month to call Shiro. Then she came to Shiro’s mansion and, sitting on a bench in front of the main building, in clear view from the windows (at Mr Fennel’s insistence), she apologized. Actually, she’s come prepared. She’s written separate apologies for Lance and Hunk on two pieces of paper and given them to read. It was a wise idea because she could hardly talk. She cried and repeated that she’s so, so sorry. Hunk and Lance didn’t really know what to do with her first. They didn’t think that any cruel things that have happened to them at the Holt Manor have been Pidge’s fault. After watching her indecisively for a minute or so, Lance
remembered that he’s a “ladies’ man” and tried to be charming and cheer Pidge up. It was so silly that Pidge snorted through her tears, and they’ve been on their way to friendship since that.

Mr Fennel doesn’t punish Hunk and Lance. Like, at all. He says that he can interpret his own rules any way he wants; no one complains about their performance, why bother? But Keith, says Shiro every time they have this conversation. “He’s got used to this system,” - answers Mr Fennel. “He will get used to another system as well,” - contradicts Shiro. “You want to order Keith around yourself?” - threatens Mr Fennel, and their argument is over after that. No, Shiro can’t do that. Instead, he trusts Mr Fennel, Keith’s laugh and his own eyes. Infuriatingly, but Keith seems to accept the fact that his life is more painful than the life of his fellow slaves without complaints or jealousy. As if he believes that Shiro (who’s invented the weekly discipline for him) knows better. Shiro is relieved that Keith doesn’t act up despite his rebellious nature and unhappy because this level of acceptance of his owner’s faults is wrong. There’s no easy way out of Shiro’s predicament.

Shiro tries his best not to focus on negative things too much. Keith’s life is better than it could be at mercy of 98% of other owners. Shiro can live with that (he has no other choice).

However strange, his mansion has reached a good point in time. The atmosphere is lighter than it’s been in years.

Of course, there have been accidents involving slaves. Unluckily, both of the biggest ones have involved Lance. As if the poor boy hasn’t endured enough already!

Shiro gets angry despite himself when he remembers those.

The first one happened when Lance has first tried to work for the gardeners' team. Who’d expect trouble? Who’d think that Lance’s new boss would attempt to beat Lance with a belt for talking out of turn? According to Lance and a gardener who’s witnessed this scene, Lance has suggested making some amendments to the design of one of the ponds. He’s shown all his enthusiasm, describing his concept loudly - which has earned him the irritation of his boss. The man decided that Lance attempted to make him look pathetic and unmanly by being so impolite, demonstrate to him that he can't bring a slave to heel. Shiro won't ever understand how the brains of such empty-headed persons work. Was it a matter of pent-up frustration or something else, but Shiro would have gladly snapped the stupid gardener’s neck that day. Luckily, Keith has entered right on time. It was a pure coincidence. He’s called Mr Fennel immediately, at the same time evading the angry man’s lashing belt. But even before Mr Fennel could react, a guard has burst in: the motion sensors have alarmed the monitoring station about some heavy action, the officer on duty has watched the respective camera’s feed to check for threats and, of course, they took action: every member of the Security Department is aware that the slaves are off-limits for everyone but Shiro and Mr Fennel. The aggressive worker has been punished and fired, the guards have been praised for staying alert, Lance has been coddled by Hunk until he couldn’t take anymore. Keith has looked at Shiro as if he’s seen him for the first time, so furious and unlike his calm self Shiro has been. Keith's surprise has calmed Shiro, a little.

Mr Fennel has promised that this situation won’t ever repeat itself, and it didn’t. Still, the vision of Lance, pale and shaking like a leaf in Hunk’s embrace, won’t ever leave Shiro’s memory.

The second time Lance has suffered in Shiro’s estate has been, by a proxy, Shiro’s fault. This laboratory for testing drugs has been Shiro’s idea, after all. No one was paying it much attention until it’s been ready for use. Then, Keith has announced this news to his friends. Hunk started to say that he wants to try the equipment out when Keith has noticed that Lance is behaving strangely. In the meantime, the poor boy has gone almost catatonic from his all-encompassing fear. Shiro hasn’t been in the mansion at that time - he’s been on a business trip in another city. He’s been notified when
Lance has snapped out of his daze and there was no danger for him. Shiro hasn’t asked for details, too afraid that Lance’s story may trigger an episode by Shiro himself. He’s talked to Lance upon return, though. He’s promised and swore that here, in his mansion, Lance won’t ever be used for tests. Lance hasn’t believed him. In the end, he has believed Keith and Mr Fennel who swore that Lance can trust Shiro.

Then Shiro has learned the full story of Lance’s childhood. Everyone in the mansion has noticed that Lance is too bony for his age and that sometimes he looks a bit pale even with his naturally dark skin colour. But who could guess the true explanation? No one knew the truth, except for Hunk and Mr Fennel. Now that Shiro thinks of it, Lance’s clumsiness may have come from that very source… Actually, Shiro would prefer not to know, so similar Lance’s experience was to his own.

It turned out, that Lance has been born with a disease of internal organs. He was meant to be euthanized, as a defective slave, when a company has invented a new healing method. Lance has gone to that special “boarding school” and he has been “cured”. He will never be as healthy as Keith, for example, but, at least, there is no danger to his life anymore. Lance himself says that he’d prefer to die a painless death when he has been a child than to go through all this. At the beginning of Lance's narration, Shiro was one minute away from going back to the depths of his depression. He’s thought he won’t hit the bottom that time, though, that he won’t let himself slip, but… He’s listened to all Lance has had to say and then Shiro couldn’t leave his room for several days, with Mr Fennel or Keith keeping watch over him all the time. He couldn’t eat because of nausea and he couldn’t sleep, because, well - nightmares. It's been torture.

When Shiro was better, Lance has come to him and they’ve talked again, more about Shiro this time. They haven’t exactly shared their painful memories, but - they discussed some aspects of their traumas with a person who understands. It helped them both.

The whole depressive episode took a week. But, afterwards, when Shiro emerged from his fortress, exhausted, but not beaten, he felt as if he has defeated another part of his anxiety and that he’s become stronger, doing it.

Also, every cloud has a silver lining: Keith has spent several nights by Shiro’s bed, watching over Shiro. Shiro has grown closer to Keith over those days, while Keith has dutifully played his nurse. He was too out of it to keep distance, as usual. Keith turned out to be a surprisingly patient and thoughtful person, at that, Shiro couldn’t shoo him away.

Sometimes, when Shiro couldn’t fall asleep, he would pretend that he did, to not make Keith worry too much. If his act was good enough, Keith would believe him, relax and let his emotions show on his face. Shiro tried to watch Keith stealthily. Keith would look at Shiro with so much tenderness, that a weaker man could easily persuade himself that Keith was infatuated with him. But not Shiro.

Shiro doesn’t like living trapped in his own illusions.

Only a few things are in Shiro's power: to treat Keith right and to protect him. Shiro can try and become as close to being Keith’s friend as he can as Keith’s owner, and that's it. There’s nothing else to hope for.

Chapter End Notes

I guess it was as fluffy as it gets with me.
I have an idea for Sheith porn for the next chapter, I hope I'll make it happen
Making Decisions

Chapter Summary

Shiro has another dream about Keith. There is something wrong with Allura's boyfriend, and no one knows exactly, what. Also, Keith has trouble with sleep.

Chapter Notes

Hello, dear readers!

It's been an interesting chapter to write. But also, a very hard one.

I hope you all are well because I've caught a cold and it's disgusting.

Have a nice read and stay well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He is in the glass library; the inside lights are dim and he can see the moon and the stars through the glass roof if he looks up. He's on his (better, their) favourite spot: in a secluded corner on the second floor where no one else enters. Shiro is lying on a bed with pristine white sheets; somehow, a bed in the library doesn't come as a surprise to him. He is naked while Keith, sitting by his side, is fully closed. Keith also has his fingers up Shiro's ass.

It feels really good. Shiro's eyes have slipped closed at some point, only heightening the sensations. It's impossible to stay aware when the person you crave the most caresses you so intimately. Shiro's whole world has narrowed down to the feeling of Keith's touch, his warmth. He only knows that he should stay still, for some reason. He's not allowed to move. So he just lies there, on this white bed, his arms stretched out in front of him, his legs slightly parted for Keith’s convenience, and takes it.

Keith's touch feels so good.

He wants to push back on Keith's fingers, fuck himself on them, hard and sloppy. He wants to rub off his hard dick on the sheets until he finds release, then smear the evidence of his desire all over the white plains of the bed, make it filthy. He wants Keith to touch him deeper, more insistent, move his digits faster… Shiro is usually not a very vocal person in bed, but he is so needy he can't stop himself from whimpering every now and then.

Keith just feels so good.

Shiro can't remember why he can't move. There's something with Keith and wanting to please him, but Shiro is so aroused, he can't think straight. Keith won't be mad at him if Shiro chases his own pleasure, just a little, will he? To test the waters, Shiro makes a few quick abortive movements with his hips, impaling himself deep on Keith’s fingers and humping the bed alternately.
Immediately, all movement of Keith’s fingers stops. It’s sudden and so, so wrong, so not what Shiro wants, that Shiro whimpers loudly and looks over his shoulder back at Keith. His breath hitches when he’s met with a smouldering-hot look; and it’s not simply lust, Keith is not pleased with him. But, goddess, how beautiful he is: his scarlet shirt clings to him like a second skin, his hair is long and silky, an inky-black contrast to his fair complexion and bright shirt.

Shiro has to stop admiring Keith after the latter clears his throat. Some fog in Shiro’s mind dissipates and he hurriedly hides his head between his arms where it’s supposed to be; he’s not allowed to watch. Even if Keith is the most beautiful sight in the whole Universe.

The fingers retract from his channel, and all Shiro can do is breathe through it and wait. Keith’s voice fills his conscious, husky and strong, commanding and warm; Shiro loves this voice. Keith wants Shiro to give it all to him, Keith wants Shiro to do his best for him.

“I’ve told you, you’re not allowed to seek your own pleasure, Shiro. You are to take what I’m giving you or get nothing. Is my touch not pleasurable to you?”

“No, Keith, I love it, please, don’t stop,” - Shiro begs. Now he remembers: he only has to let Keith make him feel, nothing more. This is why he shouldn’t have moved.

“What do you want, Shiro?” - inquires Keith, demanding and in control.

The answer is easy.

“I want to please you. Want to be good for you,” - says Shiro. He also wants Keith, wants to get fucked, wants to come, wants to make Keith come undone. But Keith won’t let him, so all of this doesn’t matter much, only the two wishes he’s said aloud do.

Keith hums in lieu of a response. Then, he retrieves a pillow from somewhere and puts it under Shiro’s pelvis, elevating his hips.

“Since you can’t be as good as I want you to be without my help,” - adds Keith and takes Shiro dick in his hand. Keith’s palm is calloused and hot; the touch feels heavenly despite Keith making it quick. Keith guides Shiro’s member back and positions it between Shiro’s thighs, on the pillow. Shiro’s dick is now fully on display for Keith. It doesn’t feel as comfortable as being snug to the bed sheets, but the new position serves its purpose: this way, Shiro won’t be able to hump the bed. Not that he’ll try to, after being admonished, but Keith is right in being strict with him.

The torture continues: Keith fucks Shiro’s ass with his fingers lazily, rubbing on his prostate in slow circles or tugging at the rim from time to time. It’s maddening; it’s so good, it’s almost perfect, but it’s nearly not enough.

Never enough. Shiro can’t ever get enough of what he has.

As if sensing Shiro’s inner turmoil, Keith rubs his lower back soothingly and talks to Shiro in a calm manner, as if he was a petulant child:

“Relax, Shiro. You will only have what I’m giving you; you’re not allowed to come anyway. I’ve told you, you have to still your hips and concentrate on the sensations I give you; enjoy them. That’s it, Shiro, just like that. Relax and give yourself over to me.”

It hurts now; his dick is hard and it must be leaking all over the pillow. His dick is so hard and it’s aching, and Shiro is so desperate.

And yet, he does what he’s told: he lies there and feels. If he concentrates on the sensations inside his
ass, he is able to ignore his aching member. To be honest, Keith’s touches there feel amazing, more so with every passing minute. Shiro melts under Keith’s attention; he can feel how much he sweats, how his limbs tremble from the exertion of holding still; he can hear his own panting and soft swearing. When Keith rubs at his sweet spot a little more generously, Shiro lets out broken moans.

Later, Keith orders him to get on his knees, put his arms behind his back and to put his weight on his chest. Then, Keith tells him to tug at his asscheeks with his hands to reveal his asshole. Shiro does as he is told. Despite the fingering he’s just received, of the same ass, from the same person, it’s humiliating to be put into this position: to have his most private part, his now pathetically twitching hole on full display.

A second later, Keith bends down to mercilessly blow cold air over Shiro’s wet and swollen pucker, causing Shiro to arch his back helplessly and inhale sharply.

Keith seems to watch him for a while after that. Shiro feels exposed and vulnerable; he wouldn’t be able to show himself off like this for anyone else. Only for Keith. If it’s for Keith, it’s Shiro’s pleasure to let him look, even if it’s so embarrassing.

Keith says conversationally:

“It’s such a nice hole, Shiro. I think I should slap it a little the next time I’ll have you like this. Use just my fingers for the first time, then, maybe, my riding crop…” - Keith sounds pensive, and Shiro shivers from the roughness of his voice. - “It’ll hurt terribly, take my word for it. I would know. But I can already predict that you’ll let me. I can’t wait to see what sounds you’ll make for me when I’ll put you through your paces.”

Shiro is a fool for wanting this. He wants this because Keith wants this and Shiro is sure that he can take it. Shiro thinks about the pain it will cause him, and he only starts wanting it more. If he’ll be able to endure every hit, Keith will see how much Shiro wants to please him and, hopefully, Shiro will be able to make Keith a little bit happier.

But, however good Shiro is going to be, Keith still won’t let Shiro come.

Even at the moment, when Keith isn’t teasing him directly, only watches, Shiro feels like bursting. He can feel the weight of Keith’s gaze on him on an almost physical level.

He needs to come so much. He needs more of Keith.

Shiro wants so much more from Keith.

But Keith has told him only to take what’s given to him and not to ask for what he wants.

So Shiro goes as pliant as he can, given his position, and lets Keith play him.

Shiro wants to please Keith so badly. He dares to think that he’s doing a decent job of it. But when he steals one short look back, unable to hold out the long silence, he sees that Keith is looking at Shiro tenderly and... sadly? It breaks Shiro’s heart and fills him with dread. Has he messed up?

Before Shiro can ask what’s wrong, Keith replies to the unspoken question:

“You’re so good to me, Shiro. Yet you can’t just give me all you have. You want to, I know. And you would, I don’t doubt it. But I can’t take it.”

The desperation in Keith’s voice is Shiro’s undoing. Even naked and deliriously aroused, he is a man of action, he can’t let his lover suffer in his presence.
Shiro is ready to try anything Keith wants him to, Shiro is ready to fulfil all Keith’s wishes, help Keith with whatever woes he has. But how is he going to help if Keith won’t let him?

Shiro has to change it; he wants to embrace Keith, wants to hug him tight and cherish him, wants to show Keith the depths of his love, wants to let Keith spill all his secret struggles.

But, as soon as Shiro breaks his ordered position and moves to his hands and knees, the scenery around him changes drastically. In a matter of seconds, the library is gone, and Shiro is in a sun-lit desert, on that same bed with white sheets.

It takes Shiro a moment to realize that Keith is gone, too. It horrifies him to no end.

A thin scarlet band crowns an abandoned white pillow at the headboard. This is the same pillow from earlier, stained with Shiro’s precome and sweat.

Large scarlet petals scatter from under the bed, and Shiro assumes that they are made of fabric when they rustle under the wind; at the same time, they flow like a liquid, rotting the sands. Like blood.

Shiro wakes up, breathing hard. As always with such dreams, he misses having the second arm immediately when he fumbles in the dark in search of his phone.

He calls security: Keith is in his room, asleep. He’s OK; a guard offers to check on him if Mr Shirogane has any doubts.

Mr Shirogane has a lot of doubts (and even more fears), but he is sure of one thing now: that Keith won’t appreciate a man in a uniform disturbing his sleep. He refuses politely, thanks the officer and ends the call.

Shiro’s dick is hard in his pyjama bottoms, but it’s the last worry on Shiro’s mind.

After an hour of corralling his anxiety into the back of his mind, Shiro calms down enough to try to fall asleep again.

Soon, he lies on his back in his pompous, lonely bed and imagines how it would feel to have Keith sleeping next to him. He’ll hardly ever learn how it feels for real, but even Shiro has to allow himself to dream from time to time.

Shiro doesn’t notice that he’s gone back to sleep until his morning alarm goes off.

It seems to Shiro that he can’t blink the sand from under his eyelids the whole following day. It’s irritating, and the association with the desert sand from his dream doesn’t help much in calming Shiro down. It makes Shiro slightly aggravated, and he has to keep himself in check more than usual.

It’s a Friday of a fairly busy week which doesn’t make things easier for Shiro. So, when their scheduled meeting with Keith starts, Shiro is too busy staying cultured at first to notice that Keith’s facial expression is slightly pinched. They still have a nice conversation (as always), Keith has a ton of questions (as usual). Spending time with Keith is Shiro’s favourite thing to do, so much that Shiro feels almost back to normal when Keith stands up to go (Keith’s the one who insists on staying punctual). Thanks to feeling much better, Shiro is able to notice the tension in the set of Keith’s shoulders. But, when he starts to ask, Keith deflects gracefully and leaves. Shiro wonders, not for the
first time, whether avoiding loaded questions is another skill Keith has learned at this school of his.

Thankfully, Shiro sleeps better on Saturday.

On Saturdays, Shiro usually goes to Matt or to Allura. He still awaits meeting Allura’s boyfriend in person. Somehow, Allura hasn’t shown Shiro a picture of this mysterious man yet. At first, when they’ve resumed contact, Shiro wasn’t focused on Allura’s life enough to ask, being too rusty from the perspective of socializing. Then, he’s been waiting for Allura to offer to introduce them to each other. She never did. Up to this day, Shiro hears a lot about Allura’s boyfriend (but only hears).

Allura’s boyfriend’s name is Leonard (at least, Shiro knows his name). Allura says that he travels a lot. Leonard has been so sweet when he’s confessed to her and has been worried about not being able to make Allura happy because he’s going to be far away from her so often, according to Allura. He calls her a lot and he texts her a lot, he is very attentive when he comes back home to her, assures Allura every time she mentions Leonard’s endless business trips. He takes her with him when she is able to go. Allura also adds, as if is an endearing trait to her, that Leonard hates being called Leo and that she sometimes teases him over it. Allura smiles happily at that, and, even if Shiro feels like this Leonard may be a shady person, he doesn’t trust his own judgement enough to give her any unsolicited advice.

Shiro has never had a lasting relationship. He’s always been too focused on his studies or work. There have been close friends (read: sex friends) or lovers who were dear to Shiro, but he’s never hidden from them that his utmost priority was becoming a highly trained specialist as soon as possible. His lovers have either agreed to that, or they’ve gone away. Then - there was too much tragedy in his life to seek love.

Shiro has never felt particularly sad when someone decided to leave him: his best friends, Matt and Allura, whom he met in the university, stayed with him no matter what. They had more in common than one could assume from the first glance, not just the looks or ambitions. They were all strong-willed and knew what they wanted. It’s only been a coincidence that Shiro and Matt have lived close to each other most of their lives and have never met. To stay close to them, Allura has bought a house nearby as soon as she’s earned her first big money (which happened shortly after Shiro has returned back from captivity). Now, the three of them have every opportunity to hang out together.

Matt is worried about the strange boyfriend as well; rational arguments aside, he is also jealous, poor thing. Matt’s unending infatuation with Allura will never cease to be a good opportunity to tease the daylights out of Matt which Shiro and Pidge deeply appreciate (Allura, not so much). But, whatever the reason, when Matt hears about another sudden trip to another part of the planet (which Allura learns about at the last minute notice), he feels concerned for real. He and Shiro have discussed their worries not once, but, in the end, they have no clue how to approach Allura with this. What do they want to accuse Leonard of? Of being unfaithful? When they have no evidence? Of being irresponsible? Maybe, of being inconsiderate to Allura’s feelings? When Allura feels cherished and is clearly in love with him?

Allura… Sometimes she still tends to see the world in black and white. She wants to trust Leonard, she believes in his good will. She thinks that Leonard is an exceptional person who will do a lot for this world.

Shiro would be glad to feel happy for her, but - the seed of doubt has been planted in his soul.

This Saturday both Allura and Matt are out of reach. Matt is visiting some relatives, Allura has gone to a conference in a far-off city. Actually, Pidge has come to Shiro’s place, but, after greeting Shiro, she’s holed up with Hunk in the workshop and hasn’t emerged since. Shiro has already planned to make her stay in a guest bedroom. They won’t stay up later than Hunk’s curfew allows, anyway, so
Shiro doesn’t worry about them. Hunk always makes Lance stay with them when they meet to invent something together like that. Shiro has a vague suspicion that Lance may serve like the third wheel (he doesn’t have any interest in science or crafting), but he appreciates Hunk’s thoughtfulness and loyalty to Lance. It’s as if Hunk has taken responsibility for Lance after caring for his wounds for so long. Or, maybe, it has started at the auction house or right after it at the Holt Manor already.

Now Pidge considers both boys her friends. If you look at it from the point of making Pidge a more social person, then Matt’s purchase has paid off in spades. Yes, everything has gone to shit (and neither Shiro nor Matt approve of Matt’s methods now), everyone involved has gone through their own trials to reach this point in time, but, in the end, Matt’s literally bought his little sister two friends; how funny. Shiro thinks that Pidge has a good chance of making their friendship last. Now that they’re not in the direct owner/slave relationship (like Shiro and Keith are), things are easier for them.

As before, Shiro is not ready to see Keith before or after he gets spanked this Saturday. But, since he’s stayed at home, he has to busy himself somehow. Just to remember his nerdy years, Shiro sits down at his laptop and makes a detailed plan of his lessons with Keith for the next three months. When it’s ready, Shiro is impressed by the plan himself and contemplates opening a new line of business which would be selling study plans for people’s self-education.

When he meets Mr Fennel at 5 p.m. in his study, Shiro already has a plan for opening this new line of business forming in his head. He’ll formulate it in writing and give it a test run by Mr Fennel (and, maybe, Keith) a few days later.

Mr Fennel seems very attached to his work lately. Even now, after their scheduled (!) meeting has started, he’s doing something in his laptop.

“Hey, Steve?” - asks Shiro in order to distract his chief assistant from whatever he types away.

“Yes, sir?” - replies Mr Fennel, not looking up from the keyboard. His head is still in his work.

Shiro feels light after coming up with a new idea. He also feels a bit mean.

“I want to build a planetarium near the glass library. It would look nice next to it. I always wanted to have my own planetarium. Why don’t live my dreams finally? We can build a small one…” - Shiro develops his idea until Mr Fennel chokes from indignation when Shiro starts reciting the price lists of the most famous architects who could construct a real pretty planetarium for him from his phone.

Mr Fennel looks comically bewildered, and Shiro can hardly suppress a giggle.

“Repeat, please, what architects?” - asks Mr Fennel incredulously.

“You know, for the planetarium. The one I want to be constructed near the glass library,” - supplies Shiro readily and enjoys how Mr Fennel’s eyes start bugging out. Shiro shows mercy to him before the man frets himself to death and explains that this was all a joke to attract his attention while he only wanted to discuss Allura’s boyfriend.

Mr Fennel’s gaze grows serious in a matter of seconds.

“Mr Leonard Frisk, am I correct?”

Shiro nods.

“Well, you will be surprised, Shiro, but I have next to null information on that man. Aside from official sources, I mean, and even there, there is not much,” - says Mr Fennel, looking at Shiro
For the first time in ages, Shiro feels insecure in his own home. He’s so used to Mr Fennel always knowing everything. Logically, Shiro knew that Mr Fennel is not omnipotent. But, again, even if he doesn’t know everything, Mr Fennel has his ways. If he can’t dig any info on this man, then… it’s either a bigger fish or a state agent, Shiro can’t find any other explanations.

He looks Steve in the eyes and knows instantly that they are on the same page. Shiro wants Allura to sever any connection she has to this man immediately. Mr Fennel, reading him like an open book, shakes his head: no. It’s hard to admit, but he is right. Shiro knows better than anyone that Allura wouldn’t listen to anyone who would try to dictate her how to choose her lovers. Shiro wants to go hit a wall.

Steve smiles at him with his lips only; his gaze stays somber. They’ll think of something, but it won’t come easy.

Shiro sighs and leaves the topic alone. There’s some other thing that worries him.

“Is Keith all right? He looked tense yesterday,” - starts Shiro.

Mr Fennel relaxes just a fraction and drawls:

“Depends on your definition of being all right.”

Before Shiro gets irritated with the drawn-out pause, Mr Fennel continues, as if unsure how to breach the topic better:

“He can barely sleep lately. He has nightmares, just as bad as you have sometimes. He begged me not to tell you, this is the only reason you haven’t heard about it earlier.”

Shiro grits his teeth. Why do he and Keith have to be so similar when it comes to poor self-care?

“And what have you done to solve this… issue? I mean, you and Keith?” - he asks in a carefully neutral tone.

“I’ve made him talk to your doctor on the phone. The one who has been giving useful advice. It helped, a little. Helped Keith to get better on the whole, not where it comes to his nightmares,” - replies Mr Fennel, as carefully calm as Shiro.

Shiro can’t understand. Why - get better? First nightmares, then - this! Mr Fennel has claimed Keith was fine all this time!

“Before you launch all your missiles at me, Shiro,” - Mr Fennel doesn’t show any signs of regret and his face is stern. He won’t get scared of Shiro’s anger. - “Keith is as healthy as one can be after what he’s experienced. Don’t pretend that you don’t know what I’m talking about. In this regard, Keith has been riskier than you, actually. He’s fished out of me as many information about your condition and about what has caused it as he could. Even if it was very hard on him. I’ve supported it, partially: when he went to read on psychology articles about anxiety or PTSD, I hoped he’ll learn something useful for himself, too.”

Shiro exhales. When he starts to think that he’s become better to people around him, his ignorance smacks him in the face. Again and again, time after time. Shiro listens to Mr Fennel talking, trying to calm his racing thoughts, without missing something important.

“You sure want to ask about the spankings. No, they don’t make his condition worse. Don’t worry, I
ask myself this question, too. Maybe, you’ll feel a little sympathy to me after I’ll tell you the next thing.” - Mr Fennel steels himself and continues in a strained voice: - “Previous Saturday, after we’ve finished, Keith has said, that his new life seems to be a dream. Sometimes, he’s said, the spankings are the only thing that makes him believe that he is not dreaming and not back there, at the boarding school. Because these discipline sessions, they are very real and root him in the presence. Because I stop when he asks me to. Because I treat his welts afterwards. I wanted to crush something.”

“You did?” - says Shiro stupidly, looking at the floor. He definitely can sympathize. With both of them.

“Yes, I did. I’ve destroyed one of the lamps here afterwards. It’s already been replaced,” - replies Mr Fennel mildly. He’s in full control again. - “Shiro, by not telling you about his condition, Keith wanted to protect you from having more flashbacks. He still gets livid when he remembers that first time, in the bathroom at your cabinet. He hates seeing you in pain.”

“For how long does Keith have nightmares?” - inquires Shiro in a falsely-steady tone. He barely stops his mind from spiralling, his ever-present guilt for being not enough lurking at the surface of his conscience, trying to take the reigns.

“For almost a month. You know, as soon as he’s started to trust me fully and became friends with Lance and Hunk, something has snapped. The doctor has said, that maybe Keith’s psyche has decided that it’s finally safe to heal its old traumata. From this point of view, it is a good sign. It proves that it’s good for him here. And, that he can heal.”

“Does he still sleep alone in his room?” - interrupts Shiro. His ears start to ring. How could Shiro have guessed that Keith is so good at hiding his fatigue?

“Yes. He’s refused to get a sleeping bag and sleep at my room, or the room where Lance and Hunk live…” - says Mr Fennel.

“Will his bed fit in Lance and Hunk’s room?” - almost growls Shiro.

“Yes, easily,” - replies Mr Fennel, watching him intently.

“I suddenly have a wish to organize another server room, able to support new monitoring devices, to the glory of my paranoia, and Keith’s room is, by coincidence, placed exactly right. Move him to the other two boys tomorrow,” - orders Shiro.

“I’ve been thinking along those lines,” - acknowledges him Mr Fennel.

“Has he slept alone all this time?” - now Shiro just feels tired.

“I’ve stayed with him every other night. Shiro, I’ve made him sleep during the day, like a preschooler. OK, one more time. Are we really sure that being positioned with the other two would help him?”

“No, but it’s always better to wake up to someone breathing next to you,” - replies Shiro. He would know. There’s also the issue of taking the choice from Keith’s hands, and it worries Shiro, too.

Then he has another thought, a more practical one:

“How about we invite my good doctor here next week? I feel really depressed, Steve.”

For the first time since the beginning of this conversation, Mr Fennel genuinely smiles.
“I’m sure he’ll consider it an honour to be able to help you, sir.”

“Good,” - answers Shiro and smiles exhaustedly in response.

They say goodbye to each other a little later.

Shiro walks back to his room, letting his head run any thoughts he has on the matter back and forth.

There’s a lot of spare room in Shiro’s own bed, and even more room for Keith’s bed in Shiro’s own room. Shiro would use a neighbour, too.

How funny that they have to struggle with that same problem. How funny that Keith is ready to suffer more, but will do his best not to involve his fragile Master Shiro. How sad that Keith’s fears to hurt Shiro more are not unfounded.

How sad that Shiro can’t even talk to Keith when it matters.

Or? What prevents him from doing so now? Another guilt trip for not reaching out to Keith in time of need will crush Shiro more effectively than any flashback ever could.

Shiro stops and turns his steps in the opposite direction.

This time, Shiro will at least try.

Chapter End Notes

We've been waiting for this, hehe? I mean, the Talk, not the porn))}
Sharing

Chapter Summary

Shiro goes to Keith’s room in order to have a talk. But something goes wrong, and Shiro has another violent flashback.

Chapter Notes

Hello, dear kitties! And doggos, if there are any

I know it's been forever, but I just couldn't make it right. This is an important chapter, to me, at least.
Such a tricky thing - writing a story. I've been waiting for this conversation forever but when it was time to write it all down I've been ill and had no thoughts in my head at all.

I hope you'll enjoy it

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's the door to Keith’s room.

Not letting his nerves to conquer him, Shiro knocks on it and immediately hears Keith respond.

“Please, come in!” - sounds Keith’s clear voice from the other side. Does he expect someone? Does someone visit Keith casually every so often? Mr Fennel? The boys? He most certainly doesn’t expect Shiro here.

All of a sudden, Shiro’s self-assuredness from five-minutes ago is all but gone. Keith is just on the other side of that door. Shiro just has to come in and… What if Keith doesn’t want to talk? What if Keith doesn’t want him to be here at all? Seconds are ticking by, and Shiro can’t make himself move.
If Shiro doesn’t enter right now, Keith will probably open the door from the inside and see his owner standing on the doorstep indecisively. There’s no better way to start a life-changing conversation. A quick thought of how much easier running away would be flashes in Shiro’s mind; Shiro groans internally, imagining Keith watching Shiro’s retreating butt and blinking in surprise. No way.

It’s Shiro’s time to influence the life of one of his charges. Shiro’s turn to try to help Keith, because he wants to and because he is eternally grateful to Keith for being so patient with him.

Shiro will do that.

Shiro will offer his help.

He can do this.

Despite this small self-encouragements, Shiro has to concentrate all his willpower to make one simple move with his hand. Whatever, he manages it in the end. He turns the knob and, finally, the door opens in front of him.
The room is as spartan as Shiro has remembered. Keith hasn’t added much personality to it which is sad, on the one hand, but also relieving, on the other, since Shiro wants Keith to move to another room anyway. Again, Shiro is struck by the thought of how wrong it is: giving Keith this room, his personal place, and then taking it back. It must be the first time in Keith’s life when he has been offered this much privacy.

He shouldn't have offered such a questionable solution. Abort, no moving Keith; they should just leave Keith be for once in Keith’s life.

Now Shiro feels stupid for ever considering the idea. Honestly, Shiro should just walk away right now, without explaining the real reason behind his impromptu visit. Keith doesn’t need to know. It’s good that Shiro has stopped before he could make things go down the hill. He has to make something up to cover his mistake; for example, tell Keith, that he’s decided to check on him, pretend that coming to Keith’s room is one of the ways Shiro is trying to become more open to other people. But first, Shiro has to at least greet Keith, yeah?

Shiro lifts his eyes from the floor (when has his gaze fallen there?). Keith stands in the centre of the room, barefoot on a small carpet. He wears dark-grey sweatpants and a black t-shirt. His dark hair looks extra shiny, it must be wet after a shower. It’s such a dazzling image that Shiro forgets that he’s come here to speak.

Keith is so soft like that. He looks comfortable; obviously, he is at home, he acts like that. Shiro feels warmth blooming in his chest from this realisation. It’s so nice to see that Keith has let his guard down. It means that Shiro’s been a good enough owner to make his house feel like home to Keith.

Between panicking and staring at Keith, Shiro only now notices that he still hasn’t crossed the threshold of the room. Shiro has received Keith’s explicit permission to come in and, obviously, they can’t talk like that, with Shiro hovering in the hallway.

It’s simple. Shiro has to enter the room and talk to Keith.

Despite Shiro’s best efforts to shake off the trance, it still takes him a few more seconds to get his bearings and make a step inside. Shiro shuts the door behind himself and looks around briefly. For the first time, Shiro is officially visiting his first (and favourite, screeches a treacherous voice from the back of his mind) slave.

Keith looks somewhat between awestruck and dumbfounded. It is kind of cute but it still doesn’t help to settle Shiro’s nerves much.

“Hello,” - says Shiro. His voice sounds weak even to his own ears.

“Master Shiro,” - says Keith in lieu of a greeting. He even sounds awed.

Shiro can hardly believe his ears. Keith has called him “Master Shiro” in his face. That’s a lot to take in for an evening such as this one. But, there must be a simple explanation: if Keith calls Shiro “Master Shiro” in his head, then it’s no surprise he’s said it aloud now, when he feels out of his depth.

It’s the worst timing. Previously, Keith has mercifully called Shiro “sir” in person, just like in the very beginning. Formal and polite, impersonal. Not making Shiro feel hot all over and horrified at once. Not making him freeze like a salt column.

This way, instead of making small-talk (which they are both able to do), they just stand on the
opposite sides of the small room, unable to tear their gazes from each other.

Keith’s face is unreadable for Shiro at the moment. Keith seems so far away despite standing in front of him. What is he thinking about?

When it comes to Shiro, everything is clear. He thinks about Keith; he thinks that Keith is beautiful. He’s so precious to Shiro. He would’ve told Keith that he likes him now (he wouldn’t have dared to say the word “love” aloud yet), if they were equals. If Keith wasn’t a slave. If Shiro wasn’t Keith’s Master. This is so fucked up, and, while Shiro hasn’t forgotten why he’s come here, he can’t stop marvelling at how mesmerizing Keith looks, can’t stop mourning all the opportunities they’ve lost simply by being born in different castes. He rarely lets his mind go there, knowing, how dangerous it might be. This is why his repressed infatuation catches him off guard when he expects it the least. Like right now.

Suddenly, Keith’s eyes go big (seems like he’s realized that he’s entered a kind of a staring contest with his master) and he averts his gaze. Shiro shakes off his reverie, too. By the way, he is back at square one - trying to say something. Nothing comes to mind. It’s a little disconcerting, how easy he’s lost his concentration.

What did he want to talk about?

Not about his feelings, for sure.

This was supposed to be about Keith. He wanted to do something to Keith, something he didn’t approve of, but still found necessary. Something Keith wouldn’t appreciate either. Why has Shiro chosen such a course of action, then?

Shiro can feel his breathing turning shallower. It’s a bad sign, and Shiro should end the situation right now to avoid going down with an episode. He should do something right now while he can still think. Ask for help? Whom? His head feels fuzzy.

Talking… He should be talking to Keith right now. But he obviously can’t. Why did he bother to try? He’s so damn useless when it comes to all this social life. But… He’s been so much better lately, why has he started stumbling anew? He’s come here aiming to help Keith. To help, not to confuse him or hurt his feelings. Which Shiro will end up doing anyway if he does that thing he’s forgotten about, the one that will most likely upset Keith. After this thought, Shiro’s memory dutifully supplies him with a reminder of how many things Keith has forgiven him already. Shiro’s selfishness, his aloofness, his inconsideration - the list is so long, and each item on it makes Shiro’s heart ache.

Would it maybe have been better if Shiro were a slave too? - thinks Shiro desperately. His head feels heavier with every second. Would it be easier to confess, to come closer to Keith, to be open and honest, if they were both slaves? It would, his mind supplies. It would. They would get close and fall in love. And then, after they’ve fallen in love, they would’ve been separated by their master who would sell one of them on a whim or send each of them to different premises. Or, most likely, Shiro wouldn’t have a chance at reaching out to Keith, let alone talking to him: for Keith is a well-trained sex-slave and he would most likely spend his time chained in his owner’s quarters, available for rape at any time. There’s no saying how much a different owner would like Keith’s services, his personality and his snark; or how much they would be inclined to share their pet with other owners, or even their servants…

That’s the last thought that is Shiro’s undoing. He can’t think of it. He can’t he can’t he can’t. He is Keith’s owner. Shiro is Keith’s owner. He won’t let this happen. Keith is safe. But, nevertheless, not heeding Shiro’s opinion, anonymous hands emerge from the fog, which has filled the room unnoticeably, try to touch Keith just in front of Shiro’s eyes. The hands try to restrain Keith, they
gropes him, make him cry and plead. Shiro doesn’t know what it is: his projections of his memories or his darkest fears personified. He can’t tell up from down anymore. It’s scary, and he feels helpless and lost. Completely out of control while Keith suffers because of his neglect.

Then, the faceless attackers seem to find interest in Shiro as well. Feeling someone’s hand touch his forearm hurts physically. Being touched himself turns out to be even worse than seeing Keith submit to ghostly abusers. Shiro can’t endure this anymore. It is an even deeper step down on the way to hell.

Shiro freezes. He’s thought he’d never have to remember this; those phantom fingers, those scalding touches… As always, nothing will help; whether Shiro fights or pretends that he doesn’t exist, the foreign hands won’t let him alone. He’ll thrash, and he’ll beg, and he’ll bleed, but no one will come and save him. Next, though, Shiro feels two hands grip his shoulders strongly, holding him, grounding him. This is a real touch, not a mirage by any means. And the hands are warm; just warm, nothing more. A little sweaty. But, where are the latex gloves, then? People who touch him against his will always wear gloves. This person clearly doesn’t. It’s not like it has been at the camp. Then, a voice trickles into Shiro’s whirling mind; a familiar voice. It doesn’t sound aggressive or exasperated, it doesn’t threaten Shiro or humiliate him. It’s warm, like the hands on his body. It calls out to him, it pleads. The owner of the voice sounds worried. Worried… for Shiro? Shiro has to tell the person that it’s a waste of time, to worry about him. He’s long gone, the Shiro who was worthy of anybody’s attention; he is long gone. There’s only this left. A ruined, scared man, who can’t save anyone. Not even himself. Can’t help… Whom was he supposed to be helping?

A name penetrates the fog in Shiro’s mind.

Keith.

“Keith?” - he repeats aloud, and he can recognise his own voice. His vision starts to clear, little by little, until finally, instead of an outline of a surgical room and ghosts from his past, he sees a small bedroom and Keith.

The ringing in Shiro’s ears has lessened, too, it seems. Because now he not only hears the voice which has been talking to him all this time, but he can also distinguish the words.

“Master Shiro, Shiro, please, please, come back. You’re safe, you’re home, no one will hurt you. Master Shiro, please, look at me, it’s OK, no one is going to hurt you here. No one is going to come close to you…”

Keith sounds calm and persistent, but his eyes, when Shiro can concentrate on them, are not. Actually, Keith looks frantic and close to panicking. That’s sad. Whatever the case though, Shiro is so glad to see him upon returning from the underworld. Keith is the best person to meet on the other side. He is warm. He won’t hurt Shiro.

And… He is so cute, thinks Shiro. It feels nice to be in the centre of Keith’s attention. Shiro smiles at him. He’s so glad to see Keith.

Keith sees recognition on Shiro’s part and his body sags in relief. He hugs Shiro tight (and Shiro’s single arm, which has been already tangled in Keith t-shirt), presses Keith to Shiro’s breast firmly. They should cuddle more often, feels so good, - thinks Shiro absently.

But soon (too soon) Keith tries to wiggle from under Shiro’s hold, and Shiro frowns at him unhappily. Then, he takes in the surroundings one more time, looks at Keith’s slightly red-rimmed eyes and stops himself from tugging Keith back. Keith now stands one step apart, his right hand still lying on Shiro’s left shoulder.
“You’ve scared me, sir,” - says Keith with a sheepish smile, attempting to mask his nervousness, and
his hand lifts from Shiro’s body, slowly, as if not to startle him. Shiro instantly feels cold without this
single point of contact. Keith straightens his posture and his eyes leave Shiro’s. Instead, he looks at
the floor. The magic is broken.

“You should sit, sir,” - suggests Keith. - “You may be dizzy”.

To show an example, Keith goes to his bed and sits down, then pats the place next to him, as if
inviting Shiro to follow.

It’s exactly two steps to the bed, and Shiro sways a little when he starts moving, just as Keith’s has
predicted. Immediately, Keith leaps to his feet to support Shiro and hovers over him until Shiro safely
lands on his butt. Keith stands near him, clearly not knowing what the protocol in a situation like this
should be. Now that Shiro is coming back to his senses, Keith looks 100% a nervous teenage boy. It
must be endearing, but it’s plain sad because Shiro doesn’t know what to do and how to make Keith
feel better. He is older and, technically, he is in charge. Come to think of it, Shiro and Keith meet
almost every day, talk about trivial things, have at least one hobby in common, know a lot about each
other at this point. They’ve been on their way to a stable relationship. Some would call them friends.
Why should Shiro’s mental state always interfere? How could this evening have become so horribly,
disgustingly awkward?

Keith breaks the silence.

“I should call Mr Fennel,” - he says, small and lost.

“No, I’ll be fine,” - answers Shiro automatically before he realizes that, perhaps, Mr Fennel was
needed as back-up for Keith, not for his “Master”.

Fuck this shit. Fuck Mr Fennel’s interference. Shiro will start from the beginning and talk to Keith.
He has recovered enough to remember that, before his flashback, he has intended to inform Keith
about his plan of moving him to the boys’ room. Anyway, this has been an excuse to not breach the
topic of Keith’s nightmares, to not make Keith fight the decision to not let him sleep alone.

Shiro is not as bad at lying as he has been back in the day. But he hates it. He hates white lies just as
much as any others. Thanks to his idea of manipulating Keith into thinking that Shiro has another
illogical wish because of his paranoia, Shiro has driven himself to another episode with this goddess-
forsaken overthinking of his. He hasn’t made anything better by trying to be smarter than Keith.
Keith may be a slave and a very stubborn boy, but he is very smart, too. Shiro should have at least
tried to persuade him normally like Mr Fennel did. Then, if Keith declined to cooperate, Shiro could
act as an owner who values his slave’s well-being more than his opinion (or, attitude). It would be
more like Shiro. Keith would be angry at him, but (and Shiro is sure that he can foresee some of
Keith’s reactions by now) he would’ve come around. Although Mr Fennel, who knows Keith better
than anyone, has agreed with Shiro’s idea, it hasn’t made the idea itself more useful. Shiro tends to
forget that Mr Fennel isn’t always right. Because he is a human and makes mistakes too. Now, when
Shiro is too exhausted to gloss his words over, he is going to just say what’s on his mind and regret
what he’s said later. If Keith will think that Shiro is one hypocritical bastard by the end of the day, so
be it. It won’t be so far from the truth.

Shiro finds his resolve to trick Keith from half an hour ago silly and impractical. He and Keith are
both straightforward, when possible. They prefer to hear nasty things told openly.

Maybe, it is the seed of Shiro’s current woes. He forgot how to make it easy. How to say what’s on
his mind for real, without sugar-coating it. How to use honesty to become stronger.
He has been kidding himself for years.

Shiro is not a unique case whom nobody can help. He is a scared and a tired case. He still needs therapy, has needed it for years. He’s a patient who has lost hope, but Shiro has convinced himself that he is hopeless.

He is not if a good boy like Keith worries about him.

Shiro worries about Keith as well. He wants to ask Keith to stop acting up and accept help. To be more mature than Shiro.

An afterthought flashes in Shiro’s mind. Maybe, it’s time for Shiro to stop being stubborn as well and seek help for real?

Keith stands in front of Shiro, just like before, with his eyes downcast.

Without saying a word, Shiro tugs him by the arm and makes him sit down, too. Before Keith goes deeper into his shell, Shiro starts talking and offers the first thing that comes to his mind when he thinks about Keith.

“Why are you so kind to me?” - asks Shiro, making Keith startle.

Keith looks at Shiro as if the latter has gone insane and says incredulously:

“It’s you who is kind to me, sir, and you’ve always have been.”

“Oh no,” - disagrees Shiro, feeling bold and not looking for excuses anymore. - “What good have I done? I’ve bought you. Like cattle.”

It’s incredibly liberating to speak up his mind. Even if the words feel rotten on his tongue.

Keith inhales sharply.

Shiro slides down from the bed and makes himself comfortable on the floor. He stretches his legs on that carpet, closes his eyes and relaxes. Keith stays where he is while Shiro gathers his wits.

“Keith? We need to talk,” - announces Shiro when he deems himself steady enough to hold a conversation. It’s easier to speak with his eyes closed. Doesn’t feel like the world around him may change into a torture chamber from his flashback at any moment.

Keith makes a noise, somewhere between “huh” and “duh”. He hasn’t commented on Shiro’s rude statement.

Shiro begins with an apology:

“I’m sorry for what I’ve said earlier. But, in our country selling people is organized in a similar fashion to cattle trade and the meaning is the same. It makes me feel disgusting, or, more like, disgusted with myself. I’ve never bought a slave before you. You know why?”

“No, sir,” - answers Keith. He’s slipped into a polite, listless tone. Doesn’t know how to process new info, then; doesn’t know what to think of Shiro anymore.

But Shiro is so fed up of feeling guilty when all he’s done is acting upon an impulse and trying to help at least one human being to avoid being stomped on for the duration of his life.
“I hate this system,” - says Shiro with conviction. - “Have always hated. The first thing I’ve done after I’ve buried my parents and got a little bit steady on my feet was to relocate the slaves from this mansion to my other land plots. My parents didn’t have many slaves, and all of the ones they had have been old. So it happened. They’ve been buying ageing slaves and letting them serve at our household. A form of charity, yes. I couldn’t look the slaves in the eyes. Most of them had scars or phobias. Maybe, it’s been a cruel decision not to continue this tradition, but I wanted to not have anything in common with this system. I’ve never ordered to euthanize any of the old slaves, the same as my parents before me. I’ve given them medical help. Whatever the case, they’ve all died before I’ve bought you. The last one has died two years ago. He’s been 63. Too exhausted to live longer. He tended to a greenhouse on one of my farms. His colleagues (free people, of course) have said that he looked fine in the evening, eager to see some flowers bloom soon. He’s never awoken.”

Shiro has seen his photos. A cheerful man, a hard-working, too. The others have died at 55, 57, 61… The oldest one has died at 66, a woman. Shiro has a big collection of photos, actually. A whole album of faces - not to forget.

Keith speaks up, breaking off Shiro’s reverie. His voice is a bit hoarse.

“It’s a good death,” - says Keith, and Shiro startles and has to open his eyes to look back at him.

Keith looks dishevelled and very serious.

“It’s a good death,” - repeats Keith, and explains: “You know just how many slaves of his age have to die from a venom in hospital beds?”

“No, I don’t,” - says Shiro and looks ahead again.

“Almost all of them,” - mumbles Keith.

“So, you think I could bring this practice back?” - asks Shiro. - “Hiding from the reality of slavery hasn’t helped. I have to thank Matt for that, of course.”

“Were you… hiding?” - asks Keith, unbelieving.

“Yes,” - states Shiro. Again, it feels good to speak up his mind like that.

“But, why? You’re, like, at the top of the pyramid.”

“It’s a stupid, ugly, non-efficient pyramid. Don’t want to be a part of it,” - says Shiro, playing up his childishness.

Keith is not amused.

“But it is there. The slavery, I mean. The things you wear, the things you eat, the things you use for your work - everything has been made by slaves and sold by their owners. You can’t just pretend it’s not there!”

Keith almost shouts in the end. Shiro just feels tired. He has ignored the truth for so long. Doesn’t mean that when he’s ready to accept it he has to be enthusiastic about it.

“I’m sorry. If I could’ve changed it, I would,” - says Shiro dully.

“I’m not talking about that!” - now Keith definitely shouts, and boy, does this sound hurt Shiro’s already aching head. - “It’s just so… So… So ignorant and… disrespectful to the people who die from hard work every day, or get abused every day, or get raped every day! And you! You just say
you’ve hidden from it. Tried to believe it doesn’t exist.”

Keith deflates by the end of the last sentence, seemingly having exhausted his anger. He is perplexed by Shiro’s admission.

It must hurt, to hear Keith’s words, but it doesn’t.

“I’m sorry the world is that way, Keith. I feel sorry that I’ve been so weak. The reality doesn’t change much, whether I buy slaves or not. The way it is now, I give workplaces to a lot of men and women who won’t need to sell themselves into slavery because they do have money to buy food for the family. I give money to charity. I don’t go to places where slaves are required to accompany all owners.”

“And you’ve bought me,” - says Keith, as if continuing this list.

“Yes, I have,” - agrees Shiro. He wants to see where Keith will take their conversation.

“Why?” - asks Keith.

“That’s simple. I have thought about you: “This one will get himself killed very, very soon. I don’t want that”. And then I was already at the pay-office.”

Keith makes that non-committal humming noise again.

“So, it’s been charity?” - he asks a few seconds later.

“Call it whatever, but you are here and you are not beaten up bloody. I’ve succeeded.”

“You’re so arrogant, Master Shiro,” - says Keith, sounding surprised.

Shiro snorts.

“There was a time when people used to think I’m an angel. Especially my dating partners, those girls and boys who saw my smile and my perfect grades and my muscles and decided that I’m prime boyfriend material. You should’ve seen their faces when I’d tell them that I need to study and I don’t have time for a cinema visit.”

This time, it’s Keith who snorts. Moreover, he starts cackling. Keith doesn’t stop his horrendous laughter until Shiro throws Keith’s own pillow at him.

“You know, Master Shiro, you haven’t changed much.”

Shiro stares at Keith, unimpressed. Keith elaborates.

“Nowadays, you’d tell them: “I need to work, honey, see those bags under my eyes? They don’t grow themselves, you know”.

It is said with a straight face, and Shiro, for the first time in his life, wants to strangle someone more than he’s ever wanted to strangle Mr Fennel. He tries to come up with a retort, but Keith sobers up before that and says quietly:

“I don’t consider you guilty, sir. I think that it’s you who is kind to me, not backwards. You treat me well. More than that, I feel like I mean something next to you.”

Keith is so vulnerable, and yet he trusts Shiro with this, after all the cynical crap Shiro has just said.
“If I am kind, as you say, sir, then it’s a normal response to your kindness,” - continues Keith.

Shiro can’t agree here.

“No, you’ve been very kind to me in the very beginning when all I’ve done was buying you and promising to whip you in my office. I’ve humiliated you, making you wash yourself in my presence and take that plug out. I was acting so cocksure it’s cringeworthy. And then, when I had an attack, you’ve held me. Instead of just calling for help you’ve rushed to me, not letting me fall to the ground and split my skull, and you’ve held me. You’ve been very careful and delicate. You’ve helped a stranger, who intended to spank you personally. A stranger who held your life in his hands, but still.”

“But I knew you won’t be a dick. Sir.”

Shiro rolls his eyes.

“Oh yeah? How about disappearing for a month after trying to get to know you better? Not a dick move?”

“You were unwell.”

“But still…”

“Sir. You have panic attacks. You’ve had a trauma. I’ve read about it. It’s serious. Don’t do this to yourself, don’t say that you were a dick when you weren’t. You’ve needed time for yourself, and I get it.”

“You’ve thought I was disappointed in you. It has hurt,” - states Shiro.

“Yes, - agrees Keith. - “Now I know more and I don’t blame you.”

“So you’ve blamed me, after all.”

“No. I’ve blamed myself. Now I don’t blame myself, too.”

“Good,” - says Shiro and they leap into a comfortable silence.

Then, Shiro changes the topic abruptly.

“What about you? Your nightmares?”

“Ow. That’s why you came here.”

Shiro hums in agreement.

Keith crawls down to the floor and sits cross-legged next to Shiro. Shiro turns to him.

“You want to ask about nightmares? They are dreadful,” - says Keith looking Shiro in the eyes. - “I wake up screaming.”

Shiro swallows nervously.

“So what about them?” - asks Keith, sighing.

“I want you to move in with Lance and Hunk. Then, a doctor will come to see me. I mean, I’ll have therapy sessions. You’ll have some, too. It’ll be the same doctor you’ve spoken to on the phone, so it should be fine.”
Keith doesn’t say anything. He still looks at Shiro.

“I’m sorry I have decided everything without asking you first. If you really don’t want to lose this room, I can arrange something. I mean, personal space and all,” - offers Shiro not to stay silent.

Keith laughs at that.

“I only sleep in here. I spend more time in Mr Fennel’s study and in the glass library than here.”

Shiro cocks his head to the side.

“Yeah? No temper tantrums, no angry stares, nothing?” - he inquires.

“Would it do any good?”- counters Keith.

“No. Mr Fennel already plans a server room in here,” - admits Shiro sheepishly.

“This answers my question well,” - summarizes Keith.

“Why are you so calm?” - Shiro can’t help but ask.

“It’s called “accepting things you can’t change,”” - explains Keith with a solemn expression.

“Is this how you’ve managed to come so far?” - laughs Shiro.

To his surprise, Keith doesn’t share his fun.

“Actually, yes,” - says Keith, and it sounds like a prelude to a long story, if Shiro wants it to be.

Shiro shuffles on the floor so that he can look at Keith at a better angle. He concentrates all his attention on Keith, non-verbally asking him to tell his story.

Keith smiles a little at Shiro, pleased.

Just as Shiro has guessed:

“I’ve never talked to anyone about all this,” - and Keith dives into his narration headfirst, immersing Shiro in the vision of his past.

Chapter End Notes

Now, my dears, thank you for reading, so much!

I hope I haven't overdone it with Shiro's visions. I tend to be dramatic with him. Actually, writing Shiro is therapeutic. I put in his mouth (and head) all the things I keep thinking of lately.

Please, leave comments if you have anything to say! ^--^
Coming Undone

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Hello, my happy mice!

Another chapter is there to torment your tender hearts. Not joking here, proceed with caution. Keith's life has been far from ideal. I mean, I've added the rape warning.

There will be another chapter of that... shit.

Also, 6k words. No, I'm not mad at myself for keeping myself awake and writing. No, my eyes are not red and my head doesn't ache from sleep-deprivation. Fuck my life.

Enjoy the ride! If you can.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s 7 p.m. It’s getting dark behind the curtains of the sole window in Keith’s room. It’s quiet; the sort of quiet that prefaces a revelation; however, a good or a bad one, goes unsaid.

Keith talks, watching straight ahead; Shiro sits on the floor, watching Keith’s face from the side, and listens, his headache and his unsolvable problems forgotten.

Keith’s voice is naturally a little rough, even more so when he is overcome with emotions. But today, he sounds hoarse, raw. Shiro does his best to not let himself be affected by Keith’s overwhelming presence, his boiling feelings too much. Keith needs him collected, he needs Shiro’s judgement as much as he seeks his attention. Keith aches to be heard, for once. Shiro will grant his wish, gladly.

Were Shiro less tired, he would’ve been elated to be let so close to Keith’s sacred memories. For the first time since he’s mentioned the death of his father on that warm summer night so long ago, Keith is lifting the veil over his past life a little and allows Shiro to take a peek. As it is, Shiro is still more than willing to listen, to learn everything that Keith is ready to show. He can’t believe that they’ve come far enough in their relationship with Keith for Keith to be able to trust him this much.

Because the things that Keith says - they are not for an owner to hear. They are harsh and cruel things, the ones which are always kept hidden from the view of those who rule this society by those who live and die at its bottom. There is a lot to take in, even for an ex-prisoner of war.

It’s also a long story, of course. An unbearably long, unfair and devastating story. Shiro has been shielding himself from this sort of knowledge all his waking life but has been unable to make it disappear entirely from the world around him.
Shiro’s reaction to slavery has always been different from the reactions of his environment. He suspects that something had scared him a lot, or that he’d felt repulsed very strongly by something connected with the slavery lifestyle when he’s been small, and the trauma has preserved. Shiro has always tried to keep his interactions with slaves (any slaves) at the bare minimum. At the same time, he could barely sustain his reprehension when someone treated a slave poorly. Shiro has been a model boy all his childhood and youth, that’s why, when he’s acted weird or avoided some events because of his “whim”, no one has tried to push him too hard to act normal - neither his parents nor the school authorities. No one has tried to forcefully make Shiro abandon his “little quirks”, as one of his uncles has called it once. Shiro is sure that his ever-present unwillingness to ignore his relatives’ cruelty towards their slaves is the reason behind the ostracism they put him through now.

Maybe, muses Shiro, if he would have visited that uncle, walking naked Keith on a leash and ordering him around rudely, his family would’ve recognised Shiro as one of the kin and forgiven him. One small detail - there’s no way in hell Shiro would do that, ever. He is disgusted with himself for even contemplating such an idea.

Keith clears his throat for the umpteenth time, breaking Shiro’s reverie. He is definitely not used to talking much despite having to speak to a lot of different people during his working time every day. Maybe, Keith’s lack of habit to talk about himself is more at fault here. Maybe, it’s simply nerves.

Shiro doesn’t know what he’s expected. Some grim mystery? Something atrocious? Instead, Keith’s past is not complicated and not surprising, taking his slave’s status into account.

OK, it is atrocious, corrects Shiro himself. But he will listen, through sheer willpower, if necessary.

Mostly, Keith narrates everything in chronological order, his tone dry and his voice steady. But, sometimes Keith would go around in circles, repeating itself or losing some of the logic or connections between its parts. Or it is just Shiro, losing his focus every so often - his intense thinking process won’t let him listen as attentive as he would like to. As a result, the beginning of Keith’s story gets divided into small pieces, each of them leaving a bright and vivid trace in Shiro’s memory.

“We lived with my father in a small house. It was two-storied, and there were two more families living in it. We had a bedroom to ourselves, on the second floor, but the bathrooms and the kitchen we had to share.”

“My father worked on the farm, I went to school. Thankfully, slave kids can’t be used for labour until they come of age. Attending a school or a boarding school is always better than full-on working, I guess.”

“Everyone in the village lived like we did, so, as a kid, I didn’t think that our life was hard or unfair.”

“I’ve had a couple of friends, and we would play hide and seek in the gardens, or between the greenhouses, or just run along the crop fields, watching our neighbours tend to the plants or drive some farm machines.”

“There were rabbits, among other animals. We, the village kids, would come to pet them, as often as we were allowed. Each of us would choose a favourite animal. You can’t imagine how hard we’ve cried when it’s been the time for them… You know, to become pelts and fillet.”

“I was responsible for the cleanliness of our room because dad had to work. He praised me every evening, and I was so proud of myself. I was doing the job just as good as the neighbours’ daughters who were all older than me.”
“I learned how to cook at four or five, I think. One of the older girls from our house has taught me. I wanted to impress my father with being skilled so I’ve trained for two weeks before I tried to cook something for dinner. The evening I’ve tried to, it’s been a total disappointment. My dad came home to a steaming broth, but, instead of praising me first, as I’ve expected, he’s covered his face with his hands and, I think, tried not to cry. I didn’t know why he’s acting like that and decided that my meal looks too bad. I took the steaming plate and attempted to take it back to the kitchen, tripped over my own feet, burned my arm… My dad has apologized later, while tending to my burn, has told me that I’m his greatest helper. It was nice but the evening has been ruined. My dad has been always so concerned that I have to grow up alone; that he has to raise me alone. More than I ever was, actually. I’ve had my dad, what else would I need, right?”

“I’ve asked about my mother, of course. Other kids did have fathers and mothers. Some would even tease me. It felt horrible to be teased for having been abandoned by your own parent.”

“It is convenient to make slaves raise their own kids and teach them how to do their work before they pass away. Better than grow kids in a state institution from their birth. I’ve heard that from an overseer in the boarding school - he’s said that children grow up not damaged psychologically that way.”

“I could have stayed in the village, at 12, were a family with one kid or without any willing to take me in. I believe someone would agree, but the boarding school needed pupils, so, I’ve been not allowed to stay.”

“It was after he’d died that I had to go. No farm life for me, see? That accident...” - Keith’s voice shakes a little with suppressed grief.

Shiro can’t stop his words of sympathy, even if he’s intended not to interrupt the story initially:

“I’m sorry, Keith. I think I can imagine what you were feeling. You know how my parents have died.”

“No, actually, no, sir,” - Keith turns to look at Shiro, concerned.

“A car crash. They’ve both died within two days,” - replies Shiro. It doesn’t even hurt to say it like that. He’s told different people the same thing so many times over the years. Only a few have cared for real. Shiro’s survived his parents’ deaths and moved on. If Shiro doesn’t concentrate on the details of his memories from that tragedy too much, he won’t feel anything in particular. Or is it just him trying to convince himself that he’s stopped hurting? Anyway, for the sake of his sanity, Shiro doesn’t let himself go there now; when his parents had died, his suffering had been all-encompassing and seemed endless. Shiro doesn’t want to live through this ever again, and Keith’s genuine sorrow catches him off guard and makes him furrow his brows.

“I’m sorry for your loss, too” - says Keith, quiet and sincere. His eyes are big and suspiciously shiny. He swallows and mutters: “It’s been years, but it still hurts so much when I think about my dad.”

“Yeah,” - mutters Shiro numbly. He just won’t go there now; he’s had enough of horror for one day, what with that awful flashback. He can’t. Shiro feels a little guilty for not letting his own sorrow unfurl, but, if he did, he wouldn’t be able to function, and Keith’s story is far from its end. It’s his duty to listen to the whole length of it.

The moment freezes between them; Keith letting his feelings flood him and Shiro building dams to not feel that pain anymore. Shiro’s dams seem to be made from thin ice: they’ll crack and split open
from the easiest pressure, drowning Shiro in inky-black nothingness, and Shiro is truly horrified by it.

It takes time to calm down, to come back to their senses. The silence stretches around them, until Shiro sighs loudly, unable to endure it any longer. Shiro turns his gaze to Keith, hunched over his knees, and allows himself to briefly squeeze Keith’s shoulder in a show of compassion; Keith looks up at him and smiles sadly. The moment is broken (luckily for both of them).

Then, as if a switch has been flipped, Keith is back on track. These abrupt changes in demeanour always startle Shiro; it’s as if there are multiple Keiths who show themselves at different times. As if Keith has just summoned one of his masks and hid behind it.

Anyway, Keith’s narration starts anew, and Shiro braces himself for more. Keith doesn’t disappoint. This time, though, Shiro participates in the conversation rather than just sitting idly. Simply listening is too passive for him.

“You know, they’ve punished me a lot at that boarding school,” - says Keith in a way of introduction.

“Yes,” - Shiro indicates that he listens.

“It’s been shitty. But, my father, he’s always told me that, no matter what, I need to preserve myself. So this was what I did.”

“Preserved yourself? You mean, by not letting them hurt you too much? Harm you?” - asks Shiro, needing a clarification.

“No, not like that, it’s... more complicated,” - says Keith and huffs in annoyance. Shiro can tell that this concept means a lot to him, and Keith wants to make Shiro understand. After a minute of mumbling aggressively and tumbling his hair, Keith continues: “It is more like not letting anyone corrupt my image of myself.”

Still not pleased with his explanation, Keith puts a hand against his mouth and mutters, angrily: “Whatever.”

Shiro ignores the dismissive last sentence and asks delicately, trying to help Keith explain his thought:

“So, your father has been telling you to defend your... core? Like, the important things?”

Shiro’s method is working, it seems, because Keith nods, relieved.

“My father has always said that I’m smart and kind, that I should not believe anyone who says otherwise. I think now, that he had to contemplate all this for a long time, to make a strategy or something, because his actions look far more logical now than they’ve looked when I’ve been a kid. He wanted me to survive as a slave but still stay a person, I think. Does it make sense?”

“Yes,” - confirms Shiro. - “It makes perfect sense. Any caring parent would want their child to stay unharmed, as much as possible”.

Keith smiles at Shiro, a rare and beautiful thing, before straightening his spine and starting to talk again. He is serious and thoughtful when he says:

“He would tell me that, as a slave, I don’t own anything, that's why I don’t have to worry about
things - there’s nothing mine even at the place where I live. He’d say that my body is not mine as well. I would argue, but he’d tell me that, as soon as I turn 16, I’ll have to use my body for work, any work my owner deems right for me, without having any say in it. He would also remind me since I’ve turned 7 years old and went to school, that I can be spanked by the teachers or the overseers. Again, no control over my body.”

Shiro’s body trembles a little, involuntarily. Keith looks at him with concern.

“Continue, Keith, I’m fine,” - says Shiro impatiently. The phrase of “no control over my body” rings in his head on a loop.

But instead of listening to Shiro, Keith takes his phone and taps on the screen quickly. Then, he shows Shiro the text sent to Mr Fennel a second ago: “My room; telling M-r Shiro about my past.” Answering text chimes in before Shiro can voice his displeasure at being sold out. “I’ll stay alert,” - informs Mr Fennel.

Shiro’s annoyance at being held for a fragile, worrisome thing lifts up after Keith’s earnest words that Shiro may need medical help if a second attack happens the same evening. “I won’t be able to soothe you again,” - adds Keith, firmly, and Shiro puts himself in Keith’s place, imagines watching his owner thrash mindlessly in panic, and feels childish for his pettiness. Keith doesn’t need more trouble to carry. In the meantime, Keith decides what he wants to tell Shiro next and announces:

“So, I wanted to tell you about my first experience with corporal discipline.”

Shiro doesn’t feel like listening, to be true.

“What about your father and control over your body - what has he offered?”- interrupts Shiro, in an attempt to find a safer thing to talk about. He only manages to prolong this torture.

“Oh, yeah, this,” - says Keith, oblivious. - “He’s said that my thoughts are mine only, and that the only way to stay myself is to keep others out of my head.”

“That so? And, what then?” - Shiro is still trying to avoid the topic Keith wants to discuss.

“And then he’d come up with this crap about accepting what I can’t change and changing what I can. And deciding which is which. Annoyingly, my father’s words have proven to be right so far, even if I still feel the wish to act up every time I meet an obstacle instead of coming to terms with it. Anyway, I would’ve gone crazy if I let myself contemplate every little thing they’ve done to me. Later I’ve understood that this has been one hell of a wisdom.”

Shiro frowns. He gets very angry very quickly when he thinks of Keith’s abusers.

In front of him, Keith is biting his lip; the gesture would be adorable if Shiro didn’t know what it means right now: more unsettling news.

“I think there is a bit more to tell about my father and his ways of… preparing me for my future adult life as a slave,” - murmurs Keith. Then, he steels himself and starts narrating in an even tone:

“I’ve been 6 and a half when my father has told me he needs to show me something. It won’t be nice, he’s said. Some things just need to be done heedlessly of whether we want it or not. He said that in school I will be spanked for my mistakes. If the first spanking was to happen to me at school, it may scare me a lot, that’s why he thinks a demonstration is needed. He’s intoned that he is not angry with me, nor is it a punishment. Just a demonstration.

He has spanked me, then. It didn’t hurt much, but I’ve felt so vulnerable, bent over the kitchen table,
with my pants lowered, with my dad doing it to me. After about ten spanks, I’ve told him to stop, and he did. I’ve twisted from under his hands, and, while he was telling me how I would have to endure every strike if I were at an overseers mercy, I ran away through the door. I hid somewhere between the greenhouses afterwards. Didn’t return till the evening. Just sat there, cried and thought “how could he, how could he, why won’t he save me from this”… I’ve felt betrayed. When the sun has gone low, I’ve been very tired and lonely already, and I wanted home. My dad hasn’t come looking for me, and for that, I’ve been grateful, - for not changing this routine. My father trusted me to come back on my own on regular days, and I have been proud of his trust. I used to return home after my games with the other kids before he had to start worrying. This time, I didn’t want to go. But spending time on the street didn’t seem very nice, and I’ve walked myself to our little house, slowly, dragging my feet, trying to postpone the meeting with my father for as long as I could.

To top it all, I’ve felt a little guilty for not making it home on time. I was afraid that my father will scold me. That was it for us - if I misbehaved, he scolded me and forbid me to go play with other kids, or took my few books away. I knew my dad didn’t have time and energy for any temper-tantrums a kid may have, so I tried to be like adults - calm and collected. But I was still a stupid kid…”

Keith wavers and he has to turn away from Shiro to rub at his eyes. Then, he talks again, this time with feeling:

“When I entered our room, the lights were out. My father has been sitting there, in the dark, motionless, his head in his hands. At that same table where he’s reddened my ascheeks earlier. There’s been such utter despair in all of his posture... I’ve been overcome with sympathy and ache for him. I forgot about my own hard feelings, ran to him and hugged him.

My dad made a few more demonstrations, later during that last summer before school. I’ve behaved and didn’t run away. I came to him myself on the days he’s indicated in our calendar and reminded him. It hurt more with each time, but I took it as a challenge. I have thought, my dad was pleased with me. Now I can’t imagine how he’s managed to hide his suffering from me, to smile at me afterwards... We are so alike in this - we hate when people around us are in pain...

I didn’t know then but I know now. It’s been a brave thing for my dad to do. He could have lost my trust entirely. Scared me off. But it didn’t happen, luckily. I suppose, he knew me well to propose this “demonstration”. I’ve felt prepared when the teacher has first told me that I need a correction, somewhere in my first year of school. I knew that it’ll be horrible, but, afterwards, my father will hug me and tell me, that I’ve taken it well. Everything will be OK after the spanking is done.

I… didn’t take my first correction at school well.” - a rueful laugh slips from Keith’s lips at that, and Shiro can’t help but shiver, again. - “They’ve used a thin birch, and it has hurt like nothing else before has. I tried to stay still, or quiet, but I couldn’t. The pain was too much.

At home, my father was livid after seeing those long, thin welts. But… He praised me still. I didn’t understand why. I’ve told him that I couldn’t take it. That I haven’t succeeded at accepting my punishment. His gaze was so full of pain then. I didn’t understand at all. I’ve been such a dense little boy. My dad has said: “You’ve done your best, Keith, right? Next time, you’ll do better”. I only sniffled and nodded my head in response. The welts have been all but gone by the next morning. I couldn’t believe my eyes. The pain has been so great and what, no evidence has been left?”

Shiro watches as Keith pretends that he is all right, that he’s gone away from that shit unscathed, and lets him do it. Keith may be safer for now while he acts. Shiro’s head is alight with thoughts. Would his father have done this for Shiro? How would Shiro take it? What would he tell a willing listener as an adult about being spanked by his own father just for the sake of being shown how it goes? What
would his father’s kind face morph into when he would raise his hand to his beloved child or worse, wield his belt or a stick to hurt him?

Meanwhile, Keith shakes his head in dark amusement.

“I’ve been so stubborn. I thought that if I want it enough I will power through any pain, that I won’t show the adults how much the spankings hurt.

I’ve been lucky to be beaten as often as I have been at the village school. The school administration has given me plenty of room to train my endurance until I’ve turned 12. It helped a lot later, at the boarding school. A few other kids had it as hard as me in the village. Several girls annoyed the hell out of our teachers as if they’ve been asking for trouble. I didn’t understand back then that they were simply too scared to wait; that a beating is better than the expectation of one. Me? I wasn’t scared of the indefinite. My problem was that I always wanted everything to be fair. My mouth wouldn’t give me a break.

My dad… instead of telling me to watch my tongue he’s given me advice on how to take different strikes better. He knew me well. Ridiculous. I’ve been ridiculous.”

Keith heaves a deep sigh, and Shiro breathes in with him, their lungs drawing in the air in tandem. Keith closes his hands into fists at his sides and talks again, watching the floor under his feet:

“The school in the village has been a far cry from the boarding school. And, the worst thing - I’ve been all alone there.”

This part will be the worst. Shiro knew it would be, but the truths Keith reveals still burn him, still make wrath coil tightly under Shiro’s skin. He isn’t afraid of a panic attack anymore. He is afraid that he’ll take a car and go to that school now, to strangle its overseers, its director, every single teacher who has laid his fingers on Keith or made him watch the others struggle.

“In the boarding school, they’ve taught me the basic rules of conduct first. How to move, how to greet, how to sit or stand. It… has been hard. Because I’ve thought (and still think) that this is bullshit.”

“They would discipline me for everything. They would say so many derogatory things to me, insult me, try to crush me. I remembered what my father was trying to tell me. Only then have I understood the true meaning of his words.”

“I’ve just told myself every time: “They don’t know me. They won’t change me. I won’t show them what’s on the inside”. I’ve agreed to say whatever they wanted me to say. Ever since that training, it’s like there are two Keiths. One is the real me, and the other is the clone of me who doesn’t have (or need) any pride and could do practically anything if ordered to. I wonder where the border lies.”

“There was this woman who looked right through me. She frightened me. One day she said this scary thing. “You’re too smart to be a good little slave. But, if a Master is smarter than you, he’ll know how to tame you. Then, you’ll give yourself over to him. All of you,” - she’s said with a nasty sneer. I have been horrified. All my attempts at hiding my real personality - useless?”

“They’ve told us from the beginning that we can’t masturbate. Because our cocks are not ours to command. I’ve been 12, remember? I wasn’t even so interested in all this yet. But, they haven’t forbidden us to touch ourselves entirely in our first three years there. Instead, they’ve restricted us with only Thursdays, for a start. If someone was caught with his hand down his pants on some other
weekday, he’d spend the night with his hands bound to the bed rails. They haven’t touched us sexually until we turned 14. Aside from usual school subjects, there was etiquette, discipline and more discipline. Learning submission. At 14, we’ve started to train with mannequins and sex toys. It’s been not so bad. I’ve decided to look at it as at physical exercises; it was almost fun to train to meet their requirements."

“We’ve had a lot of standard school lessons, of course. I liked sports the most there, apart from books. We played volleyball, two times a week. Seems like they’ve found out that kids go crazy without good things, after all. They’ve taught us dancing, too, but I didn’t like it much. We could also run on a track if we wanted. I’ve been running every evening. This is a thing you do alone, you know?"

Keith seems stable enough not to worry about the state of his mind, whereas Shiro feels numb. To shake this feeling off, at least a little, he says:

“I didn’t like running much. Working out was more of my forte.”

His phrase does lighten the mood, as intended.

“I can see that,” - laughs Keith.

Shiro smiles. He could watch Keith smile for eternity. Shiro already feels the tension ebb away, when suddenly Keith’s laugh fades, his expressions darkens.

“They’ve spanked us every second evening. Imagine, a room full of boys, taking their spankings. Mostly, the regular spankings have been light, but other boys would still be so vocal about every damned strike. Imagine, everyone around you is hurting, some are almost mute, like you, but the others - no, not so much. They whine, and moan in pain, and even try to beg for mercy. I could do this thing my dad has taught me to myself, I mean, accept my fate and all, but the other boys - they were suffering and I couldn’t do a thing. I couldn’t help, even if I couldn’t stand their pain. Every other evening, Shiro.”

Keith holds his head in his arms as if he tries to shield himself from the painful memories. He is as honest and open as possible, his very soul bared to Shiro’s view.

“That sounds awful,” - comments Shiro lamely, just to not start another silent pause. But it’s enough to make Keith perk up. He almost snarls when he throws the words like punches:

“Oh yeah. Fucking disgusting. They would also punish us for real at Saturdays, that was another matter entirely than the evening discipline. I must add, there was no evening spanking on Saturdays. A small mercy.” - Keith laughs, humorlessly, and goes on: - “They would use different paddles, and whips, and canes, and we were all so scared and helpless. Even I. They’ve punished not our asses only, at that. I got disciplined severely almost every week. I’ve managed to look defiant even at my most obedient. I haven’t lucked out with my face or my character.”

The last sentiment Shiro can’t share, and he almost comments on it, but then Keith squirms on his ass, making Shiro remember that Keith’s ass is freshly spanked right now. The sentence dies on his lips.

The story continues, regardless of Shiro’s inner turmoil.

“The school was not allowed to teach its pupils how to fuck on living examples. Strangely, but this rule is strictly obeyed. Perhaps, the fines are big or something. That’s why they only molest the kids a little since they turn 14. I mean, that’s when they’ve started teaching us how to use our assholes,
with toys and gentle hands. I’d say who would care if they raped a kid at 15 already, not at 16, as it happens? Why wait? A small reprieve is better than nothing, though, yeah? That’s why, as I said, we’ve had dummies. We’ve practised on sex dolls and sex toys.”

It’s a strange turn of conversation. Shiro is even more surprised when Keith gets agitated over his next line.

“You know, Shiro, some female dolls have been so innocent-looking, I’ve felt horrible training on them,” - says Keith with conviction. Keith seems displeased that such a meaningless thing has attracted his attention while he’s lived in dread every day. He, and dozens of other alive boys.

“Yeah?” - swallows Shiro. He doesn’t ask about male dolls. (Un)luckily, Keith mentions it anyway.

“Yeah! That was like, ten times more horrible than getting just a plastic vagina to lick at. The male dolls were not as bad. We were all used to beautiful boys being treated like dirt, after all.”

Shiro is out of his depth here. Luckily, Keith has a lot to say and doesn’t expect much reaction. Keith doesn’t notice how Shiro has to fight his nausea, caught-up in his not-fading anger.

“Anyway, what I’ve been trying to say, is that when a boy or a girl at such school turns 16, he or she is legally fuckable. The kids belong to the school, why not use them a while longer? So, when selling a graduation class, they would leave two or three persons behind to teach them more thoroughly and sell at a higher price later. I think they’ve organized the whole school-thing to be able to find those unhappy ones who would answer their requirements and earn themselves this special training regime. They would select the most naturally submissive persons, or just very beautiful or unusual in appearance.”

“In my last year, there have been two 17-years-old boys, who have been chosen for this special training. So beautiful, submissive and pliant - even I could tell they were special. What has been a struggle for me, came easily to them. Or so I’ve thought. Like a vision, they would stand in a corridor, chained to a wall, their arms outstretched over their heads, writhing and panting through a gag, - a punishment we wouldn’t know the reason for. I have no idea who’s decided to dress them in see-through pants, Oriental style, and put veils over their faces, but they’ve looked stunning. Under the thin veil, we’ve always seen a gag or tape. They’ve been always caged (and we could see it clearly through their silky gauze pants), always had to endure some evil routine.”

“Caged?” - asks Shiro stupidly, not being able to put two and two together. Have these boys always kept behind closed bars?

“You know what cock-cages are, Shiro?” - Keith tries very hard not to let himself speak patronizingly.

“Yes,” - mumbles Shiro, embarrassed. He hates this topic. He hates this talk. Keith, whereas, continues, as if nothing has happened and Shiro isn’t blushing (what a strange combination - nausea and utter embarrassment!).

“I had to wear one since I’ve turned 15. At 14, I was still allowed to masturbate on Thursdays. After turning 15, I was only allowed to have an orgasm at the hands of our overseers. Or not to have an orgasm. They usually… took care of it on Mondays, in the morning. We could expect a ruined orgasm or just… milking. That was the only thing they’ve done to us in a separate room as if watching each other feeling anything nice could be a bad influence. Milking… they’ve called it that, - I hated it. Without removing the cage, they’d rub this spot inside my asshole until my come would trickle from my flaccid cock. Actually, they’ve rarely made us come, I mean, have a pleasurable orgasm. They’ve relieved us purely for health reasons. They’ve seen no need for us to feel good.
Just... knew about the necessity to empty our balls regularly. They’ve also taught us how to play BDSM-games, of course. Or, more like, how to endure them. They’ve been very careful not to damage our bodies permanently, not to mark us. Also, have I told you that we’ve never worn clothes except for our sports or dancing?”

Shiro shakes his head. Actually, he doesn’t know what to say to that, how to react at Keith’s tangled admissions. His own experience with sex seems to be limited, very vanilla, in comparison to Keith. No wonder, that Keith’s on good terms with Mr Fennel - Mr Fennel would at least know what Keith is talking about.

Then, Shiro asks a question and instantly regrets it:

“What do you mean, they’ve done... only this thing on Mondays in a separate room? Surely, they’ve had a room for discipline and so on.”

Keith nods.

“You are right. Our usual classes were held in a common classroom. The Saturday punishments took place in a special room in the basement. The evening spankings took place in our bedroom, though.”

Bedroom. This should be the safest place of all, actually.

Keith grows silent once more. His gaze becomes distant, and Shiro suspects that Keith has remembered something particularly taxing.

“You don’t need to tell me if it’s awkward!” - says Shiro, a helpless attempt to lift the tension (and spare himself from hearing more horrible things).

“Oh, it’s not that,” - Keith turns his eyes to meet Shiro’s. He swallows, takes a steadying breath and says in a particularly rough voice:

“Do you know why nobody was trying to buy me that day?”

“No,” - admits Shiro.

Keith smiles at him warmly, as if Shiro is the most naive little thing in the world.

“Everybody at the auction has read my profile, carefully. Except for you. I assume you still haven’t finished reading it.”

“I deleted it after that night with you in the city, when I’ve made myself distant and dived into my work,” - says Shiro.

Keith grins happily and teases, amused:

“That was a right thing to do, Master Shiro.”

Then, he soberes up and his eyes turn dull. After a moment, Keith continues, in a falsely cheerful voice, not sounding like himself anymore:

“You wanted to learn about my nightmares. And this involves the reason why nobody wanted to buy me. Don’t worry, there’s quite a funny story behind it. Wanna listen?”

Shiro doesn’t call Keith out on his bravado. He only wishes that Keith won’t get hysterical soon. Shiro steels himself inside and prepares to stay put through the entirety of Keith’s undoubtedly “funny” story.
“Bring it on, boy,” - answers Shiro in a matching tone of false joyfulness. Keith lifts his tired eyes to Shiro’s and obviously braces himself, too.

It’s 10 p.m., and the only thing Shiro wants more than to crawl under the covers of his bed and sleep his exhaustion off, is to call Mr Fennel and ask him to take care of the mess he and Keith are now (or going to be soon, in any case).

Instead, Shiro settles against the bed in (the not yet taken away) Keith’s room and prays that he won’t start crying while Keith delivers the next piece of his story.

He pats his pockets for tissues, just in case.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been very hard to reread and to edit.
I'll be glad if you'd share your thoughts and feelings with me.
Chapter Summary

Keith and Shiro walk to the gardens and talk.
Or Keith tells Shiro his story. Part 2.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!
I think I'm posting quite regularly now?
I'm glad to finally give more info on Keith. He's such a sweet boy, I love him to pieces)
Keith doesn't describe all the bad things that have happened to him. Still, it is a painful story. Even if I tried not to be too graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Keith giggles.
It’s a giddy and unsettling sound, completely out of place.
“I hate telling you this,” - says Keith, for the third time since he’s promised Shiro a “funny story”.

Shiro can barely suppress his own urge to answer with: “Then don’t!” It would be awful, rude and counterproductive. To Shiro’s credit, he is exhausted and sleepy while his head is loaded full with heavy thoughts. His endurance is running thin and he doubts that he is the best company for an angsty teenager.

Shiro takes his phone and writes a message to Mr Fennel: “Keith looks like he might break. Should I tell him to stop talking for now?” He doesn’t show the sent message to Keith.

About two minutes pass until the answering text from Mr Fennel comes in: “Use your discretion. If Keith is unstable, let me come to get him”. It’s not very helpful if Shiro is being honest. Shiro types in: “Can’t do, he’ll go into his shell if someone else comes in. He needs to talk it out. I think.” Mr Fennel replies with a simple: “Call me any time”. So Shiro is alone in this, fine.

Shiro sighs and lays his phone aside. He needs to stay calm a little while longer and it will pay out in spades. They have started discussing Keith’s wounds today. It is a start. Then, they’ll have therapy, he and Keith. They’ll both get better, they’ll both get rid of their nightmares. But, before this bright future becomes possible, Keith needs Shiro to be here for him now, and Shiro can’t refuse.

“Keith,” - tries Shiro.
Keith lifts his eyes up from the floor. His gaze is a little muddled.

Shiro contemplates calling Mr Fennel now. Or simply using the emergency button on his watch.

Because Shiro doesn’t want to risk Keith dropping, even if he thinks that it’d be good for Keith to unload the burden of whatever has happened to him in his boarding school. If Keith shows more signs of being unstable, what will Shiro do? Mr Fennel won’t teleport here the same second if he receives a call. Shiro has to invent a way to stop Keith from going further down and do it now, just to be on the safe side.

Then, an idea comes to Shiro’s mind. Maybe, changing the topic a little would help?

But to what?

“I need a sip of water. Do you have some?” - he asks in the hope to distract Keith and win some time.

Seems like Shiro’s needs are always above anything else for Keith, even Keith’s own feelings, thinks Shiro bitterly, watching how Keith immediately leaps to his feet and searches the small room for water bottles, which he, thankfully, finds under the bed after some bustling around. Shiro suspects Keith would have run to the kitchen or to the basement if there was no water in the room. It works fine as a distraction, though: Keith calms down significantly after getting a task to fulfil. After providing Shiro with a bottle, Keith also takes a bottle of his own and drinks it greedily in one go. Despite not feeling thirsty, Shiro makes a few sips not to look inconsistent. He can’t help but watch droplets of water run down Keith’s chin, watch Keith wipe them absentmindedly with the back of his hand. What a picture it would be in other circumstances, muses Shiro mournfully. As it is, he can’t appreciate it. How could he, when every minute he receives another proof of why he shouldn’t pursue Keith if he still wants to stay a person of worth in his own eyes.

Keith, meanwhile, stands at the window, his figure a stark contrast to the darkness outside. He leans on the windowsill and looks at the sky, not frantic anymore, but still visibly anxious, shaken.

Following Keith’s line of stare, Shiro has a sudden struck of inspiration.

“What if we go to the gardens now? I give you permission to go out after your curfew this time, in case we come back late,” - offers Shiro.

Keith looks back at him, startled after being pulled out from his thoughts suddenly. It’s not like Shiro is ready to deal with any additional emotions, good or bad, right now, but he still feels sad because of Keith’s reaction. Keith would have been glad and happy any other day. This time, he just agrees mechanically and follows Shiro out of the room when he goes.

They stop at Shiro’s cabinet where he takes his backpack (yes, he may feel better but not having his special kit with him when outside doesn’t feel right) and exit from the main entrance. Shiro leads the way; Keith walks a couple of steps behind. While walking behind the owner is a traditional indication of the difference in status for a slave - something, that is ingrained in Keith’s behaviour, something Shiro shouldn’t pay much attention to, - it hurts to see Keith doing so. Because Keith has long ago got used to walking alongside Shiro when they go somewhere together; they would walk and discuss something, a perfectly innocent and friendly thing - with Keith communicating with Shiro without shying away...

Whatever, chastises Shiro himself. It’s not the right time to pout - Keith is not entirely his usual self right now. On the bright side: Shiro could use some fresh air and quiet, too.
They walk in silence for some time. When they stray away from the well-lit pavements and go further, where the trees are dense and the grass is unkempt, Shiro is reminded again of how he and Keith have run away from his fortress-like mansion back in the summer. The two of them, against the security system and the guards. It is a nice memory, even after all that has happened. Especially after Shiro has shared his thoughts on the matter with Keith - after being sincere for once his guilt doesn’t crush him as hard as usual.

Shiro purposefully chooses the darkest and most abandoned places in his gardens. He doesn’t want to be interrupted (also, strangely, he feels safe in here). He can move in his gardens without a problem even in the night, he loves the domesticated wilderness surrounding his house and knows its outlines by heart.

In the end, Shiro brings them to an old marble fountain, positioned on a clearing in a forested area. It isn’t functioning, and Shiro has ordered to leave it be as it is - covered in leaves, grass and ivies. There has been a proper tile floor back in the day, surrounding the fountain and giving the place a sophisticated look; now it is mostly hidden beneath the plants. Mr Fennel claims it’s been a pretty place to entertain the Shirogane family’s guests, about two generations back. Shiro doesn’t care; he likes how this place looks now. The abandoned fountain reminds Shiro of adventure movies he’s liked as a kid - with mummies, paradises lost in red-sanded deserts and wild jungle beasts hiding in the shadows. Lance has tried to get permission to clean the old thing, make it as refined as it has once been - but he’s been flat out forbidden to touch it at all. A little bird has whispered to Shiro that Lance has bitched about it for at least a week straight. Shiro appreciates Lance’s enthusiasm, but… Being an estate owner should have its perks, right?

Keith doesn’t take the surroundings in while they go, just merely follows Shiro. When Shiro stops, Keith stops, too. Only then does he look around and, to Shiro’s delight, gasps in wonder. Shiro feels a little relieved that Keith can appreciate the peculiar beauty of this place. There are no lanterns, no artificial light - just the moon and the stars above them, making the formerly pristinely white marble sparkle between the patches of greenery that tries to conquer it. Keith is stunned, disbelieving, and Shiro is proud of eliciting such a reaction in him.

“Like what you see?” - Shiro asks, smug and unashamed of it. At last, something good on this goddess-forsaken evening.

Keith nods, wide-eyed. He takes in the “hidden spring” once more and meets Shiro’s eyes. Finally, fucking finally, thinks Shiro, seeing Keith’s gaze not dull or anxious anymore. Shiro can’t help but grin. I won’t let your memories corrupt you, thinks Shiro.

There’s a small smile on Keith’s lips; he looks at Shiro as if Shiro has once again proven himself worthy of Keith’s trust. Shiro imagines what Keith might think: “I knew I wasn’t mistaken when I’ve decided to believe you”, or: “You’re so special, Shiro. I just knew it”. Shiro feels stupid for interpreting Keith’s smallest gestures like that - what if his explanations are far from the truth? It is silly and childish, in any case.

“I like it a lot. Thank you for showing me,” - voices his appreciation Keith. Then, he grows mischievous and muses with feigned nonchalance: “It this the fountain Lance is always whining about? Is the rest of this grandiose and sparkling-clean territory not enough for him, I wonder?”

As much as Shiro wants to laugh and joke about Lance being passionate where others will hardly ever be, they’ve come here with another purpose. So he only allows himself a small smile in return.

This is an important moment. Keith has to decide now, whether he will talk or not. If not, then they should head back home. Shiro is glad that they’ve come here, whatever the outcome. He feels much better after their walk, his head is clear again.
Shiro comes closer to the fountain basin’s rim and runs his hand over it, savouring the feeling of cold stone under his fingers. Suddenly, Shiro feels old and rusty, just like the fountain in front of him; only good for remembering things reminiscent from the past, unwilling and unable to shed the caked mud and to throw off the foreign weeds that took root on him. And he’s only 26, goddess forgive him! Is this the real reason why he makes an exception for this place, not making it nice and civil like the rest of his property? So that he can have a thing he relates to. It has nothing to do with the cinema masterpieces from his happy childhood as he’s been telling himself, then...

Keith polite coughing catches Shiro’s attention. He doesn’t turn around, but he acknowledges his request with a quiet: “What is it?”

“Don’t you want to go home, Master Shiro? You look tired.”

Shiro makes one short high-pitched laugh before he can stop himself. He’s not as stable as he’s assumed. He rests his palm onto the fountain’s railing, bows his head low and does his breathing exercises until he feels his heartbeat slow down. When the hysterics recede, Shiro reminds himself that he has come here to listen to Keith.

“Keith?” - says Shiro, still not facing him. - “I want to hear you out. Today, now. If you are ready. I want to know what you have to say. If you want to share it with me, obviously. But, as much as I am interested in your story, I don’t really want to come back to this topic ever again. That’s why I’d prefer to talk about it now than to postpone it for another day.”

Now Shiro feels as if he’s pressuring Keith to talk to him.

He’s such an asshole. Telling Keith to take his time then literally trying to make him talk without delay to make it more comfortable for Shiro.

He spins around, an apology on his lips, and sees that Keith sets his jaw resolutely, a determination in his eyes.

Too late to take his words back.

“You are right. I don’t want to revisit my past either,” - informs him Keith.

Shiro nods, scared. Yes, he literally feels scared at the moment.

Now that Keith will talk about the horrors he’s survived, Shiro fears that he won’t be able to hold his own nightmares at bay. So late in the night, after such an emotionally-heavy day, it’s not easy to sustain the barrier between welcome memories and unwelcome ones.

His fears prove right: when Keith names a horror from his boarding school days, Shiro feels a horror of his own coming alive in his conscious.

“They’ve decided I’m exotic enough. To be left for two more years. To be trained for someone’s future sexual pleasures which this person would rob from my own body.”

Shiro remembers his own desperation from being used for someone’s benefit - being torn and knit together again so that some anonymous villain would gain knowledge, fame or influence thanks to Shiro’s suffering.

“I’ve bitten him, Master Shiro. My new individual overseer. When he’s ordered me to suck him off. Such a basic command, actually. A skill I’ve perfected on too-alive-looking dolls. Don’t know what
has possessed me. Maybe, I’ve imagined doing the same thing for two more years, then for the rest of my life - and I refused to.”

Shiro thinks of how he’s tried to kick his tormentors, to break free, to bite their hands. Nothing has worked. The lab rats there, in the camp, couldn’t understand why Shiro has tried to talk to them, every day, persuade them to stop. Despite all they’ve been doing to him. Shiro is surprised, now, that they’ve never gagged him, despite his intense loquacity.

“A whim, a stupid whim. They’ve been shocked. This man, whom I have hurt. I could have just bitten his thing off - good that I didn’t try, you know? He’s been shocked more than anyone. A 16-years-old slave, trained for four years, rebelling over a simple thing? After all the conditioning? All the pain he’s taken? He was more surprised about my behaviour than about the act itself.”

Shiro remembers saying some rude thing to the lab rat who’s come for Matt to their cell. Even after seeing the camp itself.

“Master Shiro... if I had a chance to rewrite history I wouldn't have bitten him. I would’ve taken all their lessons obediently like a good slave should.”

Shiro would have done the same thing again, realises he with dread. He would have attracted attention to himself so that the guards would leave Matt alone. Because living and knowing that he could have saved Matt and haven't done a thing would have been worse than hell. Because Matt has had no chance to return from that place in his right mind. But has Shiro?..

“They’ve punished me for a week straight. That... I, Master Shiro, I’ve broken on the third day.”

Shiro thinks how he’s broken on his first day in the laboratory in that goddess-awful camp.

“They’ve whipped me bloody the first day. My back. Then, the next day, they’ve done the same to my ass and thighs. Then, my feet. You know that it hurts like a bitch when they hit your soles with a stick? It was when I’ve broken down and begged. Then, I guess, it was time for reminding me of my place in life. They’ve used a fucking machine on me and different stimulating toys. I don’t know how many times they’ve made me come, but, just so you know, the fourth orgasm without a pause usually hurts already. They haven’t raped me, I mean, no human with a dick has used my asshole, so that they could write in my file that I’m a virgin. A machine doesn’t count, see? My mouth, though. I couldn’t talk when they’ve brought me to the auction house.”

Shiro remembers restraints and pain. Searing, hot, unavoidable, unrelenting pain. Shiro remembers merciless people who only wanted to use him.

“At the auction, they had to give me two weeks to heal. Then, a week more to regain my good looks. I wonder what there is to my file? Aggressive? Insufferable? Rebellious? Uncontrollable?”

Shiro wonders what they’ve learnt from the experiments on him, those bastards in white robes. What scripts have been left after Shiro’s escape.

Keith shakes when he’s finishing his story. Shiro’s eyes are damp. When Keith stops, Shiro tugs Keith close and holds him tight. His single arm is good enough for that. He weeps, hiding his face on Keith’s shoulder. For himself, for Keith, for thousands of others whom they cannot save.

Keith just freezes in Shiro’s embrace for several long moments until he squeezes Shiro back just as tightly and sobs. Turns out, he’s desperate to recall all the smallest details of his last days in the school.
“I was so scared, Master Shiro. I thought they’d torture me until I die. Until I can’t do anything but feel pain,” - whispers Keith roughly, his fingers clutching and kneading Shiro’s shirt.

“I’ve thought I’ll never come back home!”- echoes Shiro.

This is the fair, obvious truth, and yet it feels like Shiro hasn’t ever said it aloud, at least, has never said it aloud, meaning it. He was afraid to admit his weakness. Too scared to show his real emotions, as if in doing so he would draw the horrors of the past to his own home. As if there was any person in their right mind who would shame Shiro for being scared and desperate while he has been experimented on, tortured, harmed, played with (Shiro sincerely hopes there are no such persons in the world outside that camp). Shiro’s mental health has been too fragile to face his real fears. But all of this doesn’t matter right now; Shiro’s imperfection doesn’t matter. There is no judgement, no repulsion from Keith; nor will there ever be, Shiro just knows that. Instead of pushing Shiro off (as Shiro has feared despite knowing better), Keith pulls him closer, buries his wet face in his shirt and trembles with him. Sharing his own suffering with Shiro; splitting up the burden. Accepting all of Shiro.

This level of support loosens Shiro’s tongue. He couldn’t have stopped his next phrases even if he tried:

“I’ve thought I’d never return because there will be nothing left of me. They’ve taken my right arm, Keith! My right arm! It’s been healthy! I swear there was no reason to take it. Why did they? And my memories? All blurry, Keith. Have they taken them as well?”

Shiro can sense his growing panic, can anticipate slipping into another attack already, bile rising in the back of his throat. But he is too wound up, too submerged in his own need to talk it all out to attempt to do his breathing exercises again or to concentrate on something bright.

Keith gets back on track faster. He catches up on the last sentences Shiro has exclaimed, seeing them as the bad sign they are. Keith stills, makes his fists unclench and steps back to look Shiro in the eyes. When he speaks, his voice is raw from crying but firm, resolute:

“Master Shiro, no, your memories they couldn’t take. You’re fine. You’re safe.”

When Shiro doesn’t react immediately, too slow in his response, his brain sluggish and chaotic, Keith tries another way:

“Remember, your thoughts belong to you only? Only yours, Master Shiro!”

That sounds good, coming from Keith. Dimly, Shiro realises that Keith doesn’t mean that he, personally, is only Shiro’s when saying “only yours!”; that their conversation was about other things. It doesn’t sound less pleasing because of that. Then, Keith hugs Shiro again, this time rubbing his back soothingly and muttering some calming nonsense.

They stand in the clearing, swaying gently until they both come back to themselves. Until the touches start to feel too familiar, too right. Until Shiro remembers how much this evening has been supposed to be about Keith. And then a thought pops up in Shiro’s head which needs to be voiced immediately.

“Keith?” - and Shiro separates himself gently. As much as he would like to stay that way for the duration of the night, they can’t.

Keith lifts his hands, reluctantly stepping away from Shiro’s warmth.

He rubs his eyes with his sleeve, breathes in and out wetly, then steels himself and meets Shiro’s
gaze, at last.

“Yes, Master Shiro?”

“I wanted to tell you,” - and Shiro’s voice comes out a little shuddery, watery, even. - “I wanted to say that I’m so, so sorry that all this shit has happened to you,” - very eloquent, bravo, Shiro, - “But, at the same time, I am glad that you’ve ended up here.”

Goddess, what is he saying. Shiro starts again, only to fail again:

“It would be a pity if you haven’t been at the auction and I haven’t bought you. Or that Matt hasn’t decided to buy Lance and Hunk, whom I’ve ended up buying, too. What I want to say…”

And Shiro shuts his mouth, mortified.

To his surprise, Keith laughs, amused. His eyes crinkle with mirth when he looks up at Shiro and tells him warmly:

“I know, Master Shiro, I know. I am happy to be here. I will be forever grateful to you.”

Despite Keith’s easy tone, the last part sounds like a declaration. It scares and reassures Shiro at the same time.

“We should go back inside,” - suggests Shiro. He doesn’t want to leave, but they have to. - “It’s getting colder.”

Keith agrees, despite the warm evening.

It’s midnight when they enter the house.

Mr Fennel is waiting on the stairs. He’s been typing on his tablet and lifts his head when he hears the door opening. Seeing Shiro and Keith, Mr Fennel smiles politely. He is as calm as ever but to Shiro, it seems that Mr Fennel looks relieved.

“I believe Keith will have to sleep in a sleeping bag in my room today,” - says Mr Fennel with false regret, tucking the tablet away. - “Don’t worry, you’ll come back to your room tomorrow to collect your things before you’ll move in with Lance and Hunk.”

Keith sighs, a petulant child for a second, and then smiles sweetly at Mr Fennel:

“I will feel so sorry for disturbing your peace, Mr Fennel. It may be a better option for you to let me stay where I am now.”

Shiro just blinks, directing his stare from one to the other.

“No, dear, you won’t be a burden at all. I would avoid further arguing if I were you. Unless you want to add to your Saturday count so badly,” - there’s underlying steel in Mr Fennels syrupy-sweet voice. Shiro would feel intimidated if it were him in Keith’s place.

Keith is the obedience itself when he replies innocently:

“As you wish, Mr Fennel.”

Shiro briefly wonders if Keith has been taught how to curtsy. It seems an appropriate thing to do right now.
These two deserve each other, thinks Shiro while being escorted to his room by Mr Fennel and Keith who continue their polite bickering to mutual amusement all the way long.

These two have too much in common, thinks Shiro when both start trying to take care of him rather aggressively.

It’s too exhausting, really, to fight them both off at the same time after such an eventful evening, assures Shiro himself while being tucked into bed. He’s had no choice but to roll with their plan.

Then Shiro’s eyes are drooping, and the last thing he manages to notice is Keith’s proud little smile when he looks back at Shiro’s figure, curled up under the covers.

The light goes off, and Shiro sleeps soundly for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Meow!
^_^
( 3 3 )

I’m evil!
*rolls away, cackling evilly, only to start crying when out of sight*

Now, that you’ve heard Keith’s story: is it what you’ve expected it to be?
Thanks for reading, as always!
Adjusting

Chapter Summary

Keith moves in with Lance and Hunk. A little chaos ensues.
The therapy becomes a real thing really quick. Or...?

Chapter Notes

Hello, my kittens, puppies, little mice and other folks)

I'm here with another chapter. I am not sure it is as good as it could be, but I have tried. I truly did!
It's fluffy! Yeah, no real angst here, just a little discomfort here and there)

Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Shiro wakes up the next day, it’s 1 p.m. Seems like the day is almost over before it’s properly started.

He doesn’t feel well-rested, at that, on the opposite, his limbs are heavy as lead and his head aches, like during a storm. His overall condition reminds Shiro of a hangover, but without being thirsty and smelling like a cheap martini.

He stretches on the bed; he’s comfortable and warm. Shiro has ordered this gigantic designer bed, with all the modern accessories, along with a mattress almost as expensive as the bed itself, four years ago, because of a rare impulse to use his funds on himself. Shiro’s bed is the most comfortable of all; he thinks that every penny spent on this bed has been worth it.

In tow with the thoughts about his ridiculously luxurious bed come the thoughts about how well Keith would fit here, whether he likes to cuddle or prefers to have some space to turn and toss while he falls asleep. How nice it would be to wake up to Keith, sleepy and adorable, smiling at Shiro.

Keith’s bed is not as cool as that, although it should be comfy if only because Shiro doesn’t buy any bad-quality beds with cheap mattresses for his mansion. Shiro may be ignorant, but he cares about his employees’ health.

And then it hits him: how Keith still has his own bed but doesn’t have his own room anymore.

Because of Shiro’s self-proclaimed “wisdom”.

Because of Shiro’s susceptibility to Mr Fennel’s opinions (or backwards).

Because it must be just Keith’s luck that he can’t fucking live alone in a room for longer than three months.
So much for a quiet morning.

Shiro sits up on the mattress and groans loudly: he has enough place in his manor to provide each of his slaves with a room. If he had ten times more slaves, he would be able to provide each with a room, as well. Shiro sighs and climbs out of his warm blanket cocoon slowly. His window offers a marvellous view of his estate; this morning, though, even his beloved panorama brings sad thoughts. Shiro is reminded again that he lives alone in a giant mansion built to house a big family and a horde of servants (or slaves) and invite over several friendly families at the same time. Another tragedy of Shiro’s life: he is the last in his line. His branch of the Shirogane family will go extinct after Shiro’s death.

Mr Fennel has once said that, with how much money Shiro is leaving him according to his will, he would have to change his family name to “Shirogane”, were he ever to receive his inheritance - just to honour Shiro (also, what a fine way to spit at his father’s expectations; there won’t ever be one too many signs of disrespect towards that man).

Both Shiro and Mr Fennel sincerely hope that the day won’t come.

There are relatively standard variants of how to not let his branch of the Shirogane family end with him. For example, were Shiro not as sick as he is, he could’ve adopted some kid, raise them, teach them and make them the heir (an absolutely crazy idea, in the real life). Or he could take a young person into his house, also teach them, educate them, build trust with them, make them the heir… Whatever. Shiro’s wealth is unreasonable, regardlessly of who will inherit it.

Shiro makes a mental note to check how much money he donates yearly and to increase that sum. Also, the profit from his newest study-plans-selling project will go to charity (and this Shiro adds to the notes on the project in his tablet). While rolling out of bed, Shiro does some math in his head and counts his profits. He manages it without much difficulty, remembering the most important numbers and operating the data on his businesses stored in his memory easily. After doing this, Shiro feels better about himself - he might be not as useless and obtuse as he feels when his brain is filled with fog.

Shiro stands up, stretches languidly and pads to the window. There, on the table, is a beautifully served plate with fresh berries, cheese and canapes waiting for him.

There’s a little paper, lying atop the berries. Shiro takes it, curious. His heart starts beating faster in his chest when he recognizes the handwriting. It’s from Keith, Shiro can tell from the first lines already.

“Thank you for the last evening and for everything you’re doing for me.

Living with the boys will be alright.

(If you find yourself short of one noisy slave, put the blame on Mr Fennel. He won’t let me gag him, and I’m not a saint).

Keith

Shiro reads and rereads the small note until he learns the text by heart and can repeat it in different
voices with different intonations. He could make a play out of it, if he wanted. And he isn’t ashamed
of making such a big deal out of a little piece of paper, not even a little bit.

Shiro knows, that this ridiculous, bratty note will be cherished among his treasures for the years to
come.

Still, he finds himself reaching for his phone and writing a text to Keith (they rarely use their phones,
somehow, but Shiro can’t leave the note unanswered). He types: “Hello, Keith. Thank you for
listening to me yesterday. I appreciate your support. P.S. Be nice to Lance, I’m watching you.” Shiro
clicks “send” and rereads the text. Oh well. He comes to think that he isn’t equipped for writing short
messages; he sounds dull and emotionless even to his own ears. At least, there’s a tiny hope that
Lance will stay intact now, that’s a plus.

Shiro comes to Mr Fennel’s study after he showers. They talk business; they discuss yesterday’s
conversations with Keith, sparing personal details, when possible; they have a couple of strong
drinks, afterwards.

Then, Mr Fennel narrates the story of Keith’s “migration” to the other slaves’ room. He starts with
the previous night.

Keith has slept in Mr Fennel’s room in a sleeping bag. In the morning, he hasn’t heard the alarm at
all. When Mr Fennel tried to wake him up gently, there was no response. Moreover, Keith has tried
to shove Mr Fennel’s hands off, murmuring angrily and burrowing further into his bag.

Mr Fennel is a man of simple pleasures: he’s taken a sprinkler bottle and made Keith regret the
choices his unconscious has made for him.

Wet, groggy and miserable, Keith has had a shower too, then, a little less groggy, but still grumpy,
went to the canteen and had breakfast with Mr Fennel, Lance and Hunk. The other two slaves have
been “elated” after hearing the news about Keith’s relocation, so much that Lance has lost his
privilege to have dessert for the rest of the week for announcing his joy too freely and using a very
fancy language, at that. Keith, to his credit, has endured the conversation stoically. Mr Fennel was
most impressed that Keith hasn’t even smirked at Lance while eating his brownies after the main
dish.

Then, after delivering light food for Shiro to his room, Keith has moved in with Lance and Hunk. It
has been surprisingly easy; drag Keith’s bed to the next building and - bingo! Keith is relocated.
Aside from the bed, Keith had only his modest collection of clothes and his tablet with him. Actually,
remarks Mr Fennel absently, they could’ve fitted even more people in that room. He has been in a
generous mood when choosing where to situate two newly arrived slaves back in the day.

More juicy details follow: Lance has asked for permission to build a fort around his bed. He’s
received his permission, of course, smirks Mr Fennel, his eyes crinkling; as if Mr Fennel ever denies
kids their wishes. Lance has also been provided with extra materials and a little blue flag to put on
top of his fortress. Lance has started the works immediately. According to Mr Fennel, Hunk has been
torn between pretending to help Lance with draping sheets over their part of the room and snooping
at Keith’s few personal belongings. Mr Fennel finds Hunk’s behaviour really funny, apparently. And
the man of the hour, Keith, hasn’t uttered a word of complaint all this time (not taking the text to
Shiro into account).

“Keith looked at ease despite his annoyance with Lance’s antics when I’ve last seen him. We’ll see
how well Keith will sleep there,” - says Mr Fennel.
Shiro adds pensively:

“It won’t do any good if Lance and Hunk lose their sleep because of Keith’s nightmares. But I hope we’ve made the right choice and it’ll go well.”

“Whatsoever the outcome, even if Keith will start feeling safer with other people in his room and sleep better, his trauma won’t get healed overnight. We need to plan the visit of your therapist,” - concludes Mr Fennel. The incorrigible bastard looks almost serene, saying such horrible things aloud in Shiro’s presence.

“Ow,” - says Shiro, eloquent as ever.

In broad daylight, this idea scares Shiro with its implications. Tolerating an invasion of his personal space by a relative stranger, having his sins exposed and dissected, being at this stranger’s mercy… Shiro knows, logically, that he is exaggerating, knows that he will stay in control of the situation, as the client and the host, knows that he’ll have Mr Fennel as his back-up, were anything to go awry. Unfortunately, Shiro’s imagination betrays him and runs wild pictures of how his treatment will make his life hell in front of Shiro’s mind’s eye.

Shiro has been so adamant on therapy just the evening prior. For him and Keith. Everything has seemed so simple.

“Maybe, we’ll wait a bit?” - asks Shiro after a long-drawn pause, a hopeful lilt to his voice. He sounds like a child begging his parents to postpone a dentist’s appointment.

Mr Fennel tilts his head to the side in gentle exasperation.

“Just one week? I’ll feel better about getting therapy in a week!” - pleads Shiro.

Mr Fennel’s gaze says, loud and clear: “I’m fed up with your shit, Shiro. We both know you need it and you’ll get it as soon as I can get the doctor’s ass here. With or without your drama”.

He wordlessly takes his phone and dials.

Shiro honest to goddess pouts and slumps in his seat. He’d cross his arms on his chest now petulantly, but he has no means to. Instead, he digs his phone out from his pocket and starts playing 2048.

Fuck being an adult. After Mr Fennel is done talking, he will go to his room, maybe slam a door or two on his way there, and, in his room, he’ll mope in solitude to his heart’s content.

In the meantime, Mr Fennel makes an appointment due in three days (Shiro listens very attentively even if he pretends not to), thanks the doctor on the other end and hangs up.

Shiro gets ready to bolt, hiding his phone again, when Mr Fennel’s voice catches him off-guard:

“And now to your new business idea. What was it, again? Lesson plans?”

“No, more like all-encompassing studying plans for self-education,” - replies Shiro on auto-pilot.

Mr Fennel is a devil himself. He knows how to bait Shiro into talking and being compliant.

Shiro takes a deep breath and starts narrating.

After fifteen minutes of inspired preaching, Shiro realises that playing a big baby will have to wait for some other time. He has too much fun planning the costs for the set-up of his new line of business
to pretend that he still wants to antagonize Mr Fennel for doing what’s good for him.

For him and for Keith, reminds Shiro himself.

Keith deserves all the good things, even if Shiro doesn’t.

Three days go by in a rush: Shiro doesn’t have time for even a fleeting thought about the doctor’s oncoming visit.

On the first day, in the evening, Keith finally breaks down, unused to having someone so loud by his side. He shouts at Lance to “stop screeching my ears will bleed soon” and gets slapped by the outraged and offended Lance. Thanks to Hunk, no one gets throttled. Still, the incident gets caught on camera, reported to Mr Fennel and to Lance’s boss. Shiro has to act all disappointed around the boys (which he is, but he overperforms for Mr Fennel’s sake). Lance is sentenced to only doing cleaning work during his shifts for the next week and has a sort of detention in the evenings, when he has to read books on garden design under someone’s supervision (he likes the topic, yes, but not so much as to enjoy it instead of having his free time). Also, another week without desserts for him. Keith… Keith adds to his tally, definitely, accused of losing self-control. Keith looks at it as at a necessary evil for finally speaking his mind. Shiro takes his time trying to explain to Keith that he could have tried asking Lance to stop, for starters. Hunk takes it upon himself to babysit Lance through his punishment time. He even sits with him through his readings with some book of his own. Hunk is the only one who wholeheartedly enjoys the show, even if he has to hide his amusement carefully.

On the second day, Shiro has to go to Matt and Pidge to help them organize their thoughts about how to treat their slaves from now on. Even if the cruelty has stopped, the control over the slaves’ lives got much worse. Neither Pidge nor Matt have ever used it against any of their slaves, but it doesn’t matter much to the scared people living in their manor. Pidge is in tears when Shiro arrives. She has tried so hard to eliminate the threats to their charges’ life and health, only to make them consider Matt and her themselves a threat. Shiro asks what did the slaves say when Pidge and Matt have last talked to them, how they’ve held themselves… He is met with two stunned gazes. It’s turned out that neither has communicated with the slaves normally, person to person, too ashamed to meet them. They’ve only collected and analyzed the data from the video feed of the cameras in the manor. Truly, it’s a long-ass day for Shiro. Sometimes, when his patience is growing thin, Shiro feels the urge to facepalm and leave. Shiro asks himself why hasn’t he checked before, why has he been so aloof as to not notice elephant in the room. He wants to ask Pidge: “You’ve been to my home, you are friends with Hunk, why do you suddenly get so shy here, in your own domain?” He wants to ask Matt: “You’ve been to my home, you’ve seen how it’s organized there, why not ask Mr Fennel and me for advice earlier?” In the end, he keeps his quiet and tries to be useful.

On the third day, Shiro finds out that Hunk has rewired the electric circuit in the room where he, Keith and Lance live, to stop Keith from reading through the night. Keith’s tablet shuts down at 10:30 p.m., just as before, to prevent exactly that, but Keith has managed to find paper books and has read them under the covers, using a bedside lamp for light. Hunk isn’t one for half-measures: he’s changed the electricity supply system so that he is the only one who can turn on the light and Keith had no other variant but to sleep (thank goddess, it hasn’t come to flashlights). Shiro is impressed. Really, it’s a good job for a novice mechanic (their electrician has confirmed the electricity chain’s safety). But, after doing so without permission, Hunk joins Lance in cleaning jobs and spending his
evenings reading books of not his own choice, on work safety, mostly. The no-desserts rule also kicks in for Hunk. Keith tries to stay out of it, he really does (his tally for the next Saturday gets even longer, of course, what with his untimely reading). He plays chess with Shiro or asks to use the telescope so that he doesn’t have to be in the boys’ view and doesn’t annoy the shit out of them with his freedom of movement.

What’s good, Keith doesn’t have a single nightmare since that fateful night at the fountain. His dreams are far from innocent; they are wicked, heavy and leave a stale taste in his mouth when Keith wakes. Keith acts cranky when asked about his roommates, but Shiro has known him long enough to recognise this as an act, and an act only. Keith genuinely likes Hunk and Lance. He can’t fathom the reasons for Lance’s jealousy towards him; in Keith’s eyes, they are all equals, and nothing makes Lance’s overboard competitiveness justified. Shiro doesn’t try to explain all there is to Lance’s feelings, yet. There is too much on Keith’s plate already.

To be honest, Shiro is absurdly proud of Keith. He barely catches himself in time not to start bragging about Keith’s achievements before Matt or Mr Fennel when they meet for a chat.

When on the fourth day Shiro is notified about an unannounced visitor, he doesn’t even think about his therapist.

Shiro doesn’t think about his therapist, when the visitor’s photo from the entrance camera shows a young blond woman, as well. Tall, skinny, short-haired, with a lot of freckles. Shiro has no idea who she may be and why she’s come to his mansion.

He calls Mr Fennel who’s come to meet the woman himself.

Mr Fennel is delighted. Shiro can hear the certain notes in his voice. This new person has kept his chief assistant entertained, which is a surprise in itself; moreover, Mr Fennel suggests Shiro should talk to her, too. Why, Shiro can’t fathom. Of course, Mr Fennel keeps his description of his conversation with Mrs Freckles vague enough to leave Shiro wondering what’s so interesting about her.

Mr Fennel has brought Mrs Freckles to one of their guest houses (highly suspicious; Shiro can’t help but think that she may be here not by mistake). When Shiro enters, Mr Fennel questions the woman about how many cameras are there on the front porch, what turns she should make to come to the gates from this house and so on. Shiro coughs loudly to attract their attention. Both Mr Fennel and Mrs Freckles turn to Shiro simultaneously. For a second, Shiro experiences a strange sensation of being watched and analyzed by two powerful minds. It’s disconcerting; when he is used to Mr Fennel’s personal sort of attention and doesn’t react at it anymore, being scrutinized by another person just as methodically (and at the same time) is somehow scary. The difference between the two is obvious, at that: when the second passes, Mr Fennel clears his gaze, stands up from the armchair he’s been sitting in and plays the perfect butler, his favourite role, while Mrs Freckles doesn’t even attempt to put on a mask or to hide her processing analysis of Shiro. Also, she doesn’t greet him. Shiro hasn’t said “hello” either, yet, but it still feels a little odd.

The moment lengthens, and, as Shiro doesn’t know what to say, he chooses to observe the woman in front of him. She is attentive, inquisitive, maybe, stubborn. She seems a little bored, if anything. Bored in general, not because of Shiro or Mr Fennel. Like, from life or something like that. And certainly, the talk with Mr Fennel has left her a little annoyed. Whatever reaction Mr Fennel wanted to elicit from her with his questioning, it would make sense if he was not the first one to try a similar thing on her.
But Mr Fennel doesn’t freeze in place, unlike Shiro. When it’s clear that neither Shiro nor Mrs Freckles are going to speak on their own, he introduces them to each other, quite elegantly. Mrs Freckles turns out to be Mrs Leifsdottir. Thankfully, she prefers to be called by her given name, Ina. When talking, she is polite, precise in her sentence-building and wording, and, as before, doesn’t hide that she studies Shiro.

Not that Shiro feels intimidated… But this level of scrutiny is certainly not to his liking.

Mr Fennel suggests that Mrs Freck… Leifsdottir (!) tells her story herself.

Next, the enabler that he is, Mr Fennel slips out of the door claiming to be very, very busy (what has made him sit there idly and chat not five minutes before, stays unsaid) and that he’ll send Keith to help the guest settle. Just like that, the old fox disappears, leaving Shiro with a woman which unnerves him.

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually…” - starts Shiro and trails off, uncertain.

“You shouldn’t be sorry at all,” - comes the reply, unexpectedly soft and contrasting with the piercing gaze. - “I can be intense on the first meeting. I am sorry for making you feel insecure because of my ogling.”

Shiro doesn’t know what to say to that. He was hoping his insecurity wasn’t showing.

Ina looks at the wall beside Shiro instead of directly at him, when she continues:

“I can be very intimidating, especially with new people. But there’s so much to know, so much to notice every time. Ryan always scolds me for that. This is the reason I only talk to his patients when he asks me and only under his supervision.”

“Ryan?” - asks Shiro. - “As in Ryan Kinkade?”

“Yes, exactly,” - says Ina. Shiro thinks that he’s seen a start of a smile.

“Then why?...” - Shiro doesn’t understand anything anymore.

“Oh, Mr Fennel hasn’t told you. I’ve expected that,” - and Ina sighs, lightly, then starts talking: - “Your staff manager is a remarkable man. He keeps a lot of his own secrets and is very keen on knowing the secrets of others. He pretends to be interested in persons around him very well. Yet, he is genuinely interested in you. And in me, it seems. Also, this Keith person...”

Ina stops talking abruptly. Looks like she feels a little guilty.

“Oh,” - she laments, - “I should control what I say better.”

“It’s OK” is on the tip of Shiro’s tongue, but, inexplicably, he says nothing.

“Are you a therapist, too?” - he can’t help but ask, instead.

“No, I haven’t finished the course. That’s why I work as Ryan’s helper and don’t have my own practice.”

“Ow,” - offers Shiro in lieu of a response.

Ina sighs, heavier this time.

“Ryan has sent me here in a taxi intending to join me very soon. But he’s running late. I’ve been
sitting in a waiting room in a building at your gates for half an hour when he’s called and said that he can’t make it. Then Mr Fennel has entered. I’ve shown him my ID and he’s let me in. Ryan has planned to stay at your mansion for the night so we haven’t booked any hotel. This is why he has thought the safest for me to wait here, where we’ve been planning to sleep anyway.”

The situation becomes clearer, but not by much.

Shiro inquires:

“And what is the reason for his delay, if I may ask?”

He sounds terse even to his own ears. But Ina’s story seems to lack certain details, and Shiro is growing tired of moving in circles.

Ina sighs again.

“I have so hoped that Mr Fennel will tell you who I am and what has happened properly. Ryan and I have been travelling in his car; you maybe know that he likes animals very much. So, very unfortunately, we’ve run over a racoon and Ryan has hurried to the vet in his car, with the racoon in tow.”

“Why didn’t you go with him?” - interrupts Shiro.

“He has promised to be here at 1 p.m. He realized that he couldn’t make it if he was going to visit the vet so he’s sent me, his helper, to explain everything personally” - replies Ina.

“But you can’t replace him?”

“No, but I can get to know you and tell him about my observations.”

Shiro feels a little unhappy about that. Ina’s gaze seems to penetrate his very soul and he doesn’t want to know what Ryan will hear from her (or, truthfully, he’s scared to learn). Shiro doesn’t know much about her yet, but the scalded cat fears cold water and to Shiro, all new people seem judgemental.

“I will understand if you’d prefer to stay away from me. It’s only for the better if we wait for Ryan to have any further discussions. He should have informed you that I’ll come, though. Has he?”

“I guess he has, since Mr Fennel isn’t displeased about you showing up,” - admits Shiro grudgingly. Shiro hasn’t been informed.

Shiro puts a hand to his face. This woman is too perceptive. He feels bare in front of her. Yet, in his heart of hearts, he feels no ill intent coming off her; if she makes him uncomfortable (which she does) then it’s not on purpose, but because of her natural inclination towards observing and analyzing only. It is strange that she can’t control it.

Or Shiro is simply too used to communicating with a certain number of people only in his daily life. Too used to Mr Fennel’s impulses to dig for information being perfectly controlled and measured. Too used to people knowing how fragile he is (Shiro winces from this thought) and treating him accordingly.

When he goes on business trips or has conference calls with the boards of his companies or the partner companies, he wears a mask. The skill is practised and doesn’t require much effort on Shiro’s part. This woman is a stranger, but, at the same time, she is at Shiro’s place, on his turf, and Shiro may unwittingly expect a certain behaviour from her. Which she doesn’t know about.
Keith chooses this exact moment to come in. Keith notices Shiro and smiles widely; then he sees the foreign woman, immediately schools his face into a blank mask, steps closer and greets them both in a carefully-polite way. He fucking bows after introducing himself and offering his services.

He’s a well-trained slave, after all, thinks Shiro bitterly. At the same time, Shiro notices how Ina swallows nervously. What kind of reaction is that?

“Hello, Keith,” - she says warmer than anything she’s said to Shiro.

Keith blinks in surprise but otherwise doesn’t change his facial expression.

“Keith?” - says Shiro tiredly.

“Yes, sir?”

“This is Ina Leifsdottir. She is the helper of my therapist, Ryan Kinkade. He’ll come here later, too. He’s preoccupied with solving a road incident with a racoon. Ina will stay here… I suppose for the rest of the week, as planned? Until Sunday?”

“Yes, that’s right,” - says Ina.

“Keith, could you please help Mrs Leifsdottir settle?” - asks Shiro.

“Yes, sir,” - says Keith enthusiastically. Shiro can’t help but smile. Keith is so youthful in his eagerness.

“Ina?” - continues Shiro. - “I suppose your luggage has been left in Mr Kinkade’s car. What do you need? A change of clothes? Something to eat?”

“No, thank you,” - answers Ina politely. Her boredom is not apparent, at the moment; on the opposite, she seems to be thinking hard about something.

“Then, maybe, you’d like to take a walk?” - tries Shiro. He needs to leave this strange woman as soon as possible but he can’t forgo his responsibilities as a host.

“Sir?” - it’s a rare thing for Keith to speak up in a conversation between two free people (who are not Mr Fennel and Shiro, or Shiro’s friends).

Shiro turns fully to Keith, seeks his eyes, finds concern and tenderness there.

“I suppose you may need to return to your work now, sir. I would gladly assist Mrs Leifsdottir”.

“There’s no need!” - protests Ina hastily. - “I’ll be fine on my own!”

Keith frowns before he can make himself look distant again.

Shiro feels a headache starting. He doesn’t know Ina’s reasoning but Shiro starts feeling a little hostile towards her because he suspects that Keith feels unwelcome and sad as a result of her refusal.

“It’s a pity,” - says Shiro, clearly not thinking much. - “I was going to ask Mr Kinkade to spend some time working with Keith as well, and it would be good for you to know each other a little…”

Shiro stops, noting the growing tension in Ina’s posture, her widening eyes.

“No, sir,” - says Ina. - “There’s no way Ryan will work, as you call it, with slaves”.

She looks almost indignant when telling this, and Shiro wonders whether he should tell her to wait outside his gates for Ryan Kinkade to take her with him in his car, call her a taxi or send her to the city in one of his cars.

He turns to the variant with the taxi more and more, when the door swings open and no other than Mr Kinkade invades the room, Mr Fennel on his heels.

Mr Kinkade takes a look at Shiro and Keith, then turns to Ina with a displeased hum. He arches a brow, inquiringly, disapprovingly, and there’s so much meaning in this small gesture that Shiro wishes to be able to express himself as elegantly and laconically.

Then Mr Kinkade speaks and Shiro’s jaw drops hard on the parquet floor.

“What the fuck have you told my clients this time, Ina?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey
What do you think of the new characters? I fear they are, mghm, OOC. But also, I'm already in love with my Ina, so. Not much anyone can do.
Coming to an Understanding

Chapter Summary

Ina Leifsdottir has a bit of temper-tantrum. Keith takes her for a walk, while Shiro, Mr Fennel and Mr Kinkade discuss their situation. The discussion goes astoundingly well.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dear readers!

This chapter is ready on time (I seem to have quite a schedule lately - I post on Sundays and it’s good). There's not a lot of heavy action - just the present-day-Shiro making problems for the future-Shiro.

Please, leave some comments! I really need your opinion!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What the fuck have you told my clients this time, Ina?”

The question falls heavy in the loaded air of the room. Shiro can almost envision how it solidifies as an object and lands on the floor with a squelch, not unlike a dead fish or something equally slimy. In this moment, Shiro doesn’t like either Ina or Mr Kinkade. In this moment, Shiro feels no trust towards them at all. He wants them to be gone. He wants them to argue somewhere else, not in his home. He wants solitude and peace, and no doctors with questionable morals breaking in and pretending to be compassionate. He can’t understand how he could’ve wanted to have therapy by this man.

Meanwhile, Ina, the friendly Mrs Freckles who has turned out to be an intolerant and narrow-minded prude, freezes in place after hearing Mr Kinkade. Shiro expects her to look chastised, at least to pretend that she feels sorry for her crude words about slaves from before, but, no, seems like it won’t be the case. As the initial shock fades, Ina turns to her employer, looking angry and betrayed. Shiro can’t quite place her reaction; is Ina not pleased to be called out on her deeds in the presence of strangers or what?

For the first time since meeting Shiro, Ina Leifsdottir doesn’t look bored at all.

“What the fuck have I told them?” - repeats Ina in a strained, quivering voice.

Huh, thinks Shiro, she does have the guts. To talk to Mr Kinkade like that? They must be very good friends, or Ina is just stupidly inconsiderate. Shiro has witnessed firsthand how good Mr Kinkade can wield his words when he aims to diminish his opponents. Mr Kinkade doesn’t like rudeness, strongly so.
The man in question regards Ina thoughtfully, waiting for her to elaborate, patient and calm, despite his previous swearing. Come to think of it, Shiro hasn’t heard him swear before.

Ina starts walking towards Mr Kinkade and stops only when their chests are almost touching. She is taking deep, furious breaths, her little fists trembling at her sides, - the very picture of a righteous anger. Shiro finds her somehow ridiculous. But Ina doesn’t care about Shiro’s opinion right now - it appears like she doesn’t see anyone else in the room right now, beside Mr Kinkade. She opens her mouth as if to talk. Closes it, as if deciding against saying aloud the first thing that’s come to her mind. She pursues her lips angrily, collecting her thoughts, and then she in Mr Kinkade’s face. Her voice takes an unpleasantly high lilt that makes Shiro wince when she snarls at her companion.

“That we don’t work with slaves, that’s what!”

Here it comes again. Shiro mentally prepares his speech for breaking off relations with Mr Kinkade and his helper. Not too rude as not to disappoint Mr Fennel but harsh enough to let them know what he truly thinks of them.

Ina’s next shout is loud enough to startle Shiro from his musings:

“They will fucking ask us to do something disgusting to them, again! To make them compliant, to use hypnosis, to make stupid little dolls out of them! Anything, to make them compliant! Or, even better, they’ll ask us to make them like the shit they have to live in!”

Shiro realizes that he’s confused over her train of thought. To say that he’s expected something else would be an underestimation.

Mr Kinkade is raising his arms slowly around Ina, as if not to startle her. When she finishes her last sentence, Mr Kinkade is ready to support her when she collapses against him, is ready to let her hide her ugly wet sobs on his breast. Mr Kinkade allows Ina to cry for as long as she needs, all of his attention on her, his strong arms shielding her from the world, his large hands kneading her shoulders gently.

“I thought he doesn’t own slaves! You’ve told me so!...” - mutters Ina dejectedly between heavy pants and fits of crying. Mr Kinkade only shushes her, with tender touches and wordless murmurs, rocking Ina’s smaller body gently from side to side. At one moment, he plants a chaste kiss to her nape.

These guests are an enigma. Shiro almost feels like he’s intruding on something too private when Mr Kinkade holds her like that and she lets him coddle her.

Shiro, Mr Fennel and Keith stand there silently, observing the scene. There’s a slight smile playing at Mr Fennel’s lips: the one he wears when people around him amuse him (that’s the expression normal people have when watching playing kittens or puppies). Keith has his neutral mask on; since he’s become Mr Fennel’s apprentice, his control over his facial expressions has become much better than before. Shiro, in his turn, tries to reconcile his presumptions from hearing Ina’s refusal to work with Keith with what he’s heard now. He should’ve known better than to assume anything without hearing Ina’s reasons first.

To put it all simply: Ina considers Shiro the bad guy here.

What a strange coincidence! Ina and he have more in common than Shiro’s previously thought.

After a few long minutes, Mr Kinkade releases Ina from his gentle hold. She stays close to him while
he is dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. Shiro finds himself watching greedily; only now he realises that he’s missed common human signs of affection something fierce. He’s forgotten that there may be these precious moments in everyday life, not constricted by social roles and statuses. Sweet things that he’s been deprived of since his family has died. Shiro is happy to have Mr Fennel - but they both know that Mr Fennel is incapable of replacing Shiro’s family. The few friends Shiro still has - well, they haven’t had a lot of possibilities to come close to Shiro, let alone get affectionate.

Suddenly, someone touches Shiro’s forearm, distracting him from thoughts. Shiro spins on his heels in surprise, only to find that it’s just Keith standing behind him. Keith’s gaze transpires that he’s sorry to startle Shiro this way. Shiro breathes out with relief (it’s not an enemy, as his nervous mind has suggested) and nods at Keith, showing that he’s not angry at all and prompting Keith to talk. Gingerly, as not to crowd Shiro’s personal space too much, Keith leans in and whispers to Shiro’s ear (he has to stand on tiptoes to do so; so cute; stop this now, bad Shiro!):

“May I take Mrs Leifsdottir for a walk?”

Keith lowers himself and stands still in front of Shiro, waiting for his decision. Shiro is taken aback; he hasn’t anticipated Keith’s intervention at all. Shiro casts a confused look to Mr Fennel to gauge his reaction; Mr Fennel nods barely perceptively which must mean that he approves of Keith’s plan, whatever it is. Shiro says (just loud enough for everyone in the room to hear): “Yes, you may invite Mrs Leifsdottir for a walk.”

Keith smiles at him, a fleeting, grateful thing; then he puts his mask of a “poor, obedient boy” on (he wears it mostly while doing something that Lance goes ballistic about while the latter watches, to irritate Lance even more) and makes his way to Ina.

After crossing the room, Keith stops in front of Ina and Mr Kinkade. When he has their attention, Keith says in his carefully trained respectful tone:

“Mrs Leifsdottir, may I suggest…”

She interrupts, seemingly on autopilot:

“Ina is fine, Keith”.

“Mrs Ina,” - continues Keith, unperturbed, - “may I suggest we take a walk through the gardens? I really want to demonstrate you one beautiful place.”

In the end of the last phrase, Keith makes his voice sound a little childish. Shiro wonders, whether it’s something he’s learned in that goddess-forsaken boarding school of his or if it is a trick he’s been taught by Mr Fennel. He doesn’t believe that it comes naturally from Keith - it’s not in his character to be so indirect; besides, the boy has been conditioned to hide his weak points all too well by now.

But Ina doesn’t know Keith as good as Shiro does. In her distress, she is not as perceptive as Shiro believes her to be. Her eyes widen a little when she turns her gaze to Keith’s. Ina can’t refuse Keith now. Not when he sounds so pitiful. Not when she thinks that she and Mr Kinkade are the only ones standing in his corner.

“Master has allowed me,” - adds Keith, still childishly, but also adding a note of hopelessness to it. Ina stands no chance. A little lost, she looks Keith in the eyes for a moment or two until she accepts the inevitable. She’ll have to stay in the hateful mansion one walk in the gardens longer because a little lonely boy has asked her for it. In her opinion, she owes him this much. Ina looks at Mr Kinkade and they have a talk without words similar to the ones Shiro, Mr Fennel and Keith share so often, then turns back to Keith. Smiling with her lips only, she whispers helplessly:
“It’ll be my pleasure, Keith,” - and immediately moves to the door in long strides, neither checking whether Keith follows, nor, goddess forbid, waiting for Keith to show the way.

Shiro wonders what Keith may feel at the moment: satisfaction at playing his part successfully, regret at having to manipulate a seemingly kind person, or a little of both? Shiro wonders just how much Mr Fennel’s mentoring has influenced Keith’s inner thought process and his decision-making. Shiro wonders whether this, here and now, has been a part of Mr Fennel’s master plan, or that Keith has come up with this idea entirely on his own.

Despite being engrossed in his ruminations, Shiro notices Keith typing something furiously on his phone before he has to bolt after Ina to intercept her at the door until she takes herself wherever she desires without him.

When the door closes after Ina and Keith, Shiro is left with his (ex-?) therapist and Mr Fennel. The perfect company for asking some questions.

“Mr Kinkade?” - addresses Shiro the psychologist coldly. - “Do you have an explanation of what has just happened here ready for me? If you do, you’d better fit it in 20 words.”

Mr Kinkade frowns unhappily and replies in an expressionless voice, matter-of-factly:

“My lovely friend Ina has assumed you’ll make us delude your slaves under the pretence of doing therapy.”

So Shiro has translated Ina’s accusations right. Sounds logical, Shiro has to admit. What else would one expect from a wealthy descendant of a renowned family of slave owners? Shiro doesn’t even have it in him to act offended anymore.

“This is why she’s been so livid after I’ve mentioned that I want Keith to get treatment, I suppose?” - clarifies Shiro, just to be sure.

A nod from Mr Kinkade.

Shiro can only sigh tiredly.

For some time, no words are spoken; the three men use the pause in their discussion as a chance to mull everything over. There’s a lot to consider, for each of them.

Mr Fennel speaks first:

“Mr Kinkade, is it possible still that you will stay here and try to organize sessions for Shiro, Keith and one more slave boy, Lance? Your services are much needed”.

Mr Kinkade answers with a note of dry fatalism:

“Depends on Ina.”

It may be interpreted as “depends on Keith”, as far as Shiro is concerned. He’ll be cheering for his boy from the sidelines.

He, Mr Fennel and Mr Kinkade don’t have other options now except for to wait and see. But spicing up the process of waiting a bit is in Shiro’s power, though.

“Mr Fennel?” - says Shiro as haughtily as he can master. He puffs his chest out and raises his chin high, the very picture of a cocksure nobleman, making Mr Kinkade’s eyes crinkle with amusement.
“Yes, sir?” - replies Mr Fennel in a comically obsequious way, playing along.

“How do you feel about making us some drinks? I don’t think that Mr Kinkade has had a chance to taste one of your famous cocktails yet,” - continues Shiro magnanimously. Mr Kinkade has almost started smiling.

“He’s been on business here before, sir,” - suggests Mr Fennel, as if trying to be of help. He opens his eyes wider as if to play up his non-existent naivete, inclines his head to the side and folds his hands to his chest, palm to palm. In this moment, Mr Fennel reminds Shiro of a praying mantis - long-limbed, thoughtful and ravenous. He may look grotesque, but not to those who will fall prey to his actions. Shiro may not have anyone to kiss on the head, but he has Steve to play stupid little scenes and enjoy their own brand of humour. He needs to cherish that.

“Then we have to thank Mrs Ina for providing us with a unique and generous opportunity to relax in an informal setting,” - shrugs Shiro.

He turns his head to their guest and arches a brow, inviting him to make a request.

“One whisky, please,” - reacts Mr Kinkade immediately. He doesn’t outright smile, but his eyes are shining with mirth and a corner of his mouth twitches, as if suppressing a grin.

Mr Fennel bows his head, pleased that Mr Kinkade is participating in their fun, and goes to the little bar at one of the walls.

He won’t disappoint.

Two hours later, when Keith leads Ina back to the living room of the guest house, the gentlemen who’ve stayed there, are drunk, agitated and a little too friendly with each other. Mr Fennel is the most coherent of all, while Ryan is almost completely shit-faced.

Shiro is lucid enough not to call Keith. He regrets not drinking more; then, if he invited Keith to their table and pulled him close (maybe, even made Keith sit on his lap, hugging him tightly), Shiro would’ve had a perfect excuse for his misbehaviour. Shiro contemplates doing so anyway - he can still think clearly enough that he will notice if Keith is truly uncomfortable and won’t force him to do anything. He doesn’t want to scare or anger Keith, no way! He would be gentle and everything would be OK… Thankfully, Mr Fennel doesn’t give Shiro enough time to gather his courage and do something stupid. With one hand (the other holds a shaker) he indicates at the corridor leading to the bedrooms and knits his brows, urging Keith to move. Obedient to a fault, Keith immediately starts tugging Ina in the direction of her assigned bedroom. Ina gapes at her friend and employer who is currently describing to Shiro how hard it is not to break a nose or two while visiting his clients at their houses. Shiro listens and nods vigorously. Seeing Ina’s reaction, Shiro wishes to reassure her that her precious Ryan will be alright in their company; actually, better than anywhere else, but Ina’s slim shape disappears around the corner and Shiro can only shrug. Even better, no one will spoil their fun. Already Ryan hands him a shot with something green and blue in it, and Shiro forgets these trouble.

It’s a shame that Keith hasn’t stayed, Shiro can’t help but think sulkily. This party would benefit from his presence. At least, Shiro has a willing ear to listen to his “awesome” stories about fellow slave owners, this time. Or so he thinks.

The drunk Ryan talks a thousand times more than the sober Ryan. Shiro has the patience to wait for his turn to narrate for as long as necessary but after some time he begins to realize that he may wait in
vain since Ryan’s collection of stories seems to be bottomless and he doesn’t make pauses.

If he is being honest, Shiro is as content to listen to Ryan as to talk himself. Still, it’s a pity that Keith is not with him. Keith would have laughed at these stories, too.

Shiro reclines on the back of the sofa and watches Ryan talk. He doesn’t understand the meaning of the current story, too distracted by his thoughts to pay proper attention. But does it even matter? They’re having the time of their lives, bonding over their hatred to social norms and arrogant compatriots, why bother with technicalities?

To show that he cares, Shiro nods his agreement (when appropriate and when not) and, on the overall, demonstrates his support of Ryan openly and loudly.

One thought crosses Shiro’s mind in the middle of their fun. Do hungover therapists treat their drinking buddies the next morning? Or, at least, the next day?

Shiro sincerely hopes so. He needs therapy because of reasons he can’t recall right now, but he is sure that he needs it badly, and he doesn’t want to get treated by anyone but Ryan.

In the meantime, Ryan starts retelling the story of the unfortunate death of the nameless raccoon from this morning for the umpteenth time, and Shiro has to stop his musings to properly mourn the poor thoughtless animal together with Ryan.

The next morning, Shiro wakes up in his own bed, a glass of water and a pill on his bedside table.

He doesn’t remember anything after the moment when Keith has disappeared in the doorway of the living room in the guest house with Ina in tow, heading for her bedroom.

Shiro checks his phone: two new incoming messages from Mr Fennel. Both contain photos of Shiro. On the first, Shiro is vomiting into a houseplant. On the second, he is being half-carried by Hunk and Lance. Shiro seems to be making some wild gestures with his arm (his only one, which is supposed to cling to Hunk’s shoulder for support). Lance can only hold onto Shiro from his right side and try to usher him in the right direction while Hunk does the major part of holding Shiro’s weight. Thanks to Shiro’s flailing, the boys have to make a visible effort not to let their Master stumble to the ground.

Shiro only wants to hide under the covers for the rest of his life. He contemplates pretending to be ill and doing just that until everyone forgets what a shameful disaster he is when a new message comes in. It’s from Ryan’s number this time.

“Those cocktails, man. Your butler is a devil! And Ina is here already… bye, my friend, will die a painful death, RIP, me,” - reads the text. Shiro can definitely sympathize. He’s lucky that no one has come after his head, yet.

Next comes another message from Mr Fennel (yeah, speak of the devil): “Everything under control, captain! Your therapist and his assistant plan to stay and work for us! The operation “Distract-Ina-and-Party-Hard” has been a success! (Also, the azalea has been transplanted. It will live).”

That’s some positive news for today. Shiro doesn’t even get irritated at Mr Fennel’s sarcasm. He’ll have to apologize to the gardener who’s had to repot the poor flower, though. And to the maids who clean the guesthouse (surely, his vomiting area hasn’t been limited to the azalea pot). And to Hunk and Lance. And to thank them all for their… assistance.

Shiro flops back to the bed, wincing from the impact. He closes his eyes. His head is killing him. He
doesn’t want to decide anything. He doesn’t want to interact with anyone for the next millennium.

Another message chimes in. Shiro doesn’t want to know what’s in it.

After a minute of fighting himself and against his better judgement, Shiro gives up. He gropes blindly for his phone of the bedside stand, nearly sending it flying to the floor, but catching it in time, unlocks it and looks at the screen blearily.

It’s from Keith. Shiro doesn’t know whether to feel happy as he always does when he receives a message from Keith, or to be frightened of what Keith might have to say. The curiosity wins out, and he slips the text open.

“Ina snores,” - informs Keith. - “Please, don’t party at her bedroom’s door next time, sir! At least, not on my shift. She’s made me stay and watch the door until the noise from the living room has ceased.”

See, not so bad. Except for Ina fearing for her life because of some drunken idiots. Shiro reads the next line:

“Also, drinking is bad for your health, says Mr Fennel. Don’t forget to take the pill on your nightstand, sir.”

This cocktail-mixing hypocrite! He has to intervene even here!

Shiro reads further, and the last line says:

“sorry, Master Shiro, he’s my boss (get better soon)”

Shiro feels his heart swell with adoration. Keith is just so sweet to him.

But let’s face the unpleasant truth: Mr Fennel, Keith’s boss and Shiro’s right-hand man, hasn’t let Shiro interact with Keith yesterday. Who knows what Keith could have thought of the situation. Shiro will have to forgive Mr Fennel any amount of sass for this deed, and will still owe him.

Shiro sighs with resignation. He’ll just have to survive the hungover and the return of his memories. That’s no big deal. It won’t be worse than the last time he got drunk, in summer.

The main thing right now is that Keith doesn’t hate him and doesn’t consider him a massive pervert; all other problems are solvable.

Shiro swallows the pill and drinks the water, then lets himself fall asleep anew. He dreams of Keith in a sexy bunny suit offering him a head-sized pink azalea flower.

Chapter End Notes

Who doesn't love some Keith in a bunny suit?

Please, let me know what you think about the new characters - Ina and Ryan!
Your feedback will give me the power to continue this story!
Chapter Summary

Shiro starts his therapy with Ryan.
Keith and Ina get to know each other better.
Pidge causes a little mayhem.
The usual)

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

I'm sorry for disappearing. The previous week I have posted two little things for Kinktober (who knew I would?). Go read them if you are interested in Sheith porn.

Anyway, a week later than on the schedule, but the chapter is here. I like how it turned out in the end and I hope you will like it as well)
Please, leave comments, I love them so-so much)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This therapy thing - it’s tricky. It’s like letting someone pry your wounds open with a knife, but not to hurt - to make sure there’s no poison or pus left. It’s like pulling yourself out of a mire by your own hair. It’s like waddling through wet sands, dragging your feet and getting stuck at every second step.

It might be a different experience for others who turn to therapy, but that’s how it feels for Shiro.

To put it simply - it’s scary. Shiro hates it. Hates feeling not competent enough to deal with his problems on his own. Hates feeling weak. Everyone keeps telling him that getting help is the right thing to do, that he can be proud of himself; and yet, their encouraging words fall on a dead soil. Shiro would have said the same thing to anyone who is brave enough to let a professional tend to their psychological trauma. But telling such things to others and taking them to heart himself are two different things.

Maybe, were he able to conquer his fear and, instead of resisting every step of the way, face his therapy openly, full of confidence in himself and his abilities, full of faith in his future healing… Shiro shakes his head ruefully; that would be a tale of a legendary paladin, not the story of his life.

But, as if to spite his worry, self-contempt and doubts, Shiro’s life has given him Ryan as his doctor. Shiro realizes full well how much he has lucked out with him. Ryan is just as patient and subtle with Shiro now as he has been (four? or five?) years ago when Shiro has sought his help the last time. Ryan can explain things short and clear, if and when Shiro needs him to. Ryan is able to lead Shiro through the roads where Shiro would have stumbled were he attempting to cross those alone. In sum, Ryan’s support makes Shiro feel that he is not alone in his fight. This is not the same thing as the care and comfort that Shiro gains from interacting with Mr Fennel, Keith or his friends: where his closest
people don’t let him fall, Ryan gives him the ammo to fight his battle.

Despite Shiro’s insistence, Ryan refuses to accept a higher payment for his services than the one he usually charges, saying that living at Shiro’s mansion is like visiting a holiday inn for free and that he should be the one paying for a chance to stay in such a wonderful place. Ryan’s arguments make Shiro laugh every time. Shiro has done his best to make his estate as nice and pleasing as possible, but he’s done it for himself only, and hearing from someone else that they are fascinated by his house always takes Shiro by surprise. When Shiro feels down, he recalls the awe with which Ryan speaks of his mansion and its beauties, and reminds himself that Ryan and Ina like their workspace, at least, even if their visit to Shiro is a useless effort in terms of their work.

Just like before, Ryan never shows any signs of displeasure at Shiro’s lack of tangible progress. Never does he insinuate that Shiro doesn’t try enough or that his problems are made-up and that others wouldn’t need therapy five years after the traumatic event. Shiro can tell that a therapist who would tell their patient such things should have his license revoked. This is his fear talking, for sure. Shiro realizes that these things don’t belong in the reality of his treatment by Ryan; Shiro thinks that it would hurt Ryan’s feelings to hear that Shiro, even in his wildest thoughts, can imagine Ryan doing something so cruel to one of his charges. Shiro feels like the worst patient ever for contemplating this.

There’s one more important observation: being only treated with kindness by his therapist, the man whom Shiro shows himself at his most vulnerable, soothes something in Shiro he didn’t know needed soothing.

Some days though, Shiro’s thoughts would go in circles and keep returning to imaginative situations where Ryan would hurt him, deliberately or not, where Ryan would do something unforgivable, make Shiro drop. At times like that, Shiro reminds himself that, if Ryan fails him, he will still have Mr Fennel, Keith, Matt and Allura. It helps to know that there are people outside of the room where they do the therapy who would support Shiro no matter what. It helps especially when during some of their sessions hearing his own voice, talking aloud about things Shiro’s conscience is not ready to share yet, makes Shiro’s skin prickle.

It’s Monday already, and their work with Ryan and Ina is in full swing. Unsurprisingly, Shiro is a well of dark memories and painful revelations. For the thousandth time, Shiro thinks that he is very lucky that Ryan has agreed to work with him on such a short notice. Very lucky that they’ve managed to clear the misunderstanding with Ina and her views on slavery from the last Thursday before it’s been too late, as well.

The misunderstanding, that could have ruined more than just Shiro’s chances to have therapy with his favourite specialist (but also his faith in people and many more things as well), is all but forgotten, too boring now in comparison to the drinking binge that has followed it in the evening. If there is one good thing that has come out of the sloppy first meeting with Mrs Freckles it is that Ina and Keith have found themselves striking a quick friendship with each other when neither has expected anything like that to happen in the given circumstances. Shiro and Ryan can’t decide about whom they should be more surprised for being so open - about Ina, who sees too many people’s flaws written on their faces before they even talk to her and is able to predict a dozen different ways of how any of her new acquaintances may go wrong, or about Keith, who’s been taught not to trust anyone by a life full of hardships and has perfected his masks in order to always stay distant.

Despite everyone’s hopes, Keith can’t work with Ryan. Keith isn’t able to trust Ryan, in the first place. But, miraculously, he trusts Ina, and, thankfully, that makes some progress possible. Ina doesn’t even attempt to analyze Keith the way Ryan does to Shiro. She and Keith just find so many invident similarities in their personalities, that many things that would need an explanation with
another person are a given between them. Of course, they are two very different, very complicated people, both with their own life experiences, secrets and fears. But there is something that draws them to each other, that makes them good for each other. Besides, Ina, when not stressed, is really, really perceptive. She manages to catch on Keith’s behavioural cues right off the bat and, what’s more important, is able to discuss his problems with him in a way which doesn’t scare Keith off.

From what Shiro has gathered from Ryan, Ina is a prodigy. While she could have excelled in many fields, she has been fascinated with the humans’ inner world since her childhood, thus her first choice of a profession. The intricate patterns of people’s minds, in their angst or disease, hold her in thrall, so much that she often forgets that the objects of her study are living, feeling beings, and not just a collection of mixed up childhood memories, motives and fears. It was Ryan who’s told her that she builds her communication with other people on the wrong basis, watching her interact with other students around her or the patients they were allowed to meet at practice. He didn’t mean for her to leave her major after the third year, just to help her re-evaluate her tactics. Ryan still feels guilty that things have happened the way they did. He doubts that someone else would have been concerned with Ina’s peculiar way of thinking as much as him, or consider it an obstacle in her chosen line of work. For goddess’ sake, Ina is clever and well-read, doesn’t lack in compassion or ability to analyze, what’s more? She gets carried away easily, yeah, and so what? She could have matured during the years, become a notable person... But Ina has always cherished Ryan’s opinion: she has listened to him seriously, contemplated his words and concluded that her best friend is right - she reacts to other people in a weird way. But where Ryan has meant for her to change her attitude, she’s decided that she won’t be able to and that it’d be better for everyone if she doesn’t become a psychologist. She could’ve graduated on top, could’ve had her own patients by now. But it wasn’t meant to be: after hearing Ryan out, Ina has made a decision. She has changed her speciality and hasn’t, even once, regretted doing so. When asked, she’d tell that she couldn’t see the forest for the trees which is a bad trait for a therapist. She’s graduated with flying colours with a major in Library Science. She’s always joked that her new major is very useful for Ryan since she will always find him the best books on any subject. In her free time, along with her own studying materials, Ina has been reading through every textbook Ryan has had, helping him get ready to his tests and exams. With her memory, Ryan won’t be surprised if she is better with the theory in his field of knowledge than him.

Ina’s perceptiveness is something closer to magic than to a human ability; apparently, it’s a mix of well-developed empathy and keen attention, paired with a fantastic memory and uncompromising logic. Keith says that Ina just sees all the things that are worth seeing; the ones he himself can’t ever find the words for. Many of those things don’t really require words between the two and can be left unsaid because simply seeing them means acknowledging them already, and it’s enough for Keith.

Shiro has a fleeting suspicion that Ina discovers just as much about herself as Keith does about himself during their time together.

To more distressing matters: Ina has insisted on witnessing Keith’s Saturday discipline. Keith has taken the idea in stride (“If you think that I or Mr Fennel would feel confused or embarrassed over letting you see...” (a careless shrug), Mr Fennel, too. But not Shiro, of course. He has been close to fainting when he’s heard about the idea. Ryan has tried to reassure him, saying that Ina can handle such a sight and that Mr Fennel is a patient man who doesn’t harm people unnecessarily which will prove to Ina that Keith is in good hands... Shiro has been too tired to explain that it is him who can’t handle it all.

Shocking for Shiro, but Ina has come out of Mr Fennel’s “playroom” calm and relieved. “I’m not against BDSM.” - she’s told Shiro, and that was all she’d say on the matter. Shiro has had to stifle hysterical giggles for the rest of the day. BDSM? Like, as in Safe-Sane-Consensual? Shiro wouldn’t argue the first two terms from the abbreviation being placed correctly, - what with Mr Fennel being
an actual professional Dom, - but a slave giving consent? The idea rattles Shiro to the core.

Shiro has shared his thoughts on the matter with Mr Fennel and, to his relief, Mr Fennel responded that he totally agrees with Shiro, but, at the same time, it’s the best he can offer in the current situation.

Shiro couldn’t stop thinking about the topic even after consulting his chief assistant. In the end, his legs have brought him to the boys’ room. Shiro wanted, no, needed, to finally speak to Keith personally on the matter of his weekly discipline. In front of the door, Shiro paused, steeled himself and knocked.

At his second knock, Hunk has shouted: “Come in, please!”, which Shiro did, to his own dismay. He hasn’t been prepared to witness the scene playing out inside the room. There, thanks to Lance’s pillow fort, Keith’s bed was the only one in view. On that bed, Keith was lying on his stomach, in his T-shirt only, all of his prominent after-spanking bruises visible on his ass, while Lance was sitting at his side and rubbing something into the reddened skin. At the foot of the bed, Hunk was busy organizing a medical kit. As if nothing was out of order, the three of them looked up at Shiro simultaneously, seemingly pleased to see their Master in their little kingdom. What has unsettled Shiro the most, was Keith’s look over his shoulder, searching Shiro’s face for reasons to be here, a little confused but still trusting. As per usual, Keith was not concerned about his nudity at all, whipping marks or no.

Shiro has turned his back to them, beet-red and stunned, not letting himself watch, not letting himself look his fill of the boy who’s been taught repeatedly that his body doesn’t belong to him. Not wanting to be that man. Shiro couldn’t say what exactly has made his cheeks flame so hard: seeing Keith indisposed, getting aroused because of seeing Keith indisposed, becoming aware of his inappropriate arousal, or all of the three combined. Immediately, all thoughts of talking to Keith flew out of Shiro’s head.

“I’m sorry, Master Shiro”, - complained Keith to him, then. In Shiro’s peripheral vision, he was half-lying atop of his pillow, his eyes on the wall beside the bed, his ass still getting a rigorous massage from Lance. - “These two make me endure the second round of aftercare as if Mr Fennel doesn’t do a good job of it. They’ve managed to start it long before I moved in with them”. At the end of his sentence, Keith sounded petulant and sullen. Shiro could only mutter that this may be wise as the additional portion of a lotion probably makes the bruises dissipate sooner. Next moment, he has hurried away immediately. Shiro has closed the door behind himself to Hunk yelling excitedly at Keith that he’s been telling him the same thing for ages, “You can’t just ignore what Master says the way you do with what we say, no, Keith, it doesn’t work like that!”, and Lance saying smugly (also to Keith, who was apparently trying to escape) that: “No, Keith, we are not done here, ah-ah, you can’t just be so careless about your health, pretty boy, what would Master think!”.

Said Master would think that no one wears stripes across their hips as beautifully as Keith does. That no one is as perfect and precious as Keith. That he wants to be the only one allowed to touch Keith, always.

Shortly, this is why Shiro had to flee to his room to rekindle his acquaintance with his long-term friend, the cold shower. Standing under the chilly spray, Shiro cursed his wild imagination and poor self-control. Why does Keith look so alluring with his freshly-welted butt exposed like that? Why would Shiro like it? Why is Shiro like that? At least, Shiro didn’t have to worry about Keith feeling ashamed of himself for letting Shiro see. Keith is never ashamed of his body. Maybe, it’s Shiro who misdirects his anger, from his own woes to the show of Keith’s nudity. His clever, beautiful boy doesn’t have the same prejudices Shiro does; there is no reason for Keith to be wary of his body, he has every right to feel good in his own skin, nude or clothed, alone or in a company. It’s Shiro who
needs to quench his jealousy and possessiveness, his insecurities and fears.

Still in the shower cabin, Shiro has laughed bitterly and put a hand over his eyes, tired. Who has he become over these short months? He feels possessive over a 16-year-old boy who he by no means should have the right to own, in any meaning of the word.

A monster, that’s who.

Shiro has tried to avoid Keith on Sunday (old habits die hard) but to no avail: Ina has hunted him down under the pretence of wanting to know more about the main house history and then led him straight to Keith. Between Keith and Ina, Shiro didn’t know where to run (and, obviously, he isn’t sure if he could’ve outrun Keith who still runs regularly to keep in shape). He has admitted defeat and, after Ina has left them alone, has finally talked to Keith about Saturdays.

Keith has been genuinely surprised to hear how much Shiro suffers over ordering to discipline Keith every week. “But, don’t you think that I would have told you if I wanted this to stop? Or Mr Fennel?” - his slave has asked, brows furrowed in confusion. Shiro didn’t know what to say to that. That Keith doesn’t have to endure any beatings, not when he has a way out? That he hasn’t expected such a level of trust from Keith where he simply asks to be freed from corporal punishments when he wants to, ever? That, as an owner, he doesn’t deserve any level of trust from his slaves? That Keith doesn’t know what he’s talking about?

Seems like Keith could sense all of Shiro’s arguments (and didn’t like any of them) because suddenly his gaze has narrowed and he’s stepped away from Shiro. Then, Keith uttered angrily to Shiro: “Not even you trust me to choose what’s OK for me?” and stomped away in the direction opposite of where Shiro has come from.

Shiro thinks he has cried; he can’t tell for sure.

It took the remnants of Sunday and joint efforts of Ina, Ryan, Lance and Hunk to make Shiro and Keith talk once more and make peace with each other. Mr Fennel has observed from the sidelines, the old fox: he’s announced that there would be a conflict of interest if he would try to resolve the matter (maybe, it was really clever of him; Shiro would’ve gotten into a fight with Mr Fennel, too, were the bastard’s whereabouts known to him at that moment).

Now it’s Monday, and Shiro still feels shaken and unsteady. They have another session with Ryan; this time, they discuss Shiro’s last three years and the issues Shiro has faced during that time which he finds significant. Keith is somewhere in the main house, doing his chores, followed by the ever-curious Ina, and Shiro’s thoughts turn to him every now and then, distracting him from Ryan. It is a tiring and a pleasing day at the same time. It gets only better when Shiro learns that, upon Ina’s insistence, Keith has decided to give sessions with Ryan one more chance, under the condition that she comes with him; Shiro would’ve gotten into a fight with Mr Fennel, too, were the bastard’s whereabouts known to him at that moment).

Shiro only manages to carve the Monday’s evening and the first half of Tuesday for himself. Actually, he has been expecting… something to happen, what with the unusual guests in his house. But that?

On Tuesday Pidge comes to visit Hunk. Of course, this is the same day when Ina has a sudden wish to inspect Hunk’s workplace. Keith accompanies her to the mechanic workshop, high-fives Hunk,
greets the other workers and returns to his duties. After Keith is gone, Ina sits down on a bench at the far wall and watches the masters and the single slave that work there, self-assured and a little bored. One would think that she owns the place with the way she holds herself. She is tolerated, as a capricious child looking for entertainment amidst adult life, treated with gentle caution.

The employees and the servants can’t quite decide what to make of Ina, to be honest. It’s not like the workers don’t know a thing about psychotherapy; still, most of them consider it a whimsy suited for rich people. But Ryan, they know from four (five?) years ago (he hasn’t taken Ina with himself back in the day, from fear of unsettling or overwhelming Shiro with the presence of one additional stranger); he’s the doctor who doesn’t do any stitches, but makes their employer cry regularly anyway. Said employer claims that he feels better afterwards, and they don’t have a reason to disbelieve him, which means, that Ryan is useful, he can stay.

Ina, on the other hand, spends her time distracting Mr Shirogane’s favourite slave from work (and the boy does have a lot of important tasks, as most of the employees agree now) or lazing around in the grass beside the fountains which Lance is tending to at the moment. She looks all the men and women she meets straight in the eyes and doesn’t show even a sliver of embarrassment. Where Ryan is simple and modest, she is enigmatic and seemingly boundless.

She doesn’t make sense.

She is the guest of Mr Shirogane, and in this, a blessed rarity.

She still doesn't make any sense.

Shiro doesn’t even try to explain that Ina is Ryan’s irreplaceable helper, that her observations make Ryan’s work ten times more effective, that she has managed to decrease Lance’s anxiety levels remarkably over the few days she’s been here. That Keith looks like he finds a new clue to himself every day.

Shiro is just grateful that everyone shows Ina respect.

Pidge, obviously, is an entirely different matter. She also is wickedly clever, devoid of shyness, direct and open in both her likes and dislikes. But that’s all about the similarities between them. What’s important, Pidge has become a familiar face in the mansion, and no one looks at her as at a twig that might break under the slightest pressure anymore. Pidge has proven himself, time and time again, with skilled hands and unexpectedly sharp mind. At 14, she masters projects no one would have deemed possible and does so masterfully. Here, in the workshop, Hunk has become her long-sought companion (and a co-partner in crime, when needed). When Pidge comes to visit, she enters the workshop as if it were another room of her own house, with no care for formalities such as knocking, knowing that she is accepted and very welcome.

This time, Pidge doesn’t announce her arrival either. She just swings the door open, makes a step inside, intending to yell to Hunk that she’s managed to solve her latest problem with the wiring of their last invention-in-process. And stops in her tracks, after meeting Ina’s baby-blues.

Hunk later describes this moment as a brain short circuit that has changed Pidge’s whole life.

With Pidge here, as elated as she is, the work is disrupted, utterly and completely. Introductions are made; Pidge blushes when taking Ina’s hand to shake; Hunk makes photos; Pidge runs around the shop, pointing at Ina and explaining to everyone how cool Ina is; Ina watches all of this with her usual polite interest; at some point, Keith comes to retrieve Ina only to get sucked into Pidge’s madness. To save at least some of the working hours for the mechanics, Keith stirs the company out of the workshop to one of the garden-houses and calls Lance to join them for a good measure. Mr
Fennel, the realist, when informed, orders Keith to continue their fun and don’t go back to work until the next day. The kids fetch some food and forget the outside world completely. Ryan and Shiro observe the company from afar (Shiro has produced two sets of binoculars), afraid to breathe too loudly and spook them. In the end of the day, Pidge proclaims her undying love to Ina (Mr Fennel and Keith later swear that there have been no alcoholic drinks at their improvised garden-party) and Ina says, in complete earnest, that she doesn’t feel the same. The boys later share their impressions from the scene: they couldn’t decide which of the girls makes them want to facepalm more (or harder).

Shiro and Ryan decide to intervene. By the time they come closer, they can overhear a fine conversation.

Pidge (devotedly): “I am very serious about you, Ina! You’re my ideal!”

Ina (calmly): “It may be an unhealthy thing to consider someone ideal, this is a way which leads to disappointments from both sides…”

Pidge, interrupting: “OK, I get it, whatever! Just let me love you!”

Ina, grimacing a little: “I couldn’t stop you from doing so if I tried to.”

Pidge (back to seriousness): “We could have a trial period…”

Ina: “You are a minor, as far as I’m concerned. I am not allowed to pursue any kind of relationship with you, except for… a friendship.”

Pidge (pleading): “We can stay platonic until the age of consent! What is it in our country, by the way?”

Hunk (deadpan): “16.”

Silence falls on the garden-house; Lance facepalms, Keith’s tugs his gaze from Ina to Pidge and back in utter despair (so much intense human interaction in the span of one day). Shiro imagines that Keith wishes to hide among his books in the glass-library right now, and the only thing preventing him from doing just that is Mr Fennel’s training.

Lance is the first person to come back to presence. He pushes Keith to Ina who is on the verge of tears because of Hunk’s reminder of the boys’ ages and the things that can be done to any teenage slave after they reach the age of 16 (Ina takes the boys’ lack of freedom far harder than the boys themselves), then starts tugging Hunk away muttering under his breath that being so tactless is a horrible, horrible thing. Shiro and Ryan come into play at the same time: Shiro neutralises Pidge while Ryan helps Keith in calming Ina.

Later at night, Matt, who has had to come to Shiro’s mansion personally to retrieve his little sister after the incident, calls Shiro to say that they have come home safely and that Pidge is alright, if a little subdued.

At the end of their conversation, Matt exclaims proudly: “We both love unreachable women, Shiro. Must be a family thing!” Seems like it’s Shiro’s turn to facepalm.

Chapter End Notes
Remember Pidge seeing that robot Nyma and Rillo have owned? How she has squealed and run around with starry eyes? That's how I picture Pidge meet Ina.
I, like, ship them with abandon now? I think they are perfect for each other? Fight me!

Thanks for reading and, please, tell me what you think!
Many hugs to all of you who are still around)) ^--^
Trying Not to Fall

Chapter Summary

Ryan and Ina's stay at the Shirogane Mansion comes to an end. There is a farewell party and promises to stay in contact. The next day, the usual life begins.

Chapter Notes

Hy, my dears,
I'm almost on time!

That's been a struggle! I feel not so very well (please, no catching cold this time!) and I am sleepy all the time.
Only rabbit and unicorn videos have seen me through to the end of Chapter 21!

Please, enjoy and tell me your thoughts! Every comment is welcome!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shiro would give half of his kingdom away to let Ina and Ryan stay for one more week. But he knows that he has taken a lot of their time already and can’t ask for more.

It’s been almost three full weeks since they’ve come to the mansion on that confusing Thursday. A lot has happened, pleasant and questionable things, but, all in all, the operation “Therapy” has been a complete success.

It is a miracle, how much can change in a short amount of time when two dedicated people take everything in their hands. It’s a miracle that Lance has been able to allow Mr Fennel to take a blood sample from him during the “Annual Health Check for Shirogane’s Mansion Employees” (organized and supervised by Mr Fennel) without struggling or fainting after. It’s a miracle that Keith is now able to talk about the events from his past which he fears but still feels the need to discuss. It’s a miracle that Shiro feels less and less guilty for what has happened to him and his team back in his army time.

Actually, Shiro thinks that he might have had a real break-through with his own therapy. Since his return from the enemy’s labs, he’s been told again and again that he can’t control everything: can’t predict the enemy’s every move, can’t always make perfect decisions, can’t be ideal. He’s heard the phrase “It’s not your fault” in various combinations time and time again, from doctors and friends alike. Lost in denial, Shiro has come to believe that everyone who tries to console him says such things not because they consider them true, but because they want Shiro to stop beating himself up. Out of pity, mostly, or so he’s thought. In truth, Shiro couldn’t even consider the possibility that he may be not guilty for real.

Not until this year.
This year has changed everything.

First, he’s met Keith. Feelings aside, Keith is the person who has made Shiro re-evaluate his own choices. Keith, who’s spent four years in a maddening circle of violence, sex and loneliness and who is still able to see good things in people despite that. Keith, whom Shiro loves and wants to be able to take better care of.

Second, Mr Fennel has stayed with him all this time. Since Shiro’s 16, he’s been there for him. He continued guiding and nursing Shiro even when Shiro has been a handful (read: all the time). Mr Fennel has made sure that Shiro stays a responsible citizen, a respectable businessman, a keen innovator in the eyes of society, he has fought tooth and nail so that Shiro doesn’t lose his hard-won achievements because of a trauma which (and Mr Fennel has always told him so) definitely will be cured one day.

Third, he’s met Lance. A boy who’s managed to show Shiro a way out of a dead end from years ago. He’s become the first person whose retold experiences Shiro has been able to believe.

Shiro can hardly recall now how he’s come to be so untrusting. He supposes it may have happened during his time in the hospital five years ago. At that time, Shiro has been socializing with some other war veterans. He has tried to listen to them or to share memories since it was the thing they have done. It hasn’t helped a bit, if possible, it has only has made things worse for Shiro. In terms of reaction, he remembers having two options in his arsenal: sometimes, he could only think with irritation that those veterans were bragging and exaggerating for the sake of impressing him; the other days, he couldn’t make himself feel anything at all while listening to the stories he’s genuinely believed to be true. And the second option has been a lot scarier than the first: not feeling a thing where he knew he would’ve felt a lot of things, were he the same man as before, made Shiro feel inhuman. Shiro remembers listing emotions he should be feeling, were he normal, in his head while listening to someone’s story: anger, irritation, fear, disgust, pity, pride… It’s been a mistake by the medical staff to let him interact with other men and women in the hospital so freely; no one has expected that his PTSD (when it’s shown itself) would be so bad. The first week after Shiro’s rescue he’s managed to convince everyone that he is OK, shaken, of course, but mostly in order. And then, the next week, he’s gone catatonic after seeing a medical gurney with straps. After that, he’s been treated with much more caution, but the harm has been done: Shiro couldn’t ever forget the feeling of being inadequate to the point of absurdity. Moreover, not showing any emotions when he’s known that he must have been showing some, staying passive when he’s known that he should have given some comfort to the suffering person in front of him, made Shiro feel deceitful. As if he only pretended to be a human when he was anything but, - only an empty shell, nothing more. Just look at me, people, wanted to shout Shiro some days, I am breathing, talking, walking, using my single hand while I shouldn’t have existed at all at this point, the miserable creature that I am!

After years of thinking along those lines, what a revelation it has been to see the big picture from Lance’s point of view! Lance has been small and scared in Shiro’s eyes when they’ve talked about their time in the hateful laboratories, not trying to sound brave or confident. Lance didn’t want to prove anything, he just wanted comfort and support offered freely by Shiro, no false sense of pride or propriety in between them. Lance has shown himself to be tender and caring; his heart has suffered for Shiro even after all the things he himself has been through. Maybe, the reason for feeling better after confessing his fears to Lance was that Shiro has waited enough to let his wounds heal before trying to “compare notes” once more; maybe, it was because Lance hasn’t judged him; maybe, Lance is simply this special. Whatever the case, this time, while taking in another’s story, Shiro could feel, the way a human is supposed to in his eyes. He has listened to a person and heard them, and even offered comfort. It may not sound like a big break to someone else, but to Shiro, it is one.

And, the last person in this row, but not the least, is Ryan.
Ryan... He is a wonder. He is the one who’s told Shiro “It’s not your fault” and whom Shiro has believed.

Needless to say, Shiro has tried consulting several specialists before finding Ryan back in the day. Ryan has been perfect for him those years ago. Ryan hasn’t pushed him, hasn’t insisted on Shiro telling him anything, but, at the same time, Shiro could tell that his mind was going towards things that horrified him beyond any measure. Ryan understood Shiro so good that Shiro couldn’t take it anymore. A little more time and Shiro would’ve stumbled upon his greatest fears. He couldn’t go there. That’s why he has cancelled his next appointment with Ryan (through Mr Fennel, the coward that he was; Ryan tells him that he shouldn’t say bad things about himself but it’s the honest truth) and decided to try to visit a psychiatrist instead. There has been a woman, recommended by Mr Fennel’s acquaintance from his hospital times, who he went to. She has been patient with Shiro, just as Ryan has been. She hasn’t been that kind, though. Shiro’s progress has slowed down significantly with her. Shiro’s fears have stayed rooted deep into his psyche, and, while her methods have helped with many things, his anxiety especially, at some point he has decided that he’s done with therapy, and even Mr Fennel has been unable to change his mind.

Now, Ryan has come into Shiro’s life again and Shiro is going to be forever grateful for that. Ryan jokes that he does it all for money when Shiro starts thanking him. But Shiro is not blind. He can see a difference between just a good specialist and a talented and devoted one.

Ryan says that it is unprofessional of him to befriend patients. Shiro replies that he couldn’t have helped it if he tried - they are simply too good a match, which never fails to make his doctor smile. Ryan claims that he’ll have to find another specialist to work with Shiro since he’s biased now. Shiro finds that he doesn’t really mind for as long as Ryan doesn’t fade away from his radars entirely.

The situation in the mansion gets a little out of hand once, when Ina starts feeling jealous because of Shiro, and Ryan has to go to great lengths to reassure her that he’s not going anywhere from her, that she is as important to him as ever.

Shiro wonders just how close the two are, aside from being long-term friends. Ryan says to him once that he considers Ina his life-partner. Whether he ever falls in love and marries or not, he and Ina will stay close. Shiro can’t help but think that Ina may be a hindrance when (or if) Ryan chooses to settle. If she reacts so strongly at Ryan’s friendship with Shiro then how would she react at Ryan’s lover? Shiro doesn’t voice it, of course, but Ryan seems to guess it anyway and says, laughing: “She just doesn’t like you, she tolerates you for my and Keith’s sake. You own slaves, period. She won’t ever start liking you.” Shiro opens his mouth and closes it again. So simple. Does Ina even consider the idea that Shiro is, no matter which way you look at it, a good owner? That he’s given his slaves the work they like, that he encourages his team leaders, whom his slaves take instructions from, to educate them? That the only way to stop being an owner for him is to sell the boys to another owner, who may not be this caring? Shiro’s reverie is interrupted by Ryan’s words: “Shiro. Don’t let it get to you. Rationally, Ina knows that you don’t belong to the type of owners she hates. But, in daily life, she can’t help it - your status is like a red flag to her.” Shiro only smiles ruefully in response. As long as Keith smiles and laughs as often as he does in Ina’s presence, he’s ready to endure any rudeness on her part.

The next day after his talk with Ryan about Ina and her hatred towards the owners’ class, Shiro hears a knock on his door in the morning. Not waiting for a reply, the unannounced visitor comes in. It’s Ina. She sits down in a chair in front of Shiro’s working table and informs him that she has a story to tell. Shiro nods, too stunned for words from seeing her here, of all people. In the next half an hour, Ina tells him how her mother (she hasn’t ever seen her father, nor heard much of him) worked at a boarding school for slave girls and how they’ve lived in an apartment at its territory. In many ways, it’s the same sad song of human cruelty and misery that Shiro has heard from his own boys, now
retold by an outsider. But there is a difference: Ina has seen both sides of the equation. Not only the suffering of young girls, but the reactions of their overseers. She’s seen how the employees either struggled to stay put under the pressure while bringing pain to their charges or immensely enjoyed their power over helpless teens. She’s witnessed her mother drinking herself to sleep countless times to numb the memories from her working day. Also, she’s seen her mother discipline girls a little older than Ina, following the rules she hasn’t created and couldn’t disobey, and then go on with her day as if nothing has happened. You’re always stricter to your parents than to other people, especially as a kid, Shiro has noted; Ina has been that way, too. She couldn’t forgive her mother for her method of earning money. After she’s finished high school, she’s gone for college on a stipend and hasn’t talked to her mother since.

“I would prefer to never talk to you or any slave owner or overseer again,” - finishes Ina.

Shiro nods. He can’t blame her, not really. He doesn’t avoid medics without reason himself, as well. It saddens Shiro to the core to see another victim of the system, though.

Then, she says that she should go, stands up and steps to the door. For a second, she pauses, contemplating something, and then mutters: “I am glad that it’s you who owns Keith”. It’s as close to an acknowledgement from Ina as it may be, guesses Shiro, watching her hurry away. After her leave, Shiro just sits there for an hour or so, thinking. As a rule, he’s thought he’s had it hard in his youth when dealing with any slaves has been the bane of his existence. Turns out, he’s seen only the very top of the iceberg back then and already considered himself a noble sufferer. Shiro grins crookedly to himself: life shows one his mistakes, doesn’t it?

Ina stays distant until they leave, and Shiro is absurdly grateful for that. He doesn’t want to unwittingly cause a scene. He still learns how to treat his emotions right, after all.

By the way, Ina has been true to her word and stopped every single one of Pidge’s confessions in the very beginning. But Pidge is nothing if not persistent. She’s managed to catch Ina’s attention and prove to her that she may be interesting as a person to her. In the end, Ina has graciously allowed Pidge to make her own mistakes and show her affection openly (if in a very limited range).

Shiro and Ryan couldn’t believe what their lives have become: a story of young love with plot twists worth a yuri-manga, no less.

The fall is mild this year, and still, it has gotten perceptibly colder while Ryan and Ina stayed in the mansion. The leaves have all turned yellow, red and brown so that when Shiro wakes up and walks to the window of his room to take a look over his domain, he can enjoy the ochre-coloured sea with islands of ruby and crimson here and there.

It’s Wednesday and the day when Ina and Ryan go back to the city, to their homes, duties and favourite things. It’s absurd, but Shiro feels as if he’s going to lose another limb when he thinks about the oncoming departure. It’s a strange feeling, it’s entirely illogical and unfounded, to his point of view. It’s not like he’ll stop being able to feel or analyze his feelings when Ryan departs, tries to convince himself Shiro. Moreover, Shiro plans to stay in contact with him. They live 1,5 hours away from each other only. They don’t say “farewell” forever. But no matter how hard Shiro tries to talk some sense into himself, he feels scared and restless. Why do simple things have to be so hard?

Maybe, it’s his fear of abandonment raising its head again? But why now, of all times? It’s not like he has been alone before Ryan’s arrival - no, luckily, he’s had his little, but secure circle of support; not like he’ll stay alone after Ryan leaves. What makes Ryan so unique? It’s not like Shiro could talk to Ryan about everything that bothers him. It’s not like he’s suddenly become his very best friend or
something. Just - a person who may become a very close friend, with time.

Is it how parting with people whose presence in your life you’ve grown to appreciate feels? Parting with friends from a summer camp should have felt similarly, or not? Letting his parents go to another long business trip should have felt the same, or?

How could such a basic feeling become forgotten by him, marvels Shiro.

Sadder things can happen when you only let you chief assistant close enough to become attached.

Yesterday, there’s been a surprise party with lots of food, colourful balloons and his boys (and Pidge) dressed in kigurumis. Keith has been a pink rabbit (hence the bunny suit dream). Pidge has chosen to dress as a unicorn, while Lance and Hunk have become a shark and a hippo. Keith had his best poker face on while he and other plush “animals” hugged their stunned guests and made their humorful speeches (all written by Lance), making their public wheeze with laughter. The highlight of the evening has been Keith, lying in an intricately built box (Pidge-and-Hunk-production) and getting sawn in two halves with a power-saw by deviously laughing Pidge. Needless to say, that he looked bored and even made sarcastic comments along the way.

After the little show, Ina has made the costumed boys and girl show off how their kigurumis move on them, how the look with and without the hoods on. She had such an awed look on her face as if she has never seen anyone so precious. She cuddled each of them, one after the other, and then again. In the end, she has been gifted with Lance’s kigurumi, which she hugged to her chest and refused to let go of. Upon Lance’s insistence, she has promised to make a photo of how she looks wearing it when at home. Pidge, surprisingly, hasn’t thrown a tantrum over Ina not asking for her unicorn pyjamas instead (the size was too small for Ina anyway). She just looked progressively more and more lost in the course of the party so that even Lance and Hunk’s most elaborate attempts to cheer her up have failed. Keith has come to her then and leaned down to whisper something to her. Shiro doesn’t know what’s been said between them and why Keith would bother comforting Pidge, since they don’t even talk to each other much, but it has looked like he’s managed to find the right words. Pidge has glared at Keith and marched to where Ina and Mr Fennel stood, talking business-like about how to organize the next sessions with Shiro until Ryan finds a suitable replacement for himself. Pidge has taken Ina to the side and then they have been discussing something in hushed tones for the remnants of the party. In the end, when Matt (almost sober) has called their driver and ordered to wait for them at the gates, Pidge looked content for the first time in weeks, and Ina was smiling to herself. Despite the heavy interrogation from all sides, both girls wouldn’t tell to what conclusion they have come in their conversation.

It felt homely and warm as never before. Or, more precisely, it has been homely and warm as it hasn’t been since the tragedy with Shiro’s parents. That evening, it seemed to Shiro that the whole world is like that: safe, filled with friendly people, only ever showing people its bright side. How could it be different when Keith bickers with Lance, Ryan teases Ina over having a dab of ice-cream on her nose and everyone is so happy?..
distract his friends from their unhappy moods, then he’ll do it. The fact that he is able to, is a revelation.

When it’s time for the guests to go, everyone seems to remember something worth saying just now, something that can’t wait and can’t be delegated to emails or messengers. Unconsciously, Ryan and Ina linger, try to give a portion of their attention to each of their new friends, until finally, after lots and lots of hugs, they climb into Ryan’s car and drive away.

Lance bursts into tears. Hunk calmly takes a big handkerchief out of his pocket and starts wiping his tears away while Lance clings to his shoulders and complains in a whiny tone.

Meanwhile, Keith comes to Shiro and, surprising him (he’s rarely so open in the presence of other people), says that he will miss Ina a lot and that he’s forgotten how to miss someone. Shiro is astounded with how similar they feel. “But it’s a good thing that I remember now,” - adds Keith with a small, barely-there smile. - “Mr Fennel will be pleased to learn that there is one more thing he can use against me except for my books and the telescope now. Ina will want to have video-calls with me at the strangest times, and I will have to ask for his permission.” Before Shiro can interrupt and tell him that Mr Fennel can’t be so mean, Keith says: “It’s OK. I know that even he is not that petty. But he’ll enjoy threatening me with cutting off my friendly calls a lot. I imagine Ina would want to talk to me amidst working day and forgive him in advance. Because I will try to find a way to talk to her every single time.” Shiro has the urge to contradict, wants to say he’ll talk to his chief assistant, that Keith doesn’t have too many friends to risk losing her, but Keith is already walking away with a curt nod, and Shiro can only remind himself that Keith and Mr Fennel seem to work very well together and that he shouldn’t intervene. Right?

The mansion looks even bigger now that there are no guests to tend to. Shiro has forgotten this feeling, too; it’s entirely the same as it has been when his parents have never returned from their car ride and he has been walking through the empty corridors waiting for the sounds of voices he won’t hear again. The memory is so vivid, and Mr Fennel is not yet there to save him, and Shiro starts drowning in the atmosphere of despair, when -

“Master Shiro!” - calls out Keith, moving to him in long strides. He’s out of breath, maybe, from running to catch up with his owner. He’s here, and alive, and doesn’t intend to go anywhere from here. Keith comes closer to Shiro and looks at him with concern. His eyes are the most perfect shade of violet Shiro has ever seen and it’s majestic; Shiro forgets the cruel tricks his mind tries to play on him and focuses on Keith.

“Do you want something? You look a bit flushed,” - teases Shiro to disperse his own stale mood a bit more.

Keith crosses his hands at his chest and scowls a little, just for show; or has Shiro managed to embarrass him a little? Shiro has recently re-acquainted himself with his own flirty side and now slowly recalls what a joy it can be to be able to get playful with other people. Anyway, he shouldn’t overdo it with Keith. Shiro changes his tone for something more serious and asks:

“Please, tell me your news, Keith.”

“There’s a visitor at our gates. The security team has identified her as one of your business partners. She claims that you are neighbours now, too,” - replies Keith and watches Shiro expectantly.

That’s really... news. Shiro has the urge to call Mr Fennel. He goes as far as fishing out his phone from a back pocket. Then he squints in displeasure at a reminder he has pinned at the top of the screen: Mr Fennel has gone on a long-postponed business trip as soon as the guests have come back safely and the (almost non-existing) mess in the mansion has been taken care of. He’s on the other
side of the region at the moment, if Shiro is correct. He is busy and, more important, he wishes Shiro to learn how to act like a grown-up. Shiro can totally do that.

He’s fine, tells Shiro himself. He’s OK. Accompanied by Mr Fennel’s team, he can entertain the sudden guest just fine. Shiro talks to wealthy people for a living and, as a rule, gets what he wants from them. He’s met in his life more CEOs than, for example, salespersons or waiters. He has nothing to worry about.

Why does he feel so weirdly nervous imagining meeting the yet unnamed woman? He can’t even tell right now, whether she is as difficult and disagreeable as he imagines her to be. She may be a nice person, a person who Shiro will be glad to have as his neighbour, what does Shiro know?

“Master Shiro,” - says Keith, touching his sleeve lightly. “You don’t need to see her if you don’t feel like it. She’s come here unannounced, we can tell her whatever and make her leave. Me and Mrs Teffy can handle it…”

“Who is Mrs Teffy?” - asks Shiro through the ringing in his head. Keith is right; that visitor has come here uninvited, she tries to get into Shiro’s home, tries to get close to him…

Shiro realises that he doesn’t listen to Keith’s explanations when all he hears is the white noise in his mind and silence in the outside world while Keith’s mouth keeps opening and closing. Shiro shakes his head and looks at Keith properly. The boy has stopped talking. He is not irritated as Shiro has expected, just concerned.

“Let’s forgo me trying to persuade you to send her away and you insisting that you absolutely must greet her. Instead, we’ll get you to your room and choose you a nice outfit. I’ll tell you about Mrs Teffy and that partner of yours with no manners and a nosy attitude, while we are at it. And then you’ll decide, how we proceed. Maybe, the outfit we choose will be so disastrous that you’ll have to stay inside,” - announces Keith and turns to go to Shiro’s room, clearly expecting his owner to follow. Said owner just stands there for a moment or two. He doesn’t want to wear a suit (and it’ll have to be one, whatever Keith says!). He doesn’t want the meeting with this woman. He doesn’t want to do as he is told.

He wants long talks with Ryan, chess games with Keith and a lot of laughing from every corner of his house. He wants calm and quiet. Safety.

He follows Keith to his room and into his wardrobe.

As Shiro waits behind Keith while the latter sorts through his clothes, he manages to slow down his pulse and untangle his thoughts a bit. He is safe, whatever his treacherous instincts scream at him. He is safer here than anywhere else in the world, actually. He trusts his team. The fact of a foreign woman entering his fortress doesn’t make the fortress less safe for Shiro to be in. He’ll be fine.

...Shiro emerges in the garden house designed specifically for business meetings in a pressed dark-blue suit and armed with his best smile, Mrs Teffy (Mr Fennel’s favourite subordinate from his team; of course, he knows who she is, he’s only had to put a name to a face, that’s all) and Keith trailing behind him. He is ready to meet Mrs Ezor, his cheerful and very petty business partner. However, he almost drops his only weapon (and his jaw) when he sees that Mrs Ezor is not alone. At her feet, a collared man kneels on a pillow. He is dressed in a sort of tight yoga pants and a sheer gauze top, magenta in colour, which compliments his dark complexion. Not a very fitting choice for the current weather; for example, Keith is wearing black pants and has a red jacket over his black turtleneck. Mrs Ezor’s slave looks a lot like Lance: the same tanned skin, the same lanky limbs and blue eyes. His collar is broad; heavy and sturdy, from the looks of it. Surprisingly, it is simply black.
The woman herself is typing at the tablet with a manicured finger, looking bored out of her mind. She wears a bright-violet costume with flare legged pants and a slim fit jacket. It looks good on her. Her long hair is violet and red and pink this time, held in her signature high ponytail. Shiro can’t help but think that she is the only business-woman he knows who can pull off such a combination of colours and don’t look out of place in a high-end business office. Also, that her hairdresser should earn a fortune tending to her caprices.

Mrs Ezor notices Shiro quickly, puts her tablet on the couch where she’s been lounging and leaps to her feet energetically, chattering a mile a minute about how happy seeing Shiro makes her. Shiro is only able to nod and add a couple of words when he is lucky. They move to the garden, Mrs Ezor’s slave (not even trembling from the chilly autumn air) and Keith follow at a respectful distance as well. Mrs Teffy stays on the porch of the house and observes the garden from there, ready to call necessary specialists if needed (there are already drinks and light snacks in the parlour where Mrs Ezor has been waiting, but she must be ready for emergencies). Shiro tries to cater to the woman’s whims as much as he can without appearing too weak or revealing anything about himself which may be useful for her. He is afraid that she can get a lot of information just from watching him, though.

Shiro shouldn’t be, but he is shocked at how flawlessly Keith plays the role of a body slave. Shiro is aware that Keith has been taught how to behave around owners and how to please them for four years, that’s true; but he’s come to know and love the regular Keith, the prideful boy with a dry sense of humour who is so keen on evolving and getting his work done without a single fail. A person. What he sees now, is an emotionless doll, obediently following its puppeteer and ready to grant any of his wishes. Shiro decides to not dwell on it. He can’t change the society alone (says Ryan’s voice in his head), that’s why he and Keith have to play by the rules. He should be thankful that Keith knows those rules better than Shiro and doesn’t protest (Shiro wishes he would; he imagines coming in with Keith and letting him sit on the couch next to him; telling Ezor that he treats his slaves like people because they deserve this; he has to laugh bitterly at himself).

The meeting goes well (alarmingly well) until Mrs Ezor asks her slave to bring her another drink from the table in the parlour of the garden house. It would be nothing, but the slave obviously doesn’t have enough experience with such tasks. On the flat floor, he can carry the glass just fine. But he trips over his own feet at the bottom of the stairs leading to the garden, too concentrated on not spilling the drink to step carefully. Immediately, Keith runs to the hapless slave, checking him on the injuries. The man looks OK, but he is pale and can barely react at Keith’s concerned questions. The glass is broken, of course, and the drink forms a multi-coloured puddle on the stone pass. Already, Mrs Teffy is ordering someone around on the phone (most certainly, the cleaning team’s manager). What’s more important, no one is hurt so Shiro turns back to his guest, relieved that the incident is insignificant (and not caused by one of his workers). He trusts Keith and Mrs Teffy to take care of the little mess while he is entertaining his capricious guest.

To his astonishment, Mrs Ezor smiles, delightedly and wickedly, as if she’s got an unexpected gift. She bites her lower lip a bit. Shiro follows her line of gaze: she is still watching her slave who is almost shaking on the grass. When she looks back at Shiro, she pretends to be concerned. She purses her lips coquettishly and drawls in a thin voice:

“I’m so sorry for his lack of skill, Mr Shirogane. It’s an omission on my part. I should have trained the boy better before taking him to such a respectful house as yours.”

Before Shiro can say that it’s not a big deal and that he isn’t angry at all, Mrs Ezor addresses her slave:

“What was your name this week, boy?”
“Squeak, Mistress,” - replies the slave immediately.

“And this is because…?” - prompts Mrs Ezor in a steely tone, masked under a honeyed surface.

“Because I squeak like a baby bird when Mistress punishes me,” - recites the boy readily. His voice is trembling so hard he can barely finish the phrase.

“That’s right. Mr Shirogane, could you do me a tiny little favour? Ask one of your overseers to discipline Squeak for me, please. I’m so disappointed in him that I’m afraid I won’t be able to temper myself…” - and the woman trails off as if considering the results of her possible outburst.

“I hear you, Mrs Ezor. But the only person I usually task with the slaves’ discipline is out of the mansion at the moment… You could forgive Squeak this time and let him do better by you…” - tries Shiro.

“No, no, no, it’s out of the question. He knows his rules, he shouldn’t expect to be treated differently because we are not at home,” - interrupts Mrs Ezor. - “Persistence is everything with slave boys!”

Shiro is at the loss what to do. He’ll have to either decline, and make Mrs Ezor angry at him and possibly even more cruel to the poor Squeak (at her own home, where Shiro has no influence over it at all), or he can order Mrs Teffy (whom else?) to do this “favour” for Mrs Ezor.

The second variant is out of the question. Shiro can’t task his employees with beating other people. He can’t take it upon himself, too, as he could with any other job, for the sake of all holy! Shiro would gladly mop the floor himself if it meant safety for the slave boy!

Just when Shiro wants to plead for mercy for Mrs Ezor’s slave again (knowing that it’s hopeless), he notices Keith leaving Squeak kneeling on the grass and coming closer to them, stopping at a polite distance in a waiting pose. Shiro beckons Keith to come closer and leans to him, letting Keith speak to his ear.

What he hears, makes Shiro’s mind whirl:

“Let me do this, Master Shiro. I know how,” - suggests Keith without an ounce of doubt, as if he speaks about cleaning up the broken glass and not about spanking another boy.

For several long seconds, Shiro is speechless. He can’t give this task to any of his employees, he’s thought; but his slaves? Isn’t it the same thing?

It is, for Shiro. But it isn’t, for Keith.

Keith sees everything from a very different perspective. He can imagine in excruciating detail what expects the slave if his mistress disciplines him herself. He can analyse the variables of the situation much better than Shiro can.

He knows what he is asking for, doesn’t he?

At the same time, has Keith ever let Shiro down? Can Shiro trust him to not make things worse for everyone, including Squeak?

Keith looks calm and resigned, he is not afraid to act while Shiro can’t make a decision.

“Please, don’t hurt him too much,” - tries to convey with his gaze Shiro. It’s a bad idea, all of this is a giant mistake on Shiro’s part. He knew it was a trap! The world is coming apart around him, and Shiro can hardly tell up from down.
He could buy Squeak, thinks Shiro with a desperate surge of hope. Then he remembers who Squeak’s owner is and the idea is dismissed.

Keith waits patiently for him to sort his inner turmoil out and give him a reply. Keith won’t judge Shiro whatever he chooses.

When Shiro nods at him slightly, confirming his agreement, Keith only smiles indulgently, for a flitting moment, as if Shiro were a child who doesn’t know the ways of the world. That’s the only emotion Keith allows himself before he straightens and resumes his waiting stance.

“Keith, you will see to Squeak’s discipline,” - orders Shiro in his best uninterested voice. - “Use the implements Mr Fennel would see fit for the case.”

Keith bows.

“Also, plan a call with Ryan for the evening when you’re done,” - adds Shiro as an afterthought and turns back to the shining Mrs Ezor, purposefully not watching Keith collect Squeak from the floor and lead him to the parlour where the punishment will take place.

Chapter End Notes

hey hey, the Keith-bunny is here! Surprise!!!

OK.
Ezor is a bitch, yeah?)
I love her, too. She's entirely sadistic, in my Universe. Playful, curious and cruel.
Also, Keith is such a good boy!!!

Please, leave a comment, make the author happy!
Reassessing

Chapter Summary

Keith administers a spanking while Shiro entertains the guest and shoos away his inner demons.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dear smart and pretty ones!

I am proud to present you Chapter 22! On time, finally
I am pleased with it, a lot (makes you think, huh? which chapters am I pleased with?
right, the most agonizing ones!)
So, I wish you a happy reading!

Warning: there is a basic whipping scene and also there are Shiro's thoughts, quite cruel,
so, please be careful while reading. Always be careful while reading btw you never
know when a hard topic comes out in some work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro has survived war injuries, has survived experiments, has survived hospitals; hell, he has
survived Mr Fennel teasing him about his kinky interests more than once! He could even look his
bully in the eye without blushing afterwards!

Jokes aside, Shiro has been through a lot. Really, he is not some tender flower.

He can tolerate another display of violence. He can handle it. He won’t retreat into himself, because
he just can’t. Not today.

It is in his power to witness one violent scene without breaking.

Even if said scene is happening in his own space, the violence is inflicted on a non-willing
participant under the pretence of discipline and Shiro can’t interfere because of his concern of
making everything worse for the victim.

Even if the person who literally holds the means of discipline in his hands is Keith.

Everything gets so tricky when Keith gets involved, doesn’t it?

Keith, who still has nightmares about his time at the boarding school (even if it happens not as often
as before).

Keith, who has talked about how he felt for his peers who have had to suffer spankings from their
overseers next to him.

Keith, who Shiro took for a man who despises violence and suffering of others with all his being,
hates the very idea of it, cannot stand being unable to help or lessen someone’s agony…

His bright, clever, loyal Keith.

His Keith has offered his help with punishing another slave for a pesky little thing.

His Keith is going to whip Squeak.

Some nagging thoughts wiggle helplessly in the back of Shiro’s mind. Something about Keith knowing the downsides of a slave’s life, Keith being a reasonable and reliable person, Keith having some semblance of a plan when Shiro has none…

But he pays them no mind.

All he can concentrate on right now are the feelings of hopelessness, betrayal and absurdity which flood Shiro’s senses like a tidal wave. He can’t fathom how it could have come to this. He was having a normal sad morning, he was intending to have a minor break-down over a trivial thing. Why did it have to come to this?

The disconnection between the real situation and his expectations grows.

Shiro wishes to be far away from here with all his might.

Soon, instead of being a part of the situation, Shiro feels as if he only watches the events around him from somewhere above, or in the third person. At that time, the real Shiro, small and helpless, is lying paralyzed and shaking in a place inside his mind where nothing can reach him (or hurt him).

From a distance, the adult part of Shiro wonders how he can act appropriately and even communicate amidst his internal meltdown. It’s kind of illogical with how far he’s fallen down into his childish self, isn’t it?

Education and trained social habits are a good thing.

An autopilot is a necessary option in any human’s body.

In the real world, Mrs Ezor talks about something and Shiro listens, unable to pay attention to the contents of their conversation. He just nods and hums when it feels necessary while all his thoughts are with Keith and the boy he intends to discipline. He hopes Mrs Rainbow-Ponytail doesn’t mind.

They are still in the garden, still away from the main scene. Shiro wants to throw up from just imagining the things Keith might do to the poor unfortunate boy right now. No, he’s been wrong. He has overestimated his own resilience. He can’t watch something like this and stay sane. At the same time, he needs to see, he needs to know. Staying in the dark seems tantalizing and even more unbearable than finally learning what is happening.

It is this need to know that makes Shiro return to the steering wheel of his own conscience and body, slowly but surely. This need that makes him impatient, irritated at Mrs I-Love-Bright-Things-and-Spankings, itchy in his own skin.

In the end, Shiro can’t take the tension anymore.

“Don’t you want to watch the discipline with your own eyes? See if your slave has been punished properly?” - asks Shiro with feigned curiosity when he thinks she has just finished her thought.
“Oh yes, sure! But only when Squeak starts crying and his behind looks pleasing,” - replies Mrs Ezor in the same cheerful tone she uses all the time, except for when she is bored.

As far as Shiro can tell from his observations, she can be either amused and cheerful or bored and dissatisfied. No in-between. And she damned well hates not being entertained properly.

Right now, she is content to listen to her own voice, it seems. It’s an endless stream of bragging, sarcastic jokes and playful whining. Despite being clever and fast-thinking, more than capable for her young age, she plays up a young girl who doesn’t know what she is doing and what the end results will be. She just pushes the metaphorical button and holds her breath; what will happen? So interesting!

Shiro has never noticed how these traits reflect on the life around her, aside from her working environment. He hasn’t ever watched whether she takes slaves with her to meetings or not, has never been interested in how she treats them. He knew that she is not kind, but not to what extent.

How many people’s real natures has Shiro overlooked in a similar fashion?

While Mrs Ezor talks, Shiro is growing more restless with the minute. Every minute, he becomes more aware of his surroundings and the waiting only seems harder.

When the right time comes and Mrs Ezor suggests they go “check on the boys” with a mischievous smile, Shiro almost blurts out something like: “Finally!”. He reigns himself and follows her springing steps back to the garden house and inside it. He does not let himself look too grim. He doesn’t want to make things terribly hard for Keith (yes, the still awakening adult part of Shiro’s brain says that Keith is trying his best in a desperate situation). What’s also important, Shiro doesn’t want to give more ammo to the cocky bitch. Not when he still can help it.

One after another, Mrs Ezor murmuring a tune, Shiro holding his breath, they enter the parlour where Keith is disciplining Squeak.

What they see inside, surprises both Shiro and Mrs Ezor.

Squeak is leaning over a bar stand, bare. Keith is standing behind his back, his fingers fisted in Squeak’s hair, and he hisses into his ear something unintelligible from where Shiro and Mrs Ezor have stopped at the entrance. Keith is slightly shorter than the other slave, that’s why he has to raise onto his tiptoes to be able to do so. Squeak’s ass is bright-pink, obviously well-spanked already. There are tears glinting in the corners of his eyes, as much as Shiro can see. He looks scared, and Shiro’s heart clenches painfully.

But Squeak is not the main reason for Keith’s bemusement.

Keith is.

It’s as if an identical twin has replaced his Keith. Or an evil spirit has taken his Keith’s body.

Shiro hasn’t ever seen Keith in any similar circumstances before. Shiro hasn’t seen Keith acting with so much authority (and, he dare say, certain cruelty) and putting so much pressure on another slave. There’s more to it: Shiro has somehow expected Keith to have blistered Squeak’s ass bloody by that point, to grant the guest’s wishes. He has foolishly hoped that Keith would be done by now and he won’t have to look at the punishment longer than he should. And, honestly, Shiro realizes that he has been loathing Keith’s actions in advance - he has wanted to put the guilt for this stupid and unfair situation on Keith’s shoulders, wanted to find someone to blame for the imperfection of the society they both live in. Who is a better candidate to be shamed for an unfair spanking than a slave who is
beating another slave despite his own disgust towards such things? It’s so ugly an urge that Shiro can’t believe it has been born in his head.

Shiro watches Keith’s grip on Squeak’s hair fasten, hears the famous squeaking sounds as the reaction to the pain, steals glances at Keith’s expressionless face (what an oxymoron - Keith and expressionless!) and tries to form a more feasible opinion.

Keith obviously thinks that he knows what he’s doing. Or is he faking so convincingly? What impression does he want to leave with Mrs Ezor?

Shiro doesn’t know what to do at all. He is out of his depth here. But he thinks that he will be able to support any of Keith’s play-pretend scenes when the situation calls for it. He prays that he will.

Turns out, Mrs Ezor is surprised that Keith has bothered with a hand-spanking at all. She makes a displeased comment about Keith wasting time on unnecessary things. Keith lets her slave go, nudging him closer to the bar stand so that the slave nearly sprawls with his elbows slipping on the polished surface, and turns to face her. Keith bows his body in a gesture of respect towards an owner and stays that way. His dark strands fall him in the eyes and help conceal any traces of real feelings he isn’t able to hide. When Keith speaks, his gaze is cast to the floor and his voice is humble to the point of servile:

“My overseer teaches that a spanking has to be done thoroughly, otherwise a slave won’t ever remember its place. He’s shown it to me in great detail, and on my own body, too.”

Keith has just said “its”, hasn’t he? Shiro has certainly misheard. He’ll definitely talk to Keith about it later. It’s… It’s too much even for the show they’re giving now.

Or, maybe, it isn’t.

Because Mrs Ezor smiles at Keith, haughty and self-assured. She looks as if things are finally making perfect sense to her. Her gaze lingers on Keith’s bent form for a moment more and then slides to Shiro.

“Now I see that you only look sickeningly sweet and proper. Men have rarely demonstrated good trainer’s skills, in my experience. But you take good care of your slaves, I can’t argue that,” - she drawls watching Shiro as if she sees him for the first time in her life now.

The last sentence makes Shiro’s hair stand on end. He pushes his abhorrence at being called a monster to the side, adding it to the pile of things that need to be analyzed later.

Shiro doesn’t know what moves him to say, as carelessly as he can muster:

“You could leave that boy to me to take care of. Not for long, just for a week or two, until he learns his place,” - and then he smiles his own brand of a creepy smile. Shiro imagines Mr Fennel looking at someone he needs to intimidate for inspiration when he carefully arranges his features into a barely conceived scowl and hopes that he isn’t overdoing it.

The hint of aggression Shiro allows himself sends a chain reaction through his psyche.

He feels his anger flooding his system with adrenaline.

He feels his defences being washed down.

He feels the humanistic side of himself retreat.
He imagines breaking the woman’s neck and using his resources to hide the body.

He imagines driving her corpse over with a car until all of her bones are broken and her features are unrecognisable.

It would’ve been so easy to get rid of her now - less than a step separates them and she definitely is no match for him.

But, with a conscious effort, Shiro snaps himself out of this sudden bloodthirsty daze. It’s unbecoming - and, obviously, her death wouldn’t have helped anything.

Mrs Ezor agrees to let Shiro condition her flighty slave boy easily, giggling and clapping hands at him. She is shining with joy, little and playful and unsuspecting of Shiro’s evilness. Her neck is so long and thin, observes Shiro with a kind of sick obsession; beautiful, as everything in her. Beside her rotten, rotten soul.

Shiro smiles and jokes and can’t stop staring at her nape - it seems so fragile now that Shiro has remembered how a human body looks to a trained warrior, to someone who’s done detestable things and knows in the first person how it feels when the enemy’s life is ending under their hands.

In front of them, the second part of the discipline process begins. Keith takes a switch - freshly cut from the garden nearby - and starts whipping the boy methodically. His aim is precise, his hand - unwavering. Squeak yelps and wheezes and sniffles. But, to Shiro’s surprise, he stays where Keith has put him - he holds the position and never asks for mercy.

Watching the scene unfold in front of him, Shiro realizes a few important things.

He hopes it’s not too late.

This situation has been saved by Keith’s smartness. What if something as wicked happens when Shiro is alone or has someone weaker than him to take care of?

Shiro wants to be the person who has the strength to help and protect, to offer shelter and to give advice. Shiro wants to face the challenges of the world head-on. How could he forget for such a long time who he wants to be? Why has he allowed himself not to strive for anything? How could he have been so blind?

Shiro realizes that he is ready to start taking upon himself more responsibility more than the others around him, again. He is ready to be in control. He is ready to not make Keith (or Lance, or Hunk) suffer additional strain because of their master’s weakness. He is ready to put his worries aside to see Mrs Ezor’s slave getting through his torture and don’t make it worse for him by any unconscious gesture, be it of disgust or of fear.

Keith needs him. His other slaves and his employees need him.

He has all the means to and he will be able, he is able to be the unshakeable stone pillar for Keith to lean onto.

He will call Ryan today. Talk to him, tell him the things the way they stand. Listen to his advice – not as his patient, but as his friend. Shiro feels strangely uncaring about the therapy, over the pause in which he’s been scared just yesterday. Whether he spoils its results or disrupts the process of his
psyche’s healing, doesn’t mean much for him in the moment.

He has stayed away from the world’s reality for too long. It’s time for him to come back to earth since the Evil finds him and his loved ones wherever they go.

Why is it Keith every time who makes Shiro reassess his choices? Or does it only feel like that because - and Shiro can admit it to himself easily when all the pretence has fallen off of him like an empty shell in his time of stress - he doesn’t stop thinking about Keith since the day he’s met him at the auction? That he weighs his actions based on how it could influence Keith’s life?

It’s a good time to stop hiding under a cocoon. As good as any. Better as any because the best time is now.

The whipping goes on and on, with Keith staying as calm and meticulous as at the beginning of it. Rare lashes overlap with each other for as long as there is unmarred skin on Squeak’s behind, and when there’s no place left, Keith still distributes the strokes evenly, not letting big bruises form. The skin breaks in a few places anyway.

Squeak half-lies on the counter, holding onto its far end with a white-knuckled grip, shuddering with each new strike, sobbing out his pain and exhaustion.

To the right from Shiro, Mrs Ezor watches, enraptured.

When Shiro considers the number of welts on Squeak’s ass enough, he says evenly:

“Keith”.

Immediately, the action stops. Keith looks up at his master and turns his body to him, bowing again and holding the pose. It’s a pose in which he will be expecting his master’s wishes for as long as it takes. The pose he’s never used with Shiro before today.

“You can finish disciplining him in the evening. Bring that boy somewhere where he doesn’t disturb me and do the arrangements, as you’ve been told,” - orders Shiro to Keith.

Then, he addresses Mrs Ezor, smiling charmingly:

“May I show you more of my gardens? So that you don’t associate my mansion with untidiness and clumsiness anymore”.

She agrees enthusiastically.

During their walk, she clings to his arm, and he lets her. She tells him that Keith has a lot of potential as a future overseer, that no one has been able to make Squeak suffer with so much dignity before, and Shiro just listens to her without interrupting.

He brings her to the gates when she says that it’s time to go home for her and promises to bring Squeak back when he comes to her place with a return visit.

He promises to himself to never forget this day.

In the evening, after both Keith and Squeak has been taken care of by Lance and Hunk, under Shiro’s supervision, after Shiro has cried during the call with Ryan which Keith has dutifully
organized the first thing after Squeak has been deposited with his friends, after Keith has almost (almost) let himself cry talking to Shiro about the events of the day and went to sleep drained, but still in one piece, after Shiro has had a long discussion with Mrs Teffy and her team about how they will treat the slave and when will be the best time to repay Mrs Ezor’s visit, after Shiro has forgotten that someone else can shoulder his burden, Mr Fennel returns to the mansion.

He goes straight to Shiro’s cabinet where Shiro is getting ready to get very drunk very quickly. Shiro notices a strange look Mr Fennel gives him, something contemplating and troubled. But it’s gone in milliseconds and Shiro forgets about it just as soon.

He wordlessly pours Mr Fennel and himself a shot of vodka each and makes an inviting gesture.

They drink, and Mr Fennel must wonder just how shitty Shiro looks, while Shiro makes faces at him. Then Shiro asks Mr Fennel just how horribly he whips Keith for him to claim that he’s learned cruelty by the hands of his overseer on his own body. Mr Fennel counters that Keith hasn’t specified which overseer it has been. Shiro is too drunk to ask himself how Mr Fennel has learned the contents of Keith’s conversation with Mrs Ezor so soon upon arrival. He should have prepared something to bite along with the vodka, thinks Shiro. Some snacks would’ve been good since the room is starting to blur. They have another row of shots, and Shiro admits that he’s a monster to which Mr Fennel only says: “Me too. We all are,” with an arched brow, apparently surprised that he hasn’t been able to teach Shiro such a self-evident thing by now.

For the next set of shots, Mr Fennel takes orange juice from the mini-fridge and makes basic cocktails. It tastes better.

Dimly, Shiro muses that his chief assistant must have cheated with his own portions of alcohol because Shiro feels substantially more shit-faced than him.

Definitely.

Shiro knows that he needs to stop talking but he fucking can’t. It just pours out of him.

“Steve,” - slurs Shiro. - “Ste-eve.”

“Yes, Takashi, I’m here,” - answers Mr Fennel from across the small table. He sounds as if he talks from afar.

“Thought I’ll be strong from now on, Steve. And then,” - Shiro hiccups, - “And then I called Ryan. I cried. Told him the truth. I’m no good at all, I’ve told him, and you know what? He’s just smiled at me and said I’m wrong. Is he lying to me, Steve? Has he known from the start? How pathetic I am? Why hasn’t he told me?”

“You are a good person, Takashi. Life is shitty, the world is shitty, but you are as good a man as they come,” - says Mr Fennel softly.

Shiro doesn’t believe him. The words still make something warm tingle inside of him, the praise from Mr Fennel, as rare as he hears it, can’t just go unnoticed.

Why does Mr Fennel look at him so strangely tonight?

Shiro thinks that he may have had enough cocktails. He starts seeing things. Mr Fennel is the same as always, it’s Shiro who acts strangely.

From there, Shiro teleports to his bed.
The last thing he remembers of the day is Mr Fennel’s voice whispering to him in the darkness of his bedroom:

“You’ve done well, Takashi. You’ve done what you could. I’m proud of you. I’m always so proud of you.”

And then comes the welcome nothing.

Chapter End Notes

You're reading this, which means you've followed Shiro and Keith through the chapter! Yay! Thank you for being with us!

Are you as proud of Keith as I am? (Are you as unhappy for Shiro who will have to give Squeak back to his Rainbow Mistress in a week as me? My heart aches for him)
Finding Strength

Chapter Summary

Shiro does a lot of thinking.
Then, he talks to Keith to help him decide how to act.

Chapter Notes

Hello, dears!

Another chapter is there! It hasn't come very easy to me, and Shiro's experiences here may be quite disturbing for the fainthearted. It starts with "He stretches his muscles" and ends with "Then the last shred of his control over his conscious tears and Shiro falls down, and seems to be falling forever." Just saying.

Anyway, Shiro is a good boy in this chapter. I am proud of him.

While I've been writing it, I've listened to Nine Inch Nails' instrumental tracks. Check this out:
NIN

Have a nice time reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro wakes up in the middle of the night, from the trivial need to relieve himself. Water and pills wait for him on the bedside table, and he swallows a portion down, making a mental note to thank Mr Fennel for his care. Where would he be right now without him?

Shiro is hungover, as to be expected, but, nevertheless, he feels better than before the start of their impromptu drinking party with Mr Fennel. His head is clearer despite a headache, his feelings under control again.

Shiro stands up from the bed and winces when the ache in the back of his head starts pulsing. He won't ever learn how to drink properly, it seems.

He goes to the bathroom, takes care of his needs, then, after a bit of contemplating, takes a quick shower. Shiro imagines how the filth of the day runs down the drain, word after acid word, action after desperate action. It helps to ease the tension, a little.

When he comes back to the bedroom it feels like he won't be able to fall asleep again. Just to spite his rebelling body, Shiro goes back to the bed and lies down. This time, he won't be the bad employer who wanders around the enormous mansion in the night and makes every guard in his service worry. He will stay in his room and relax. Lying still in bed is a nice opportunity to rest, too.
Good for his frayed nerves.

So Shiro makes himself comfortable, squeezes his eyes shut for good measure and lets his mind do whatever it wants.

There’s so much on his mind lately. All kind of things, from therapy to lawn mowing, honestly.
Shiro feels like he is spending less time doing his work and still manages to do more lately. Also, it seems to him that he is doing his tasks better. Work doesn’t seem to be so much of a chore anymore; neither does it seem like the only socially approved way to fill in the gaps in his timetable in order to avoid an existential crisis. It feels like his sense of purpose has returned after being absent for about five years. If Shiro were to formulate a year’s business strategy now, he would have come at it from a very different angle and offer a more mature opinion. His life has gotten more complicated but he feels more confident than before. He has more responsibilities now, but he knows better how to handle them all. Still, there are too many things requiring his attention. It’s highly overwhelming.

As expected, Shiro’s thoughts keep revolving around Squeak and what he’ll do with him. Shiro will have to return Squeak to his cruel Mistress in about a week and a half. It will be a Monday if Shiro recalls correctly (he doesn’t want to light his phone’s screen to check the calendar). By that time, how will the boy feel? Will his stay at Shiro’s place be a welcome respite or a mocking show of how his life could have looked like were he owned by a different person? Will Keith’s presence and attention be a beacon of light or a reason to see his usual life as completely hopeless?

Shiro can only pray that Keith knows how to act around Squeak. Strangely, but with all the worrying about Keith he does, Shiro feels like he doesn’t have to worry about the situation with Squeak, - he has already basically given the boy to Keith’s care and he trusts Keith to lead Squeak the best possible course. With the advice from Mr Fennel, Keith will be alright. Shiro will be there for Keith, too, any minute of the day, whether to support him verbally or to take some tough decision from him.

Shiro will talk to Keith first thing in the morning. He needs to know how Keith will feel the next day, needs to know that his boy will truly be alright. He has to make sure that Keith is willing to be in charge of Squeak and that it isn’t just Shiro’s imagination.

Shiro can doubt that Keith is capable enough to do this, but, at the same time, asking Keith whether he wants to take care of Squeak feels excessive. Shiro suspects that even if he openly forbade Keith to see Squeak, Keith would find a way to look out for Squeak for the duration of his stay, that he would risk losing Shiro’s benevolence and trust to do the right thing.

Shiro smiles in the dark. He has managed to fall in love with an extraordinary boy. He will do his best to let Keith grow into an equally extraordinary man, the way he’s been destined to.

Maybe, Keith won’t ever be a free person. But he will have opportunities to learn and to be useful and to do things he finds interesting. If Shiro is careful, Keith’s life will be better than the lives of some free people out there.

How does it come that even free people have to lead shitty lives in their country? Is it because only assholes are let into the ruling class? Or is it because coming to power means becoming corrupt and heartless?

From there Shiro’s thoughts go to Mrs Ezor. He has a lot of joint deals with her and her “sisters”. He can’t cut the ties to her abruptly. It would be bad for the business, for his reputation, for the employees of his and her companies.

If he could forget about Mrs Ezor’s existence without everlasting consequences, Shiro would do so in a second.
But with whom would Shiro replace her, anyway? This fucked up world always holds him between a rock and a hard place. There are no good, kind-hearted slave owners out there - Shiro tends to agree with Ina here. He, Matt and Allura are neither good nor bad, simply struggling; the others are even worse. The “best” representants of the Owner class he would’ve described as reasonable, but nothing more than that. The qualities that used to be associated with humanity have mostly gone extinct in Shiro’s circles.

His mood becomes so sore that Shiro has to spend several minutes contemplating in which ways the world sucks and why he still has to stay alive and (try to) be brave when all the good he ever does gets turned onto its head and pulled inside out.

Then Shiro remembers the moment of clarity during Squeak’s discipline when he’s thought he can become as strong as he’s been back before his capture. For some minutes, he has felt empowered and capable. For that short time, life hasn’t been an impossible burden to carry.

It has felt so good.

He doesn’t feel like that at all anymore - there’s no rush of energy, no self-assuredness, no feeling of being more than enough. The only thing that has stayed the same is his responsibility to his charges which he won’t dream to hand over to someone else. He has become more productive lately, yes, can endure the strain better, but - will he ever feel so natural in his role as in that moment?

Doesn’t matter. It’s time to accept what he can’t change, just as Keith teaches.

Won’t be easy, will it?

Shiro tells himself that there’s no reason for him to hide from his destiny anymore. He can’t be a perfect leader as he’s always hoped. It’s not in his power. But he is a leader by his birthright, he is a bearer of people’s expectations whether he wants it or not. With his aristocratic upbringing, he has been prepared to lead the life he is leading now by his parents and his mentors, he has worked hard to learn all that he knows now and to be able to do things he does now. He can’t let his fear of spoiling or shattering something keep him from his fate.

There is always a choice, reminds Shiro himself. Even if you have been eaten, you still have two ways out.

In his case, what are the options?

Basically, there are three present: to rule himself, to choose a proxy or to sell everything and forget about all responsibilities.

Can he entrust his house, his companies, his employees, his slaves to another person? Can he let another rule his empire in his stead? Can he have another fire his employees or drive his companies to bankruptcy? Can he watch another rearrange rooms in his mansion or cut down his trees? Can he allow another to decide whether Keith is worthy of his lessons, whether Lance needs therapy, whether Hunk is allowed to have his own projects? Whether his boys will stay or will be sold? Can he let himself lose the very right to be kept informed about such things?

No, to each of the questions. Shiro can’t trust anyone else to make these and similar decisions for him, not even Mr Fennel. Maybe, he is being just a teeny-tiny dramatic. Maybe, he will still rethink it all later. But one thing Shiro knows for certain - it’s his burden to bear and he isn’t planning to shy away from it anymore.

The moment of acceptance doesn’t last long.
Next, Shiro thinks that he is so far from being suited for this kind of job it’s ridiculous. Goddess knows he isn't up to leaving his room some days.

He still has so many issues!

But who hasn’t, counters Shiro’s inner voice immediately (the one that reminds him of Ryan’s). His illness will be a problem, sure, but not an obstacle he can’t overcome. Once again, he’s been doing a lot already - he has worked on all kinds of business matters, participated in meetings with partners and rivals alike, studied reports after reports. He’s been doing his best for years while battling with depression simultaneously.

Shiro pats himself on the head in place of Ryan. He’s remembered another good thing about himself. Well done.

At the same time - and that’s what differentiates a mediocre leader from a good one, in Shiro’s opinion - he hasn’t taken an effort to learn even his “head-quarters” employees’ names, for example. He has never participated in any extra-curricular activities with his team (binge drinking with Steve doesn’t count). Also, he has hardly communicated with people aside from work - for years, he has only talked to Matt and texted Allura.

While Shiro has been at war with himself, all the things he didn’t have the energy for have been done by Mr Fennel. Meticulously, with a great attention to detail. One would even say, flawless.

Not the way Shiro would have done those things were he in his right mind.

They think differently. They feel differently. They have different motives.

They act differently.

How could Shiro have forgotten that?

Shiro looks back at all the executive decisions he’s put on his chief assistant’s shoulders over the years - he doesn’t have a chance to even remember some of them because of his frequent breakdowns. Essentially, Mr Fennel could have done anything behind his back, literally anything. And even if Shiro would not approve of some of those things, Mr Fennel could always say that he’s followed his own best judgement because he didn’t have any other choice since his boss has been absent.

Now, at least, Shiro can admit to himself that Mr Fennel hasn’t always been the right person to make decisions. Shiro has been deluding himself by saying that Mr Fennel will do the top’s work better than him in any case. No, that was not true at all. Shiro has been the best candidate to make the decisions. Shiro should have made a greater eff...

Shiro slaps himself on the left cheek with a resounding clap! No, that’s a wrong way to think. For years, Shiro has been in no shape to be a true leader, a good or a bad one. It hasn’t been his fault, though, repeats Shiro Ryan’s words stubbornly (maybe, the time will come when he will believe in them).

Let’s phrase all of this correctly. Shiro takes a deep breath and concentrates.

It would have been better if Shiro were able to make decisions at the times of need, instead of Mr Fennel. But Shiro couldn’t, and that’s how they have come to the situation at hand. It’s neither good nor bad, it just is.

Shiro can’t change anything in his past so he will have to work with the present, won’t he?
It feels good to find a compromise with himself.

Shiro starts drifting off to sleep when a notion bubbles to the surface in his head: is there something Mr Fennel needs to tell him really or is his strange gaze from before a product of Shiro’s wild imagination? It doesn’t transform into a full thought; Shiro is back to the dreamlands in a matter of seconds.

Unexpectedly for himself, Shiro wakes up timely, at about 9 a.m. He would be up at 8 a.m. were it a normal day, as he is used to lately, but still, it is not nearly as late as his attempt at forgetting about the previous day over a shot of vodka would suggest.

He stretches his muscles - they feel sore, as if he’s run a race or climbed a steep hill and not just stood there and fought his impulses to stop the spanking and to hurt the person who has been the reason for it. Her laughter comes to memory, then, and Shiro pauses mid-stretch. He sits up and tangles his hands into the sheets, trying to hold on something. The anger that has simmered down to low-tingling ashes, surges up anew, boiling Shiro’s blood, making him wish he could hunt Mrs Rainbow-and-Bloody-Stripes down and purge her from her sins through pain and horror. He would not kill her, not in his today’s mood. Death doesn’t bring anything good to the world. But one can learn to understand the other truly through their own suffering only. Shiro is all too ready to help Mrs Sadistic-Giggles learn.

Shiro wants to have the woman under him, held tight, without means of escape, helpless and weak, just the same way she has her slaves. He won’t let her hurt Keith. She won’t ever be able to pose a threat to him again! Keith…

God, Keith. A vision of Keith’s lone figure standing in a doorway, bathed by the light from the corridor behind him, his eyes wide and horrified from watching how Shiro tortures the battered and screaming body of a woman with multi-coloured hair, appears in front of Shiro’s mind eye. Instantly, he feels cold all over. He doesn’t ever want to scare Keith.

Where has that rage that has blinded him come from?

The rage has filled his senses so fast, it’s alarming. Could he have acted upon it in different circumstances?

Shiro swings his feet over the edge of the bed, intending to go and to freshen up his face in the bathroom. Yet, when he tries to push himself up to standing, he feels so dizzy he just plops down where he sat heavily. The image of a butchered body accentuated by a single source of light flashes before his eyes again.

Then, more. There are bursts of shrill, booming sounds, blinding lights, and a vomit-inducing stench crawls at Shiro from every corner. More explosions, more noise, more shrieking. There’s nowhere to go, nowhere safe, but Shiro runs and his fellow soldiers run too, behind him, following him, and Shiro knows that he leads them into a trap, but there’s nowhere to go, nowhere to hide, and dead bodies are strewn everywhere…

Shiro screams.

He screams, and he kicks and struggles because this time he knows they will try to take him and he’d better die than be taken. But they come prepared, this time as well, because soon Shiro feels a nip of a needle at his right shoulder and then his strength oozes away. He resists even when his legs and arm don’t follow his commands (and how have they managed to chop off his other arm so soon?),
even when all he is able to do is wiggle his head from side to side weakly. Familiar voices trickle through the whirlwind in his head; they call him by his name; they sound concerned. Shiro feels sick to his core when his captors call him by his name and dare pretend to be worried about him. Last time they have been honest in their disinterest, at least.

Then the last shred of his control over his conscious tears and Shiro falls down, and seems to be falling forever.

The next time he wakes, it’s to a dimly lit room with someone whispering behind his back. Not entirely aware where he is and what time of day it is, he lies there and listens. His bed he recognises and the voices, too. It’s Keith and… Hunk?

“You go to sleep, Keith. I can handle one unhappy patient.”

“No, I must stay here, Hunk. He knows my voice better.”

“Mr Fennel promised to be here soon. You go, Keith.”

“No, I…”

“The guards are just behind the door if he flails again.”

What? Who “flails”??

“No, Hunk, you don’t understand. He will need to see a familiar face when he wakes up. I have to…”

“You’ve spent the day handling Squeak and defending him from Lance’s exceeding kindness. You need rest.”

“Hunk, it’s nothing. I’m OK.”

“Go, or I will drag you away bodily if needed,” - threatens Hunk.

Keith sputters.

“Never underestimate the power of a well-fed body,” - jokes Hunk. Then: “Seriously, Keith. I can keep watch until Mr Fennel shows up. Please, go. Lance will get antsy if we both stay here.”

Keith snorts, as subtle, as he manages.

“If he even wants to see me at all after today.”

At this, Shiro stirs. Has he slept the whole day long after his short awakening?

“Master Shiro?” - reacts Keith immediately. - “Do you recognize me?”

“Why should I not?” - asks Shiro wryly. - “I’m a little hungover, not ill.”

Keith and Hunk look at each other, uncertain. Their silence makes Shiro worry.

“Actually,” - starts Hunk and shakes his head. - “You do that, Keith. I will just go to my room and wait for you, because sure it will be OK from now on, and then Mr Fennel will be free, right?”
Keith doesn’t stop his babbling, just says, fondly: “Go to Lance already.”

Hunk retreats, bowing to Shiro, saying good buy and apologizing and wishing him to get better all at once.

Shiro pushes up from the pillow, uncomprehending. What time is it? Surely, he couldn’t have spent the whole day in bed.

“Technically, it’s Saturday already,” - answers Keith the unsaid question, attuned to Shiro, as always.

“What’s happened?” - asks Shiro, not wishing to postpone the inevitable.

Keith fumbles with his red collar the way he sometimes does when troubled.

Then, calmly and patiently, he explains how Shiro has had an intense flashback on Friday morning. Thanks to the monitoring system, Mr Fennel, along with Keith and Mrs Teffy, have quickly arrived to check on him. They were afraid that Shiro will hurt himself, but when they have tried to subdue him, Shiro wouldn’t recognise anyone.

“You’ve left a bruise on Mr Fennel’s left cheek and kicked Mrs Teffy in the stomach, taking us all for enemies.”

Shiro swallows audibly. He seeks Keith’s eyes to see a confirmation that he’s hurt him, too. Keith notices Shiro’s almost pleading gaze and responds, not unkindly:

“No, Master Shiro, you haven’t touched me. I haven’t tried to restrain you, I’ve been the one who gave you the injection. Mr Fennel has taught me how.”

Shiro releases the breath he’s been unaware that he’s been holding.

Keith tells him the details, how Shiro has cried and curled in on himself in fear, but Shiro doesn’t listen. It’s all the same every time it happens. There was only a slight difference this time - Shiro’s been more aware of himself in his vision, and it has been not the exact memory, but a compilation of several. And, for what it’s worth, he’s never had a flashback reminiscing his experience of being taken. Is it a good thing - a sign of suppressed memories returning - or a bad one - of his PTSD-symptoms increasing - Shiro can’t know. Maybe, he does need to contact the specialist Ryan has recommended rather sooner than later, to ensure the safety of his own people if not for his own good.

“Thank you, Keith,” - says Shiro sincerely. - “You should go and sleep, just as Hunk has suggested.”

Intentionally not noticing Keith’s rebellious expression, Shiro continues: “Actually, I’ve been a bit surprised to see Hunk here. Has he volunteered?”

“Yes,” - says Keith. And then: “Luckily for us, while Mr Fennel was at the infirmary in the morning, after this... incident, Hunk has come there for the new portion of Lance’s medicine. Mr Fennel has had a suspicion that he has earned a light concussion so he has taken additional time to check, and he also needed to check Mrs Teffy more thoroughly, but he didn’t want to leave me alone here. So Hunk has taken turns with us...”

Keith winces, realizing that he should have probably kept that intel to himself.

Shiro smiles at him dryly:
“I won’t break from the news, Keith.”

Keith gives him a sad look.

“I’ll be fine, really. You can go to your room, Keith. You need sleep,” - repeats Shiro.

Seeing Keith’s reluctance, he adds:

“I will spend the night writing into my boring diary, just as Ryan has so brilliantly suggested. I won’t fall asleep anyway. I don’t need a company for that. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s not only…” - starts Keith and then quickly interrupts himself: “I’m sorry, I should go.”

When he takes a step to the door, obviously intending to flee the scene, Shiro gives into his curiosity (five more minutes in Shiro’s room won’t change anything) and says: “Keith.”

Hearing his name, Keith stops and freezes standing with his back to his owner, as motionless as a statue.

“Yes, Master Shiro?” - he manages.

“You were saying something. I want to hear what it is.”

“I shouldn’t trouble you with this now…”

Shiro almost groans aloud. Not that again! He is so tired to be treated as if he is made from porcelain. He doesn’t even remember his latest outburst yet, only the time he’s spent lying in bed and thinking. His resolve to not abandon his responsibilities is as present as then. One throwback won’t shatter it. He needs to let his underlings know about it, too. That they can rely on him, as before.

Shiro huffs out a laugh, surprising even himself with such an inappropriate reaction. To let them know won’t be as hard as to make them believe him (or better to say, in him) again.

Keith, still looking anywhere but at Shiro, turns at the sound, baffled.

Shiro can start his new mission with Keith. It’s only logical so.

“Keith. You will walk slowly to that chair by the bed, sit down there and tell me what worries you,” - says Shiro, his tone velvety-smooth, commanding. Shiro has always been the controlling type of person. The dominant male, as Mr Fennel would joke.

Keith starts walking despite himself, it seems. It is pleasing, to be obeyed so readily.

Shiro doesn’t feel guilt or remorse for taking control, as he would have, just recently. He’s finally coming to accept it.

He’s drawn a lucky lot when he’s been born, yes. But the merciless fate has also gifted him with a compassionate heart and an alert conscious. Where Keith suffers from his pieces of injustice, Shiro suffers from his own, and there is no way to tell who has it harder.

When Keith takes a seat, still hypnotised by Shiro’s metamorphose, Shiro turns on the bed to have direct eye contact with his boy and continues:

“Keith, I’m here for you. If you don’t intend to run away from me,” - and Shiro enjoys the widening of Keith’s eyes at the unfair suggestion, knowing that he’s being mean, - “And will further abstain from kicking Lance into silence,” - this elicits a desired grin, and Shiro goes on, serious now, - “I will
always be on your side. You can ask me about whatever bothers you.”

He hopes that Keith can trust him. He hopes that they have shared enough significant moments for Keith to let him into this problem, too.

I have proven myself to you, haven’t I? - wants Shiro to ask. I did everything in my power to show you that even if I own you on paper, I want to protect you and help you in reality. Haven’t I proven that I care about you?

But it’s not about Shiro, his wishes and feelings. Keith looks like he’s close to tears and Shiro forgets about his own grudges and asks, concerned:

“Keith? What is it?”

In lieu of an answer, Keith just presses his palms to his eyes and sniffles barely audibly.

To wait until Keith starts talking on his own seems the wise thing to do, so Shiro gives him his time. Keith takes deep breaths, the hand at his face still hiding the presumed wetness there, and visibly tries to get his bearings as soon as possible. Shiro waits patiently, not hurrying him up, not acknowledging what Keith might view as a weakness in any way, not trying to console Keith until he knows what’s wrong. Finally, Keith’s hand wipes his eyes furiously. Keith shakes his head and looks down, to the floor, avoiding Shiro’s eyes. From that position, he mumbles, his voice thick:

“It’s just so much. I don’t know how to do it all anymore. I’ve felt confident with Clint, and I think we’ve found contact, and Mr Fennel has said that I’ve done well. It’s been hard, of course, how could it not? But then Lance and his accusations… He’s thrown me off my track completely. Just - a couple of sentences from him and my confidence is gone. And after that, you!”

Here Keith looks up at Shiro, still dismayed, still wound up tightly from seeing Shiro hit his low once more after such a long period of stability. Shiro feels his breath catch in his chest. It almost hurts to see someone so worried about him; no, not someone, to see Keith worried about him to the degree that he can’t calm down even after Shiro woke up and came back to himself again. Keith continues, tense from his memories of the day:

“I was so worried about you, Master Shiro. I just… All the worst things have just come into my head. Mr Fennel has told me not to read too many medical books…”

Shiro gives him a rueful smile which is returned. Instantly calmer, Keith looks at him with such a tender expression that Shiro can’t place it, not really. What does Keith see right now? Is he glad that the person he cares about is alright? It looks like something else...

Keith doesn’t give him enough time to fall into a reverie. With a curious expression, he asks:

“How do you and Mr Fennel do this?”

The question seems clear to Keith, evidently, but it isn't to Shiro.

“What do you mean by “this”, Keith?” - asks Shiro softly.

“How do you handle all these… Decisions? With so many people involved? When I can’t handle Lance and Clint?” - asks Keith.

“But you help Mr Fennel with so many tasks involving my employees already. And everyone says that you do good,” - suggests Shiro to encourage Keith.
Keith tilts his head a bit to the side and looks at Shiro as if he is dumb.

It’s never a nice feeling to not understand something the others deem simple.

One more time, Shiro can see so clearly how Keith has managed to raise ire of his overseers time and time again. He is so glad he’s stolen Keith from everyone and brought him here. Shiro can endure being called dumb in his face if he prompts it.

Meanwhile, Keith gathers his thoughts for a while, looking for an appropriate phrasing as not to insult his master, before he starts, carefully:

“I work with all kinds of projects about the mansion, involving security, and batches of materials or goods, or search for new workers - everything that Mr Fennel does, influences my work, too. To put it shortly, I help everywhere I am able to. But I always have that back-up in the face of Mr Fennel. This time…” - Keith shrugs helplessly, unable to finish the thought.

The boy bites his lip in concentration.

“My usual tasks don’t mean influencing someone’s life so directly and acutely,” - says Keith slowly in conclusion. - “As with Clint”.

Shiro nods. He has almost got it. Just one thing and the picture will come together in his head.

“Before you continue, Keith, I have one little question. Who is Clint?”

Chapter End Notes

Poor Shiro, I don't give him breaks too long...
You may not believe it, but I love him a lot!

Everyone has guessed who Clint is, hey?

Have a nice day and thank you for following the story!
Shiro discusses the hard topic of Clint's fate with Keith, after learning about the results of his breakdown.
Keith has a serious fight with Lance, and Shiro has to intervene.

Hello, my dear kittens, doggos, mice, hippos, little snakes and other folks!
(actually, don't mind me, I am sleep-deprived and it feels like I love animals more than people now)

I like the direction where my story goes now. I hope I won't forget any plotholes and twists in the future and tie it all up and will be able to bring it all to a conclusion which will suit me and you)) A long way awaits me still!

Also, a happy thing in my life - another beautiful song with the same name as my fic! It's been issued in the spring, I guess, but I have found it just lately. Meg Myers is a treasure, and her song just works so well with Shiro's feelings here (and mine, for all my life). The video is really expressive, as well! Please, check it out!
Meg Myers - Numb

Have a good time reading and please tell how you liked it!

Shiro can’t say he can blame Lance for his reaction. Actually, if not for years and years spent practising self-control (and the knowledge that he would hurt Keith’s feelings), he would have reacted just the same.

At first, it seems the only possible response.

Why does Clint have to suffer when he only has a week and a half here, where he doesn’t owe anything anyone? Where no one will act as if he is obliged to be the puppet Mrs Ezor makes out of him?

Next, Shiro remembers to always listen to people first before making a judgement. He never steps back from this principle if he has time and freedom to do so. He wanted to trust Keith with Clint’s life for a reason, and he hasn’t heard Keith’s version yet.

Shiro won’t act the same as a scared adolescent boy, hunted by his own nightmares, and won’t lash out at Keith. If in the course of their conversation he finds out that he agrees with Lance he will say so, calmly and in a way that Keith will understand.

Keith, in front of him, barely breathes, as if sensing Shiro’s doubt, Shiro’s instinctual wish to call the
actions of his “favourite” slave cruelty. He expects to be chastised and, maybe, even punished. Shiro didn’t want to elicit such a reaction in him. But, honestly, how could he have prevented it when he can’t hide his doubt and Keith is so perceptive? A little hesitation on Shiro’s part, and Keith is already afraid that Shiro will think bad of him, maybe, will be disappointed. More than anything, Keith doesn’t want to disappoint, doesn’t want Shiro to give up on him, no, he desperately wishes to be acknowledged. Sadly, but two months of building trust are nothing against a lifetime of staying unnoticed, against an eternity of unvocalized opinions not being taken into account by uncaring people. What fascinates Shiro is the fact that, despite his fear, Keith readies himself to stand his ground. Even if it drives Shiro away from him, even if Keith will have to turn his soul to steel again, he won’t flee from this conversation.

That is only one of many qualities Shiro admires in Keith.

Let this discussion be another milestone in their way to bonding, not a reason to be driven apart from each other.

“Talk to me, Keith,” - asks Shiro gently.

Keith only looks up at him, frowning, still unsure what to say.

Shiro smiles at the boy warmly and suggests:

“Start from the beginning? Tell me how you’ve learned Squeak’s real name, for starters. I haven’t even thought of finding it out, I must admit.”

Keith’s face contorts in a grimace of anger. Shiro hopes it’s not on his account.

Keith breathes in harshly through his nose, braces himself and starts his story. Once he starts, Shiro doesn’t need to direct him anymore.

“I have asked, Master Shiro. And he has told me. After some coaxing, but he’s told me. Every slave has a name given by their parents or chosen by himself. It’s that simple. If a slave hasn’t forgotten their name, that is.”

Keith pauses for a long second while he collects himself again.

“His Owner has called him a new filthy name every other week. She has many other male slaves, that woman. But they are all broken by her. Those once broken she doesn’t rename. It took her more time to make him the way she wanted him to be than she has expected.”

Another angry noise. Shiro listens.

“What can we do for him? - I’ve thought. What will help him in the future? And I’ve realized that we can’t let him enjoy a happy vacation here as we all want. The change would be too hard to bear when he returns. He can’t… he won’t survive if he grows too soft.”

Keith’s hands crawl to his collar, and for the first time in Shiro’s presence he squeezes and tugs at the thin scarlet band as if it chokes him. Watching that makes Shiro feel as if he is being suffocated himself. But Keith isn’t done with his speech, and Shiro forces himself to stay attuned. It is his responsibility to take care of his slaves, and of Clint for the time of his stay, after all.

His burden.

“And then I’ve thought of the slaves I had met at the auction, in the boarding school and on the farm before that; I have also tried to recall Hunk’s and Lance’s stories. I’ve thought so hard that my head
felt like bursting. And then, in the morning, I’ve told Mr Fennel that I don’t know about anything as useful as the things my father had taught me all those years ago when I first learned how to take the pain from his hands. But I couldn’t just tell Clint some magic words which would make him ready for all kinds of trouble.”

Keith's voice is loud and righteous now, as he reawakens his memories.

“So, I’ve told him my plan. Mr Fennel has listened to me and said that he’d order me to do almost the same but without any theoretical base under it. He told me to not be cruel to Clint but not to pity him either. As if I would offer him pity.”

Keith snorts. His brave, resilient boy.

“And so I’ve come to Clint, it was then that I’ve learned his name, by the way, and I told him that his Mistress, goddess damn her soul, liked the way I’ve performed and that I should teach him the same thing. After he’d had breakfast, I’ve taken him for a short walk and we talked. When we returned to his chamber and before I’ve started “teaching” him, I’ve shown him my leftover marks from the last Saturday. Just so he doesn’t think that I don’t know what I’m talking about,” - and Keith lets out a rueful laugh and looks at the wall to the side, - “It felt like a lie. Even if I’ve taken the cane from Mr Fennel just as fairly as Clint has had to take the birch from me on Thursday. I guess it’s because I submit to my punishments willingly every time and I don’t fear them.”

Keith says the last thing so matter-of-factly, so calmly, and Shiro’s mind seems to flip upside down and back again. Shiro feels so many conflicting emotions at once he can barely hold it together.

He should have made some kind of noise as an indication of his inner turmoil because Keith’s eyes start searching his with purpose, and Keith doesn’t ease off until Shiro looks straight at him.

When the eye contact is established, Keith says with fervour:

“It is true, Master Shiro. My Saturday discipline doesn’t feel like with Clint, doesn’t feel like… a violation. I would have asked you to stop it, were it different. I wouldn’t be afraid to ask. Not after…” - and Keith trails off a bit and then starts anew. - “I would have asked if I wanted it to end. Or, if I were too scared for that, Mr Fennel would have noticed that I regress from such treatment and stopped it himself.”

Keith’s voice quiets down at the end of the passage, and his sudden outburst dies as soon as it’s started. He drops his gaze to the floor in sudden shame and his next words are mumbled, not shouted out.

“I don’t know why I need this the way I do. But with Mr Fennel, it feels safe and I just, I just…”

Keith is working himself into a frenzy again.

“And it will stop. Oh, how Shiro wishes Keith’s disciplinary sessions would stop. He won’t ever get it. He believes Keith when he says that he needs them, but he can’t understand him. Keith is such a good, strong person. He doesn’t require corporal punishment to strive to perfection.

Keith smiles; a small, crooked thing warming his elegant features insurmountably.

“I know. Thank you, Master Shiro.”
Shiro prevents a sigh of relief from emerging. He doesn’t know if he could stand Keith’s breakdown over such thing, not now.

“How did Squeak, no, I apologize… Clint respond at your actions?” - asks Shiro, stirring their conversation back to the topic of their collared visitor.

“He’s been scared first. But when he realized that I will heed his limits and let him get accustomed to the pain until it gets worse, then, I think… no, better to say, I hope he started to trust me, in the end.”

Shiro hums in acknowledgement.

“I plan to train him in how to take his punishments best, explain how to make it easier on him and most pleasing for his Owner and other viewers. Also, I need to help him hone his manners. I was planning to ask Lance for assistance, but now…”

“What did he say? Lance, I mean,” - interrupts Shiro, knowing the most possible answer already.

“That I’m no better than them,” - cites Keith, his voice gone listless and dull.

Shiro steels himself internally and says:

“It is as far from the truth as it could be. We both know this. Hell, Lance knows this as well as we do! Keith, you are the one who’s survived such treatment and who hasn’t been broken by those monsters. What you intend to do, is education, not cruelty.”

“But I will hurt Clint, and not in the way he wants,” - counters Keith.

“If it makes you a monster, then I am a monster as well. A despicable and greedy one. I make you and the boys wear collars and do not pay you for your work,” - states Shiro.

Keith frowns. The humour is completely lost on him.

“You give me books, and I like my work, and you let me use the telescope…” - starts Keith listing in earnest. Then he notices the wrinkles of laughter in the corners of Shiro’s lips and eyes and says loudly:

“Hey! I’m being serious here!”

Shiro is so happy to see Keith’s youthful anger directed at him because of such a silly reason. It confirms that Keith is talking to him like to another person, not a representative of a social construct he hates, and it lifts an unbearable weight from Shiro’s shoulders.

“Keith, I know. Sorry. I was just messing with you. I am glad that you see it that way because I don’t see it like that all the time. Sometimes, it is hard to find any difference between me and Mrs Ezor.”

Keith wants to contradict, but Shiro lifts his palm and Keith closes his mouth, docile.

“Also, I want to thank you for your work, Keith. I really appreciate the efforts you make and I don’t say it often enough,” - says Shiro earnestly and means every word.

Keith blinks at him, stunned, then averts his eyes in embarrassment. He mumbles:

“You’re welcome,” - and ducks his head even lower. He sure hasn’t expected their talk to turn to something like that.

Keith is so cute when he is embarrassed.
Shiro hopes that one day Keith will proudly accept the deserved praise.

Shiro just wants to pinch Keith’s cheeks or ruffle his hair or give him a real bear hug.

Shiro loves him to pieces.

“Please, show Clint how to be as brave as you,” - offers Shiro softly. Not an order, not a request, but a mere suggestion.

“I will do my best,” - promises Keith and finally looks back at Shiro.

They look at each other for several long moments, both not hiding from each other, both grateful for the support the other provides.

Shiro wonders what Keith sees in him right then.

Shiro himself can see Keith’s worries, Keith’s fear that he will become one of the monsters who harvest weaker people’s angst and hurt. Shiro fears this, too. Very much. He doesn’t remember his flashback yet, but some gut feeling tells him that it’s connected with their current topic. With his gaze, as much as with his previous words, Shiro tries to reassure Keith, make him feel less alone in the task of caring for Clint that Keith has basically taken upon himself by offering to spank Clint back in the garden. Shiro can’t lessen his burden, just as Keith can’t lessen Shiro’s. He can’t tell him that he won’t become a horrifying soulless creature that only heeds its own desires because he can’t guarantee that Keith won’t. He believes that Keith won’t but who is he to tell Keith such things? Shiro fights and loses his own battles daily, and Keith will have to do the same. In his experience, only the choices and the actions matter. Not fears and expectations, the person’s or someone else’s, not thoughts and theories.

Shiro wants to voice this last thought for it might prove useful for his boy, after all, when the room’s door bangs open, revealing Mr Fennel and Mrs Teffy.

Keith stands up to greet his boss appropriately, his manners drilled into him by the boarding school and refined by the very man in front of them.

Shiro just looks Mr Fennel and Mrs Teffy, his chief assistants favourite team-member, over. Their costumes are as impeccable as ever, postures regal, the faces serious and calm.

The harmony is disrupted by a big bruise starting under Mr Fennel’s eye and crawling down onto his cheek. Mrs Teffy holds herself just a hair stiffer than usual, too.

Shiro stands up, as well. No longer dizzy from simple motions, he takes a couple of steps towards his employees and says that he’s sorry for the injuries he’s caused, even if he couldn’t comprehend what he’s doing.

Mrs Teffy allows herself a smile and jokes that she and Mr Fennel should both train more as not to be defeated by their employer who only sits in his office all the time and goes to boring meetings. Shiro barely restrains himself from adding: “And who is one-armed, at that.” - knowing that this won’t be funny to anyone but him (and Mr Fennel).

Mr Fennel asks Mrs Teffy to walk Keith to his room and discuss his regime for tomorrow.

“Tomorrow, he stands up from the bed not earlier than 10 a.m., I’ll check it myself,” - warns Mr Fennel.

Keith goes reluctantly, shooting one last look at his owner.
After the two of them depart, Mr Fennel allows himself to relax. His shoulders sag, his face contorts in a slight grimace.

“You are such a shit, Takashi,” - he murmurs, letting his body fall onto the couch with a loud whoomp! From there, he continues to pity himself exaggeratedly, recounting in a sing-song keening voice:

“What have I done to earn your wrath, my beloved Master? I serve you with good faith and fidelity…”

“Keep your stock full and your cattle - healthy and fat,” - confirms Shiro trying to copy the complaining tone, fighting a smile.

“Your dwelling - safe and your men and women - compliant,” - continues Mr Fennel.

They could go on the whole night if they wanted, but Shiro gives up and snorts loudly.

Mr Fennel looks at him with feigned displeasure.

“Such a little shit,” - he repeats under his breath and shakes his head as if Shiro has just confirmed all his worst expectations. And then, without any transition: “I’m happy you feel better now, Takashi. And thank you for talking to Keith.”

Shiro only sighs in response. There is nothing to say to that.

“What about your head? Do you have a concussion?” - he asks instead.

This time, it’s Mr Fennel, who snorts.

“Since my very birth, I guess. A very heavy concussion. A trauma irreconcilable with mental stability, common sense and simple logic. How would I have found myself here otherwise?”

And now who is a shit between the two of them?

The next day, when most of the late-night idlers are finally up and awake enough to play decent people, Mr Fennel informs Keith that there won’t be a Saturday discipline for him this time because “too many spankings a week in this mansion won’t do”. According to Mr Fennel, Keith has only said: “If you change your mind, you know where to find me,” and left, presumably to go to Clint.

Shiro feels so relieved by this news he wants to dance. Which he does, uncaring for the cameras in his sun-lit bedroom.

Actually, it’s almost time for lunch and Shiro decides to join his employees in the canteen. He’s met with smiles and happy greetings. Everyone invites him to their table, but Shiro chooses to sit with Hunk, his boss (the chief mechanic at the shop) and Lance. Unexpectedly for himself, he gets dragged into the discussion of Keith’s actions concerning Clint and ends up quarrelling with Lance. Shiro doesn’t want to attract the attention of his employees to this particular issue, but when Lance’s high-pitched voice rings so loudly in the full dining room, Shiro has no choice but to make their argument public.

Lance can’t beat him in the art of rhetoric, no matter how much he strains his vocal cords. Hunk can only sigh forlornly next to him, expecting the imminent fall. After Lance has run out of arguments, only Mr Fennel’s training allows him to stay at the table and finish his food. He even says goodbye
to Shiro before stomping out of the room.

Hunk, for better or worse, stays at the table.

“I won’t say I’m sorry for Lance’s behaviour, Master, even if he acted childishly, which he did. But I am sure we would all agree that if we were listening to our hearts and offering our thoughts honestly, we would have said exactly the same things Lance here has said, even if we realize how hopelessly naive it is to expect Clint to survive going back to what he’s had at Mrs Ezor’s after living a good, happy life here, if even for a week, because happy memories don’t always do us good, not when we have to prepare for the worst and steel ourselves, since that’s what Clint will have to do, obviously, and I don’t envy him, really. So I’m with you and Keith here, but it fucking hurts,” - offers his opinion Hunk.

Shiro doesn’t know how Hunk manages to say all that in one go, but he does, and Shiro is left to grit his teeth and pick up the last shreds of his determination from the floor after hearing his own feelings put into words so uncompromisingly, preparing to see Clint’s stay at the mansion to the end.

The day only gets weirder after that.

Keith has another fight with Lance after the latter steals Clint from his chamber and gives him a tour of the mansion, showing him the fountains and the glass library. When Keith learns about it via his phone from one of the guards, he’s busy helping Mr Fennel with the preparations for Shiro’s business trip next week (there are presentation materials and information charts to be sorted out, a hotel to be booked, the schedule to be planned, restaurants to be booked for formal and informal meals; it’s a lot when only two people do that, especially since the trip is important and Mr Fennel needs to check everything several times). Besides, there are other tasks waiting. Keith decides that he can’t simply pause his intellectual work and go catch wayward slaves. The guard offers to help with it, but Keith politely refuses, only asks to keep an eye on Lance and Clint and inform him if anything out of ordinary happens.

When Mr Fennel retells this story later in Shiro’s cabinet, he enjoys describing Keith’s annoyed huffing and puffing while he has been finishing his immediate tasks and, most certainly, thinking about the scolding he’ll give Lance as soon as he sees him at the same time. “Why wouldn’t you just send him away? I’m sure his current task could have waited until he returns Clint to his place. After all, I do the major part of the preparations myself this time,” - asks Shiro. Mr Fennel smiles smugly and says: “I’ve really enjoyed seeing Keith restrain his temper for the sake of what’s more important at the moment. He knew that Clint is safe and has chosen to finish his current assignment first. Who am I to mess with Keith’s choices and priorities?” Shiro can’t argue that a little exercise in suppressing one’s urges can be useful in the long run, but knowing about Keith’s connection to Clint, he can’t approve of Mr Fennel’s teasing. “You give people strenuous tasks and, when they give their best, you make their tasks even harder. You are a horror of this house, Steve,” - says Shiro. His chief assistant takes it as a compliment; isn’t he too full of himself?

Shiro just shakes his head; nothing to be done here. He steels himself and listens about Keith’s further trouble.

The story goes as follows, according to Mr Fennel.

When Keith allows himself to leave Mr Fennel’s office where he usually works on office tasks, he goes straight to where Lance and Clint should be at the moment. By a strange coincidence, it’s at the old fountain where Shiro and Keith have exchanged painful memories and cried in each other’s hands. The meaningfulness of the place doesn’t dampen Keith’s fury.

He and Lance have a positively epic shouting contest. They argue and insult each other until Keith
notices, to his horror and absolute dejection, that Clint is all but covering his ears pressing himself to
a tree in his dismay. That image shuts Keith up real quick. Absolutely ignoring Lance, Keith comes
to Clint slowly and kneels in front of him. The action takes the desired effect: Clint’s surprise
overweighs his fear and he is able to listen to Keith. Keith calms him down with a few careful words
(that part they know from Lance’s retelling - Keith’s ability to command another person’s attention
so easily has impressed Lance beyond measure). Then, he leads Clint away from the park, back to
his room, leaving Lance to stand where he is, conflicted.

When Shiro learns that Clint has been spanked for being out in the open without permission - Clint
has been told that only Keith has the right to take him anywhere amongst the staff and shouldn’t have
believed Lance’s promises that he’s got it covered - he can’t help but be angry at Keith. It’s been
obviously Lance’s fault, why punish Clint for that little escapade? No one’s got hurt!

Mr Fennel only says that he’s with Keith here and offers Shiro to talk to Keith himself.

Shiro is so annoyed with Mr Fennel’s evasiveness by that time that he agrees easily. He’d have to
talk to Keith sooner or later anyway. Shiro closes his laptop and takes one of the books he has in his
room for the purpose of relaxing. It takes him more than ten minutes to start understanding what he
reads. Another ten - to start enjoying the process. After about forty minutes of reading Shiro feels
decidedly calmer. Still, thoughts about Clint’s situation keep circling in the back of his mind.

It’s almost dinner time when he meets Keith in his cabinet.

Keith looks so tired. Shiro has never seen him like that before - and he notices it while Keith is
walking along the two-way mirrors framing the room’s entrance already.

In that instant, Shiro undoubtedly regrets pushing responsibility for Clint’s “training” on Keith - he’s
a clever and well-meaning kid, but still a kid!

Shiro is an adult and he should have known better.

Then Keith enters, bows to Shiro and asks whether he’s allowed to kneel on the floor instead of
standing or taking the chair. Strangely, but Shiro is prepared for this situation - since the amount of
slaves in his mansion has increased so drastically, he’s ordered to buy lots and lots of throw pillows
suitable for kneeling and made sure those have been strategically placed in the most popular rooms.
He tells Keith to take the pillow from the couch and position himself in the centre of the room. Keith
does as he is told. After he kneels and settles, the tension seems to leave his body. His pose is
disturbingly elegant; Shiro doesn’t want to think how long (and ruthless) Keith has had to be trained
to look so natural at that.

Shiro takes a deep breath and concentrates. What has Mr Fennel said about Keith one day? That he
feels better after he can relinquish his control to someone else for a while? Shiro can give him that, now.
That’s a new ground for them, but not entirely unfamiliar - Shiro has used his commanding
persona in Keith’s presence more times than he can count, but never so openly. There’s a first time
for everything, isn’t there?

Shiro circles his giant wooden table and stops in front of it, a meter away from Keith’s figure on the
floor. The boy looks comfortable enough to spend the time of their conversation kneeling on the
pillow.

“Keith?” - addresses Shiro when he feels calm enough.

“Yes, Sir?” - asks Keith without looking up to Shiro. Instead, he looks straight ahead. It’s a little
unnatural for Shiro since he is used to seeing the eyes of his conversation partners, but he’ll have to
work with that. It is better than making Keith crane his neck from his position on the floor.

Keith sounds… different? Is it one of the headspaces Mr Fennel puts him in every Saturday? Shit. It’s Saturday. And Mr Fennel hasn’t done anything to Keith, they have continued to work instead. Shiro has been so elated about that in the morning he hasn’t gauged the possible consequences.

They have to start somewhere.

“How do you feel? Are you thirsty?” - asks Shiro, to be on the safe side.

“I’m very tired, Sir,” - is all Keith says.

Shiro pours him a glass of water anyway which the boy accepts with a quiet “thank you”. He’s so not himself right now that Shiro contemplates calling Mr Fennel right then. He can’t fuck it up.

But he and Keith need to learn how to communicate, even when Keith is a little out of it.

So Shiro pushes his doubts out of his mind for now and starts the “interrogation”.

“Please, tell me, what punishment have you given Clint for going out of his cell without permission?”

“I’ve spanked him quite thoroughly, Sir, but that’s all”

“How has he taken to it?”

“He’s been good.”

“How have you explained his fault to him?”

“It wasn’t exactly his fault, Sir. But in his Owner’s household, he would’ve been punished for that, which I’ve told him.”

“Has Clint been scared?”

“At first, yes. But we have talked, and I’ve told him that he should have said “no” to Lance, that Lance wouldn’t drag him out by force, or that the guards would report any fuss to me. When he’s calmed down, I apologized for screaming in front of him. That was irresponsible of me. Clint has accepted my apologies. And then I’ve spanked him.”

“It’s good that you realize that you shouldn’t have argued with Lance in Clint’s presence. But, Keith, was such a punishment necessary at all? Wouldn’t a simple scolding do?”

“No, Sir. Clint needs to learn how to take his pain, and it’s been a good opportunity. A real breach of rules - that’s good for our purposes.”

“Oi?” - is all that Shiro can muster in response.

Keith elaborates.

“I’ve spent an hour spanking him. In the end, his behind has been dark-pink only. We stopped all the time, and I’ve corrected his position, commented on the way he’s clenched his muscles, reminded him how to breathe… I need to teach him how to look repentant and how to exaggerate the pain level while looking believable, as well, and there so little time left.”

That’s true, and Shiro can only admire Keith’s thoughtfulness, again. While Shiro worries about
universal things, Keith takes care of a real person who needs it the most.

Then Shiro makes up his mind as to how to handle this situation.

“Keith, look at me.”

Keith looks up, and he’s not exactly here. That’s alright, for now.

“You have done well correcting Clint. But shouting and insulting each other is not appropriate for a good slave. I am not pleased with that.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.”

Time to put his plan into action.

Shiro takes a clean kerchief from a table drawer, makes Keith bite in the middle and binds the ends behind Keith’s head. Keith doesn’t protest the treatment.

Shiro goes on with his directions, trying to sound reassuring:

“That’s it. You’ll spend twenty minutes right where you are, silent, and you will contemplate how you will be apologizing to Lance for being so harsh on him.”

A protesting sound dies behind the makeshift gag.

Shiro continues, unperturbed:

“Then Mr Fennel will collect you to dinner. You are not allowed to say a word until you go to sleep. The only thing you may say is “Good night, Mr Fennel” or your safeword. Am I clear?”

A distinct nod.

“That’s a good boy. As you might have gathered, you’ll stay in Mr Fennel’s room for the night.”

After that phrase, Keith’s figure freezes for a millisecond, then sags again, more sullen than before. Without being able to ask or contradict, he can only accept the fact that he won’t have the evening to reconcile with Lance.

Shiro sends a text to Mr Fennel, asking to collect Keith in twenty-five minutes and order Lance to come to Shiro’s cabinet in thirty-five.

When Keith’s kneeling time is up, Shiro crouches in front of him, unbinds the kerchief and sits back, waiting until Keith’s gaze gets sensible and focuses on him. When Shiro is sure that he has Keith’s attention, he says, slowly and distinctly:

“Your time-out is over. I forgive your impulsive behaviour. It’s all over, Keith, and you won’t beat yourself up over that. You hear me?”

“Yes, Sir,” - intones Keith. He speaks quietly, but clearly. That’s good.

Shiro asks, just to be consistent:

“Have you thought about what you’ll say to Lance when you meet?”

“Yes, Sir,” - and nothing more, no details, no questions. Keith’s voice grows a little louder which Shiro takes for a good sign. He finishes his little speech:
“You are doing a good job, Keith. I am very proud of you.”

Keith’s lower lip wobbles, but he doesn’t say anything.

Again, he looks fragile and unsure.

I’m sorry for doubting you, wants Shiro to say. I’m so sorry for dumping this shit on you, he wants to admit.

But Keith’s doesn’t need this from him now.

“Stand up, Keith. Slowly, that’s it. Use the restroom while we wait for Mr Fennel.”

With Keith out of sight, Shiro has an unseemly urge to curl up into a ball on the floor, put his palms over his mouth and shout himself hoarse. He restrains himself; that’s all he does recently, it seems - restraining his own urges, reasonable and unreasonable ones. Isn’t that what he does all his life, though? Why is it so hard now?

Keith spends quite some time alone in the bathroom, and, when Mr Fennel comes in, he and Shiro spend this time in silence, each thinking of their own things. When they hear the door, both put their unavoidable masks in place and straighten themselves.

Keith looks as if he has tried to wash his hair in the basin, so wet it is. He doesn’t look so hopeless anymore, though, and it’s a relief.

Shiro has ten more minutes to calm down further after Keith is taken away. He stays where he is, standing by his table and looking out of the window into the dark landscape. Even his park doesn’t bring Shiro joy right now, despite the good order and jolly lanterns lighting the passages. The trees are almost bare and their branches weave and flutter under the wind, casting strange and ugly shadows. The image makes Shiro shiver, as ominous as it looks to him in given circumstances.

Shiro realises with aching clarity that he will have to put an act again right now when he turns away from the view and, through the mirror-glass, notices Lance already walking down the corridor towards the door to his cabinet. Immediately, Shiro puts the appropriate face on - he’s an owner in dismay, after all! And boy, does it feel forced and unnatural to pretend he’s “angry” with Lance. But that’s what the situation is calling for.

Lance takes his time in front of the door. Shiro starts getting impatient waiting for the knock - he wants to be done with this shit, and the sooner, the better.

It’s not Shiro’s or Keith’s fault that life is so stupidly unfair to Clint.

It’s not Lance’s either, of course.

When the knock finally comes, weak and hesitant, Shiro is ready.

One conversation more, and he can finally be alone with his own demons.

Chapter End Notes

I really think that Shiro and Mr Fennel put too much pressure on Keith (who do I kid, it's me who's doing that; am I even sane at all; who put me in charge of characters???)
On the other hand, Keith is the type of person (IMHO) who thrives at beating challenges.

Thanks for sticking with me! Please, don't forget to leave a comment! Even if it's a very short one, I'll be very glad!

^_^
Training

Chapter Summary

Shiro has a serious conversation with Lance.
Clint's week at Shiro's mansion is over too soon.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

I've had quite a crisis over my fic lately! I am surprised the chapter is ready, in the end!
I hope you'll have a good time reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The main culprit looks as unseemly as Shiro feels.

Actually, Shiro is surprised that Hunk isn’t accompanying Lance to the door - Lance looks like he could use some support right now. Is it because of Mr Fennel’s instructions or has Lance decided on it himself? If it’s Lance’s own decision, then Shiro is impressed.

Honestly, the peace-breaker looks more than miserable; as if he’s started crying immediately after his argument with Keith and never really stopped. Lance’s eyes are red and his nose is runny; he snifflies and takes shuddering breaths. His eyes never leave the floor.

It’s the most gloomy and, strangely, the most sincere Shiro has ever seen him since their meeting at the whipping post at Matt’s place. No put up front, no attempts to look shiny and careless. It’s not like Lance isn’t an open book for an attentive observer - his acting skills are worse than Keith’s have been before the start of his apprenticeship under Mr Fennel. Lance may remember the way he used to be back in the day, before his disease and the "healing” have changed everything. Maybe, he has an image of what kind of a person he would’ve become after growing up, if not for all those years spent in the limbo of constant operations, vaccine inoculation and lying exhausted in bed. The fake showing-off may be the result of either (or of both). Shiro can respect Lance’s choice - to hide his insecurities and pains under a mask of an eternal enthusiasm, to look the way he thinks would be better for him and everyone else. Shiro imagines that Lance hopes to try and adopt those bubbling, positive emotions he likes to send to the world so much, when his mask is authentic and habitual enough, to make this sunny personality real. Lance does a good job of it so far.

Shiro hopes that Lance will manage it one day, too; that Lance will become strong enough to do the things life calls for in different circumstances, that he will experience (and express) genuine happiness and share his darker feelings with the rest of the world without fear or the need to exaggerate.

In this very moment, on the opposite, Lance gives the impression of being small, unhappy and vulnerable. Despite his decent height, he seems no more than a kid, honestly. Shiro would very much prefer to hug him and tell him that everything will be OK than give him a Talk.
Shiro will be able to do just that when they’re done with the nasty part, or so he hopes.

He is still awfully distracted after his conversation with Keith. It has had a greater impact on him than Shiro’s anticipated.

His head is whirling and his heart aches from exhaustion. Actually, he would very much like to go to his room now and rest.

But Lance has come here upon Shiro’s request and expects Shiro’s judgement. It will be a long evening.

Shiro greets the boy in a calm, emotionless tone:

“Hello, Lance. Thank you for coming.”

As if he had a choice, goads Shiro an inner voice; gosh, Shiro is tired; this day is unending.

“Good evening, Sir,” - answers Lance in a deliberately polite tone. He speaks through his nose, just a little bit. With this whole “air of tragedy” surrounding him, it could have looked comical in a different situation.

But Lance is here because Shiro has asked for him, so he goes on.

“As you may have gathered, I wanted to address your behaviour today. You knew that Clint is not allowed out of his room. You knew that he’s Keith’s responsibility and that Keith has a plan for Clint’s time here. Yet, you’ve decided to disregard all this and take Clint for an unauthorized walk. Could you explain what your reasons were?”

Lance shrugs and mumbles:

“No particular reasons.”

Shiro keeps silence, so Lance has to elaborate:

“It’s unfair that he has to sit there all the time. It’s boring and… and…”

After looking for suitable epithets for half a minute, Lance gives up and repeats, louder and more heated:

“Unfair! It’s unfair, that’s what it is.”

As if it could have been any other way, in the world they both have been born to. They won’t have a fruitful discussion like that.

In a way of an interlude, Shiro offers:

“There’s a saying I’ve read somewhere: “Life is fair because it’s unfair to everyone.” Lance, you must realise one thing. We can’t do much for Clint, even if we want to.”

He can’t help but add sadly:

“I’ve thought we’ve been over that already. I hoped you would think about my words after the argument we’ve had in the canteen and take them into account. I have contemplated what to do with Clint long and hard. I haven’t been able to find a different solution.”

It’s hard to find the words. Shiro tries to convey his feelings as good as possible, even if his tiredness
wants to eat him whole. This sensation of going numb all over seems to be a real, existing being to Shiro; a beast of stealthiness and rascality; a big, dangerous snake which coils around him slowly, but surely, intending to suffocate him before he notices. It wants to make Shiro stop caring about anyone besides himself, or, better yet, leave him mute, unable to communicate, and thus not let him spend the precious energy.

Shiro shakes off the trance-like state and concentrates. You’re a big boy, pull yourself together! - he orders himself. One talk, and then he can sleep. He may even sleep on the floor right here if he likes, no one can prohibit him.

As expected, Lance doesn’t respond after Shiro’s last phrase, still too busy inspecting the parquet floor under his feet. Seems like Shiro has to try harder to get through to him.

There’s a certain difficulty in looking for understanding in Lance. When it came to Keith, Shiro has agreed with his opinion and that was it; besides, they have spent much more time together with Keith than with the other two slaves. There is trust between them. If Shiro wants to speak with Lance person-to-person, not owner-to-slave, he needs Lance to believe him, too, needs Lance to take him and his good intentions seriously. He doesn’t want Lance to think all this is just a formality to Shiro.

Shiro doesn’t view Lance as a problem case or an obstacle.

Shiro cares. He just needs Lance to see that.

Not letting Lance’s behaviour get to him, Shiro goes on, slowly and patiently, looking to the window as to not intimidate the boy:

“You know that Clint will have to return to a household with a very strict protocol. Rumours also say that Mrs Ezor rarely, if ever, sells slaves. Clint’s short time here is nothing in comparison to a lifetime in her possession. When he returns, he will have to live a harsh monotone life, concentrated around Mrs Ezor’s wishes and moods. Changing his rhythm too dramatically for a week and a half wouldn’t do Clint any good.”

Shiro casts a look at Lance, hoping to see him starting to come to terms with the information. But Lance’s body language suggests otherwise. Shiro drags his gaze to the lanterns behind the glass again and continues:

“So, Keith has tried to help Clint find a semblance of a regular timetable here, as well. Keith has a plan. For example, Keith informs Clint about the times when he’s going to come to his room and when they are going to do this or that so that Clint’s activities are predictable to him. Upon Keith’s insistence, we’ve given Clint time to stay alone in his room, feeling safe. Clint has said he appreciates these things and we don’t have a reason to doubt him. Do you agree with me so far?”

Lance doesn’t lift his eyes up. To look down is, strictly speaking, the normal protocol for the slave in the presence of an owner. But neither Shiro nor the boys have ever been keen on following it. Shiro reminds himself that many people, regardless of their social status, prefer not to look the other person in the eyes when they’re having a disagreement. But Lance’s lack of visual contact hurts his feelings.

Lance chews nervously on his lower lip and says:

“Yes, Sir. That’s all good, I can’t argue with that. But, Sir…” - Lance finally looks at Shiro properly when he says hotly: “A walk is nothing! It shouldn’t be such a big deal. You know your mansion is gorgeous. And Clint doesn’t have a chance to experience any of it! He doesn’t have so many good things in his life on the whole. No chance to make happy memories. It’s so dull. And it’s awfully lonely to stay in a room alone all the time! If you’ve made him work somewhere it’d be better.”
Upon hearing the words “happy memories” Shiro thinks back to his talk with Hunk in the canteen and feels his heart clench painfully.

Shiro can offer a lot of things in reply. That making Clint work would possibly stress him out. That when you have to spend almost all your time in plain sight of your owner or an overseer, you would appreciate solitude. That rules are rules, and they are the ground for any order and safety. That, among other things, nothing can justify what Lance has accused Keith of lately. But he doesn’t think that’s what Lance needs to hear right now - he is in no state to comprehend those things in his righteous fury. So Shiro tells him:

“Keith has planned to take Clint for a walk two times a day in the next days.”

The phrase doesn’t sound right when out of Shiro’s mouth; it’s as if they are talking about a dog. Shiro cringes inwardly; maybe, Lance won’t notice.

Looking into Lance’s sad and desperate eyes, Shiro recalls another important fact:

“Keith also wanted to let Clint spend more time in the company. Yours, particularly. Has he told you that he wanted to train Clint in handling his body better? While doing mundane tasks such as bringing drinks, for example? It would help him a lot later.”

At that, Lance looks chastised. His facial expression becomes even more strained and he ducks his head again. Instead of answering normally, he starts mumbling apologies, no doubt taking Shiro’s words as an accusation and one more reason to beat himself up.

It’s not the effect Shiro intended to achieve. He’s still painfully awkward with his words, as it turns out. What he wanted was to make Lance feel included, important for the process. Maybe, the intonation was all wrong, but any progress they seemed to be making is undone now.

Shiro tries again. He’s nothing if not persistent. He tells his aching body to wait a bit more. Soon, so soon, he will go to sleep.

“Listen, Lance, there is still some time. We could discuss this situation together again and…”

“Sir,” - interrupts Lance. - “I’m not dumb. I get this, I do. I’m not a child anymore.”

When he lifts his gaze from the floor again, there are new tears welling in his eyes.

When Lance speaks up, Shiro doesn’t interrupt.

“Sir, I just hate it so much. This, I mean. I wake up to nightmares about my boarding school, where every day seemed the same. I can’t stop thinking about leading the same life we’ve had at Owner Holt’s Manor before you’ve come there; about the way we have been: helpless, voiceless, faceless. I can’t stop imagining that it is me that has to sit in some dingy room and wait, unable to influence my life at all. And this is considered easier and nicer for Clint! I just…”

Lance trails off, seemingly too overwhelmed to continue. Then, he lifts one hand to wipe away the tears that spill, unbidden. Shiro searches his pockets for a tissue, and, alas, there is none. When he finds one in one of the drawers and gives it to Lance, the latter blows his nose rather loudly, then sneezes, takes a deep breath and starts talking hastily, as if he’s afraid that someone will stop him before he can unload this burden:

“I know that haven’t you come to Owner Holt, I and Hunk would’ve still been there.”

A loud sob breaks his speech, and Lance starts looking for a trash can to get rid of the wet tissue.
Shiro wordlessly directs him and waits until Lance is ready to speak again. This time, it’s a bit slower, but not less desperate, and Shiro doesn’t know how to feel after Lance’s next admissions:

“I haven't ever been spanked, not really, in my school. Too skinny, too weak, too important as experiment material. It’s been so bad, Master Shiro, so bad. I am so, so grateful, to you. You can’t even imagine, how much.”

New sobs wreck Lance’s thin frame, and when Shiro offers him to come closer and hug him, Lance all but throws himself at him. It feels good, despite the circumstance, to hug another person. It soothes Shiro, too. He starts rocking in place a bit, repeating any calming nonsense that comes to his mind in the hope to lull Lance’s pains, if only for a short while:

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Lance. I wish it hasn’t ever happened to all of you. I never wanted it for anyone at all, let alone such kind people as Clint, or Keith, or you and Hunk. It hurts me, too. Shush, dear, everything will be OK. I’m so sorry I can’t make it better.”

It goes on like that until, after some indeterminable amount of swaying minutes, Mr Fennel and Hunk knock on the door. Shiro calls them inside and hands Lance over to Hunk’s solid hands. Mr Fennel leaves to accompany the boys to their room and comes back within minutes.

Despite his previous urges, Shiro doesn’t lie down on the floor. He sits himself on the couch and puts his palms over his eyes. The world wobbles around him, shadows and multi-coloured dots dancing under his eyelids. It’s like he thinks about everything at once and doesn’t have a single thought. Shiro needs time to cool down before he will attempt falling asleep.

He hears how Mr Fennel lets himself inside his cabinet again and sits down on the couch next to him. Shiro stays in the same position. He can talk like that if Mr Fennel wants a conversation. They sit in silence for several minutes. Shiro can feel his head getting heavier and heavier; maybe, he will be able to fall asleep despite all the trouble, after all.

When Shiro has almost convinced himself to get up and go to his bedroom, Mr Fennel addresses him.

“Didn’t know you’re such a cuddler, Master Shiro,” - teases his chief assistant.

Shiro groans and lifts his palms from his face. Miraculously, he feels better even after such a short reprieve.

He tries to level a glare at Mr Fennel, fails and asks instead:

“How’s Lance? Will he be OK?”

“He’s cried himself to high temperature,” - replies Mr Fennel. - “Nothing that a night’s sleep can’t heal.”

“May I cry a bit, too?” - asks Shiro, looking at Mr Fennel imploringly.

Mr Fennel looks back at him, unaffected:

“Should I pity you or tell you to toughen up when you start crying?”

Mr Fennel just knows how to spoil a heartfelt moment.

“Sympathize with me, you freak, that’s all I ever ask for,” - says Shiro pettily.
Mr Fennel whistles and replies, mock-indignant:

“That was low even for you, Takashi. I thought you accept me the way I am! Now I’ll have to drown my disappointment in the bitterness of absinthe. All alone, of course, since I don’t have anyone who could match me in strength and devotion to the Demon Rum…”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m a pathetic drinker and a bad friend, I know,” - laughs Shiro despite himself. It doesn’t even feel strained. He smiles at Mr Fennel and receives a lifted brow and pinched lips in response.

Then Mr Fennel stops his theatrics and says:

“You go to bed, Takashi. And I’ll go tuck Keith in.”

Shiro stands up, stretches a little and heads for the door.

“Are there any things you need here?” - asks Mr Fennel from behind.

“My notes? The laptop?” - offers Shiro.

“Just as I’ve thought, nothing of importance,” - follows a nonchalant answer.

Shiro is glad that his phone is on him.

When he’s holding the door handle already, Shiro can’t help but turn to Mr Fennel and ask: “How is Keith?”

He hates the way he sounds: love-sick and worried.

They leave the cabinet together and, while Shiro locks the door, Mr Fennel replies.

As usual, he doesn’t disappoint:

“Just as pathetic as you, only not offered drinks. I’ve won three games of chess by him in a row, and, I mean, I’ve won easily. It’s not his style at all.”

They walk side by side along the corridor, and Mr Fennel shakes his head:

“I don’t understand. It’s like he is the one subjected to conditioning by another Master, the one who will have to return to his own cruel Master afterwards. He knows for sure that Clint’s life here is way better than his life under that woman will ever be, at that! Why beat himself up the way he does!”

“Believe me, Steve, Keith would choose to suffer Clint’s trouble himself instead of witnessing (and causing) them any day of the week”.

Mr Fennel pursues his lips, his overall expression screaming: “Fools!”

“I hope Keith wouldn’t have offered himself to that weird woman in Clint’s stead, were he to have any influence on the matter,” - he adds after a second.

Shiro doesn’t reply. He hopes so, too.

But he is selfishly glad that Keith won’t ever have a chance to make such a choice. Shiro won’t ever let anyone put their dirty hands on Keith, for as long as he lives.

Mr Fennel changes his mind and, instead of heading to check on Keith who waits for his return in
Mr Fennel’s bedroom, he brings Shiro to his room, where he literally orders Shiro to undress and to brush his teeth. All the while he stands there, tapping his foot on the floor in an even rhythm. Strangely, but instead of irritation, the tapping helps Shiro concentrate. Shiro thinks that this time he could have handled being alone and putting himself to bed. He thinks that if he still looks as if he is on the verge of a breakdown every time anyone as much as sneezes at his slaves, then his progress is going very slowly.

As if sensing his self-deprecating thoughts (even if they lack their usual bite due to the exhaustion), Mr Fennel comments:

“You have had a very bad flashback recently. It would leave anyone weak and shaken. Even me, if I had the background for it. And then you have talked two adolescent boys through their existential trouble. It is a big deal.”

Shiro squints at Mr Fennel from under the blanket.

“Sleep, Takashi. You’ve done well today,” - says Mr Fennel before switching off the lamps and exiting.

The door closes, and Shiro is out like a light in mere seconds.

Shiro has made his new habit to have meals alongside his employees in the canteen. The canteen, as he has found out, is used by everyone in his mansion; for years, he’s been the only one who had meals alone or in the company of Mr Fennel somewhere secluded. And that’s a good thing he did so: he wouldn’t be able to cope with all the noise here before. Shiro notices again and again what a good place the canteen is. And to think that it’s been his antisocial chief assistant who has suggested they give the employees a bigger, lighter room to take their meals and fire the old cook. Now, Shiro learns to enjoy the conveniences accessible to his workers himself.

Come to think of it, Shiro may have to meet his Department Heads and the team leaders under their command and start their acquaintance anew. He expects some unavoidable quarrels with his chief assistant over this. There’s no way he’ll be able to get to know everything better and not have some ideas on how to change things for the better.

He won’t change the canteen, though. He likes it just the way it is.

So, unsurprisingly, the Saturday morning finds Shiro, sleepy, but well-rested, at his usual table. The canteen is almost empty due to the unpopular time, and he sits there alone. It feels a bit lonely since no one has the wits or simply wishes to join him today. Shiro can guarantee he doesn’t bite…

But in mere minutes, Shiro feels lucky he’s come here just now because he witnesses the most amusing display he’s seen in ages. Two shadows, emanating dark energy, filter into the canteen and walk, ramrod-straight spines and resolved expressions on their faces, to the food displays. There can be no mistake: these are Mr Fennel and Keith. Jokes aside, both look, for the lack of a better word, like shit. The dark circles one would expect to find around their eyes are not evident, which means lots of make-up. Have they done each other or have they painted their faces themselves? The mental image nearly makes Shiro giggle (“Mr Fennel, please, don’t touch your eyes now, you’ll smear the foundation…”)

Meanwhile, his chief assistant and his chief assistant’s helper get their meals and wordlessly come to sit beside Shiro, Mr Fennel next to him, Keith across of Mr Fennel.
They greet Shiro and forget about his existence entirely, continuing a conversation they should have been having since waking up, from the looks of it.

Shiro pretends that he savours the leftovers of his smoothie and enjoys the show. They don’t mind him, but they equally don’t make a move to include him - Keith too exhausted to consider that, Mr Fennel being sure that Shiro isn’t as shy as to not participate if he finds it interesting or necessary.

Their dialog makes Shiro want to giggle even more.

Mr Fennel, indignantly: “Then, I let that poor boy into my room, and how does he repay me? He wakes me up screaming every half an hour.”

Keith, straight-faced: “I am so sorry for disturbing your sleep. My nightmares have gotten a bit out of hand.”

Mr Fennel, with underlying suffering laced in his voice: “But you’ve stayed overnight already and it’s been just fine!”

Keith, unphased: “Another moon phase, maybe?”

Mr Fennel, decisively: “You’ll take a nap today. I’ll have Hunk and Lance sandwich you on your bed, or whatever they do to make you sleep, and you’ll get at least two more hours.”

Keith, shrugging: “I fear for the bed’s integrity, Sir, in that case. But if you say so. About their good influence - maybe, it’s their happy pheromones?”

Mr Fennel, groaning: “How would I know, happiness is unknown to me.”

Keith, gravelly: “Only hard work without gratitude.”

Mr Fennel, perking up: “Exactly. And mouthy underlings.”

Keith, compassionately: “That’s such a woeful situation you are in. At least, you still play chess well.”

Mr Fennel, amused: “Are you telling me you’re surprised my brain still hasn’t turned to goo in the monotony of this mansion?”

Keith, placatingly: “No, Sir. Only that I still dare hope to surpass you in chess one day, if the goddess lets me.”

Mr Fennel, sternly: “Is that a mutiny on my hands?”

Keith, mocking-scared: “Negative, Sir!”

They smile at each other tiredly and shut up for a time, giving their food proper attention. Shiro sits there, silent, waiting for the end of this dialogue. It’s not entertaining, though.

Mr Fennel asks Keith: “You sure you don’t need sleeping pills?”

Keith replies, with a shy smile: “No, thank you, Sir. I was just… Clint, and Master Shiro’s flashback, and then Lance… It was a lot. I’m sorry you couldn’t sleep either.”
“That’s OK,” - responds Mr Fennel simply, - “I’ll be fine.”

Then they collect their trays, wish Shiro a good day and leave.

Shiro stands up, too, leaves his empty dishes on the special stand and buys himself another smoothie.

He will go to his cabinet and enjoy it there. He has things to think of after witnessing that conversation.

Keith talks to Lance later that day, after attending to Clint. Shiro doesn’t know how it goes in detail, but they both smile when they come out of their room afterwards. The tension that has been tangible in Keith yesterday and today in the morning is gone. This is such a relief to Shiro, that he doesn’t even feel bad for standing in the corridor close to the boys’ room and pretending to have some business there. Shiro can almost hear Mr Fennel’s heinous laugh in his head.

According to Mr Fennel, Keith does take a nap in their room after lunch, under the supervision of Lance and Hunk. He sleeps for three hours, and no one even contemplates waking him up. After a while, Lance doses off on his bed, too, and Hunk just sits there on the floor and reads, responding to Mr Fennel’s texts when the latter asks about Keith.

The work with Clint goes better after that. Lance participates in the lessons for servicing the owners respectfully and gracefully. He does so much worse than Clint that it’s hilarious to watch. They have made the lessons public, to make it easier for Clint to adjust, and many workers use the opportunity to fill the pauses in their work. Shiro and Hunk do that, too. They try very hard but they just can’t stay quiet, so they get banned from the training room very soon followed by Keith’s angry muttering: “I don’t care for onlookers as long as they don’t embarrass Lance. You DO, so please leave”.

With the time, Clint’s spankings change to paddlings, whippings and canings. Mr Fennel comes to oversee the process of Clint’s education most of the times and interferes where it is necessary, correcting Keith’s posture and aim. Clint can take it better now, which is surprising for Shiro. He has no idea at all how Keith and Clint do that. Since Saturday, Keith spends most of his free time with Clint. Lance and Hunk are also allowed to visit him when they wish, too, without letting him out of the room, of course. No more accidents happen, luckily.

But the time flies, and soon it’s time for Clint to be brought back to Mrs Ezor.

At the day before last, Mr Fennel organizes the last rehearsal to show-off Clint’s improved skills. Keith looks so proud when Clint does well enough to not be scolded by Mr Fennel (funny enough, but after a whole week of training, Lance doesn’t improve much at all). They don’t do anything “educational” on Clint’s last day in the mansion. Just talk to him and let him explore the gardens under their supervision.

Everyone tries very hard to act normal. Lance has to excuse himself fairly often when his feelings get to be too much and he needs to calm down alone as not to disturb Clint with his tears. Shiro doesn’t have the same issue as Lance; he is grateful to him, though: it’s as if Lance feels and suffers openly for all of them who have taught themselves to hide their emotions and do what is needed when it’s needed. He feels less inhuman thanks to Lance.

It’s almost unbearable when they have to put Clint into a car and take him to Mrs Ezor’s place. Clint has tears in his eyes when the boys hug him (and Lance cries in front of everyone, uncaring, this time), but he holds on and behaves well. Shiro feels better after seeing Clint act so brave: maybe, they have been able to give Clint at least those “happy memories” every person needs.
Keith has asked to let him come with them, but Shiro has refused. He finds the idea too dangerous. He can’t risk it; not with Keith’s wild streak. He doesn’t want to expose Keith to the toxic environment he will find there either. Also, he’d have to treat Keith with less respect than he is used to or they will attract unwanted attention which neither of them needs.

Shiro is not ready to appear with his slaves in public, not by a long shot.

Finally, everyone has said their goodbyes, and the car is ready to go. It’s the driver, Clint on the front seat and Shiro in the back. Shiro takes his laptop and busies himself with letters, presentations and tables. He doesn’t get anything done, of course, but it’s a good distraction. It’s silent in the car. Only once, in the middle of the ride, does Shiro address Clint. He tells him that he’s pleased with his performance and that he wishes him luck.

Clint thanks him, and, to Shiro, his voice sounds a little wet.

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey
Please, tell me, what you think)

Next: Shiro’s visit to Mrs Ezor’s place)
Raging

Chapter Summary

Shiro brings Clint back to Mrs Ezor. He spends the day at her lovely mansion and sees her slaves.

Chapter Notes

Hey hey everyone!

I'm barely ready to post on Sunday evening, sorry. This chapter has been a struggle - even though I've had a basic draft since Tuesday.

To be honest, I feel tired all the time, I hate cold times of the year.

Warning: Shiro ats in the worst traditions of toxic masculinity at some point. He doesn't DO anything bad. It's for show, but he feels it, too. Starts with "Shiro lets his anger show on his face" and ends with "She leaves Shiro to his devices".

Otherwise, the chapter is nicer than I've expected from Ezor. She's a good girl, in some ways.
She's kinda cute, nee?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This little mansion is absurd.

A normal road in the fields, a standard high, grey fence, average gates. And a different world behind them.

Everything inside screams welfare and madness. Where Shiro’s home is the elegant classic, Mrs Ezor’s is crazy colours and kitsch. She’s made her inner garden look like an alien planet in a futuristic film: strangely shaped bushes, teal and dark-violet for the gravel of the passages, neon-pink benches seemingly hanging in the air. All in all, it’s impressive and a little intimidating. Security here is on a very high level, Shiro can tell, though there are no guard towers or sentinels in the open view. The servants who lead him to the entrance of the main house (shaped like a spacecraft, why the fuck not) are dressed in fitting black suits with orange stripes on the sleeves. They all have black hair and bowl-cuts. Shiro wonders whether these are wigs or their real hair. It’s not very easy to notice but they are all women - androgynous, yet still definitely not male.

Shiro can hear his car starting and riding off behind his back and has to count to ten and backwards to keep himself from hyperventilating. He is not trapped here. Mrs Ezor has no reason to harm him. There are people who will come for him and avenge him, if necessary. Gosh, what is he even thinking about?

Clint is walking behind Shiro, surrounded by bowl-cuts. Shiro resists the urge to look back at him or
to reach for his hand, to reassure him. He can’t do that here. He can’t do anything for Clint now.

Shiro doesn’t have much time to wallow in his regrets; Mrs Ezor pops out of thin air in front of him and starts talking a mile a minute. Shiro turns on his working mode. His best smiling face appears instantly, his eyes are trained on the person surrounded by the cloud of green, blue and yellow lace and gauze who will be his torturer today.

His actions don’t matter much now. He just has to stay alert and stay in the hostess’ good graces.

Mrs Ezor leads Shiro inside the house, telling him how glad she is to see him here and how she’s missed her newest slave so much since the old ones aren’t as entertaining anymore. One bowl cut and Clint follow them at a respectable distance. Upon Keith’s request, Clint is dressed in rose-coloured tights, black mini-shorts and a black gauze top (not unlike the one he’d worn when he’d come to Shiro’s mansion one and a half weeks before). A black leather jacket with red fur collar finishes the ensemble.

After they reach a beautifully painted parlour (it’s stars and galaxies; cosmos topic again - how much Shiro would love it were it in different circumstances), Mrs Ezor leads Shiro to a wall adorned with intricately crafted photo-frames. The persons on the photos in the frames are Mrs Ezor’s “sisters” - three women who share their business and, as it turns out, lives, with each other. The infamous Mrs Acxa, Mrs Zethrid and Mrs Narti. Shiro knows every one of them personally and prefers to communicate with Mrs Acxa when possible. On the pictures, the women run around, laugh and have fun. They are shown on a beach, on a raft, in front of a jungle-like forest, on a skating rink… Shiro has never seen Mrs Narti smile before or Mrs Zethrid look at anyone with so much tenderness as on the photos with their partners.

Mrs Ezor by his side chatters away, telling him about every trip they have managed to go to together, despite their busy schedules. It is interesting, and Shiro finds himself tuning in. He’s never expected to see this side of Mrs Ezor. He’s always known that these girls are more than just co-owners of several business-lines. But he hasn’t expected to see that they do consider each other a family for real.

It makes things more complicated - knowing Mrs Ezor as a ruthless business-woman and a cruel slave owner only would’ve been easier for Shiro’s conscience.

Shiro finds that he’s zoned out when Mrs Ezor squeals something unintelligible while retelling a story from their youths. It turns out they have lived in poor families and had to stick together to survive. For a second, Mrs Ezor goes silent and contemplative.

“Who’d know that someone would take interest in us and give us a chance in life,” - she says then, in a very different tone of voice than before. Shiro does his best to not show his piqued interest. Mrs Ezor remembers herself immediately, though, and the moment is over as soon as it’s started, to his disappointment.

Then, Shiro is reminded of why he hates her (and he does, he has no doubt again).

“And who would know we’d even own slaves, right?!“ - she changes the topic, squinting back at Clint, who’s kneeling on an acid-green carpet in the corner of the room.

Mrs Ezor turns on her heels and strides to the kneeling slave.

“That’s it, my dear you’re home now,” - she coos in mock sympathy, looking down at Clint coldly. - “What nice clothes you wear, baby boy. Do you like it?”
Upon asking the last question, she makes Clint look her in the eyes by lifting his chin with her finger.

Clint’s gaze doesn’t waver. He smiles (!) at her and says in a rich, honeyed voice Shiro has never heard from him.

“Yes, Mistress. I’ve been so happy when Sir Shirogane has given me nice things to wear. I was hoping I could please you.”

“Ow. Is it so?”

She looks back to Shiro.

“That was really nice of you. How much do I owe you for the suit?”

“You don’t owe me anything. Having Squeak at my beck and call has been fun. Also, my favourite slave had a chance to learn how to train disobedient boys. The other two of my slaves don’t give me trouble, you see. I guess I’m just too soft on them. I didn’t have the same reservations with Squeak, though,” - and Shiro smiles, as cruelly as he can manage.

It’s a very good thing that he hasn’t even considered taking Keith with him. Yes, Keith knows him, knows what has and has not been done to Clint, knows how Shiro treats people on the overall. He would’ve been able to see through Shiro’s deceptions easily. But knowing the truth is one thing while hearing cruel suggestions and not taking them to heart is a very different one. Keith has a vivid fantasy, and Shiro doesn’t want to ever give him a chance to imagine the “alternative” Shiro, the one he tries to show Mrs Ezor, since such an image wouldn’t be easy to forget.

Mrs Ezor isn’t convinced that Shiro doesn’t expect anything in return and decides to use another tactic:

“Let me show you my other boys. Maybe, you’ll want to make a closer acquaintance with them when you see them”.

She smiles invitingly, then orders Clint to wait for her in her room and beckons Shiro to follow her.

While they walk long corridors with walls of glass and steel she tells him about her “sisters” and their tastes in slaves’ conditioning.

Mrs Zethrid prefers clever ones, she also keeps them caged, of course. Mrs Zethrid lets Mrs Ezor choose new boys for her, Mrs Ezor adds proudly. Mrs Narti only has three slaves. They have been with her for a long time now. She is not as demanding as Mrs Ezor, it seems. But her boys need to be disciplined from time to time, the same way as all slaves do. In that case, Mrs Narti sends them to Mrs Ezor. Mrs Acxa doesn’t ask for help with her slaves at all, and, once more, she seems to be the reasonable one between the “sisters” - she mostly treats her slaves like servants; still, she is very strict if they fail.

“She doesn’t let me watch her disciplining her slaveboys! I would let her watch mine taking the cane any day, and she is just too possessive!” - complains Mrs Ezor about her most normal sister.

They’re almost at their destination, it seems.

Shiro has expected to be led into a cellar with stone walls and metal shackles on the walls, where unfortunate, shaggy men shudder from cold and exhaustion. Instead, Mrs Rainbows-and-Mood-Swings brings him to a warm, well-lit, spacious room with a pool in the centre of it. The air is not uncomfortably humid, it smells like some floral essence, mixed with cinnamon and caramel. It’s a confusing combination for Shiro but it must work for the owner. Along the walls, there are
mattresses here and there, with some small metal constructions above each. It must be hooks to tie a leash to, or, maybe, to chain the slave’s arms to it.

It is a modern version of a harem, basically, with naked men shuffling around and entertaining themselves. Upon their entrance, the slaves all hurry to kneel in front of their Mistress in a row. There are eight of them, all collared and looking very pliant. The collars are thin and in various hues of yellow, pink and blue, very unlike Squeak’s sturdy black one. There’s metal glinting between each boy’s legs - Shiro supposes these are chastity devices. This is what Keith has called to be “caged”, then. Shiro has never seen such things in real life before.

The boys don’t look down, the way Keith does when he plays a well-trained slave. They look their Mistress in the eyes.

They adore her.

That’s stated plainly on their faces.

Mrs Ezor starts talking to them, asking about their mornings and whether they have behaved. She addresses each boy after the other and they talk to her, unafraid.

It’s such a contrast with the way she’s treated Clint that Shiro can barely contain his surprise.

“Whose turn is it to be spanked today?” - asks Mrs Ezor in the end.

Three boys raise their voices, indicating at themselves, and she nods, pleased. Still, no fear in the boys’ eyes.

She flicks her fingers, and already the three boys run to the benches with the elevated middle in front of the pool, lay down on them, ass-up, of course, and freeze. While Mrs Ezor leads Shiro to a small couch to sit there for the duration of the slaves’ discipline, a woman with the same ugly bowl-cut comes out of one of the doors, holding a paddle. Shiro turns his head to Mrs Ezor, to find her licking her lips slowly, entranced by the starting show.

Each of the three takes a serious thrashing in front of them, one after the other. It’s definitely more and harder than Shiro has seen in the videos of Keith being spanked by Mr Fennel, but not to the point of cruelty. The boys writhe slightly and whimper occasionally, but otherwise, stay put. It’s not as bad as Shiro has expected it to be. Maybe, the boys are used to such treatment; maybe, they have a high pain tolerance. Anyway, they show no signs of fear, they don’t plead and don’t cry out pitifully - the scene looks almost consensual this way. Shiro watches the beating and Mrs Ezor’s reactions, alternating. Which disgusts him more, he can’t tell.

By the end of the spanking session, she starts wiggling her hips in place, barely perceptively. Shiro catches it and looks away immediately.

What has he expected from Mrs Ezor, anyway? That sadistic displays bring her aesthetic pleasure?

Oh yeah. If he has ignored his sexual urges and hasn’t gotten laid for more than 5 years doesn’t mean everyone has done the same.

She must be completely wet underneath her layers of flimsy fabrics, muses Shiro. Does she even wear panties at home, by the way?

Shiro has to stop then and ask himself: has he even thought about anyone in a sensual way lately? Before meeting Keith, that is? Has he viewed anyone as a sexual being before this year?
Because now that he’s seen how aroused Mrs Ezor is, he can’t stop a stream of incredibly lewd images flashing through his mind. Featuring her.

She would’ve been his type back then, in the uni, when he’s dated several people a month. Fiery, witty, clever - and it’d be fun to watch her fighting for dominance in their pair.

Shiro is put out of his reverie when Mrs Ezor stands up and goes to the slaves, who still lie on the benches. She feels their hot, red-violet flesh up, strokes their backs tenderly, pats their heads. She talks to them, and the boys thank her.

They say “thank you” so sincerely, with so much feeling, that Shiro can’t doubt their devotion to their Mistress.

“Did it hurt, Pretzel?” - she asks one of them.

“Yes, Mistress, so much,” - Pretzel answers readily. - “But I haven’t tried to avoid the blows this time. I’ve suffered for you, the way you like.”

“Ow, baby,” - cooes Mrs Ezor. - “That’s so sweet. I’m going to whip your back in in the afternoon, I think. Be a good boy until then.”

And she departs with a light slap to Pretzel’s rear, eliciting a pained yelp from him.

After inspecting (drooling over) the boys’ red asses, Mrs Ezor flies back to Shiro and offers him to use one of her slaves while she inspects Squeak’s progress.

Meanwhile, all the boys (the freshly spanked ones, too) line up in front of the pool again. Strangely, but they turn their backs to Shiro and Mrs Ezor. She doesn’t seem annoyed, though, so it must be a common procedure; Mrs Ezor waves at Shiro to come closer and cheerfully describes what kind of skills her slaves possess. This way, Shiro can see that all of the butts presented bear whipping marks of different intensity: seems like two boys have been spanked yesterday and the last three not later than the day before yesterday. Some have traces of lashes on their backs and thighs. Mrs Ezor notices his staring and explains, guessing his chain of thought right:

“I like having freshly spanked boys around the house that’s why I need so many of them. It has been a little strenuous to be spanked hard every day, right, Lulu?”

A tall and lean boy (or, better to say, a young man) with red curls and a comparatively pale ass replies (he has a nice raspy voice):

“Yes, Mistress. I couldn’t please my Mistress as well as I can now, back then”.

“You’ve been only 17, dear,” - soothes him his owner. - “You’ve had a lot to learn. You’re taking your spankings so well now, and I know, that your pain tolerance is still quite low.”

When the boy answers, he sounds grateful and on the verge of tears:

“Thank you, Mistress. It means so much to me. I love suffering for you, Mistress. I am glad that I can show you more because I can feel pain better”.

Mrs Ezor smiles proudly at that and pats Lulu’s back approvingly. The boy has to make a visible effort to stay put and to not lean into the touch; he all but melts in the point of contact.

Shiro thinks: just how old is Lulu now? What has he had to endure in his first year here? Mrs Ezor has been more chaotic than now, that’s for sure; young and eager. And she didn’t have many
limitations - maybe, even less than now.

Shiro thinks: Keith could’ve survived here. He definitely has the training for that.

Shiro corrects himself: no, Keith would’ve been doomed here. He wouldn’t be able to lose himself in his owner, that’s not who he is.

Shiro corrects himself for the third time: he can’t know for sure. When he’s bought Keith, the boy has been very close to breaking.

Shiro thinks: Mrs Ezor is a little better than he’s assumed.

The woman in question breaks off his reverie once more by adding:

“Of course, there are some more boys working around the mansion, but I don’t pay them much attention anymore. I’ve given them all a lot of chances to be good for me but they haven’t used them. I have to be stricter with those boys, of course. Luckily, it’s easier because I don’t have to worry about their appearance when I need to drive the point home, the way I have to with the beauties standing here. Bu-uuuuuut, Mr Shirogane, it’s time to tell me: who is to your liking? Maybe, you want two or three?”

She winks at Shiro playfully and starts laughing at her own joke; little crystalline bells, high and gorgeous.

She is such a beautiful woman - almost as much as Allura.

“I assure you, they’ll be at their best behaviour and will do anything you ask of them,” - assures the cruel beauty. She looks so curious already; as if she can’t wait to learn what kind of perverted stuff gets Shiro going.

Shiro refuses politely; Mrs Ezor insists. Shiro refuses more firmly; Mrs Ezor insists. Shiro outright says no, and his hostess gets agitated.

She asks in a high-pitched voice whether Shiro would prefer Squeak over her other slaves, just maybe.

It’s so generous of her to offer Shiro a plaything she wants to wreck herself. But Shiro still refuses, the horrible, stubborn guest that he is.

“I prefer my own slaves,” - he says in ways of an explanation, in the end.

“Why haven’t you taken one with you, then?” - comes an incredulous question.

As if not having someone to entertain you all the time is the worst thing ever.

“I can endure being alone for a bit,” - can’t stop himself Shiro. - “Besides, I hate it when someone dares to touch my things. No, more than that: I hate it when other people dare to look at my things for too long. That is why I prefer my little boys under lock and key, safely hidden in my mansion, all the time.”

Mrs Ezor honest to goddess pouts and says that Shiro is no fun at all. So greedy, at that!

They leave the slaves to rot in their harem and go back to the long corridor. Mrs Ezor brings Shiro to a guest room where he can freshen up a bit; there are some snacks and drinks on a table and a big,
comfortable couch.

Mrs Ezor continues playing with Shiro; it’s obvious, that she considers herself cunning and intelligent. That she is, of course; but one should be considerate when choosing opponents. Shiro is older and he’s been called a mastermind in his school-years already. He can see through her games easily now since his mind has been freed from a big part of the pressure Shiro’s anxiety has been putting onto it.

She pushes too hard when she mentions Keith and tries to rile Shiro up while musing aloud what she’d do to him were he hers. Shiro knows that she knows: she’s playing with fire. Shiro can’t have it, can he?

He doesn’t see red; not this time. He’s so calm that it’s scary, in a way. Shiro moves closer to Mrs Ezor, smiling suggestively. Shiro is not really her type, but she is so horny after watching the paddlings that he would do. She doesn’t yet see his move for what it is. Shiro doesn’t really tower over her since she’s tall, too, - his bulk makes up for it easily, though. She doesn’t notice when Shiro’s smile turns predatory and he crowds her into a corner. He’s looked at the cameras’ layout already - this is a blind spot.

Shiro lets his anger show on his face when he looms over her, close, but not quite touching. His steely-grey eyes - he lets his gaze grow cold and disdainful - bore holes into her skull, and he knows how intimidating he can be when he tries. His square features when not softened by guilt or a small smile add to the impression, as well, - he is just the embodiment of classic masculinity.

There’s already a hint of understanding in Mrs Ezor’s beautiful eyes. She makes a move to the side, but Shiro easily blocks her. Even if she has combat training (who can tell with her?), even with Shiro only having one arm - she doesn’t stand a chance if he gives it his all.

Shiro puts his mouth close to her ear and starts talking, low, sexy, threateningly:

"I could have fucked you right here and now, hold you down, just do what I want. Your security won’t come here quickly enough; no one will save your dignity. I doubt you’d tell anyone besides your sisters - such a low blow for your self-esteem.”

Mrs Ezor’s breath hitches; Shiro can tell - it is not only from fear. What a fucked-up person, good goddess. Shiro pushes forward:

“But tell you what? I really prefer boys’ bodies lately. Cocks, tight little assholes. Not that you have none of the latter, but I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy me rawing your ass as much as my boys pretend to, - I believe that this isn't a fucking you prefer. I can understand; both you and I are predators; we love to take, not to be taken”.

Mrs Ezor’s pupils are blown, she has to put a hand on the wall to stabilize herself. There’s one main thing Shiro wanted to let her know. He looks her up and down, as if taking stock, makes her clench her fists nervously and then growls:

"Keith and other 2 boys I own are MINE. You don’t get to lust over them, not now, not ever. If you try to pull something, anything, I’ll break you like a twig.”

He steps away, watching her fight the trembling in her limbs and holding onto her pride to not let him feel more of her fear.

Because she is afraid of him. It intensifies her horniness, yes, but the fear for her life is not easy to ignore or overcome. Whatever bullshit she may think about herself thanks to being a slave owner,
she realizes that in the most primal, primitive way, she's no match for Shiro. She can feel it, clearly and distinctly. And she knows his every word is true.

A second more, and Shiro schools his face to a more appropriate expression.

They pretend nothing has happened, but Ezor looks at him with a newfound respect.

She leaves Shiro to his devices in the room and tells him that a servant will collect him to dinner in an hour.

Later, on the ride back home, when Shiro recalls this small incident, he can't make himself feel disgusted with himself. It’s been a necessary step; people like her only understand the language of violence. At the same time, he can't shake off the feelings Mrs Ezor provokes in him. He can't stop wanting to tear her apart for what she has done and continues doing to her slaves, for her disgusting insinuations involving Keith. Shiro hates her and he wants her gone.

But it’s not all there is to it.

Is it just a “cruel owner” thing or just a Mrs Ezor thing?

What would he feel, were she a free woman with no money? What would he feel, were she a slave? His slave at that? There must be a distinction, though: Shiro’s feeling about her would heavily depend on whether he meets her before or after her crimes.

Shiro desperately hopes he wouldn't have let himself succumb to his basic, ugly urges in any of those situations - she doesn't mean that much to him as to be a cause to lose his face forever.

But, honestly, does he still have something to lose after what he'd just thought, what he'd imagined doing to her lithe, petite body?

How will he look Keith in the eye after all that?

Anyway, tells Shiro himself, he hasn't acted upon his wishes, has he now? He has held himself in check. He knows that this incident has been an intimidation tactic only, not an impulse, on his part. He couldn’t have scared Mrs Ezor were he not feeling and thinking those things for real.

Unlike Ezor, who does what she wants, disregarding others' feelings and rights, Shiro doesn’t allow himself almost anything, no matter what flies through his head at the moment. Is this where the difference lies?

Shiro supposes that using violence for the first time is not unlike someone’s first kill. And he means the first kill for the sake of killing, not a kill to save lives. Shiro has heard of a certain type of people when he’s been in the army - hungry for blood, happy to go into the battle - because it's what allowed him to kill without a penalty. There must have been a first for them, too. Shiro supposes that if you succumb to such a visceral urge once - you don't need a second time. You change forever.

He's changed forever, too, several times, Shiro believes. But not in a manner similar to Ezor's, not yet.

They are not the same at all.
Shiro hopes it will stay like that for the duration of his life.

When Shiro’s car finally reaches the Shirogane Mansion late in the evening, Keith waits for him at the gates.

Shiro is glad that the first thing he sees at his home are Keith’s unfathomable violet eyes.

Unfortunately, he can’t just unburden his soul by sharing the details of his visit to Mrs Ezor’s place with him right now. Before he forgets, he needs to straighten one little miscommunication with Keith.

Keith accompanies Shiro to Shiro’s room and enters upon his request.

Shiro straddles a chair backwards and gestures to Keith to take the couch. Shiro takes a bottle of water, drinks greedily and then looks at the wall for some time. Keith, his sensitive, brilliant boy, doesn’t disturb him.

In the end, Shiro asks, tiredly, still not looking his boy in the eyes:

"You have taught him how to seduce her, haven't you? That's what you've been doing in Clint's room for so long."

There's no accusation in his tone.

Keith takes a quick breath, then says:

"Yes".

"Why haven't you told me?" - demands Shiro, finally looking at him.

"Would you have allowed it?" - challenges him Keith in response.

Shiro is too exhausted for this shit. When he speaks, he doesn't even try to level his voice. He sounds harsh and unrelenting to his own ears. He is so fed up with everything, he doesn’t really care whether he’ll hurt Keith’s feelings this time. He needs to make him understand.

"Keith, baby, I know you all consider me fragile like a china doll. And I am, in many ways. I appreciate your care, I do. But this case is different. If Mrs Ezor would've caught me unaware, would’ve guessed that I don’t have the slightest idea that Clint has considerably improved his oral skills while in my care, not only got whipped repeatedly, it would’ve undone all my attempts at leaving the right impression. It wouldn’t have influenced Clint’s life in a fun way, as well. I’ve managed to make it look like my gift to her - and she was very pleased with Clint’s performance, so, thank goddess, no harm was done,” - Shiro takes a pause to collect his thoughts. - “You've lied to me. Call it a white lie, a lie on omission - I don't care. This is the last time you lie to me, you hear me? As far as I'm concerned, I haven't lied to you yet. I know we are in different positions and I know how vulnerable you are. But I also know that I need to be aware of all little important cues to be able to perform at my best. You work for me; you support me, you have my back; I expect honesty from you."

Delivering his speech, Shiro looks straight at Keith, and the latter doesn’t lower his gaze. Brave boy.

When Keith realises that Shiro wants a reaction from him, he swallows and starts:
"I'm sorry, sir..."

"Don't be. Just promise me it will be the last lie you tell me. If I catch you lying to me again, there will be consequences. And I guess, the worst for you will be partially losing my trust."

Keith winces.

"If you need to have a secret from me where it may concern me or my tasks, please, tell me so. I won't promise that you will be allowed to keep that thing a secret at all times. But I will promise that I won't ever pressure you if there isn't something major at stake."

Keith agrees; of course, he does.

Shiro is emotionally drained.

He speaks too much and he is being too dramatic.

He scares Keith. He overcharges Keith with his expectations.

He loves Keith and he won't be able to protect Keith if Keith plots something behind his back.

Shiro stands up and goes to the window. He needs a little distance between himself and Keith. He feels so fiercely possessive he’s afraid that if Keith comes too close to him he’ll just end up hogging Keith and locking him up in his room indefinitely; to quench his fear of losing him, of course.

The silence stretches; only Keith’s fast breathing can be heard.

Shiro takes his time, lets his favourite view with lanterns and autumn trees soothe him, bring him back to earth, to his metaphorical roots.

When he feels calm enough to talk, he turns to Keith and nods at him, prompting him to speak.

"It won't happen again, sir," - whispers Keith, eyes wild and frantic.

Shiro barely suppresses a heavy sigh. He should have predicted that.

Keith already thinks that he's fallen out of Shiro's graces.

Shiro doesn't want to do that to him.

But, at the same time, Keith needs to stew in his own embarrassment. He is Shiro's liability. He can
be Shiro's strength or Shiro’s greatest weakness; it’s Keith’s choice.

When it comes to Shiro, he knows for sure that he needs Keith on his side, fully and uncompromisingly.

"I believe you," - answers Shiro mildly after waiting an appropriate amount of time. He feels like an asshole.

Keith looks like he is going to cry.

"Will you punish me?"

"No," - answers Shiro simply. - "I hope that your shame will be a punishment enough".

Keith looks miserable when he nods.

Shiro can’t help but ask:

"Why wouldn't you tell me? Were you afraid I will forbid you from doing so?"

Keith nods again.

This time Shiro sighs. This is so not funny.

"Keith, I have allowed you to beat Clint. And you know that I hate the very idea of corporal punishments. If I knew you would attempt to teach him sex - and if you have persuaded me it would make Clint's life a little bit easier, the way it did, in the end, - I would’ve not only encouraged it, I would have offered my services as training material, if necessary".

Keith looks at him, bewildered.

"What?" - asks Shiro, suddenly defensive. - "I do have some experience with both sexes, thank you very much."

Keith doesn't look convinced.

Shiro realises it might be just shock and not disbelief only after he says his next phrase (let’s be real, he doesn't think it over too well):

"And I did my fair share of bottoming in my day."

He says it to prove that he can imagine how the process goes and what Clint may experience as a part of his sex slave's life, even if these are entirely different situations and experiences.

Keith freezes in front of him. It looks like his brain has short-circuited.

Does he even breathe?

Shiro is such a fool. He's broken Keith.

Is it time to panic?

It sure is.

"Keith? You with me? Breathe for me, in and out," - repeats Shiro the mantra he's heard so many times during his break-downs.
Thankfully, Keith reacts much quicker than Shiro during a panic attack.

One second, he stands there, motionless, the next - he goes beet-red and takes a step back from Shiro.

"O-okay, Master Shiro," - stutters Keith. - "I - I will remember."

He realises what he's said and goes even redder.

Shiro takes pity on Keith (and on himself) and orders:

"Go find Mr Fennel and tell him to give you a long, tedious task so you can wallow in your thoughts for a while."

Keith flees.

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Chapter End Notes

Hey hey
How do you like angry Shiro?
He’s a treasure)
And poor Keith, he’s totally gonna cry under his blanket, I tell you

Thanks for being with me)
Chapter Summary

Shiro has to take another step on his way to being self-sufficient. Keith is there to help him along the way. Also, he has a new psychologist.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dear fantasy creatures!
Kitties, mice and hippos, too!
Other folks, as well!

I’ve been dying to write these events since the very beginning of my work on Numb. It’s finally out of my brain.
Beware: that’s one angsty little shit of a chapter. No one dies, though. That’s all I will tell you.

Have a nice reading!
(*evil cackling is heard in the background, soon changed to pitiful coughing*)

Quick update:
It seems that I haven’t added all the necessary warnings. So, there will be a scene with a panic attack in the chapter. And a lot of emotional pain. Just so you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro will remember the last week of November as the last week of his normal life.

On Monday Lance looks askance at Shiro when they pass each other in the corridors (which earns Lance a flick on the head from Hunk when the latter notices). Keith, meanwhile, hides from Shiro until the time for their evening lesson comes and Keith has to participate. Shiro wonders what he’d do if Keith wouldn’t show up; mostly, nothing, but he’d feel wounded.

They make up quickly, Shiro not angry anymore and Keith all too ready to earn Shiro’s trust anew if necessary. Shiro tells Keith that Mrs Ezor has offered him to choose the name for Squeak, the constant one, after she’s introduced him as a new member of her harem and changed his collar to a nice violet one. Barely holding a smirk, Shiro has told her to name him “Clint” since it’s short and fitting. She agreed, pleased with “Shiro’s” choice. While Shiro talks, Keith looks at him with awe and gratitude. It makes Shiro feel warm all over, and not in an unpleasant way. Unlike before, he feels that he’s deserved such a reaction.

They don’t study, they don’t even play chess that evening; they talk, and talk, and talk. Seems like they could go on forever like that: one topic leads to another, a shared opinion starts a long
discussion. As a result, Keith forgets about his curfew for the first time ever. Both he and Shiro jump up in surprise when Mr Fennel comes to collect Keith a quarter to eleven.

Shiro ignores his impulse to ask whether Mr Fennel is alright (there are bags under his eyes and he looks worse than usual) when Mr Fennel and Keith walk out of his cabinet, so grateful he is that Mr Fennel hasn’t waited long enough to let Keith’s one-time forgetfulness become a reason for punishment. Shiro doesn’t think about this episode again until later.

On Tuesday morning Shiro argues with Mr Fennel until both are hoarse. The matter of their fight is something to laugh at, so much that the next day Shiro can’t even remember what it was anymore. But their massive egos won’t give them a break, and they part ways, fuming.

Later, in a hallway, Shiro overhears Mr Fennel saying to Keith grumpily: "It's a pity I can't spank both of my boys when they need it," at which Keith laughs merrily. "Do you honestly believe that Master Shiro would profit from it?" - he asks, mirth in his voice. "Who knows," - replies Mr Fennel, his tone a bit lighter. - “That’s maybe the only thing I haven’t ever tried on him”. Keith’s response is unexpectedly sarcastic: “You just didn’t want to buy a new spanking bench to fit his size.” Mr Fennel only hums at that.

On Tuesday evening, Shiro has a call with Ryan and his first candidate to be Shiro’s new psychologist. Shiro quickly takes a liking to the woman and is ready to agree to work with her right off the bat. Ryan insists he needs a few days to mull it over, though, so Shiro doesn’t have much choice but to wait even if he’s sure she’ll be good for him.

Shiro and Mr Fennel don’t speak with each other until Wednesday afternoon. When they do, they start with shouting at each other; it’s a good thing that Shiro’s cabinet is soundproof. It looks like they both have a lot of suppressed tension and many complaints, on each other and on the life itself. Miraculously, they end up talking; sober, at that. Shiro remembers thinking that he’s never seen Mr Fennel so drained. They make up with each other and part ways after a hug.

On Thursday, Allura, Matt and Pidge come to visit. Shiro, the slave boys and their guests skype with Ryan and Ina (there’s a bit of a commotion, tears, sad eyes and such, but it all ends in laughing and giving oaths to come together again soon). Then, Keith and Mr Fennel organize a chess match (who’d expect Pidge to be the winner, huh) and after that, they just spend time together, happy and worry-free. Shiro texts Ryan afterwards and tells him that he still likes the therapist of his choice and that he wants her. Ryan sends a happy emoji in lieu of an answer.

On Friday, Mr Fennel goes on a business trip. He visits several farms and stops in the city for a couple of hours. Shiro doesn’t have any clue what his chief assistant does there and why he has a sudden need to be at all those places in one day. To be true, he doesn’t care at the moment. His head is full of musings on how to work with the “sisters” in the future and what he personally could do to change this rotten world for the better; even a little bit better would do. Not to mention that thoughts of Keith take a lot of his time. Mr Fennel is going to return home when Shiro is long asleep. It’s not something out of the ordinary, so Shiro exchanges messages with Mr Fennel when he goes to bed and doesn’t worry.

It’s Saturday when everything goes to hell.

Shiro doesn’t have the slightest suspicion about what Mr Fennel wants to talk to him when the latter invites himself to his study after breakfast.
Their conversation starts innocently: with Mr Fennel telling Shiro what his slaves and his team have been up to lately. Shiro doesn’t recall being surprised by all the specifics Mr Fennel’s description includes.

When Mr Fennel starts talking about rates on Shiro’s shares of stock, the state of the mansion, including the areas that will need maintenance soon, different documents and such, Shiro feels that something might be off.

Shiro is sure of it when Mr Fennel mentions his will and Shiro’s will in one sentence.

Right then Mr Fennel asks Shiro to listen and not interrupt.

And Shiro listens.

He’s trained to be a good listener for as long as he remembers himself.

Besides, he couldn’t have put a word in even if he wanted to: he’s too stunned to talk.

The world around Shiro seems to be flickering in and out of focus.

Secret societies? Revolution? Underground networking?

Aren’t all those just cliches from old action movies? Or from a page of a dusty history book?

Shiro listens and doesn’t hear; at some point, he asks his chief assistant to repeat his last sentence and still, he can’t hear it.

His memory registers all that’s being said, though. Shiro will later recall this conversation in excruciating detail.

While he listens, sitting there silent and at attention, like a good boy, Shiro feels how he starts falling apart. First of all, his hands and feet start freezing. Second, he can feel his thoughts first race inside his skull like spooked horses, then slow and come to a halt, as if stuck in a thick fog. At the same time, a cold, slick feeling starts crawling into the bottom of Shiro’s stomach. Breathing hurts so much all of a sudden. Is it fear? Is Shiro scared?

Whatever it is, Shiro can’t stand it. He feels tears gathering in his eyes.

Why would he start crying! He doesn’t care!

...Or does he?

Who is he kidding.

Goddess, he just doesn’t want to show even a sliver of his real feelings to Steve right now! He can’t let him have this. Shiro forces himself to put a mask on; he can do that shit, easy-peasy, yeah? He’s a pro, isn’t he? The correct facial expression clicks into place, even if it takes all of Shiro’s concentration to make it happen.

It doesn’t change anything in how he feels.
Why doesn’t it get better after he has shielded his soul? Shit. The tears start to spill. Shiro refuses to wipe them off, refuses to acknowledge them.

But he needs to address his right-hand man’s words. He can’t pretend to be mute forever.

As indifferently, as he can master, Shiro throws his words in Steve’s face:

“And what do you expect to happen now, Mr Liar?”

It seems to Shiro that his phrase makes Steve wince. It doesn’t feel any good, to be able to get at Steve like that. It’s all the same for Shiro from this point in time.

He should stop caring.

Still, hearing Steve talk, collected as ever, shatters something inside of Shiro.

Even if Shiro prides in his patience, Steve has always had better control over himself, and it shows.

“It depends on whether you’ll contact authorities to inform them of my activities or not,” - reacts Steve.

Shiro bristles. He hasn’t even considered this; so stupid of him, right?

His next words come out bitter:

“Won’t you straight out kill me since your little secret is out in the open? It’d make things easier for your organization, I guess.”

Steve squints at him, bewildered:

“Why would I tell you all this myself if this were the case?”

Yes, indeed. How stupid of Shiro to say something like that.

Then Steve adds, serious:

“No, Takashi. I would never do that. I won’t let anyone or anything hurt you whatever happens.”

Now, that’s a bold statement in given circumstances. That’s too much even for Steve. There must be a line somewhere.

“Oh, yeah?” - is all that Shiro manages, despite all the tornado of feelings raging inside of him.

Shiro repeats that phrase to himself and can’t quite hold in his hysterical laughter. “I won’t let anyone or anything hurt you”. Have you ever heard such a thing? Steve won’t let anyone hurt Shiro. Ha! What about himself? What is Steve doing at the moment, then? Does he think he’s not hurting Shiro by his admission? If so, he’s mistaken; it damn well hurts!

The silence that stretches after Shiro’s last weak attempt at sounding nonchalant seems to fill the room with cotton wool; Shiro can’t breathe right - it’s as if something presses on his chest with every inhale.

They sit across the table from each other, not saying a word; the sinking dread in Shiro’s guts only gets more unbearable with every minute. His heart is beating so heavy against his ribs; Shiro can distinguish every separate flutter. It hurts.
Why him? Why does he have to lose a loved one again?

It isn’t fair.

Not again.

Shiro tries to hold onto his barely simmering anger to not let himself drown completely.

“What if I take my phone right now and call the police? Call the Governor?” - threatens Shiro.

Steve glances at him tiredly.

“Right now you won’t reach anyone if you try to call. But in half an hour - please, do how you see fit.”

That’s how it will be, then?

Shiro looks at his right-hand man, at his precious family, and what he sees is the person who’s lied to him for years. Basically, for as long as Shiro has known him. Still, Shiro can’t even imagine ratting him out.

This one thought drives Shiro mad.

“Did you know?” - he accuses Steve, his words laced with desperation instead of fury. - “Did you know that I won’t be able to answer you in kind when you make your admission? That I won’t tattle on you, the pathetic man that I am? Of course, you did. This naive idiot, you thought, he won’t be able to betray me. I must be so simple to you.”

“Takashi, please, don’t.”

Steve sounds pleading. It’s a big crack in his defences, undoubtedly.

Shiro takes it for an opening. He’s hurt; he craves hurting Steve in response.

“Don’t what? Don’t do this to me? Don’t talk to me that way? Why the fuck should I listen to you at all? Years ago, you came to my home knowing that you will use my family’s wealth and connections to build up your moronic society…”

“Agency. We call it the Agency.”

Shiro would’ve joked at Steve’s love to detail were it another day.

“The fuck do I care? No, let me finish, Steve. You came to my mansion and made me like you, made me believe you. Goddess, you’ve even pretended to worry about me, to care about me. How did it feel, to spend so many hours at a sick bed of a person you barely know and don’t give a shit about?”

“Takashi, please. That’s not true, and we both know it.”

Steve looks almost physically ill. Shiro doesn’t want to notice, doesn’t want to see. But Steve’s skin is ashen, his eyes are dull, - it’s so hard to ignore how ghastly Steve looks.

Actually, Shiro’s vindictive speech has reached its goal; why does Shiro feel even emptier?

Shiro doesn’t want to think that Steve cares. Shiro doesn’t want to think that he’s cared, ever.

It’d be so much easier to take it all in if Steve would behave differently. If his hands wouldn’t
tremble if his posture wasn’t so defeated.

Why does Steve have to continue pretending now? It’s over.

Shiro only has one more question.

“Why now, Steve?”

Steve replies without hesitation:

“The revolution is almost there, Takashi. I’m needed at the Agency. I also need to ensure your safety which I can’t do from here, not really. And you are stable enough, finally, so that I can leave.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve only stayed here because of me.”

Shiro means for it to come out mocking but it turns out imploring. Why is he so weak? He won’t look at Steve; it’s shameful enough that he has been fooled so easily, has continued being fooled for years, - he doesn’t want to give Steve more stuff to gloat about.

In the meantime, Steve searches for his eyes frantically, and Shiro can’t make himself avoid his gaze forever. When their gazes lock, Steve says:

“But I did. I’ve come here to be close to the monarch’s hidden bomb shelter. It’s a top-secret facility that happens to be situated nearby. No, not like that. I’ll start anew. The Agency has recruited me after learning where I’m going to work. The shelter, your family, my dissatisfaction with life - it all fit so well. I’ve agreed to spite my father. It seemed like another excellent way to disturb his idyll. I’ve come here for easy money and revenge. Shiro, I beg you to understand: I’ve been made an agent because I was going to work here. But I did stay in the mansion because of you. Said shelter doesn’t even function for a year now. I’ve had plenty of opportunities to leave. Moreover, I’ve had to fight to be allowed to stay for so long. And I’ve enjoyed living here, every single day.”

That’s stupid.

This story is more suited for a bad comedy.

Why does it happen to Shiro? Everything has been fine just an hour ago.

The next phrase stumbles from Shiro’s mouth without his permission:

“You say so. But you’re still going to leave.”

“Yes,” - confirms Steve firmly. - “I have to.”

“Why telling me now?” - repeats Shiro his question from earlier. - “Hence, why telling me at all?”

“I need you to know in order to be able to keep you safe when it all starts.”

Shiro wants to lean onto Steve so much. It’s almost a reflex by now.

He needs Steve’s support. He won’t make it without him.

His instinct tells him to forgive Steve now.

Shiro stands up and takes a defensive stance.

Shiro can feel that it will be a thing he’ll never forgive himself.
Shiro knows that he’s making a mistake.

“Are your things ready? Are you ready to go?” - asks Shiro coldly. It hurts; saying those words hurts. Not asking more hurts. Not trying to hug Steve hurts the most.

“Let me say goodbye to Keith,” - says Mr Fennel, resigned.

He looks ten years older after their short talk. He is older than Shiro, after all, remembers Shiro suddenly.

“Call him here, I’m gonna watch you two. And I’m going to watch you leave. I hope I don’t have to worry about you coming back secretly.”

“No, Takashi, I will inform you in advance if I’ll have to visit.”

“Oh?”

“I will have to come here at least once a month. It’ll look too suspicious if I suddenly disappear completely.”

Shiro doesn’t argue. A month is a long time.

Steve stands up, too. They don’t speak while they wait.

Keith comes in and Steve doesn’t waste time. He starts explaining things to Keith, telling him the same that he’s told Shiro, minus all the secret stuff.

Keith’s whole body freezes.

Unlike Shiro, he doesn’t get angry, doesn’t ask questions, doesn’t doubt Steve.

Shiro envies him right now. Or not. He doesn’t envy any of them.

Steve finishes his explanations.

Keith’s Adam apple bobs up and down. He may be fighting tears, too. He’s still like a statue and just as pale.

Then Steve does what Shiro couldn’t have predicted. He drops to one knee in front of Keith and takes Keith’s hands in his. Keith looks down at him, uncomprehending.

“Keith, I don’t leave you. No matter, what happens to me and to you while I’m gone, I want you to remember: I’ve left because I’ve had to, not because there’s something wrong with you or because you bring bad luck. Can you do that for me?”

Shiro has a feeling it’s been said for him, as well.

Keith nods.

Then, they hug. It’s awkward, their bodies hardly touch, Steve’s limbs seem wooden and Keith is afraid to make an extra move.

Thy part with a pat on the back, and Shiro asks Keith to go to his room.
Keith understands. He just goes, no excessive words or gestures needed.

It’s Shiro who sees Steve to the gates. There’s a taxi already waiting for him outside.

Shiro swallows his ill-timed question of why Steve won’t just take one of the cars.

This way, the last image of Steve Shiro saves in his memory that day is one of a lone figure in a trench-coat, a small suitcase in hand, stepping into a taxi in the yellow light of the lanterns.

Shiro barely stops himself from running after the car.

Shiro doesn’t know how much time passes until Keith finds him in his room (how does Keith even enter it?) counting his breaths, trying to stave off the impending panic attack. Keith wordlessly hugs him and waits until Shiro can breathe normally, breathing with him through it all.

When Shiro can breathe again, he cries.

Again, he doesn’t know for how long he cries. It’s dark, and he hurts, but Keith is there, and Shiro doesn’t break completely.

When the time to go to sleep comes, Keith reminds Shiro to go to the bathroom, brings him water to drink, finds his sleep pants. He puts Shiro to bed, squeezes his hand and wishes him good night. Keith starts walking to the door when Shiro catches him by the wrist.

He can’t think of staying alone right now.

He won’t be able to calm himself down once the dreams will come.

He won’t be able to breathe if Keith leaves.

Shiro wakes up to Keith napping on his side, clothed, on the far end of Shiro’s bed. He’s holding Shiro’s fingers in his hand.

When Shiro stirs, Keith opens his eyes, too. He smiles tiredly at Shiro, yawns widely and then murmurs:

“I’ll stay here for a bit, OK? So sleepy.”

Shiro nods. He feels disoriented and weak; his throat is sore and his eyes seem to be made of sand.

He extricates his hand from Keith’s, and the boy curls in on himself immediately, dozing off.

Shiro’s first impulse is to call Mr Fennel and to ask why Keith is sleeping in his room.

Then he remembers.

That first day without Mr Fennel is a strange one. Sometimes, Shiro pretends in his head that Mr Fennel has just gone on a business trip. Sometimes, Shiro feels like his chief assistant may appear behind his back at any time and start teasing him, like always. Sometimes, he can’t stop himself before writing a text to Mr Fennel and seeing that it hasn’t been delivered.
Shiro can’t make himself think of Mr Fennel’s disappearance in its complexity yet. He can’t fathom the enormity of it all - and it is an enormous tragedy in his lonely life. He half-expects himself to stop functioning at any moment and is troubled over why it hasn’t happened already.

In the evening, Shiro calls that new psychologist woman, Mrs Rizavi. His calendar tells him they have no calls scheduled yet. He hopes he doesn’t intrude. He doesn’t expect her to answer, not really. It’s a gesture born from despair on his part.

Shiro just can’t imagine talking to Keith or Ryan, or anyone from his circle about this. Not after he’s had to sit through meetings with his staff and lie through his teeth that Mr Fennel has a new important task at one of the family enterprises in the south; not after he’s had to make Keith talk to him about his feelings on Mr Fennel’s departure; not after he’s had to discuss with Mrs Teffy and others from the “head-quarters” how they will make his mansion function properly without Mr Fennel. Not after he’s answered calls from his best friends (Allura has learned from Matt, Matt - from Pidge, and Pidge - from Hunk; their close connection is both reassuring and a little scary). Not after he’s had to do breathing exercises the whole day, instead of simply breathing.

The psychologist makes him call her Nadia and happily calls him Shiro upon his request.

It’s their first session and she doesn’t know about Mr Fennel.

She asks Shiro to tell her about the things he likes in his life now so that they can start their acquaintance on a happy note.

Shiro doesn’t think he’ll manage to answer her question right now. He tells her so.

But she asks him to try. Her smile is so sunny and bright that Shiro relents. He ends up talking about Keith. Shiro loses the track of time completely. Nadia doesn’t stop him when their intended hour is almost over. Because at the end of his Keith-speech he mentions Mr Fennel. He can’t help it - Mr Fennel has been Keith’s caregiver for all this time, it’s only logical he remembers him, as well, it’s only fitting since he is… was?.. one of the main persons in Keith’s life. One mention is enough: Shiro cries again, just like a baby, doubling over the table where he sits in front of his laptop. Nadya lets him weep uninterrupted. She is still there when Shiro’s tears finally stop. She doesn’t smile anymore, but there’s no pity in her gaze, only sad resignation. So Shiro tells Nadia about Mr Fennel. He has to talk in riddles, but that’s much better than nothing. He admits to feeling like he’s lost his family yesterday all over again. Nadya only nods and tells him that she’s sorry he has to go through this.

And then she reminds him of Keith - who is the closest Shiro has to family now; about Hunk and Lance who are almost like his adopted children to him; about Matt and Allura. Did Shiro tell her about them, too? Shiro can’t remember. Maybe, Ryan has given her an overview when he’s talked to her about Shiro.

They end up talking for three hours straight. Shiro barely persuades Nadya to take the money for the additional time - she says she can’t make people do therapy for more than an hour at a time, and she’s been basically just listening to Shiro after the first hour was over. Nadya refuses to charge him twice her usual charge for the second and third hours, despite Shiro’s insistence.

At 10 p.m., Keith slides into his room with a rolled-up sleeping sack under his arm. He meets Shiro’s questioning gaze unwaveringly. “You need your sleep, Master Shiro,” - states Keith firmly and starts preparing his sleeping place in the corner by the window - in Shiro’s view, but not too close to the bed. - “I can’t let you stay alone”. 
There are so many hidden meanings and so much understanding in this short phrase that Shiro forgoes his standard reassurances that he’ll be fine and instead does the unthinkable - tells Keith to sleep on the bed with him, again. Under the covers, this time.

When Keith starts protesting, Shiro says that if Keith sleeps on the floor Shiro will keep thinking about how he’s made Keith sleep under his bed that one time and his brain won’t be able to shut down at all. In reality, Shiro still feels guilty about that episode, yes, but he’s apologized to Keith for that and has been forgiven (and has forgiven himself, as well), so it’s a poor excuse on his part.

Keith sees right through him, but, for unknown reasons, doesn’t call Shiro out on his transparent manipulation. He stands there for a minute, mulling the situation over, then says sternly that he’ll take his pyjamas from his room and will be back. Shiro might want to have changed to his pyjamas by the time Keith returns, too. Shiro gladly complies.

Anything to lure Keith closer while it’s still safe to do so.

The wonder-bed is finally serving its purpose; after Keith and Shiro lie down on their respective sides and make themselves comfortable, there’s enough space to put Hunk and Lance between them (and still none of them would be touching each other).

Both Keith and Shiro fall asleep quickly, too exhausted to stay awake for long.

Shiro has nightmares that night; Keith has some, too. They wake up from the other’s panicked noises, try to calm the other down, try to go to sleep again.

At 5 a.m., when neither dares to close his eyes again, they start talking.

It’s night, and the lines are a little blurred - in the world around and between them.

Their heads are heavy with the lack of sleep but their hearts are too full of the need for connection. They discuss utter nonsense since nothing else comes to mind, and few things in Shiro’s life have seemed to bear more meaning more than this.

When the time creeps closer to the late autumn sunrise, Keith says that he’ll make Shiro sleep in a sleeping sack in summer, too, along with Keith himself. This way, they will be on equal footing and Shiro won’t be able to forbid Keith sleeping in a sack because of ridiculous reasons. Upon Shiro’s question why they should prefer sleeping in sacks when they have perfectly normal beds, Keith gives him that sad and disappointed look he’s mastered so well. He says, as if it’s self-explanatory, that they’ll go camping. So simple, why couldn’t Shiro have guessed himself, right? Keith and the boys have planned to ask for permission to spend several warm summer nights in tents instead of in their room (minding their curfew, of course). Shiro’s next question is just as good as the first: where do they want to build their camp? This time, Keith looks at Shiro as if he were an idiot. “In your big shiny park, Master Shiro. Why would we need to go camping somewhere else?” Why indeed, thinks Shiro, without irony, this time. His park isn’t used to its full potential. Keith goes on: “We have a map with the best places marked ready; Pidge plans to come too. She also wants to invite Ina, but that’s a story for another time.”

Keith goes silent and burrows his head into his pillow; maybe, at least he will get some rest.

Shiro just lies there, staring up at the ceiling, listening to Keith’s light snoring, and feels like an idiot, indeed.

What’s with him asking about a place for a camp when he doesn’t let his slaves leave the perimeter of his mansion?
That thought brings out another, a more important one.

Has he forgotten? He needs to make sure Keith, Lance and Hunk are taken care of. It’s his decision and one of his most important tasks. The boys have their own ideas for the future - which means they see a happy future for themselves here, under Shiro’s wing. It’s more than Shiro has expected from them, actually. Not that he’s set any expectations in the first place. But now he knows that they feel safe enough to make plans for the oncoming summer, and it’s like a balm on his battered soul. It’s more than great. It’s exhilarating. It means that, even in these hard times, there is something to look forward to.

Shiro’d better make sure that the summer camp in his unreasonably gigantic park happens for real - he’s been put in charge of these boys not for nothing!

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey

This time, you just have to tell me: did the angst work???
Really, now, without kidding: I've had tears in my eyes while writing it. It's been one bitch of a chapter to write. I had to stop and breathe and vent so many times. Turns out, that's MY heavy topic. I mean, can a writer self-trigger themselves with their writing?
Yeah, I think I've answered my question already.

Please, give me some feedback. It's IMPORTANT
Preparing

Chapter Summary

Shiro survives the absence of his chief assistant.
Mrs Teffy learns how to be in charge in Shiro's mansion.
Shiro learns new things every day and prepares for the time when the Revolution comes.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

Just FYI: this chapter is the biggest so far (7620 words!) and you should do some crazy happy dance now, or something, to celebrate my generosity! Or you can just smile to yourself and think: yay! A long chapter! There's not so much of the story left...

It's a long, boring, partially fluffy chapter. Boys being adorkable, a New Year's celebration, Sheith bonding...

Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro remembers for the first time that he likes looking out of the window of his bedroom two weeks after Mr Fennel’s departure.

So here he stands, still and pompous, in front of his giant windows, and takes the view in: the lifeless trees, the heavy snow, the absence of colours except grey and white. The first half of December has passed, and Shiro only now notices how lost and windswept his favourite passages are, how lonely the park looks.

He’s certainly noticed snow - there’s been an unhealthy amount of it (two times exceeding the month’s average norm). When the snowfall has started, Shiro and his team had to solve the arising problems as quick as possible, sometimes forgetting about lunch and other trivial things.

During their team gatherings regarding the snow-wreath, Shiro has sometimes caught Keith looking at him with a strange air of relief; as if the snowstorm has been a blessing from the goddess herself - because it kept Shiro occupied. And to be busy has been a blessing, indeed. Anything, to not stay with his thoughts alone for too long between his sessions with Nadya.

But more than anything, Keith himself has been Shiro’s blessing all this time. Despite undoubtedly going through his own inner turmoil after bidding farewell to his mentor, Keith has stayed as reliable as ever - always there when Shiro needed him, always patient, never accusing or pitying.

If Shiro is being honest with himself, the past two weeks have been really, really stressful. Shiro can’t decide whether Keith makes it look like that or that Mr Fennel really has been the force
cementing his household, but now that he’s gone, the issues that require Shiro’s attention seem to pop out of thin air a dozen a minute - and Shiro feels like he isn’t informed well enough or mentally prepared to deal with all of them. Maybe, it’s Keith’s way to teach Shiro what there is to his mansion on the overall; Shiro leaves this possibility open. However, the avalanche of tasks is not only a distraction from hard thoughts to Shiro. First of all, as Shiro has discovered anew, he enjoys hard work. Second, being able to solve this many issues in such a short time makes Shiro feel competent and boosts his self-confidence. He needs it now more than ever.

Watching the snowflakes dance behind the glass, Shiro thinks suddenly that Mr Fennel would have prevented half of the problems Shiro’s had to solve from occurring. For half a second, he is confused as to why Mr Fennel hasn’t done this for him, hasn’t taken all the casual tasks upon himself like he always does. Then Shiro remembers. Goddess, does it hurt.

But he can’t hide from the fact that Mr Fennel has left him, forever. No amount of tenuous errands will make him forget about it completely.

This is why, when his mind ventures into the forbidden territory, Shiro relents and lets himself go there.

This is why, when Keith pokes his head in the door to check on Shiro at about 10 p.m., Shiro still stands there, overlooking his favourite place in the world, and really thinking about Mr Fennel for the first time since they have parted ways.

Ever since Mr Fennel has left, Mrs Teffy has assumed command over the “headquarters” of the mansion and, subsequently, over the Department Heads. She and Keith have become the major authority here, after Shiro, of course. But while Keith mostly serves as Shiro’s personal assistant and also has to mind his curfew (and Shiro is adamant on that), Mrs Teffy doesn’t have such restrictions. Shiro has a suspicion that Mrs Teffy hardly sleeps at all. He would follow her lead, but she and Keith make him follow Keith’s curfew, and to resist both of them at once is not humanly possible. They can’t make Shiro sleep too long, though, and he’s wide-awake and ready for battle at 7 or even 6 a.m. every morning. He doesn’t let them know.

The last week hasn’t been half bad if Shiro compares it with the first week after Mr Fennel’s leave - he’s been like a robot back then, most of the time, or depressed and devastated when he let himself feel. Keith has slept in his bed for the entire first week. He’s held Shiro’s hand when the latter wordlessly asked for it, but nothing more. Keith would have stayed longer, if not for Shiro’s insistence that he’ll do alright alone.

Of course, Shiro didn’t want him to go. He has simply realized that if Keith was to stay one more night, he wouldn’t be able to let him go. And he couldn’t make Keith… do this for the rest of his life. The boys, Mrs Teffy, Mr Fennel - they would’ve understood the connection they share, would’ve believed that they don’t do anything else but sleep. The others, though… No matter, how open-minded Shiro’s staff may be, Shiro is sure that some of them sincerely believe that Shiro has slept with Keith several times by now. It’s not exactly a pleasant thought.

Shiro is bad at lying to himself; it’s him who is the main problem. How soon would “just sleeping in one bed” become not enough? Especially, since it’s never, ever been enough.

But Shiro has to have Keith’s best interests in mind. It’s bad enough that Keith doesn’t get the same respect now that Mr Fennel is gone. It looks like Mr Fennel has had more influence on Shiro’s employees than Shiro. It’s time to remedy it.
With that idea in mind, Shiro goes out of his bedroom… and hears hushed voices he instantly recognizes: Keith and Mrs Teffy. They must stand just around the corner in the corridor, hidden from Shiro’s gaze, but very close for him to hear them so clearly.

Mrs Teffy speaks, harshly:

“Shut up, Keith. You will alarm Mr Shirogane.”

“But you can’t just hide it from him!”

After these words, Shiro stops and listens. They haven't heard him opening and closing the door and making the first steps outside (his habit to do everything as silent as possible pays off, for once). Shiro is so very interested in what their secret may be that he doesn’t even have a sliver of doubt in his actions. He will feel ashamed later, if necessary.

“I can, and I will!” - comes a reply from Mrs Teffy.

There’s a subtle noise, as if something thuds on the wall, and then Mrs Teffy hisses:

“Why the fuck do you have to make it so complicated, Keith?”

Shiro dares to take a peek. Mrs Teffy has Keith pinned against a wall, her elbow digging into his neck. Keith looks calm and pliant, no fear or outright anger in his eyes. As if being pinned to the wall by a stronger and better-trained person is a thing he experiences all the time. Shiro has to intervene, but something stops him. Maybe, it’s just his curiosity. Or, maybe, the fact that Mrs Teffy doesn’t seem hostile and Keith is ready to listen to her, even in this position.

Meanwhile, after holding a weighted pause in their conversation, Keith answers:

“I don’t make anything complicated, as you say. Master Shiro…”

And Keith unconsciously looks his way, making Shiro hide behind the corner again lightning-fast.

“Master Shiro can’t have you hiding anything, even for his safety or peace of mind. Not now.”

Keith and Mrs Teffy both go silent again. Shiro imagines them having a gazing contest of sorts. Then, after some rustling of fabric, the two of them seemingly step apart.

It’s Keith who talks first. His voice sounds sincere and caring. Shiro has ever heard Keith talking like that… to him.

“Salomey…”

At first, Shiro thinks he’s missed a third person, the one Keith addresses now. But it’s Mrs Teffy who answers:

“What? I’m just trying to shield him, the way Mr Fennel did.”

Shame floods Shiro’s senses. She’s worked here for three years at least and, in the last two weeks, there wasn’t a day where they haven’t interacted. In all this time, Shiro hasn’t bothered to look up her name. That’s unacceptable. He’ll learn the names of his employees and will be able to recite them just as sure as the names of their ruling dynasty, swears Shiro to himself.

“Salomey, you know that all the staff here won’t be able to replace Mr Fennel, right? Not to mention any outsiders.”
Keith’s voice is soft. He says the truth: Mr Fennel is one of the people who can’t be replaced. Keith continues, just as careful:

“What he did here and how he handled info, was his choice. I don’t doubt he knew what he’s been doing. But we can’t do the same and expect to achieve the same level of success.”

They both go silent again. Shiro sneaks another glance: Keith stands across Mrs Teffy, looking at her sadly, while she holds her face down. Her hands are clenched into fists.

“So I’ll just tell him?”

“No, I will. And you go to the culprits. They have to prepare to say goodbye to sweets for the rest of their lives. Also, someone was planning a picnic for the upcoming holidays; I guess he isn’t now. Next, they both love to read. You know, instructions, manuals, that kind of stuff. And the last: I swear, I’ll make their life hell in the evening.”

“Sometimes I wonder whether you have an earpiece with a direct link to Mr Fennel,” - shakes her head Mrs Teffy.

“Sometimes I wonder whether I have some implant in my brain which tells me what he’d want me to do.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Keith.”

“You’d be doing your best, just like now. The way we’ve been taught to.”

Shiro takes it as a clue to shuffle back to his room. He barely has enough time to steel his expression before he hears Keith knocking on the door.

“Come in!” - calls Shiro. He has a vague understanding that Lance and Hunk have brought trouble again, but he wants to listen to Keith before making assumptions.

Keith enters, greets Shiro politely and then says, simply:

“Hunk and Lance have crushed one of your cars. They are fine,” - adds Keith for Shiro’s comfort, mostly. And obviously, Keith wouldn’t have behaved so calmly otherwise. Would he? - “They have destroyed several passways, some bushes and a streetlight. Also, they have killed a pigeon. Lance is inconsolable; so, as you say, that will be punishment enough.”

Shiro winces at that; Keith manages to throw his own words at him at the worst of times; does he have this earpiece with him or not, after all, the cruel boy? Keith continues:

“I’ve offered Mrs Teffy to use the same measures Mr Fennel used to them: revoke their privileges. She has agreed. We are sorry that this has happened. We’ll take measures to not let such thing happen again.”

Shiro sighs; half from relief, half in exasperation. Those two! They are lucky that only a pigeon has fallen victim to their carelessness.

“Make them take their punishments separately. They are usually not a bad influence on each other, but not this time. They can sleep in their room, as usual, of course.”

“Thank you, sir,” - and Keith bows formally.

That must’ve been tough on him. If Keith can call anyone family, then these persons would be Lance
and Hunk. And they go and risk their lives so dumbly. Shiro says, just to be on the same page:

“Keith, look at me, please. I don’t care about the car or the bushes, but I can’t have them pulling such a stunt again.”

“You could teach them driving, too. It’s a useful skill,” - offers Keith.

Shiro looks at Keith with furrowed brows.

“Has Mr Fennel taught you..?”

“Yes, sir? I was sure you knew.”

“And you drive? Here?”

“Yes, but not so often as I would like to. Can’t just waste the gasoline to practice. So I wait for opportunities. But it’s a lot of fun.”

Shiro walks to his bed and sits down. Has he been asleep this whole time?

He doesn’t worry a bit about Keith’s skills; as in every other area he’s studied, Mr Fennel is capable enough to teach and horrible enough to require only the best results from his apprentices.

How has he missed Keith’s lessons, though?

How many mysteries are waiting for him in his own mansion?

“Master Shiro? You OK?” - Keith sounds worried.

Shiro answers, at last:

“Peachy. Teach them driving, as soon as the punishment is over.”

Keith smiles.

He and Keith go to the canteen together, later. All the way Keith keeps silent, lost in thought. Shiro is lost in thought, too. But he doesn’t think about the accident anymore.

When Lance and Hunk have teased Keith about a “crush” long ago, in summer… They have said “a crush on him”. They could have been mistaken about the object of Keith’s crush, couldn’t they? No one has ever said that Keith was gay. He can be bi- or pan-, as far as Shiro is concerned.

What if it’s “a crush on her”?

That name was so soft on Keith’s lips.

In front of Shiro, Keith enters the canteen and bumps his shoulder on Mrs Teffy’s in passing. She swats him on his neck and he smiles at her, boyish and charming.

He’s totally in love, thinks Shiro, walking past them to the queue. After he receives his food, he takes the last place at a table with his Department Heads. Let Keith and Mrs Teffy have some privacy, thinks Shiro grimly.

Yet, they take a place at a neighbouring table. It’s unreasonable, but Shiro can’t help but listen to their conversation. They speak in whispers and, were it not for Shiro’s good sense of hearing, he couldn't have been able to understand a word.
In a minute Shiro wishes he couldn’t hear them, but it’s too late - he can’t tune their voices out anymore.

“These breeches are total crap, Salomey. They look like they come from the 17th century. But I get your point, they do your non-existing ass some good.”

“Go fuck yourself, Keith.”

“Will do, as soon as I’m done with my service today. You should follow my example.”

“Fuck you?”

“No, fuck yourself. Maybe, it’ll help. But I can’t guarantee, after all those years of celibacy…”

“If Mr Fennel ever comes back, I’m telling on you. He’s never allowed this sort of shit-talk.”

“Please, do. He’ll just pat you on the head and say: “Poor girl. Do I need to hook you up with someone?”

“Maybe. But your very much existing sorry ass won’t be laughing when he turns his attention to you. You’re venturing into forbidden territory, little boy, and you know it.”

“You’re full of shit,” - says Keith, sighing.

“Says who?” - retorts Mrs Teffy.

Shiro stands up with his tray and walks past their table. He steals a glance at them: both sit there prim and regal, all their best manners in place. Seeing Shiro go, both finish eating at once and scramble to follow him.

Shiro spends his day, watching the two closely when the three of them end up in one room. Their subtle teasing never stops.

After Shiro sees Keith pretending to try and kiss Mrs Teffy and sees obvious disgust on her face and how Keith laughs and she tries to kick him (and he lets her), Shiro is reminded of Keith’s behaviour around Lance, Hunk or Pidge and how they would all tease each other and try to get at each others’ nerves.

Keith and Mrs Teffy may be not in love, after all.

It’s three weeks into December (and the mansion is bursting with New Year’s decorations) when Keith comes to Shiro’s bedroom in the evening and says that he feels like he’s going to break.

Shiro’s heart sinks. What?

Keith says that it’s been so much easier when Mr Fennel punished him every Saturday. That way he could start with a clean slate on Monday. Now, it’s been almost a month since his last discipline, and everything is piling up, and no matter how hard he tries to deal with this all on his own, he can’t. Therapy with Ryan doesn’t help with this either. Keith sounds so defeated when he says it, that the only thing Shiro wants for a moment is to tug him to the bed and cuddle him.

It’s Saturday. Of course, with all the commotion, no one has bothered to keep Keith’s discipline routine up and Shiro has forgotten his disgust towards this weekday fairly quickly. Everyone should’ve been just too happy to drop this thing; everyone, but Keith himself.
Why would Shiro dismiss Keith’s words about this being Keith’s outlet so easily and only take the physical side of the process into account?

Keith looks like he’s ready to bolt any second.

Shiro thinks fast; they both know the beating part won’t happen anymore; is there anything left that Shiro is capable of doing?

Provide dominance.

That he can.

It’s not very hard to make Keith fall prey to his calculated words - the boy is teetering on the edge, barely able to hold himself up. He has dealt with his mentor leaving him, his master breaking down, his work duties changing… He’s asked Shiro back then, when Clint has still been their main topic, how Shiro manages to wrangle his responsibilities. The thing is, again, that while Keith has been trained to bring pleasure with his body, Shiro has been taught how to become a good leader. The thing is, Keith is 16, while Shiro will be 27 soon. The thing is, it’s time for Shiro to step up and be the kind of support Mr Fennel has been.

Shiro establishes a new routine for them right on spot. He makes Keith kneel in the centre of the room for half an hour, then makes Keith recite his failures of the last weeks. They discuss each one for as long as Shiro deems fit. The next time, it’ll go faster - with only one week to discuss. Or so Shiro hopes. There are things that Shiro considers worth an admonishment and some things even deserving a punishment. He ends up ordering Keith to help Lance with his work, an hour a day Monday to Friday. It’s mean, since Keith can hardly work with Lance on a good day without snapping; it’s doubly mean, since Lance’s punishment for unauthorized driving is still a go and Keith will have to help Lance clean all sorts of places. Shiro considers his tactic a success when Keith doesn’t protest in any way. Shiro makes Keith kneel for him again, for 15 minutes this time. Then, he brings Keith to his room (it’s half past 10 a.m. already, and Shiro can’t let Keith ignore his curfew).

The next morning, Keith thanks him, bashful, and Shiro notices, that he looks so much better now. He can’t help but be a little mad at himself: so much for being Keith’s pillar of support.

But Shiro will do better.

The New Year is fun, actually. Like, real, honest fun. They hold a party, and all their friends could come, even Ryan and Ina. Hunk and Pidge build the biggest snowman Shiro has ever seen, and Lance catches a cold trying to win a snow fight by Keith. Shiro and Matt get drunk together and manage to climb onto the roof to watch stars. Allura misses her boyfriend who couldn’t make it and has informed her in the last minute. Lance, a little tipsy from the single flute of champagne he’s been allowed, tells her that she has to break up with such a hopeless cretin. Who else would make such a nice woman as Allura cry? Hunk properly scolds Lance for being intrusive (their roles are strangely reversed this time), but everyone knows that Lance has just voiced what’s on everyone’s minds: that mysterious mister is not a good match for Allura. Not by a long shot.

Despite Allura’s misery, Shiro thinks that this has been his best New Year’s celebration since his parents had died.

Thinking of Mr Fennel still hurts. When he doesn’t come to the mansion after a month of absence,
Shiro is almost not surprised. He is sad that Keith is shocked by it, though. Keith is... for the lack of a better word, livid. But then, a letter arrives - unexpected and untrackable. It is addressed to Keith and is written in some strange patois no one else understands. Keith rips it to pieces after reading it, then doesn’t talk to anyone apart from basic pleasantries for the rest of the day. In the evening, he comes to Shiro for their traditional game of chess. They play in silence, and in the end, Keith says what Shiro has guessed already:

“The letter was from Mr Fennel.”

Shiro doesn’t know how to feel about that. In comparison to his first reaction, all his feelings towards Mr Fennel seem muted. As if his soul is too tired to react in any way.

So Shiro asks:

“How do you feel about this letter, then?”

Keith’s face contorts in a grimace of pain he can’t conceal, his hands grip the seat of his chair.

“I hate it,” - he chokes out. - “I hate it that he’s there, and I’m here, and he wouldn’t come.”

Shiro can relate. He is glad he doesn’t experience so much pain as Keith, with his senses muted. He offers his hand to Keith, to hold if he wants to, as support. Keith takes Shiro’s hand in both of his and holds it gently. He lets his head bend down low, almost to his outstretched arms, and stays that way for some time. In the end, Keith shares another sentiment Shiro can relate to:

“I’m glad he is alright, though.”

And he doesn’t let Shiro’s hand go.

Mr Fennel doesn’t come by the end of January as well. Neither Shiro nor Keith feel anything apart from a slight disappointment this time. They are so used to functioning without him now that an option of having Mr Fennel to go for advice seems cheating. Salomey Teffy has established her right to rule the household by then, too, and, with her back up, no one dares to speak badly of Keith anymore.

Shiro still hurts. This betrayal (even if it may have its reasons) has cost him a lot. Sometimes, Shiro feels like his ribs are constricting him, and there’s no one around to save him. But then Keith checks in on him, and Shiro takes a new breath. He will live.

His friends, Ryan included, never abandon him. Nadya is there for him the entire time, too. Shiro couldn’t be more grateful for her enthusiasm.

Shiro hurts, and misses his dearest family member (how should he call Mr Fennel, in terms of relation? an Uncle? Shiro snickers amidst a Skype call with his branch in the capital while thinking about that).

Shiro hurts and prepares for war.

Problems arise where Shiro wouldn’t expect them. For example, the topic of Keith and rumours - it has come as a complete surprise to Shiro but some of his employees have been caught calling Keith names and exaggerating his influence on Shiro. No one dared to do so in Keith’s face, the cowards. Shiro has been so furious that he’s almost fired half of his staff on spot. Mrs Teffy and Keith have been barely able to make Shiro see reason (he still fired a couple of persons, the ones who didn’t
want to understand words). In the end, after individual talks, Shiro has invited everyone to a staff meeting, including Keith, Lance and Hunk. He said in no uncertain terms that his slaves are people, just as the rest of his subordinates, and he expects that everyone will treat them with the same respect as any free person. He added, that if he could, he would free his slaves immediately and hire them in a common way instead.

The reaction of his public was priceless, just as Shiro has expected. Some people have quitted afterwards. Hunk has cried.

Mrs Teffy made Shiro promise to not talk like that in public ever again (even his fired employees can make a hell of a scandal if someone lets them talk).

February starts with Shiro’s decision to look for a prosthetic. He asks Matt… and his fate is sealed. Soon, Shiro owns the most expensive, the most advanced prosthetic known to mankind. It’s harder to get used to it than Shiro has expected, but they make it work. Keith is in awe of his new hand, or so it looks. He makes Shiro follow his regimen on taking care of the prosthetic with an almost religious fervency.

Shiro doesn’t have any unpleasant associations with his captivity time when he uses the prosthetic. It’s weird, but Shiro has nothing against simply using his new limb, without expecting a panic attack.

Moreover, Shiro’s treacherous mind starts picturing how he would pin Keith to his bed with his new, shiny metallic hand, making him beg and whimper in anticipation. If he likes the metallic limb so much in everyday life, he may like it in bed even more, hmm?

The picture is so breathtaking that Shiro doesn’t even admonish himself as strictly as he should have. His flesh is weak, even when metal-enhanced.

By that time, he and Keith get used to each other to a degree when Shiro may hold out a hand, without looking, and Keith will shove a drink into it (or a pen, or a flashlight, or Shiro’s phone, or… whatever Shiro may need at the moment). They settle around each other so naturally, that Shiro even stops second-guessing himself when he has to order Keith around in a more traditional, master-slave way in the presence of other owners. He doesn’t think that Keith feels humiliated when he serves him - it doesn’t look like that. Shiro recalls that vivid dream he’s seen in summer - the one where he’s tied Keith up and punished him. It has felt the same - as if they have fully accepted their roles.

Also, February is the months when Shiro learns that Lance and Hunk are together, after witnessing an interesting interaction of Lance and Keith in the corridor near their room (Shiro is, again, annoyed that so much of his knowledge relies on chance; maybe, Mr Fennel’s spying has been a useful practice, after all).

Shiro just walks past the boys’ room (or intends to). He has heard too many conversations which were not intended to be heard by him in the course of last months. This time, Shiro will cough politely and alarm the boys of his presence… And then Lance says:

“You are a masochist, Keith.”

And Shiro’s brain short-circuits.

Keith replies in kind: “Should I start teasing you about how you sound when Hunk fucks you…”

And then Keith, who was walking backwards to tease Lance better, literally bumps into Shiro’s frozen figure.
Shiro and Keith graciously let Lance flee the scene and go to Shiro’s study to talk. Shiro feels like he has such talks too regularly for his liking.

“Why the hell am I the last to know?” - he asks Keith with desperation.

Keith shrugs, unaffected.

“They haven’t been too subtle with the way they look at each other, but not with public affections. You know Salomey would’ve had their heads if they so much as hugged too tight in the halls!”

That makes sense. Also, why load the master with the info on his slaves’ love life? Shiro groans. What else does he miss? Does everyone wear invisibility cloaks around him?

“And still! For how long are they… dating?” - inquires Shiro

“Since Mr Kinkade’s and Ina’s visit in fall?” - says Keith, unsure. - “They were definitely together when I’ve worked with Clint.”

Is it four months? Or more? Goddess help him.

“I’m glad for them,” - offers Shiro meekly.

Keith smiles: “Me too.”

“Don’t you need another room, to not disturb them? Though it must be the other way around…”

Shiro can’t imagine simply sharing space with those two daily, but with them actively dating he can’t imagine it at all. And he’s teased Keith for his impatience. Keith must be a saint to hold on for so long!

Keith refuses with an incredulous expression on his face; as if wanting to leave his two friends is the most illogical thing he can imagine.

A few days later, Keith confesses that living with Lance and Hunk soothes some of the darkest places in him. During his time at the school, he has gotten used to thinking that sex is only a way a free person might use a slave’s body. Seeing how two people can be affectionate, tactile, passionate with each other, sincerely and without a hint of coercion, is a miracle for him.

“Don’t tell them,” - asks Keith, as if he expects that Shiro would.

“I would never,” - says Shiro seriously. - “But if you need a room to spend your evenings or to spend a night from time to time, you can totally have that.”

“I know,” - Keith smiles happily. - “Salomey has insisted I choose one in December. I didn’t even know it would help to relax so much. I mean, I liked living alone, but I hated sleeping alone, and also when I’ve lived alone, I didn’t feel so included as I do now. But when I’ve started to spend so much time with the guys, I started missing my… solitude?”

“It’s called personal space,” - offers Shiro.

Keith inclines his head as if he hears the words for the first time and saves them to memory.

He’s so fucking cute! Shiro wants to reach out and ruffle his hair - it has grown a bit and his scarlet collar is not as obvious when Keith leaves his neck unclothed. Will he wear a ponytail later? Keith still fiddles with the collar when he’s lost in thought, though. Some things stay the same.
When Keith goes back to work later that day, other thoughts come to Shiro’s mind. Just how sad it is that Keith needs a confirmation to believe that being physical with another person is not always an act of abuse. How much Shiro hates that Keith needs such displays to heal his wounds. How much Shiro wants to be more touchy-feely with Keith - they would both profit from it, Shiro just knows it, and how he absolutely can’t allow it.

Their Saturday discipline sessions continue, with minimal variations. Shiro thinks he knows how to control Keith better, by now. He feels shitty, sometimes, for executing this kind of control, but then he reminds himself that Keith has come to him himself and has asked for it. And Keith thanks him, every single time, with so much relief in his voice, that Shiro feels ashamed for feeling guilty. Shiro knows that Keith still works with Ryan, that they talk a lot, that Keith stays in contact with Ina and they text all the time, knows from Ryan that he and Keith discuss Keith’s fear of failure during therapy, too; that Keith tries his best to come to terms with himself, - why does he still need those sessions with Shiro? He asks Ryan, one day. Ryan smiles, the way he does when the answer is obvious to him and he wants Shiro to think just a little bit more. When Shiro fails to offer his own version, Ryan winks and says: “These are two very different needs you and I help to meet, Shiro.” And then Ryan swiftly moves to another topic.

By the end of February (three months into Mr Fennel’s absence), another strange letter is delivered. Keith doesn’t even bother to rip it up after reading. He tells Shiro more about the contents this time - how Mr Fennel says he’s sorry he hasn’t been able to come (they snort simultaneously at that, knowing that it’s childish but unable to stop themselves), how he urges Shiro to be cautious whatever he does and abstain from visiting the capital without it being absolutely unavoidable. Basically, Mr Fennel shields Shiro from the grievances of the big world, just as he’s always done. It must be infuriating to be left out, but somehow, Shiro totally understands Mr Fennel’s reasoning. He doesn’t like staying on the sidelines, awaiting what the actions of others will bring. But he’d do the same, were he in Mr Fennel’s place. They both know that Shiro would leave his work in a heartbeat if Mr Fennel mentioned that his experience would serve the Revolution. Actually, Mr Fennel has promised that the Agency’s plan of action corresponds with Shiro’s views on slavery and that it will change things for the best. The life may become worse for some time, but everything will be much better in the long run than now. Shiro doesn’t have another choice but to believe Mr Fennel in this. He won’t be able to organise another rebellion on his own terms on a short notice, but the current order must go.

All in all, his trust in Mr Fennel has been betrayed, but not completely broken.

Shiro continues his preparations for troublesome times. Thankfully, his mansion is a damned fortress already; a steady supply of water is secured, food storages are full; escape routes and emergency plans have been written years ahead. Thanks to his “laboratory” (which still hasn’t visited), many purchased supplies such as wood or metal plates can be disguised as construction materials.

He does his best to appear absorbed in his paranoia when he orders his companies outside of their region to conduct mock alerts week after week. He can see understanding dawning onto some of his employees. No one asks directly, but Shiro can see that many of them take the drills seriously. Some company leaders even make weekly alerts a competition (“If our boss feels like we need to run the stairs every week, we’ll have to show him that we can do it fast. Maybe, he’ll ease off, finally!”) and Shiro knows he should warn them to not play with fire, mocking his decisions, but the tactic works.
and he lets it slide.

He also finally (finally!) orders to reopen the “old slaves program”. He finds out that Mr Fennel and Keith have started to work in this direction already. But of course, they did, without consulting Shiro, at that! Anyway, it’s good news, and Shiro can’t find it in himself to be angry for long - he gets what he wants, and sooner than he’s expected. They manage to buy and place several people by the third week of February, and Shiro considers it a success.

He tries to ignore the way Keith looks at him when he reports about their new arrivals. Like Shiro has achieved something heroic. That’s embarrassing and couldn’t be further from the truth.

In March, Shiro learns that he and his employees have taken a cat shelter under their wing. About 4 years ago. Turns out, his employees have been volunteering there for years, and Keith wanted to go there forever. Another nice surprise, huh. Shiro doesn’t even get annoyed. Only a little bit.

Shiro agrees to take Keith with him for his own first visit there. He hasn’t taken Keith to the city since their nightly visit to the road cafe (which has ended in a disaster). Now, it’s different: he and Keith are used to each other, Keith has a proper collar, they both know how to behave around each other in public.

Lance wants to go to the shelter too, of course.

Shiro contemplates taking Lance, as well; what may go wrong if they drive there by car and enter one building together? But then a new decree comes out, saying that any slave must be leashed in public. Keith sighs heavily and says: “I will show you how to lead me on a leash to not cause trouble to anyone.” Shiro sighs even heavier and agrees. They can’t let the fucked-up government spoil their fun.

But. Shiro can pretend he is unaffected by the new rule with Keith, who basically lives Shiro’s life by now, knows his quirks (and Shiro knows Keith’s, too; how he hates being touched without explicit permission, for example, and other, too) and is at ease with him, but he can’t act the same way with Lance. He can’t imagine walking Lance on a leash! The very thought makes Shiro feel weird. So he refuses to take Lance this time. Maybe, later, after he’s tested the strange new practice with Keith and knows what to expect.

Like the grown-up boy he is, Lance throws a tantrum in Shiro’s study. Keith can clearly see Shiro’s starting headache, that’s why he tries to make him go and rest, promising to handle Lance himself. Shiro refuses to leave, since it’s his responsibility, but he lets Keith try and talk Lance out of it. In the meantime, Shiro sits down at his table and looks for painkillers in his drawers while he listens to the boys converse.

Keith tries different approaches, but nothing works - as if Lance’s jealousy to Keith can’t be reigned in today. Lance’s arguments grow sillier with the second, and still, he doesn’t cave.

Shiro doesn’t think he could do better than Keith in given circumstances. Unless he turned on his army-self and scared the hell out of Lance, which all of them would preferably avoid.

In the end, Keith growls, exasperated: ”You’re an idiot, Lance. You’ve lucked out to have the best Owner ever. I don’t think you’ve been so well-cared for until you’ve come here. Ever . Use your tiny brain and hold your damned tongue when there’s nothing clever to say. And learn to obey orders first, if you want to be taken anywhere.”
Lance’s lower lip wobbles. He sniffs, casts the last glare on Keith and runs out of the room.

“That was harsh,” - comments Shiro when Lance’s steps grow quiet in the hallways. There’s no reproach in his tone.

Keith sighs and drops himself on his throw pillow on the floor. He covers his eyes with his hand and mumbles:

“Let Hunk calm this big baby down and explain obvious things to him.”

“That may be wise,” - says Shiro with a chuckle. His pill has started to bring some relief from the pounding in his skull and he feels better.

But Keith doesn’t see anything funny. He looks at Shiro through his spread fingers and says, slowly and somberly:

“Master Shiro, we both know it has been the only right decision. With Lance’s past... He hasn’t received a training on how to act outside, I am sure of it. You can’t risk taking him to the city now. Unless he’s gagged and his arms are tied.”

Shiro only nods. Looks like Keith takes it even more seriously than him. Then again, for Keith, it is a big deal, to leave the territory. What has he even seen in his life? His farmer village in the desert, his boarding school, then - this mansion. And Lance, too. Maybe, Lance thinks that he’s losing his only chance to see the outside world. Shiro’s heart clenches painfully.

Logically, Shiro knows that Lance’s lack of proper training and this shitty decree are not his fault, but he hates his role in this situation regardless.

Honestly, some days Shiro feels like Keith is doing things to provoke him deliberately. The bastard seems to know exactly how to push Shiro’s buttons. It’s all started after Shiro’s learned about Lance and Hunk’s relationship and has only evolved from there.

This time, it’s when Shiro insists on some “leash training” with Keith before their adventure. Not that he regrets his initiative, but it’s the hardest half an hour in his goddess-forsaken life! Keith thinks it’s funny how Shiro can’t make himself hold the leash without blushing.

“You’re a leader, Master Shiro,” - he taunts, - “It’s just another way to lead. A more obvious one!”

Shiro suddenly wants to gag Keith. The boy looks so smug, as if he knows exactly where Shiro’s wayward thoughts go.

They both pretend that those thoughts don’t excite Shiro at all.

Ow. But Shiro can’t reprimand Keith without putting a name to such blatant insubordination. Shiro can’t address it directly; not with the situation they are in. So Keith continues to tease, and Shiro - to endure. Maybe, Shiro is wrong. But the only person he could have gone to with such a problem is gone, and Shiro’s mistakes will be Shiro’s mistakes.

After all the struggle, Shiro and Keith finally go to the shelter together, later that week. Shiro takes a car with a driver. Keith is the perfect slave: full submission, not a hint of willfulness or cheekiness. Shiro admires his acting skills; who would guess that this boy helps him to manage an entire mansion
and does it well?

Shiro loves it at the shelter - the cats are well-cared for, and many find new homes soon after coming there thanks to the volunteers’ efforts.

The shelter workers sing praises to him; Siro doesn’t disappoint them saying that he knows about the existence of this shelter for less than a week and that it is all thanks to his employees who’ve been volunteering here that the organisation can run its work so smoothly, not him.

In the middle of his visit, Shiro wonders idly why he doesn’t own cats already. He likes cats, obviously. He likes other animals, as well; there are guarding dogs at the mansion, helping keep the property safe, and Shiro comes playing with them occasionally. But he’s never had an urge to have a dog in the house. Why hasn’t he ever thought about a cat? These creatures are too perfect to be true.

He knows the answer: Mr Fennel. The sly old man! Didn’t want to see his precious furniture scratched, huh? Shiro feels vindictive. Now, when he is the real ruler of his own home, he will have as many pretty cats as he wants! Only Keith’s wisdom manages to stop Shiro from adopting more than one cat (he’d take a dozen, really).

The cat Shiro chooses is red-furred, green-eyed, fluffy and has only three legs. No one comments on it; Shiro still hides his right, metallic hand in his pocket self-consciously after signing the papers.

Afterwards, Keith suggests they could go and eat burgers. He looks so hopeful that Shiro can’t resist. Also (and Shiro won’t ever admit it aloud), it’s not so bad to have Keith on a leash; Shiro enjoys knowing exactly where Keith is and that he can’t stray away from Shiro even if he tries. It’s calmer that way; Shiro is a bad, weak, perverted old man.

But after they’ve entered the diner of Keith’s choosing, sat down in a booth and placed an order, Shiro realises that they haven’t thought it through. Just when they start to discuss the kitten and what she will need (the red fluffball stays with the driver, for now), they hear some pitiful whimpers and outcries. Shiro immediately recognises the sound, well-known to him by now. It gives him creeps.

Two slave girls who serve as waitresses at the diner are getting spanked soundly behind the counter. The main action remains unseen, but the girls are made to show their faces to the customers. It’s sickening. Shiro knows that it’s not uncommon to punish slaves who work in public places right there, but it still makes his blood run hot and cold.

The cries rise in pitch, and Shiro can’t tolerate it anymore. Inside the diner, Keith is allowed to be kept unleashed to serve his master better, thankfully. They don’t need to communicate other than to look each other in the eyes. Keith nods, stands up and walks to the diner’s manager to talk.

Shiro sits in their booth and listens. Their burgers arrive, but he doesn’t have any appetite anymore. What with the conversation he has to witness.

Keith: “My Master is annoyed by the noise.”

Manager, offhandedly: “We can gag them, if you want.”

Keith: “My Master would prefer to stop the punishment altogether. He sends a little tip.”

Manager grudgingly accepts the money and commands to stop the beating.

Finally, no shrieks of pain in a place where people are supposed to eat.

Keith walks back to their table. He stops midway and shouts to the manager across his shoulder:
“And send the girls to His table now, please.”

Shiro is relieved to have the matter resolved so quickly. He doesn’t really want to see the girls’ tear-striken faces, but while they’ll be at his table, they’ll be, at least, safe.

Keith, it seems, is not bothered by the show since he starts chewing on his burger (the biggest and the spiciest one they make, of course) with gusto as soon as his ass lands in his seat.

"Can you afford to buy two more slaves, Master Shiro?" - Keith suddenly asks between bites.

Seeing Keith eat as if nothing has happened makes Shiro want to grin sloppily.

He’d buy anything if Keith only asked, wants Shiro to say.

Wrong line.

"You are my Mr Fennel now. Can I afford to buy them?" - inquires Shiro instead.

Keith stops chewing and looks straight at Shiro.

"Let me ask differently: do you know what you are going to do with them if you buy them?"

"I won’t let anyone beat them publicly? Or privately?" - replies Shiro without a second thought.

Keith smiles with gentle exasperation.

“I can work with that.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey

Are you squealing from fluffiness yet? You’d better start now, or!

But, seriously, please, leave some feedback!
Be nice to me ^-^
Chapter Summary

Shiro dreams.
The Revolution comes.
The slaves get their freedom.
Shiro has a lot of meetings.
Also, Keith.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

You are lucky to have this chapter today since I'm posting it before going to celebrate some birthdays in a hurry!

It's a nice, naughty chapter. That's about it, I guess. Also, one execution and a panic attack episode. Starts with "The next day, the “White Riot” and ends with "Thankfully, his sleep comes quickly and is dreamless." Nothing too graphic.

Have a good time reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s dark, save for the throbbing multi-coloured disco lights. Shiro can barely see Keith’s figure dancing a few meters away; his body is moving to the rhythm, he is swaying his hips alluringly and bending his spine just right. It’s as if there’s a bet going whether Keith will be able to make all the persons on the dancefloor want him, and Keith is determined to win.

He is thin, yet his whipcord muscles give him an air of danger, honed power; his body is like liquefied metal, flowing and flexing sinfully, luring Shiro in.

And Shiro is a weak man only. He descends into the sea of sweating humans and follows his siren’s violet gaze. He’s fallen for those eyes once and forever - Shiro would be a fool not to admit it.

When Shiro reaches his destination, the devilish creature smiles at him smugly, then sighs contentedly when Shiro’s metal hand encircles his neck and takes a hold. What a menace. Shiro leans down to Keith’s ear and bites the lobe, making him shiver.

“Naughty little boys, who forget who they belong to, ought to be punished,” - whispers Shiro threateningly, leans back a little and searches for Keith’s eyes. Heavy-lidded and glazed, those violet stars peer back at him. The siren is gone: this horny little imp Shiro will torment however he sees fit.

On the way home, Keith is shifting and wiggling in his seat in the car. He obediently holds his hands on his knees, but Shiro knows just how desperate for a touch he must be.
As soon as they enter the house and put their things away (Keith looking absent-minded and visibly uncomfortable in his narrow jeans), Shiro orders Keith to go to the bedroom and wait for him.

He doesn’t make his boy wait for too long; Shiro’s dick is suffering just as much as Keith’s.

And what a sight greets Shiro behind the bedroom door: the pretty pale figure kneeling in the centre of the bed, eyes downcast, hands on his knees. Keith’s cock lies heavy and proud between his legs; his breathing is heavy, a thin film of sweat is glistening on his skin.

Making slow steps, Shiro comes closer and closer, until he looms over Keith. He drags his right hand over Keith’s spine, making him shiver from the cold. Then, Shiro starts speaking:

“You’ve been such a tease out there, my boy. You didn’t ask me to dance with you, no; you’ve gone to the dance floor yourself, alone; you’ve been moving there obscenely in your sinful jeans, showing off what belongs to me, all the night long.”

Shiro suddenly drops his flesh hand to Keith’s cock and grips it in his fist; he lowers his mouth to Keith’s ear and growls lowly:

“I will put this thing in a cage next time I let you out; so that you’ll remember who owns your pleasure when your cock will try to get hard, straining painfully against steel, all in vain. Maybe, I’ll plug you, too; so that with every playful sway of your sweet butt the plug will jostle your insides and make you ask yourself whether you really want to anger your master with disobedience and risk to earn a spanking instead of a proper fucking.”

Keith sucks in a ragged breath and starts panting; he doesn’t try to fuck Shiro’s fist, though, - his last training seems to have stuck.

Keith doesn’t struggle when Shiro leads him into position. Then, the most delicious part begins: Keith, laid bare over Shiro’s thighs, offers himself for the punishment.

Shiro doesn’t spare him; why would he, after his boy has done everything to give Shiro a reason to enjoy himself.

Shiro spanks his asscheeks, switching between left and right, increasing the force of his blows slowly; then pays attention to the tender skin at the crease of his ass and thighs; then starts back on the plumper part, full force now. He slaps the reddening skin repeatedly, making the flesh jiggle and Keith strain to stay put. Ah, does Shiro love Keith’s quiet suffering. How his whole body tenses and lets go at uneven intervals, how his butt wiggles there and back, chasing relief that won’t come. The spanks hurt a lot, and Keith is so tender, so perceptive to pain.

Like every other time, Keith is hurting so beautifully. Shiro can’t get enough of him.

What Shiro doesn’t account for this time though, is Keith’s oh-so-hard dick which keeps sliding on Shiro’s thighs. At one point in time, Keith’s whimpers rise in pitch; Shiro doesn’t pay it any mind - the spanking is not done yet and he is too busy watching new islands of blue and violet.

This is how and why a few blissful seconds later, Keith wails and comes all over Shiro’s pants…

and Shiro feels that he’s coming, too…
and then it’s just him and his bed and a big wet spot on his pyjamas pants.

In the shower, Shiro recalls his dream. Dream Keith didn’t have a collar - which symbolizes his free will, his own wish to be there with Shiro. That’s such a turn on, that Shiro starts fantasizing about Dream Keith: about turning him on his back, right after he’s stopped coming, and licking his sensitive dick, cleaning it up from come, ignoring Keith’s pitiful whimpers and pleas, sucking him off until Keith spurts into Shiro’s mouth. Shiro comes again, hard.

He doesn’t look at himself in the mirror when he dries off and heads back to bed.

Maybe, it’s Shiro who needs to keep his naughtiness to himself.

When Shiro lies down, he stretches his arms to the sides… and then something furry touches his left wrist. He shrieks, rolls to the right, turns the closest lamp on, ready to fight… and sees a familiar cloud of red fur nesting on the right side of his bed. Small, cute and not so very dangerous. Before Shiro can properly laugh at himself, he hears his phone buzzing on the nightstand: a guard on the watch is checking on him. “Just a bad memory, is all,” - lies Shiro and thanks the guard. He can’t say that his new kitten has almost given him a heart attack, can he?

It takes Shiro several minutes to calm down enough to try to fall asleep again. He leaves the lamp on, just in case, and lies there, watching the tiny thing sleep. In other circumstances, he’d be ashamed of coming in his pants next to the innocent kitten, but after his “big scare,” he doesn’t really give a flying fuck about anything. How the kitten has managed to climb his bed (and why would she do that, instead of staying on her mattress), stays unsaid. Shiro doesn’t care. He just wants to relax and sleep.

Tomorrow he’ll have Hunk make a kitty-door in the door to his bathroom so that the kitten will be able to use her toilet there. He’ll also have to decide where to feed it…

The next day, Shiro feels like being a cat owner is the biggest responsibility of his. Everyone wants to know, where the tiny animal will live, what will it eat, does it have all the necessary vaccinations yet, and, the king of all questions: what will Shiro call her?

The fuck does Shiro know.

Everyone seems to be an expert in pet naming. Hunk suggests calling her Lassie; Shiro counters that she’s not a dog. Lance suggests calling her Miss Fluffs. Shiro declines. Lance doesn’t back down. Poppy? Sunny? Tigress? Cinnamon? Miss Butterscotch? Tangerine? After Apricat Shiro kindly asks Lance to let Shiro think himself, for a bit. Keith keeps quiet and only shrugs when he meets Shiro’s helpless gaze. Shiro can’t tell whether he’s thankful or, on the contrary, a little disappointed. Then, in the middle of another heated discussion, Mrs Teffy suddenly says: “Ginger?” Shiro looks at her in wonder: how could they all have forgotten such a simple name?

So, Ginger it is.

Ginger isn’t interested in the name-calling process; she’s interested in being petted and meowing every which way to never stay on the floor alone. The humans are all too easy to manipulate; Mrs Teffy promises to keep control over Ginger’s feedings so that the new love of the household won’t get overfed.
This March is an anomaly. It gets pretty warm pretty fast, and then a new snow season hits with full force. “The Snow Age!” - shouts Lance, throwing a ball at Keith’s back and hitting Shiro’s. Shiro watches as colour drains from Lance and doesn’t even feel the need to glare.

When Shiro sends two slavegirls from the diner out to the place of their service, he and his boys joke around about buying some sledges and horses to tug them to travel the snow-covered roads better.

The girls, when given a choice, have asked to be sent to one of Shiro’s farms - they have spent all their lives in small towns, with not much greenery, and their wish has been to grow flowers, simple and beautiful. They have never expected it to come true, though, couldn’t believe that Shiro has offered them to choose and then agreed to let them work in a place of their choice. There are greenhouses functioning throughout the year, Shiro has assured them, they will have plenty of flowers to tend to.

Shiro is worried to let the girls go, because of the possible oncoming mutinies, but, at the same time, he does have employees at that farm, too, and he will not let all of them be endangered in any case. The girls express their gratitude by trying to grovel at Shiro’s feet before they leave. Keith is the one to help them up gently and lead them to the car which will get them there. They have barely stayed a week at the mansion, but, of course, Lance is sniffing, leaning onto Hunk and watching the girls wave them from the window of the car.

When they enter the house, though, alarming news expect them: Ginger, who’s been staying with one of Mrs Teffy’s colleagues, is gone. The colleague is inconsolable. No one has seen Ginger after that colleague has lost sight of her. Then, a guard spots her at the entrance door on a camera’s feed… That’s a long and anxious day. Shiro, the slave boys, Mrs Teffy, some people from his personnel spend several hours, looking for the kitten inside and outside the house.

Shiro blames himself. He thinks about how he is the worst cat owner ever, how he isn’t to be trusted, how he couldn’t handle a little kitten for one week… Later, when they all gather in the entrance hall: tired, some dripping wet from the snow on the street, Shiro almost agrees to let his guards use their dogs to help with the search since he sees no other way... But then there’s some tiny scratching noise from under a big oak cupboard. A tiny paw appears, catches on the carpet and starts tugging the body from under the cupboard. The gap between the floor and the bottom of it is so narrow that neither Shiro, not his helpers had any suspicion that Ginger might have been hiding there. By the moment the whole kitten is out in the open, Shiro’s hands start trembling. It’s relief, perhaps. Shiro stumbles forward to catch Ginger. He crouches in front of her and takes her into his arms, feeling a thousand times better this very second. The clueless kitten starts purring happily, and Shiro can’t even be mad at her.

“I’ll make a tracking device for her collar,” - calls Hunk somewhere in the background. Shiro nods, still looking at Ginger. He’s glad that Keith and Mrs Teffy support Hunk’s idea enthusiastically, in his stead. Shiro stands up from his crouch and silently goes in the direction of his bedroom. He wants his warm bed, his cat on the pillow next to him and, finally, some quiet.

That’s not what he gets, unfortunately.

 Barely an hour later, Shiro hears a knock on the door. It’s Mrs Teffy.

Upon Shiro’s call, she enters, closes the door behind herself and says, urgently: “It’s started.”
Shiro, who was half-napping on the duvet, can’t comprehend it first: “What’s started?”

“The mutiny, sir. Mr Fennel says hi.”

The Revolution is there already? Is it really happening? Shiro has grown so used to the thought of some on-coming changes that he’s forgotten the meaning of them.

Soon, Shiro is wide-awake and calling an urgent staff meeting. Mrs Teffy’s colleagues all know already; there are them and the Department Heads. Then, it’s time to call his daughter companies everywhere. At the same time, Shiro’s friends get the news and guidelines on how to act. Matt and Pidge come to Shiro’s mansion despite the late hour and participate in the discussions. Pidge is sent to bed in her usual guest room early, of course (and Hunk’s distraction tactics work wonders here), but the others stay until 2 a.m. Keith, too. Shiro doesn’t have the heart to send him away - they have been through too much together lately to just treat Keith like a child. Still, Keith ends up napping, right where he’s been sitting on his throw pillow on the floor, leaning on Shiro’s armchair from the side. Shiro makes a sign at Mrs Teffy, stands up and gingerly lifts Keith from the floor. His prosthetic works really well lately, and Shiro has no trouble bringing Keith to his room. Shiro feels a little guilty over disturbing Keith and Lance, but it would be worse for Keith to wake up in Shiro’s room or in the room he uses for his “relaxation time”, alone and not remembering how he’s gotten there. So Shiro waits for Mrs Teffy to open the door for him and cautiously carries Keith over to his bed (conveniently, it’s the closest to the door). Lance and Hunk’s places are hidden behind the curtain (the pillow fort is still a thing), but Shiro has an impression that he sees two shadows in one bed. He leaves after tucking Keith in - the boy doesn’t stir; he’s lucky that Keith is a heavy sleeper. He would stay and watch Keith, like the creep he is, but he can’t, not with two other boys in the room and Mrs Teffy waiting.

Shiro catches Mrs Teffy smiling at him an amused little smile. She quickly schools her face into a more appropriate expression, but still, this tiny slip makes Shiro realise how much has changed during those four months after Mr Fennel’s disappearance. It’s always the little things. His workload, his involvement in his companies’ and mansion’s affairs, his overall awareness of the life around him, - all of this has undoubtedly undergone drastic changes. This he’s been noticing all along the way. But Mrs Teffy smiling, her colleagues cheering happily after the kitten is “rescued” after hours of searching, Department Heads mingling with “headquarters” during lunchtime - these are true signs of changes. Only now Shiro is able to see how much influence has Mr Fennel’s persona had over everyone in the mansion - and, in particular, how much his team has tried to mimic him, to be like him. Shiro didn’t know there was so much personality in each one of his “headquarters” employees: that some of them may be a little grumpy in the morning, that others prefer to draw attention during any discussion, while some just stop talking altogether when possible, aside from basic small-talk, and concentrate on listening and analyzing. They all have looked like Mr Fennel’s marionettes to him, or, maybe, as a better metaphor, his own Terracotta Army. Shiro still thinks that the “headquarters” employees have a lot in common with Mr Fennel. But now he can also see the difference: maybe, they are asocial, maybe, they are too-analytical for their own good. But they are all (except for maybe one, two persons) far from being sociopathic.

“My life is in hands of a sociopath,” - muses Shiro inwardly, entering their meeting room again. - “And I have a feeling that I’m in good care.”

The next day, the “White Riot” (not a very creative name, but there is still snow everywhere and some of the rebel heads had white caps on) makes the news. Shiro has expected fights on the streets, hungry crowds on the roads, noble people’s corpses hanging from trees, - but not this. Their country simply gets a new monarch overnight. It is one of the ex-monarch’s advisors - one of the 12 highest
ranking government officials there are in the country. There’s not much blood during the uprising (only some victims in the Great Azure Palace), there are no immediate executions of the wealthiest and the most influential. Just the ex-monarch, led to a guillotine in the inner yard of the Palace. In the moment when the knife falls, the camera draws away, but then the new monarch holds the fallen head by the hair, showing it to the camera. This very evening, that head in a glass tube with some liquid in it is positioned on the main square of the capital in front of the Palace. A special vandal-proof container is built just for the purpose of holding that tube. It’s the quintessence of barbaric and high-tech, and the absurdity of it makes Shiro want to laugh madly.

When Shiro watches the video of the execution (alone and in big secret, because everyone has told him to NOT watch), he notices a very familiar figure with a blond head on a too-thin, too-long body, standing in the third row of the onlookers.

Mr Fennel looks the same as always: calm, unemotional, in control. There’s no place for guilt or regret in his gaze.

All Shiro’s army experiences roll in front of his eyes. All the killings, all the torments. He knew that Mr Fennel is able to kill, has known all along. But seeing for himself is different. Looking at Mr Fennel, his closest family member, and knowing that he’ll associate his calm facade with uncaring faces of his torturers is too much.

Shiro has a bad anxiety episode; he can’t even make himself move. He doesn’t have flashbacks, he is just paralyzed from shock where he was lying on his right side with his tablet in his hands. No one comes looking for him: it’s the middle of the night, he doesn’t show any outward signs of being hurt or in pain while lying there motionless in his bed for his guards to check on him. But then, a warm weight settles on Shiro’s left cheek. Purring starts next.

Shiro’s little mischievous fluffball has ignored all Shiro’s attempts to not let her sleep on his head. She likes Shiro’s head. Why would she sleep somewhere else?

Shiro feels his fingers slowly unclench from where they are gripping the tablet’s edges too tightly; when his whole body unfreezes, he grabs Ginger, hugs her to his chest, curls into a ball around her, and cries.

Shiro feels so sad and mournful; he’s so unhappy with his life. Steve is a murder accomplice. How can it even be? His Steve, who’s done everything to get Shiro back from the captivity, from evil bastards who kill and torment people - now he is calmly witnessing a murder. Has there been a trial, a discussion, at least? No, nothing!

And then Ginger claws at his chin since Shiro’s tears are wet and she also isn’t pleased by being smashed to his chest. Shiro lets her go. She huffs at him and proudly leaves his bed to sleep on her previously untouched mattress. Her little carrot-like tail wiggles comically from side to side when she travels the vast expenses of Shiro’s immensely big bed and then, the floor.

“No, Ginger, please, don’t leave me!” - pleads Shiro pitifully, outstretching his hand towards the tiny cat. She doesn’t react, just gets comfy on her mattress and sleeps away.

The fact that even his tiny fluffball of a cat finds him pathetic, amuses Shiro to no end.

Despite Ginger’s obvious disdain, Shiro feels so much better. He’ll need more time to process what he’s seen on the screen, that’s for sure. But it will wait for tomorrow.

“I will take another cat from the shelter! A more compliant one!” - mumbles Shiro vindictively into his pillow.
Thankfully, his sleep comes quickly and is dreamless.

There’s all kind of stuff on Shiro’s mind. For example, that he maybe have to get back to a higher dosage of his medication. That this year he absolutely hates snow as such. That he wants Keith to sleep in his bed every night, again. That his slaves’ lives may change irrevocably very soon. That Keith won’t be his anymore and that he may choose to go anywhere and leave Shiro behind. That revolutions can’t be bloodless and that they’d better not let their guards down. That he has to talk to his employees. That he may have to contact his relatives personally, for the first time in maybe 10 years.

The TV works just the same way as before the big announcement. But only one main channel is allowed to broadcast news. The same with the radio.

The internet, of course, is on fire. “The White Riot” seems to be the only thought on everyone’s mind. Some claim that they’ll emigrate right now and ask for refuge in the neighbouring countries, some try to express their protests (those scripts get erased very quickly), some express their joy, some simply ask what to do when everything you’ve known all your life is getting crushed under the new monarch’s feet.

Shiro reads, and reads, and reads: blogs, forums, press, all of the above in other languages. The citizens of his country claim that they don’t really know what to make of the Revolution; at the same time, all the flights out of the country for the next month are booked. The instinct to flee must be a natural thing; there’s been a murder shown on air, after all. Shiro still shudders, remembering it. Their ex-monarch has been a vile pig, but Shiro can’t approve of a murder. The whole execution just doesn’t sit well with him. Maybe, were it to happen after a long, tedious trial in the Royal Court, with press and naïve onlookers stating their opinions, with the whole thing becoming another boring news topic with no real outcome first, then Shiro wouldn’t feel as deterred by it (even if the meaning would stay the same). Also, the guillotine. Why the fuck wouldn’t they just kill the ex-monarch with a medication? Their country has developed the best euthanasia methods, thanks to the countless generations of slaves who’d had to be put to eternal sleep upon reaching their sunset years, why don’t put the knowledge to proper use?

There are millions of other thoughts and questions in Shiro’s head, but the Internet doesn’t have the answers. When his eyes ache and his back does, too, Shiro leaves his laptop and strolls to his big windows, to take a breath and to relax, watching his snow-covered garden.

After all his searching, he knows one thing for sure - he is scared.

Shiro doesn’t watch the news this day. That’s why Keith and Mrs Teffy come to his study and give him a retelling.

There is a lot of information on the ex-monarchs crimes against his subjects, a lot of new laws for all spheres of public life getting ready for discussion by the ministers, a lot of new initiatives etc.

The main news, of course, is that the slaves are considered free people from now on and any abuse towards ex-slaves will be considered a serious crime. Since the state has the info on every ex-slave’s whereabouts, thanks to the implanted chips, there will be a count of ex-slaves in every household, in every company or school, during which every ex-owner will have to demonstrate where ex-their ex-
slaves are being held and how well they are being taken care of. The ex-owners are legally bound to provide food and shelter to the ex-slaves for the next three months. The ex-slaves will have to find proper workplaces in the future, though. Each of them will be provided with a range of works which correspond with their skills set to choose from. Also, they will be able to learn something new later and change their occupations. The ex-slaves can choose to stay with their ex-master if they wish to continue working at their factory or at their house, as hired workers with all respective rights, of course.

Sex work is banned in their country. Hiring a prostitute becomes a crime.

Mrs Teffy is the one who talks the most. Keith looks like he’s not quite comprehending what’s happening. Shiro can’t blame him, not really.

When they are done with narrating, Mrs Teffy tries to initiate a discussion of what they have just learned, then looks between Shiro and Keith, who are both avoiding each other’s gazes, and gives an exaggerated sigh. She leaps to her feet energetically, claps her hands and says, loudly:

“My precious!”

When both men look at her, baffled, she continues:

“Mr Shirogane, your slaves are free and you can finally hire them, like any other employee. Would you like that?”

“Yes, but…” - starts Shiro, unsure.

“That’s great!” - interrupts Mrs Teffy and claps her hands again. - “Keith, do you want to work by Mr Shirogane?”

Keith nods.

“Use your words, please!”

“Yes,” - says Keith firmly, looking at Mrs Teffy.

“Brilliant! Consider yourself hired. I would tell you about your rights as a worker, but you’re versed in this already. And remember, you can quit any moment.”

With that, Mrs Teffy struts to the door.

“What will make the same offer to Hunk and Lance. Hope they’ll agree,” - she throws at them when she closes the door.

To say that this is awkward would be the understatement of the century.

Shiro is absolutely floored by the news.

It is what he wanted.

The changes are being implemented reasonably, for now.

Keith has said he doesn’t want to leave immediately.

It’s all good. It’s all Shiro has ever wanted and more.
Why does he feel as if the ground crumbles under his feet?

“Keith?” - starts Shiro and nothing more comes out.

What does he want to ask? Whether Keith really does want to stay here? Whether he has some wishes for the future which are not including Shiro?

Keith makes a strangled sound, as if he wants to say something, but he can’t make himself utter the words.

Shiro can’t force him to speak his mind, especially not at a time like this.

Shiro steels himself and says, his own voice sounding hollow in his own ears:

“I am glad that you want to stay for now. I mean, if everything goes well, then you’ll be able to study something? Travel somewhere. What I’m saying is…”

And Shiro trails off, not really knowing what he is saying.

Keith mumbles something like “yeah, that’s good,” then he’s carefully shuffling out of the room, still muttering something, and Shiro is unable to stop it.

Shiro has the urge to go find Ginger and hug her. Then he remembers that she doesn’t enjoy his tears and decides against it. Anyway, he opens the app which shows the data from the tracking device on Ginger’s collar (Hunk has been good on his word) and sees that the kitten is currently lounging on a sofa in one of the recreation rooms for the employees. She’s fine.

Shiro calls Mrs Teffy. She comes back, looking sad. Shiro thinks that she eyes him somewhat reproachful. He doesn’t know how he could have deserved it.

“Lance and Hunk are eager to stay here,” - she rapport. - “I’ve checked, kids older than 15 are allowed the choice - younger kids will have to be redistributed between boarding schools.”

“Oh yeah?” - asks Shiro just to not stay mute.

“Yes, they have decided that if we have made underage persons work for us, we may as well ask for their opinions, for once.”

Shiro nods. He’s glad it is that way.

“But what if they don’t know and can’t make a decision? All their choices have been made for them all their lives.”

“Then they’ll go to one of the boarding schools, as well.”

“That makes sense,” - mutters Shiro, mostly to himself. He is not in the mood for discussing the news. He wants solitude to wallow in his self-pity.

“Mr Shirogane. Look at me, please.”

Shiro turns his head to look at Mrs Teffy, dismayed. Why can’t she just read his non-verbal message already?

Mrs Teffy doesn’t get scared so easily. Not anymore.
“You have been a good caretaker for these boys. You’ve done so much for them that I can’t imagine any other owner has ever done the same for his charges. You are equals now. Help the boys grow up and reach your level. You can do that.”

Shiro is not so sure. But Mrs Teffy is not done.

“They all think that you are a good person. They won’t want to get away from you as soon as a possibility arises. Maybe, they will leave one day - go to another place, find a school they like, a workplace they want to try out. But I don’t believe that they will not stay in contact. They all adore you. They are good boys, and they know how to be grateful.”

Shiro opens his mouth and closes it again.

Mrs Teffy reaches for his hand, giving him enough time to shoo her away. He doesn’t. She takes his left hand in her and squeezes it.

“They need you now, more than ever. Don’t abandon them. You’ve said it yourself - what if they don’t know how to make these decisions for themselves now? Their heads are bursting with all the new information, with all the new freedoms. They need a guide. I want to be there for them. Do you?”

“Yes,” - hears Shiro himself say. - “So much.”

“If you think you’re guilty of something, apologize. But don’t think that you are not worthy enough to take care of them.”

Shiro and Mrs Teffy look at each other for some time; Shiro tries to adopt some of her determination and, maybe, he succeeds.

After they separate their hands, she tells him to get ready for a big video-conference with all his companies in an hour and leaves.

Shiro can swear that she mutters under her breath something like: “How did Mr Fennel deal with this all these years…” when she closes the door.

He won’t hold it against her.

The video-conference is a big success and a big failure at the same time. The “headquarters”, the Department Heads - everyone is gathered in the big room. Keith, Lance and Hunk are also there. Keith sits close to Shiro, together with Mrs Teffy. It’s nothing new since Keith has been Shiro’s personal assistant, advisor and nanny, all in one, for many months now, but in the light of the latest events, it looks like a statement. Hunk and Lance sit in a far corner, as to not draw any attention. They are not used to such publicity.

Shiro starts his speech, saying that he approves of the state’s new initiatives fully. He remarks that the work of their business group won’t be disturbed in any way since there are only under two dozens elderly ex-slaves and two underage ex-slavegirls serving on the farms and the three slaves working in his house, all his other workers have always been free people. The fee he, as an ex-slave owner has to pay, is remarkably big, but nothing they can’t handle. Summing up, they all will be able to continue their work almost unperturbed.

The first part of the speech is met with approving nods and sighs of relief. The second brings out the controversy, as expected.
In the second part, Shiro says that he has always tried to be a socially responsible business owner. Now, when their country is at a crossroads, they all need to make a decision. Shiro wants to help their country become stronger thanks to relinquishing their old ways. He wants to help the newly freed people gain their momentum, find their way in life. Shiro says that he wants to open programs for slaves’ rehabilitation, make new workplaces for them. In the end, he voices his main thought of the evening: that all of them have a responsibility to the ex-slaves and that their society will have to do a lot of effort to atone for the misdeeds of their predecessors.

His last statement is met with an uproar of voices. All of his listeners start murmuring at each other, some surprised, some genuinely confused, some outraged. It’s a mess from then on. Some directors just disconnect the call. At some point, Keith (about whose presence Shiro has genuinely forgotten), leans to the microphone and says, before Shiro can intervene: “I really want all of you who are shouting at Mr Shirogane right now to spend a day as a slave at a common factory or a farm. Or imagine sending one of your offsprings to a boarding school for slave kids. And only then open your mouths and talk.”

Mrs Teffy rounds up the discussion very quickly afterwards while everyone (including said Mr Shirogane) is mostly stunned to silence.

They end the call and take a breath.

In the back of the room, Shiro can hear someone laughing their ass off. He turns around and sees Hunk clutching at his sides and wheezing: “Oh, Keith! Get them, you punk!” Lance looks indignant. Shiro drags his gaze back to Keith who is sitting sullen and ruffled up next to him.

“That was one hell of a conclusion, Keith,” - says Shiro. It was out of place, but it was what Shiro feels as well. He wouldn’t be able to ever say it like Keith, though, with so much conviction.

Maybe, they shouldn’t be as surprised by the violent feedback. It does make sense that many people don’t realize what slavery really means, can’t empathize with the ex-slaves. Slaves are (no, have been) a common occurrence. Seeing slaves every day and owning them are two different things, though. Only the richest people or big companies could afford to buy slaves. Other citizens may have a very vague understanding of how it all works (or has worked). Shiro makes a mental note to make a letter with background information on the slaves’ life in their country and post it online so that everyone could learn what they are leaving in the past.

Of course, any employee who doesn’t support Shirogane’s group new course may quit. There are dozens of conservative companies out there. The main problem is, all such companies will soon go bankrupt, since their main working source, the slaves, won’t be available anymore, and the ex-slaves who’d stay, even for the first three months, won’t be working for their ex-abusers as studiously as before. Also, the companies will have to pay them - which is a huge expense.

All in all, they all have to live in the new order, or flee to another country and start everything anew (one of the newest decrees was that if someone leaves the country for more than a month without receiving a special authorization from the government, they will be considered a traitor and all their property will either be given to their heirs or confiscated by the state). Their new monarch certainly looks for any means to boost the coffers.

Shiro feels drained after the conference. He wants to just stand up and leave, go to his bedroom, order whoever person has hogged Ginger to deliver her to him and nap. But reality has other plans: his employees start to come to him one by one, offering their support and encouraging him to continue moving in his chosen direction. It’s unexpected and welcome.

Maybe, because of his previous speech aimed at his mansion’s inhabitants, about how he views his
boys as free people, his employees here are not as shocked as the ones at the city companies. Maybe, his team has more experience with viewing slaves as people - they’ve worked alongside Keith, Lance and Hunk for half a year now, they know that they are just like them and not a separate class of human beings, as some prefer to think. For many, Shiro knows, it’s a defensive mechanism: to not let themselves feel, to not be compassionate so that they won’t have to feel the fear of ever deserving the same destiny for themselves - because if slaves were people like me, then I could be a slave, too? It’s too big a threat.

Shiro really wants to see Mr Fennel right now, despite all the misgivings. Talk to him. Hear his opinions, listen to his advice. But, he supposes, his ex-chief assistant is busy without him. He’ll wait. Patience yields focus.

The next morning starts with a series of early video-calls with his company’s branches, continues with some meetings, then Keith tugs him to the canteen to have lunch, then the meetings go on again. Matt and Allura come for a short visit - to discuss what they can do, together. Both of Shiro’s friends have their hands full, as well: what with the number of slaves they own. No, not like that. With the number of ex-slaves, they have to take care of. They think of making a guide for owners who have no idea what to do right now. Then Matt and Allura leave, and Shiro has some more meetings.

In the evening, Mrs Teffy closes Shiro’s laptop right in front of him and says that they need him alive and also well rested because they want Shiro to work at full capacity. Shiro wants to argue, but his eyes ache and he’d do with some rest.

He goes to his bedroom, where Ginger is waiting for him in the middle of his bed. She’s dragged her little mouse toy there and claws at it leisurely. After spotting his kitten, Shiro instantly feels better. He spends the next half an hour, playing with her. Despite having one leg less, she is just as vicious as any cat. She’s going to be a wild predator when she grows up. If there are any mice in his mansion, she’ll dig them out.

Shiro is completely immersed in watching Ginger trying to catch the end of one of his ties (he’s chosen an ugly one) so that a knock on the door makes him startle. It’s Keith.

Keith walks into the room, looks at the scene on the bed, smiles fondly at them, and then shakes his head as if to sober up. Shiro leaves the tie and the kitten alone. He sits up properly and looks at Keith, prompting him to talk. Whatever it is, Shiro feels calm enough to deal with it.

Keith takes a deep breath and says:

“I love you, Master Shiro.”

Chapter End Notes

So. Are you screaming yet?
If not, I’ve done something wrong.

Update: my dear friend nudge has summarised Shiro’s actions in the chapter with an amazing level of precision:

"I think Shiro is handling it well, even if he's an emotional wreck who keeps wanting to
cry into his kitty's fur."
**Being Happy**

Chapter Summary

Shiro reacts to Keith's confession. They are together now. They tell the employees of Shiro's mansion about it and get a party in return.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my deer, and mice, and kittens, and hippos, and little owls! (And everyone who identifies differently!)

8400 words. Why not? Really, why the fuck not? Where are my happy 5 k words? And I haven't even included half of the evil I've planned to.

That's a sweet chapter. Really. A lot of nice, long conversations, things talked through, people being honest...
And a little evil cliffhanger in the very end.

Have a nice read!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I love you, Master Shiro.”

Shiro’s world freezes for a second and then buzzes to life again.
It’s like a microscopic lightning strike, just for him.
It’s entirely shocking, as if he’s gone blind for a second and then saw the world in new colours.
It can’t be a prank, can it? No, Keith is not like that. He’d never do that to Shiro.
And there’s nothing Shiro wouldn’t have given him just so if Keith would only ask, so, this can’t be out of vested interest either. Again, Keith is not like that.
Which leaves the only possibility: that Keith truly thinks that he loves Shiro.

Shiro dares a look at Keith when his mind stops twirling and just keeps looking, unable to tear his eyes from Keith. Keith just stands there, his arms by his sides, his face open and honest. For the lack of a better word, he looks determined. Resigned. Does he expect that Shiro will tell him to leave?

And Shiro should, obviously. For Keith’s own good.
Shiro has admitted aloud once that he’s bought Keith because he had an impulse to save him. Gosh, did he want to be a hero again, for one short day? Maybe, but Shiro doesn’t regret anything. He knows, he’s 100% certain, that taking Keith home has been the right thing to do. Keith’s life has become better, Keith’s health has improved, his psychological trauma gets treated. Shiro is glad that he’s acted the way he did.

It is all so fucked up. It’s been pretty fucked up from the very beginning. Shiro didn’t want to buy a slave. And certainly, he had no intention of falling in love with that slave after buying them.

But Shiro is one thing. Shiro is depressed and has a lot of issues, but he is an adult man who’s seen his fair share of life. He can assess his feelings properly (most of the time, at least; in this particular case, he couldn’t be surer). Keith, on the other hand, is an adolescent boy who’s spent all his years living sheltered. He doesn’t know what he does. He is unable to prepare himself for the consequences. Whatever they might be imagining in their heads, 16 against 26 is a lot.

Another alternative explanation comes to Shiro’s mind - but Shiro finds it too sad to even consider. To be “loved” out of gratitude would shatter Shiro’s world just a bit more. Yes, he has helped Keith, but he has never expected anything in return.

Keith shouldn’t be in love with Shiro for any reason, though. It’s absurd.

Eventually, Shiro realises that he’s watching the wall behind Keith’s head. He drags his eyes back to Keith’s face and is met with a gaze full of such pain and longing that Shiro feels his breath die in his chest.

Keith is serious about it.

He won’t let Shiro think that it’s not a genuine feeling.

That’s an even bigger problem, then - even if it Keith’s love genuine, it can’t be, it shouldn’t be.

Keith can’t just get stuck on Shiro, can’t waste his time on a broken person like Shiro. He has so much to learn, so much to explore. Keith is brilliant; given an opportunity, he will change this world.

And Shiro?

Shiro bears so many scars, on the inside and on the outside

Shiro will never be the man he’s been before, the man he was supposed to be.

Shiro will never be good enough for a boy like Keith.

It’s true. He will never be enough.

He will have to tell Keith to go away.

He will have to make Keith leave and forget about all that.

And then, when Keith is gone, Shiro will…

Shiro will…

It all goes blurry, but Shiro has to say the words to Keith. He needs to breathe in and breathe out. Do his calming exercises. He remembers them, so he does them.
A voice reaches out to him through the haze, reminds him how to count his breaths, praises him. Shiro follows the voice.

Once Shiro’s mind reaches the surface, he recognizes the voice and its owner.

Shiro is back to himself and he feels so tired.

And oh, he’s gone into another panic attack in front of Keith. How fitting.

“Master Shiro, you with me?” - Keith’s voice is as soft and reassuring as it always is.

Keith goes through the motions as he’s done countless times: makes Shiro drink some water, tries to have some skin on skin contact whenever possible, talks to him soothingly. Despite everything, it helps; despite his hard thoughts, Shiro takes the comfort offered to him.

Once Keith deems Shiro ready to talk again, he stops his fussing.

Shiro can see him steeling himself. Before Shiro can utter a word, stop Keith from whatever he’s planning, Keith gracefully slinks to the floor and kneels in front of Shiro on the floor. If it were not enough to leave Shiro speechless, then Keith putting his palms atop Shiro’s knees and leaning in slightly certainly does the job.

“Master Shiro. I love you.”

Shiro’s breath hitchs.

To hell with everything - it is so good to hear these words from Keith’s lips Shiro can’t even berate himself anymore.

“Tell me, why you think I shouldn’t love you. I won’t promise that I’ll back off, but I want to know. I need to know.”

Shiro’s heart starts beating out of his chest. He can’t talk about that.

Keith’s palms on Shiro’s knees burn like brands. Shiro feels trapped - yet, it is not a bad feeling.

“Tell me to leave if I’m making you uncomfortable. I’ll call Salomey and leave when she comes here.”

Shiro shakes his head. He needs to explain his reasoning to Keith before he goes. Ryan will disown Shiro if he doesn’t talk this out (and Ina will probably come to rip Shiro’s head off).

So Shiro clears his throat, gathers his courage and starts with the main reason of why he can’t accept Keith’s feelings. He thinks his fingers tremble a little where he holds them against the bed.

“Keith, I’m older than you by ten years. It’s a lot.”

“It is, - confirms Keith easily. - “But you’re only 26, not 40. It’s not a death sentence.”

As someone who will reach his forties much sooner than Keith himself, Shiro sends him an
incredulous glare. Keith only shrugs in response. OK, this argument didn’t work.

Shiro goes on:

“I’m always on a verge of a breakdown…”

Keith interrupts impatiently:

“Nothing I haven’t seen yet.”

Shiro’s jaw falls down from such boldness.

“Do you really want to deal with that?” - Shiro asks after a bit of silence. - “It’ll get old very fast.”

“No, not really. I hate seeing you in pain. But if it is the price of being next to you, I can deal with it just fine. You’re doing so much better already. You are getting there.”

Keith sounds so sure that even Shiro believes him in this moment.

Shiro tries, weakly:

“You… You’re deluding yourself. I’m your former owner, and your feeling might be just a form of Stockholm…”

“…syndrome. No, not really, Master Shiro. No.”

“How can you be so sure?” - says Shiro, a little dumbfounded. He starts feeling outclassed in this argument.

“I’ve asked Ina.”

“Ina?”

The conversation grows stranger by the minute.

“Yes, Ina. I know she doesn’t have a psychologist's certificate and can’t treat people. But she knows the theory and is a better observer than Ryan. Also, Ryan thinks the same.”

Ryan? Oh, goddess.

Keith must notice his crestfallen expression.

“Master Shiro, I’ve only ever told Ina - she’s just guessed how I feel about you from the beginning. She's asked Ryan without waiting for my permission. I mean, Hunk and Lance have teased me from the start, but I’ve never confirmed anything.”

That’s a hell of a difference, thank you very much.

Keith continues:

“I think I’ve fallen in love with you on that night when we’ve been walking the road at night. Darkness, the road, and only the two of us. It felt as if there was no one else in the world. I dared to look at you as though you were just another person, not my owner. It had to be just once, just that fairy night that was so unlike any other. But then the morning has come, and we were back to our home, and I was wearing a collar you’ve given me, and you didn’t want to let me go to my room. I’ve been lying there, under your bed, and thinking about how easily you’ve caught me in the garden
the day before, despite having only one arm, how secure I have felt when I’ve learned that it was you who’d caught me. How you’ve treated me like a person. How you looked under the moonlight, all sharp angles and…”

Keith promptly shuts up in the middle of a sentence, red as a tomato. So, there are still things which get him flustered, aha!

“You’re not so bad looking yourself, moonlight or not,” - says Shiro without thinking. He doesn’t blush himself but is gifted with the view of Keith ducking his head down to hide his gaze under the fringe. Keith’s hair has grown out so much, the ponytail thing may become reality soon. His long neck looks even more fragile without the red band around it.

And then...

“You haven’t told me anything in return,” - mumbles Keith. - “I mean, about how you feel. That’s how it’s done, according to everyone. Books, too.”

Shiro’s heart does a strange dance inside his ribcage. It can’t be healthy.

“I…” - he starts talking and stops, uncertain. He can’t be honest, can he?

Keith interprets his silence as a decline.

He moves his hands from Shiro’s knees and puts them on the floor, as if to keep himself up, to not collapse completely, his whole body slumping in defeat.

He must have been on edge, talking about such things sure takes its toll. Yet, Shiro can’t make himself talk. His tongue is leaden and his head is full of static.

Keith utters, talking to the floor under Shiro’s feet:

“I just needed you to know. I’ve been in love with you all this time, and now that I’m free, I thought that there’s no point in hiding it anymore.”

Keith’s voice starts dying down as if a tumbler is being spun:

“I feel lighter after telling you. Thank you for listening to me, Master Shiro. I’m sorry for burdening you.”

In the end, it’s no more than a tiny whisper. And then Keith moves to stand up, and Shiro can already feel his lungs refusing to breathe as soon as Keith will move a meter away, so he reaches out on instinct. He doesn’t even touch the hem of Keith’s turtleneck, but, luckily for him, Keith looks back.

His gaze is sad, but still, there’s place for concern in his expression.

Shiro doesn’t deserve him.

Shiro feels like he’s going to die if he loses Keith’s trust now.

He wheezes out:

“Just… time.”

Always understanding him and his needs so well, Keith sits down on the bed next to Shiro.
It takes some time, more than Shiro has expected, but eventually, he feels that he’s able to talk.

“Keith. You know that even if you love someone, the feeling may… perish with time?”

Keith looks at him tiredly, as if asking: “Do you hold me for an idiot?”

“Nothing is set in stone,” - Shiro still says, ignoring Keith’s passive protest.

Shiro ceases talking. It’s obvious he won’t be able to get his point through.

At the same time, a wave of anger at himself and his own cowardice rises in Shiro.

What does he lose if he is being honest with Keith? If he treats Keith as a kid now, all their closeness will be lost. He’ll hurt him worse that way.

Whatever the outcome, he can’t have Keith leaving without coming to an understanding, without knowing that they still have each other (if both of them will still want it, of course).

But when it comes to Shiro, he is sure, he will always be there for Keith, no matter what. He tells Keith as much and receives the same promise.

That, and the fact that Keith is able to look Shiro in the eyes again makes Shiro bolder.

“I love you, Keith,” - says Shiro aloud.

For the first time in 9 months, Shiro doesn’t feel guilty for this.

He doesn’t mean harm and he can’t not love Keith.

There was nothing to be ashamed about in the first place (not taking his wet dreams into account).

Shiro looks at Keith and sees him crying silently. No movements, no sounds, just tears rolling down his cheeks. Shiro is all over himself from worry in an instant.

“You… you mean it?” - Keith chokes out.

“Yes, I do. I love you. I’ve been in love with you from the very start, I think. You’ve been so fierce and proud when I saw you in a cage at the auction that I couldn’t get you out of my head since then,” - admits Shiro, looking straight at Keith. The numbness from before is gone and Shiro feels ready to conquer the world.

Keith, not so much. He hides his face in his palms and starts sobbing.

Shiro just pulls Keith to himself and lets him cry.

“We don’t have to change anything. But I’m so happy you’ve made me say it, Keith. You’ve brought all the good things into my life. I love you. I love you,” - once he’s said it, Shiro wants to repeat it again and again.
Keith only cries harder. Shiro can’t even imagine how much it has cost him, to confess to Shiro. Keith is a brave boy, but he’s been hurt and abandoned so many times that Shiro can’t help but feel immensely proud of him for making the first step. Goddess knows, Shiro wouldn’t ever be ready for that.

Shiro and Keith stay cuddled close for a while.

Ginger comes, spends some time lying on Shiro’s thigh, then wanders off again.

Then Shiro tugs both of them further on the bed so that they can use the pillows by the headboard. Shiro has to stand up to turn off the lights, and Keith whimpers when he does, but then Shiro crawls back to Keith, cradles him in his arms again and they just lie in the dark, holding each other close.

Shiro hasn’t ever felt this safe and right. Maybe, only years ago, while his parents have been still with him. He tells Keith and makes him laugh.

Then, unexpectedly for himself, Shiro starts telling Keith all the things he’s thought about him, all the ideas he’s had, his favourite memories with Keith in them, the moments he’s been especially proud of Keith.

“I’ve had dreams about you,” - he says at last.

Keith perks up and asks, curiously:

“What have these dreams been about?”

“They were… inappropriate,” - admits Shiro after a blink.

“Oh yeah? Would they make Salomey blush?”

“I don’t know? Does she even blush?”

“O my gosh! She blushes so easily if you know what to say! It’s a pity it would be mean to show you.”

“Then I won’t know whether my dreams would make Mrs Teffy blush since you’ll keep her secret, like a good friend.”

“Pity,” - sighs Keith.

“Pity,” - agrees Shiro.

“And still, what have we been doing in those dreams? Having sex?”

Shiro thinks he’ll soon forget what embarrassment is, with Keith.

“Kind of?”

“You’re no fun, Master Shiro.”

“Would you call me Shiro? Finally, from now on? Please, I can’t hear this “Masters” from you anymore.”

“I don’t mind calling you Master,” - shrugs Keith. - “To be true, I would’ve been fine where I was as
a slave if I was able to confess to you and have any chance that you will accept my feelings. Back then, I would’ve been happy to just let you know. I haven’t really dared to hope that you would reciprocate. I knew you would’ve been caught between a rock and a hard place was I to tell you anything like “I love you” before the Day, so I didn’t.”

“Being caught between a rock and a hard place? That’s a good summary of the reasons for my continuous crisis of the last 9 months.”

“Your problem is that you’re too proper, Mas… Shiro. You are just too fair and merciful.”

“No, I’m…”

“And too modest, as well.”

This time, Shiro doesn’t have a retort ready.

Keith has some more to say:

“I would have never believed that I’d fall in love with an owner. Never. Until I’ve met you.”

Shiro wants to remind him of their first evening in the mansion, how he’s made Keith undress and wanted to punish him, just because that’s what he thought was expected of him. He’ll never forgive himself for that evening. For the whole first three months, actually. Shiro opens his mouth to tell Keith all this, but, as if sensing his intention, Keith doesn’t even let him start talking:

“No, Shiro, you have treated me just the way I’ve been expecting. I would’ve never believed that you are actually nice and would have always expected your darker side to appear otherwise. Nothing has happened on that first evening. I’m not really self-conscious when it comes to undressing in front of other people. Have never been. So, I’m not traumatized. Stop beating yourself up.”

“But I intended to…”

“Whip me with your belt? You would’ve thrown up before you’ve raised a hand to me.”

“I’ve made Mr Fennel spank you…” - insists Shiro.

“And he might be eternally grateful for the opportunity. He’s definitely had a lot of fun.”

Shiro squirms on the bed, scandalised.

Isn’t Keith taking things too lightly?

“Shiro. Please, let’s not go there. Mr Fennel has proven to me that I can trust him through these sessions. I mean, he’s been in charge of me. I’ve expected him to hate me from the very start, to bully me every which way and to beat me up every time he felt like it whether I’ve been disobedient or not. He could’ve done whatever to me, but he didn’t. He’s treated me fairly and he has taken very good care of me. He’s never abused my trust, especially when I’ve been at my most vulnerable.”

Shiro hears the unsaid “unlike you” at the end of the phrase. He remembers all the times he’s let Keith down, let him face his fears alone, let him suffer needlessly. His throat seizes painfully.

In response, Keith hugs him tighter.

“You’ve been always so very kind to me, Shiro. And honest. And respectful. And kind. And generous. And…”
Keith inhales deeply when his emotions become too much and doesn’t speak for a while, supposedly gathering his thoughts. Shiro waits patiently, basking in the warmth. It feels so good to lie here in Keith’s embrace. It feels so nice to finally trace patterns into his skin, to pet him and hug him close, to feel Keith’s heartbeat close to his own.

It’s a kind of happiness Shiro has considered unreachable. An unimaginable level of contentedness. A true peace his soul has craved.

Suddenly, Keith untangles his limbs from Shiro’s and sits up on the bed, looking straight at Shiro. It’s dark, save for the light from the window, but their eyes have adjusted to it and Shiro is able to see Keith’s face in the faint moonglow quite well. Keith is biting his lip and breathing hard, as if he wants to say something else of importance and gathers his wits. It must be something that pushes Keith’s boundaries but he still needs it out in the open.

Shiro sits up, too, to be on the same level.

Keith speaks, as if he continues a long conversation he’s been having with himself in his head.

“I loved serving you. I mean it. It didn’t feel humiliating to me. I was proud to be yours. I was proud to be allowed to be your slave in public. Because it is an honour, to be by your side. I… I don’t want to…”

Keith hiccups and Shiro sees it as his clue to pull Keith closer again. He hugs him very tight and rocks him slightly.

It feels very natural, to help Keith to calm down. Shiro knows Keith, Shiro knows how to treat him right. Shiro is able to help his beloved. He is sure of it, and this sort of confidence is something Shiro hasn’t expected to return to him after all his trials. He shushes Keith and murmurs into his ear, rocking them gently:

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, baby. I’m here, with you. You can still serve me if you want to. Because goddess knows, I do need your help. I need your support, I need your quick mind, I need your tenderness. You don’t have to suffer anymore. I want to give you all you need, all I am able to provide. I want you to be loved and cherished. I want you happy.”

Keith sobes quietly into Shiro’s chest. He doesn’t weep this time, but he is so on edge after opening up to Shiro like that, that the emotions override everything - they are too much, too strong for how overwhelmed Keith already is, and yet, Keith needs to deal with them now, because it’s been too long, too hard, too lonely, too painful to stay all alone with the feelings too big to be contained.

Shiro can’t explain how he knows all this - he just does.

He has a few things to add to his confession, too:

“And baby, I am so selfish. I always wanted you all to myself. Not because I’ve bought you - regardless of your feelings on the matter, no - but because you’d come to want that yourself. To be mine. I still want that. I’m scared of how much I want to own you - in more ways than I ever did.”

Keith stirs against his chest, but Shiro’s broad palm finds his mouth and covers it gingerly.

“No, baby, don’t offer me anything now. I want you to make a big, conscious decision. To do so, you need to let yourself grow and become stronger, wiser. Learn what it means to be independent. And when you did, if you’d still want to give yourself over to me, then I’d accept it. Because I want to see you evolve into an intelligent young man, want to see you come to your full glory first - and then I want to have it all. Given by you, willingly. See, how greedy I am.”
It’s a possessive and selfish wish he’s laid bare in front of Keith.

It’s Shiro at his rawest, in response to Keith’s sincerity.

Keith stills in his arms. Shiro holds him and feels like he is enough for the first time in forever.

In about a minute, Keith mutters something under his breath.

Shiro thinks it’s been addressed at him, so he asks:

“Yeah, Keith, baby? Could you please repeat it for me?”

“I want that, too,” - says Keith barely audibly. - “But what if I change my mind? What if I don’t want that when… I’m older?”

“Then you’ll let me have what you’ll let me have, and I won’t ask for more. Even if it will be nothing at all.”

Shiro shudders just from thinking about it.

“I can’t imagine leaving you,” - Keith shakes his head.

“But people change. I don’t want you to feel trapped just because you are grateful to me. Just because you’ve loved me once.”

“But I want to love you and to be with you, for as long as I can.”

“That makes two of us, baby.”

“But if I’m all grown up and still want it, will you take me? And won’t let go of me?”

“Never in my life. For as long as you’ll still want it.”

“Shiro?”

“Yes, darling?”

“And while we.. wait…”

“Go on, Keith.”

“Will you tell me sometimes… about those things… you want?”

Shiro whispers in Keith’s ear:

“How I want to hide you in my room and have you all to myself? How I want to spoil you rotten? How I want to call you all the silly names and dress you up?”

Keith whimpers.

Shiro smirks and adds, in his usual voice this time:

“Maybe, I could.”

“I won’t let go of you until you take me,” - mumbles Keith sleepily. It seems that Shiro’s possessive nonsense has calmed him up like nothing else.
Keith is so precious.

Shiro wants him. Right now, right here, pretty and pliant. He’ll often be caught in such a state from now on. They’ll have to do something about it, discuss their urges, make a decision on how to deal with them. But later, not now.

Keith needs his sleep.

“No, you won’t,” - agrees Shiro. - “And you won’t let me out of your sight. Who knows what stupid things I may do, unsupervised.”

“Yes,” - confirms Keith with a yawn, still managing to sound serious.

“And if you’ll still want to be mine, I’ll have you, all of you, and won’t ever let you go on my own volition. Only if you want me to.”

“I will never want to,” - mutters Keith and then his breathing evens out and he just falls asleep, half-propped up against Shiro.

“I suppose you’re moving in with me soon,” - whispers Shiro, tucking Keith in and lying down beside him.

There are still so many open questions, but tomorrow will be another day.

They will both be glowing from happiness tomorrow.

Shiro doesn’t think he’ll need to explain much.

Especially after they come out of his bedroom in the morning, together.

Maybe, holding hands, thinks Shiro and falls asleep, too.

Shiro wakes up to an empty bed. He doesn’t think about it first, used to being alone in his room in the morning. Then he remembers and surges up, his heart racing. Luckily for him, Keith is not gone - he is just out of bed and standing at Shiro’s favourite spot in front of the big windows overlooking the park. He’s still wearing his clothes from yesterday - he looks good in all black. Shiro didn’t have the time to admire Keith’s looks after he’s dropped the bomb, but he can make up for it now - while Keith is oblivious to his staring.

Shiro’s gaze searches the collar unconsciously which is not there since Keith has taken it off the next day after the big announcement (and any collar shouldn’t have ever been on Keith’s neck in the first place), - but to Shiro the scarlet band has been a part of their mutual history, a connection, a gift he’s let Keith choose. Shiro sees how Keith’s fingers follow the familiar path, trying to fiddle with the leather, but find no purchase there and settle on his shirt’s collar instead.

Keith is lost in thought, his expression open and unguarded. It’s not like Keith is a pro at hiding his feelings, but he’s been trained by the best of the best - Shiro hasn’t ever met a poker-face quite like Steve’s. And Keith doesn’t ever let his emotions show on his face like that.

Shiro barely suppresses a heavy sigh when he thinks about Steve - there has been no new letters or news about Steve’s life at the moment. Shiro is still shaken by the fact that he didn’t know everything
about his closest person, that he’s been lied to and used (even if only in the beginning), but he is
coming to terms with the thought. Steve should better build them a good new political system - then
Shiro may consider forgiving him.

Shiro slides off the bed and pads to the window - and Keith still doesn’t notice that Shiro’s awake.
What is he thinking about? Shiro would really like to know. Maybe, Keith will tell him later.

“Keith?” - calls Shiro in a low voice, trying to sound peaceful.

Still, Keith startles. He whirls in place, his expression panicked. As if he’s been caught doing
something inappropriate. To Shiro’s dismay, Keith doesn’t calm down when he recognizes Shiro -
moreover, he takes a step back to the window. Shiro feels like he’s losing Keith before they have
even started anything together as partners. He would’ve preferred to talk first, but by now he knows
what Keith’s face looks like when he’s ready to bolt, and it means there’s no time for words. Shiro
just steps towards him and tugs him to himself, hugging Keith tightly and not leaving him any chance
to flee. Keith tenses for a second and then just melts against Shiro, his hands grabbing Shiro’s hips
and holding on.

“That’s my boy, hugging me so tight,” - croons Shiro. - “That’s OK, everything is fine, baby. I’ve
got you.”

And again, Shiro feels how Keith starts to cry. Shiro’s brain freezes in horror for a second - what has
he done to make Keith cry so early in the morning? Then, he tries to take himself under control, for
Keith’s sake, stop making assumptions and just ask.

“What’s wrong?” - Shiro says carefully, in a neutral voice. Keith sobs against his chest in lieu of a
response.

“You can tell me if it’s not a secret. Is there something I can do?” - tries Shiro again. Keith just
shakes his head against Shiro’s shirt.

“It’s just…” - starts Keith and then cries out: - “Ouch!”

He scares Shiro with this sudden reaction - Shiro’s instinct to look for an enemy is strong - but it
turns out it’s only Ginger trying to climb Keith like a tree.

Shiro facepalms and starts laughing. No one has given him so many reasons to be scared lately (or,
maybe, the better word is - spooked?), as his little kitten. She’s a horror.

Keith joins him in his laughter in a bit, after scooping the kitten up.

He still has tears in his eyes when he says, smiling:

“Does it mean I haven’t dreamt yesterday evening?”

Shiro recalls his own behaviour from yesterday and suddenly feels an urge to hide his face
somewhere. He’s been insufferable, even more than usual. Has almost dropped so hard that Keith
would’ve had to call someone for help.

“Hey?” - asks Keith, concerned. - “What is it, Shiro?”

Hearing Keith call him by his name is so pleasing. It eases Shiro’s mind at once.

“I just thought that I’ve given you so much trouble the previous evening.” - admits Shiro.
Keith scoffs.

“You never give me trouble. The other way around, maybe, but you are never trouble.”

And then they both say “I love you” at the same time and both giggle stupidly.

They come out of the room together. Not holding hands, to Shiro’s pity, but they’ll have time to try it later.

Mrs Teffy looks at them suspiciously when they join her at her table in the canteen. She puts her phone aside and gives Keith a questioning half-glare.

Keith shrugs, grins and starts eating.

Mrs Teffy looks at Shiro, a shocked expression crawling up on her face. She jerks her gaze to Keith, and Shiro can only shrug helplessly, too. His own smile is a little sheepish. Why so, he can’t explain. He isn’t taking advantage of Keith, he knows it. They haven’t even kissed. Will they kiss soon? Is it allowed? Shiro cringes inwardly. Allowed by whom exactly? If Keith wants it, they’ll kiss. Just mentioning it makes Shiro giddy from happiness.

Mrs Teffy scrunches up her nose as if in distaste (Shiro would translate it like “leave your sappy shit behind closed doors”) and swiftly moves on, starting a topic about prices on gasoline.

The day goes on like that: Shiro and Keith follow their daily duties, receive knowing looks from everyone, don’t get any questions. To Shiro, it seems that the day goes by in some kind of a daze: there are no doubts, no sudden guilt trips, no bitter musings about the future, and instead, there is hope. Hope that life will let him have it, this time. Hope that he won’t fuck up everything given a chance to be with Keith. Hope that they both are going to be happy.

When Shiro meets Keith’s eyes, he doesn’t see anything he hasn’t seen before: tenderness, sincere interest, wish to support. But now he knows that it’s not only that; that it’s Keith’s love to Shiro that makes him look at Shiro so fondly and adoringly. Shiro has never let himself imagine a variant where Keith would love him back. It was for his own sake: how would he be able to live if he were to delude himself that Keith is in love with him and then find out that it’s entirely wrong?

Shiro thinks that they’ll have to make a little announcement to their employees, also, tell their friends. How will they say it? We are boyfriends now? We are dating? We are going to hold hands and kiss chastely until Keith is of age? But it needs to be done. People need a source of information, otherwise, they’ll construct their own stories.

The most blatant example: they have seen Hunk muffling Lance with his big hand and tugging him away when Lance was obviously trying to shout something pointing his finger at Shiro and Keith. Shiro thinks he’s heard Hunk whispering loudly: “We may be free people now, Lance, but it doesn’t mean that I’m not afraid of Salomey!” Shiro has sighed contentedly after witnessing the scene: it’s been nice to know that some traditions don’t die in this household and kids are still afraid of his chief assistant, despite the change of the person.

They sleep again in Shiro’s bedroom at night and the next day Shiro gathers the employees and announces that he and Keith are together. There are so many congratulations and happy faces around them that Shiro starts to think that people have had suspicions long before yesterday. Shiro tries to shield Keith from the attention, but it doesn’t truly work, so he just hugs him and lets Keith hide in his chest. It’s an ex-orbital level of cuteness, but Shiro glares at his underlings who start to outright
Mrs Teffy looks so proud that some may think that all this meeting is about her. She has every right to be, actually - she’s been with Keith during the most complicated times and has supported him all the way. Shiro is happy that she is so happy for Keith, her best friend here.

Keith doesn’t let himself use the safety of Shiro’s embrace for long; after a little while, he disentangles from Shiro and smiles at his colleagues. Shiro can’t even start expressing how proud he is of him. He keeps a hand on the small of Keith’s back or on his shoulder when he can; he wants Keith to know that he’ll give him as much support as he needs and won’t ever shame him for needing a break from life’s challenges. Shiro just hopes that he’ll always have enough inner resources to be there for Keith when Keith will need him. Shiro just hopes he’ll be enough.

Shiro shakes his head to return to the present moment. Right in time: turns out, the staff is already organizing a party to celebrate their final come together. Keith mutters grudgingly: “You just want a reason to not work today!”, and Shiro looks at him in surprise - he wanted to use the same line as a joke. Keith has taken the words right out of his mouth!

At that moment, Mrs Teffy ushers them out of the room, since: “There must be at least a little bit of a surprise!”

Keith says, purposefully looking anywhere but at Shiro: “I think we could play with Ginger. Everyone is so busy slacking off that she must feel lonely.”

Shiro grins: “We can’t leave the little girl all alone.”

And just like that, they hole up in Shiro’s bedroom and just spend their time glued to each other on the giant bed: Shiro working on his laptop, Keith reading his newest book. Someone even brings them food by the door at lunchtime. After they have eaten, Shiro jokes that he didn’t know that everyone was so tired to look at their faces. Keith snorts and says that it may be only Shiro’s face.

That’s simply rude. No, no, Shiro can’t have it. Shiro comes to the bed and looks down at Keith, sprawled across it on his back. He tilts his head to the side and lifts a brow. Keith stops grinning. Shiro lets his face grow stern and a little threatening. Keith gulps and sits up on the bed, his gaze on Shiro. He looks so pretty right now, all concerned and wide-eyed.

Shiro runs his fingers over Keith’s neck, then tips his chin up with his index finger:

“Mouthy, aren’t you?”

Keith’s eyes get a little glassy.

“Maybe,” - he breathes out.

“What am I going to do with you?” - asks Shiro rhetorically. - “When even Mr Fennel has been unable to teach you good manners.”

“Teach me some more,” - suggests Keith. His voice has acquired a dreamy lilt Shiro’s coming to appreciate more and more.

“On your knees for me then, naughty boy,” - orders Shiro.

Keith takes the position with practised ease and grace. He turns his gaze down automatically, the way he’s been told. Shiro doesn’t like not seeing Keith’s eyes one bit.

“Your eyes up on me, Keith. Like that. And you will keep your head straight and look in front of you when I ask you to kneel, understood?”
“Yes, sir,” - says Keith, keeping his gaze trained on the wall when Shiro moves out of his focus.

“That’s a good boy,” - praises Shiro. - “See, you can learn so fast.”

Keith squirms a little.

At that moment, someone knocks on the door. Keith tenses, but doesn’t break his pose.

Shiro moves closer to the door so that Keith won’t be in the view if someone decides to enter (he’ll keep the door locked next time) and calls out:

“What is it?”

Mrs Teffy answers:

“We need you and Keith in the canteen.”

“We’ll be there in 15 minutes.”

“That’s too long. Make it 10,” - she calls back and Shiro hears her steps move away.

He looks back at Keith, holding still for him, kneeling on his bed all pretty and obedient.

“Doing so well for me, Keith,” - says Shiro. - “I’m going to cuddle with you for a while, and then we’ll go. Does it sound OK for you?”

“Yes, sir,” - answers Keith clearly. Good, Shiro was afraid he’s gone under too quick.

Shiro orders him to lie down on his side, which Keith does, and then slides to the bed behind him. He hugs Keith tightly from behind and nuzzles to his hair. He likes how Keith smells, he thinks. Honestly, he’s yet to find anything he doesn’t like about Keith. They stay like that for a while, Shiro not really caring about Mrs Teffy’s blatant invitation to the party.

Then, Keith stirs in his arms and tries to turn around so that he faces Shiro. Shiro doesn’t let him, which makes Keith wiggle and squirm in his arms. When he’s properly exhausted, Keith gives up and goes limp in Shiro’s hold. Shiro chuckles and whispers to Keith’s ear:

“Ow, Keith, you’re such a well-behaved boy when you try. I’m impressed.”

Keith huffs.

“I could’ve tried more often if only I’ve had some… motivation?”

“O-ho? And what kind of motivation you need?”

Keith stills in Shiro’s arms and obviously debates with himself whether to tell Shiro his wish or not.

“A kiss. A kiss would be a good motivation.”

“That’s bold,” - states Shiro.

“That’s what people do when they’re dating, Mast… Shiro.”

Shiro almost groans aloud at that slip. He’ll never like this title. Too many bad associations. He enjoys Keith’s submission - since he believes it’s been a choice for Keith when it came to listening to Shiro after they have started talking for the second time, during Keith’s fourths month in the
mansion. The titles neither of them has chosen, though, - those Shiro despises.

“Then I guess I will have to,” - sighs Shiro.

He finally lets Keith turn over, so that they lie facing each other, and pecks him lightly on the nose. When Keith chases his lips, Shiro leans back, out of the reach, and starts standing up from the bed. Keith realises he’s been tricked and groans loudly, covering his eyes with his arm.

“What was that?” - he demands, all obedience gone.

“A kiss?” - asks Shiro innocently.

“If someone will call you nice during that party, I’m going to open their eyes to your evilness.”

“Oh? You say you are going to refuse your reward kiss after the party? For your good behaviour?”

Keith takes his arm away and looks at Shiro with furrowed brows.

“You’re going to trick me again,” - he says with conviction.


Keith groans again, even louder, and jumps up from the bed. He starts making himself presentable after lounging in bed all day. Shiro hasn’t noticed how and when, but there are Keith’s things in his wardrobe already. Shiro follows his example.

When they’re almost done and are standing in front of the bathroom mirror, Keith says with determination:

“I’m going to behave so well that even you won’t be able to deny me that kiss, Shiro.”

Shiro laughs, caught off guard.

“You should have asked what I consider good behaviour, then,” - he says at last.

Keith gapes at him.

“So you are going to make the rules on the move?” - he asks, disbelieving.

“It’s you who yearns for a kiss,” - says Shiro nonchalantly.

Goddess, Keith looks good when furious.

Before Keith can give Shiro a piece of his mind, Shiro leans in and kisses him sweetly on the lips, shushing him effectively and making him blush.

“So pretty,” - mumbles Shiro against Keith’s lips before pulling back.

Keith looks like a deer in headlights.

“Baby? You there?” - teases Shiro.

Keith blinks at him dumbly. Then he sputters indignantly:

“You… You’re so...!”

“Yeah?” - encourages Shiro.
“Urgh,” - says Keith eloquently and starts for the door. Shiro follows him.

“Mean,” - says Keith when they reach the door to the canteen. - “That’s the word I’ve been looking for.”

Not giving Shiro time to react, he pushes the door open and there are party poppers, and a cake, Allura, Matt and Pidge, even Ryan and Ina, and it’s a mess, and someone takes photos, and Shiro is so glad they have taken some time to clean up.

He hasn’t expected so much fuss about their announcement at all, thinks Shiro, standing at a wall surrounded by the “headquarters” staff, a little numb from all the conflicting emotions. He’s happy, and he’s excited to share this moment with Keith and their friends, and he feels so free thanks to not having to hide his love for Keith anymore. At the same time, he can’t help but think about his parents, and how he won’t be able to let them meet Keith; about Steve who’s busy doing goddess knows what while his favourite boys are celebrating their first days together; about how he’ll have to hear so many ugly things about himself and Keith the next time he meets anyone from the outside.

Keith, meanwhile, does his best to earn another kiss. He pretends to be the most well-behaved boy the world has ever seen. Shiro notices Keith’s glances from time to time; does Keith check whether Shiro is looking?

What is Shiro going to do with him? Shiro’s birthday is in April. He’s going to be 27 while Keith is going to turn 17 in July.

Shiro will have to play games with Keith and invent reasons why they can’t go further than kissing for a whole fucking year.

But that’s OK. Shiro is somehow sure that if he was to announce that they won’t have sex ever, Keith still wouldn’t be deterred.

Shiro never leaves Keith out of sight through that evening, touches him or hugs him when the situation allows it. Keith playfully glares at him and swats at Shiro’s hands lightly, pretending to be annoyed by Shiro’s insistent following. But when no one watches, Keith meets his eyes, and his look at Shiro is so reverent, so devoted, that it makes Shiro’s heart overflow with love and adoration, makes him want to take Keith in his arms and never let him down, never let anything evil (or even mildly unpleasant) happen to his beloved.

At some point during the party, Shiro miraculously stays alone, somehow. He nurses his bright-blue drink (not Steve’s deadly cocktail, he can’t help but think irritably) and watches Keith from across the room, how he is being teased by Hunk and Pidge, how he tries to poke Pidge on her nose since she’s being so “nosy” and how she nimbly evades his attacks, how Lance stealthily prances at Keith from behind when the latter is busy chatting, almost making Keith stumble to the ground under their combined weight, and how they wrestle excitedly, trying to land the other on his back on the floor, until Mrs Teffy scolds them. A smile never leaves Shiro’s lips when he watches them. There’s one moment when the party buzz around him dulls, and Shiro’s thoughts run stark and clear in his head. Shiro looks at Keith and his friends and doesn’t feel even an ounce of jealousy, the way he certainly would have felt before; what’s changed other than they have confessed to each other? Does this alone make everything different in all the good ways? What if Shiro could have confessed earlier, while the slavery has been still there? Shiro thinks that if Keith was to accept his feelings, Shiro’d feel liberated. If Keith was to allow Shiro to love him, if Keith wasn’t grossed out by Shiro’s confession… Even if Keith would say he doesn’t like Shiro back (and the mere idea makes Shiro die a little on the inside) but would allow Shiro to stay close to him, that would still be a better place for Shiro than the one he’s been before the Day.
It seems like Shiro has been more jealous of Keith’s friends having no restrictions in telling Keith how they feel if need be than of them possibly being together with Keith. Because Keith’s happiness matters more than Shiro getting what he wishes for.

It’s silly how Shiro has envied Keith’s friends like that.

And it’s a little frightening how easily Shiro can imagine letting Keith go if he asks for it.

But then Keith’s hands snake around his waist, and Keith hides his face in Shiro’s shoulder in a move that’s getting more and more familiar with them and complains how Lance is the worst and Shiro should just send Lance somewhere far away, to a farm or the capital or the moon. Keith is there, and he doesn’t want to leave Shiro. Not now. Shiro doesn’t have to get ready for a heart-break. Not yet, at least. Maybe, if Shiro is good, not ever.

It’s a little hard to find his voice, but Shiro croaks out:

“Won’t do. Then I’ll have to send Hunk away, too, since they’re a package deal, and who will track Ginger for us in the giant mansion, then?”

Keith squints at him suspiciously but doesn’t comment.

“Pidge,” - he offers and buries his head back in Shiro’s bulk.

Shiro loves him to pieces.

The party continues well after midnight. There’s all kind of stupid mischief and drunken shenanigans. Shiro stays relatively sober throughout it and is able to enjoy Ryan singing pop songs in chorus with Matt, and then Allura having a dancing contest with Ina (and Pidge going green from jealousy when Ina and Allura perform a tango in the end).

They fall asleep to Shiro’s bedroom (and Shiro is starting to call it “their” bedroom in his head), cuddled close. They both wear pyjamas to bed and it’s totally fine, for now.

Shiro has had so many dreams and fantasies about Keith, but in real life, he can hardly imagine purposefully undressing in front of Keith, trying to seduce him. They’ll go slow. That’s the reasonable thing to do.

The next weeks are hectic. April comes and goes, while Shiro gets dragged into every affair related to slaves being free people now because he can’t (and doesn’t want to) say no.

Keith and Mrs Teffy scold him, tell him to control himself and his impulses, but Shiro can see that they understand. They know how he’s been trapped in his role of an owner all his life long, how he felt that he should’ve been doing something, anything, and has rotten in his own indecisiveness for years instead. How he can’t not help when people need his help and Shiro is able to provide.

The mansion is so full of different people now - ex-slaves, social workers and volunteers from everywhere - that Shiro finally starts to miss his solitude. But when he sees his beautiful fountains surrounded by marvelling onlookers, when he hears laughter from every corner, when nothing about his home feels lifeless and abandoned anymore, then he remembers how much he’s wished for that all to come true.
Strangely, but Shiro feels like his paranoia is finally letting him go. It’s more his employees forcing him to be careful than Shiro looking for loopholes. Maybe, it’s his constant happiness or simply Keith’s presence which fills Shiro with the feeling of safety, but when he gets a call from a social worker from the newly founded “Department of Newly Freed Citizens Care Services” telling him that they can’t contact Mrs Ezor anymore after they have conducted their last audit of her mansion, Shiro doesn’t refuse to go there and check on the ex-slaves together with a Department’s employee. He’s seen more of the mansion than the auditors from the Department, he may be able to help to locate the slaves if the need arises. The tracking chips provide only so much precision on maps when not Pidge-rebalanced.

Shiro takes a driver to be able to work on his laptop, one guard and also Keith who refuses to let Shiro go without him.

Shiro doesn’t think he’ll ever forgive himself for giving in to Keith’s whim that time.

Chapter End Notes

hehey

What do you think? Shiro is so suave)))
I couldn't stop smiling myself, working on this chapter.
Suffering

Chapter Summary

Shiro and Keith visit Mrs Ezor's mansion.
Something goes very wrong.
In the end, Shiro finds himself back at square one when it comes to handling his anxiety issues.

Chapter Notes

Hey hey hey

My dears, this chapter has been a struggle. It's long, again, a lot happens, it's angsty...
It's the worst of all here, I'd say.
WARNING! Read the end notes for the chapter's whole summary! This shit may be too triggering for some! You may decide to read the summary first, then proceed with caution.
Actually, all the warnings and tags which cover this chapter's triggers are already there. Still, I know that some readers are not prepared for the bad stuff.

I hope you still have a good time reading!

I consider this year lucky for myself. This fic has a lot to do with it. It is my longest work yet, and I like how it goes. There will be two more chapters, my precious, and then I hope to start with Keith's POV for the events that come after Numb is over. It may take some time, though. I have so many projects in mind!

Happy New Year to everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

During the ride to Mrs Ezor's mansion, Shiro is working, as he’s intended, and Keith naps next to him in the back seat. Their driver and the guard exchange a word or two, but mostly keep silent. Shiro feels calm in their company. Not for the first time, Shiro is glad that his personnel, for the major part, has turned out to be nice, trustworthy people.

Mrs Teffy hasn’t been very happy when she’s heard that Shiro wants to tag along with the social workers to check on Mrs Ezor's ex-slaves. But Keith has promised to watch over Shiro, and she’s relented. Still, she’s ordered the driver to contact her every half an hour and notify her how their trip goes. Shiro has just sighed. It’s been him who’s drilled that safety is above all else into his employees. Or rather, him and Steve, but Shiro didn’t want to think about that.

“Clint might be somewhere there,” - Shiro has reminded Mrs Teffy trying to drive his point home. He has regretted it instantly since Mrs Teffy’s gaze has turned haunted and she had to look away for a second. This way, it sounded as if Shiro was accusing her of cold-heartedness. There’s no way she has forgotten who Clint is and where he must be. It’s been her hardest task as Mr Fennel’s
representative at the time. Also, it’s been their first time working together as a team - him, Mrs Teffy and Keith. From the current perspective, the events involving Clint look like a part of Mr Fennel’s master plan on teaching his charges independence - the one that made them all communicate and be allies. Shiro knows that even if Mrs Ezor’s visit has played into Mr Fennel’s intentions just so, it hasn’t been staged. What a coincidence, really.

Strangely, but the memory stirs the lingering bitterness in Shiro. He’s long learnt how to survive without Steve, hasn’t he? Why does he still want Steve to come back and praise Shiro for doing well so badly? OK, he’s gone overboard, no praising is required, but Shiro wants Steve to finally show his face to him after all these months. Why the fuck is it so hard to come to their city once? To invite Shiro to the capital? Shiro can afford such a journey, thanks to them not taking his wealth away from him. If seeing Shiro in person doesn’t work for Steve for whatever reason, why not organize a 5-minute long Skype-call? No, that must be too much to ask from a busy and powerful shithead that Mr Fennel has become. Shiro’s birthday in April, (which everyone treats like an ordinary day upon Shiro’s request anyway - Shiro doesn’t like this date since his parents have died), hasn’t been a matter important enough to contact Shiro either. Shiro doesn’t know why he is angry about that in particular. Steve hasn’t ever expressed a desire to celebrate Shiro’s birthday, following Shiro’s directives to the letter. Shiro holds in a long sigh. Maybe, he’s just looking for reasons to hate Steve.

Keith somehow senses Shiro’s quiet seething, because he nuzzles closer to him and mumbles something in his sleep. It won’t do to ruin Keith’s sleep, and Shiro makes himself take relaxing breaths.

Steve won’t be able to run away from Shiro eternally. Shiro may go into politics just to make Steve meet him if that’s what is required of him. Right after this notion pops up in Shiro’s head, he thinks that Steve most certainly won’t ever let him do that - because dangerous! - and sags in his seat, defeated. There must be a way!

Shiro still believes that Steve won’t leave him, not completely, at least.

He fucking misses Steve.

When they’ve almost reached the mansion, the guard tells Shiro that he can’t contact the Department’s car and the respective employee. Should they still go or maybe wait for them here, on the road? Shiro calls the Department and is told that the car sent to Mrs Ezor’s mansion is on its way. A mobile network error, surely. Shiro orders the guard to keep calling every 15 minutes, and then, about ten minutes later, they arrive at their destination.

The mansion hasn’t changed in the least. The same outer walls, the same gates, the same crazy colours and kitschy design. But not a soul greets them at the entrance; not a single servant or guard is seen in the general vicinity. It’s alarming. Shiro sends the guard to look into the house and calls first the Department (they confirm that several slaves are still in the mansion, according to the chips), then Mrs Teffy. She tells him to return home immediately. The Department car is “still on its way”, and Mrs Teffy doesn’t like the whole situation one bit. Shiro agrees with her wholeheartedly. But there may be people in the building. Slaves needing immediate help. He thanks Mrs Teffy and ends the call.

The guard emerges from the main building and reports that he’s found no one. But from his explanations, Shiro understands that he hasn’t been to the room where Mrs Ezor’s pleasure slaves have been kept.

Clint might be there.
Shiro orders the driver to stay in the car next to the gates and be ready to start the motor at any time. Shiro contemplates leaving Keith in the car, but he feels safer when he can see his boy (and he doesn’t want to waste time on trying to persuade Keith to stay was he to argue). Next, Shiro, Keith and the guard go inside. The place looks like it’s been just recently abandoned: everything is in good order, but the absence of inhabitants is obvious. Shiro can’t help but turn his head back and forth whenever he hears any faint sound or notices something resembling a human figure with his peripheral vision.

Shiro leads the way, Keith walks in the middle, the guard brings up the rear. No one talks, and when Keith slips on a marble plate and almost falls, catching himself on a wooden chest of drawers with a thump, the sound seems to ring throughout the whole building. Their walk is short - it seems to take hours, though, so thick the tension is. Shiro begins to doubt whether they are going the right way - but he can’t be wrong here, he remembers going to that chamber like it’s been yesterday.

The closer they come, the more Shiro wants this visit to be over with. He wants to turn back. He regrets agreeing to come here. He regrets not waiting for the Department employee. At the same time, there might be people in need of saving; to check on them is the right thing to do. Shiro has been running away for far too long to allow himself such weakness now.

Finally, the nondescript door in the middle of a maze of ugly painted corridors. Shiro steels himself and enters.

At first glance, the room with the swimming pool looks void of any life like the rest of the house. The pool is empty, though. But then Shiro sees them - the ex-slaves; their collars are all metal and they’re connected to the wall hooks with short chains. The poor things are so still and motionless that they don’t look like they are even breathing. Keith reacts first: he runs to the closest figure sprawled on the floor and checks his pulse. Shiro remembers that boy; he must be Lulu, though his matted red hair doesn’t look half as vibrant as it did last time... Keith’s call brings Shiro back to the present.

They check the closest bathroom - there’s no water in the pipes. Shiro sends the guard to search for water and contact the police, Mrs Teffy and the Department while he’s searching. In the meantime, Shiro and Keith try to find a way to free the dehydrated slaves from their shackles. In search of a key, Shiro wanders into an adjoining closet; there’s no light and Shiro has to fiddle with the switch on the wall. When the lights turn on finally, Shiro’s heart falls: there’s Clint, sitting in a crouch at the far wall. Shiro stumbles and almost falls in his hurry to get to him. First of all, Shiro tries to check Clint’s pulse with shaking fingers. At his touch, Clint moves and lifts his head a little; he has a bit-gag in his mouth and his gaze is blurry. When Clint recognizes Shiro, he gets agitated and starts shaking his head as much as he can with the chain keeping him tethered close to the wall.

“I won’t hurt you,” - tries Shiro soothingly.

The next second, Clint’s eyes go wide and Shiro hears a pained yelp.

It’s Keith.

Shiro doesn’t even manage to turn his body towards the room with the pool when a heavy blow lands to his head and he loses consciousness.

… His head aches horribly when he wakes.

If this state can be called being awake - Shiro feels sluggish and heavy, as if he’s in a nightmare
where he must run to save himself but can’t. There are murmurs of voices and something pierces the skin on his shoulder

He loses consciousness again…

Shiro opens his eyes to a grim ceiling. He doesn’t recognize it. Has he fainted in that closet? Shiro tries to lift his arms but finds out that he can’t move a muscle below is neck. He is barely able to turn his head to the side - and is greeted with a sight of an equally grim brick wall. He looks to the other side - there’s a room, a seemingly spacious one. But it’s sparsely lit, and Shiro’s vision is still blurry. He can’t make out much beside some human-looking shapes and a table of sorts.

Why is he here? Where is he?

His head aches.

Right! The blow from behind.

Keith?!

He needs to move, needs to find Keith. Shiro starts struggling - all in vain.

He can do nothing. His body is limp and useless. His mind is in disarray - he’s scared, he’s confused, he’s horrified.

Shiro lowers his gaze a little, watching his own body. As far as he can see, he’s lying naked on some surface. But something is missing. His prosthetic! It’s absent. The place where it should join the stump of his right arm is empty. The thought petrifies Shiro; he can’t lose his right arm all over again!

Shiro tries to call for help; only a gurgle comes out of his throat. He’s so thirsty. He’s so helpless and scared.

His breathing gets shallow, but Shiro makes himself inhale and exhale in a calming rhythm. He can’t give in; not when he doesn’t even know what has happened to Keith.

He is not going to succumb to his fear, he will fight it every step of the way. He will not give in. He is strong; he can be strong, for himself, for Keith.

Short after Shiro’s first attempt to make a sound, one misshapen figure moves closer to him from the far corner of the room. It comes to where Shiro lies and pours water down at Shiro’s face. The water gets into his nose and mouth, he can’t evade it with how sluggish he is; Shiro feels like he’s going to drown. But then the stream stops, leaving Shiro coughing: weak, wet, horrified, aware, alive.

His vision clears a little, too.

When he sees the person standing above him, Shiro wishes to go back to unconsciousness.

“Hello, dear,” - she coos at him in mock-sympathy. Her hair is a dark-pink halo around her long, pretty face. - “Aww, your head must be hurting, baby.”

Shiro can’t fight the oncoming panic attack anymore. The world beams with white and ceases to exist for an unknown period of time.
The next time Shiro comes to himself, he’s still in the same position - on some table or a gurney, naked and paralyzed. Dread feels like a constant in his body now - and Shiro works through his breathing exercises. He doesn’t remember much else in this state, but the counts - those he remembers.

And then:

“No, let go of me!”

Keith. Goddess, it’s Keith. Someone is hurting him.

Ezor! The fucking bitch!

The fury is a good alternative to fear, it seems. Shiro’s thoughts gain a direction - his whole being is turned to white-hot rage. He should’ve killed her while he could, and he struggles to change that fact, yet his body won’t move.

Shiro calls out to her, threatens her, shouts, but no one pays him any mind; just Keith’s voice pleads in the background:

“Please, don’t hurt Shiro. I’ll do anything, just please don’t hurt him.”

“We won’t,” - promises a rough female voice. - “We’ll hurt you in his stead and make him watch. That’ll do for a show, yeah?”

Shiro gathers all his willpower and tries to move, even a centimetre. Still nothing.

Then, a shadow looms over him; Ezor again.

“You’ve been so high and mighty the last time I’ve seen you,” - sing-songs Ezor over him. - “Not so arrogant now, are you?”

Keith’s quiet pleading in the background never stops; he sounds so scared and small. The sounds scrape Shiro’s heart raw.

For Keith’s sake, Shiro reigns his anger and asks:

“What do you want from me? You know I’ll give you anything.”

She laughs.

“Nothing, baby, just to watch how you learn your place. Your dear Steve Fennel and his friends have taken everything from us. There’s nothing in this place we’ll ever want or need again. But making you suffer - I wanted this all along, so I’m taking it.”

With that, she wheels the gurney around a little, and Shiro can see Keith from the side. He’s bent over a table, strapped to it by his hands. His feet are tied to the table legs. In the woman who stands close to him, Shiro recognizes Ezor’s “sister”, Mrs Zethrid.

Keith begs:

“No, please, don’t do it. Please. I can’t.”

Zethrid replies, her throaty voice taking on a teasing lilt:

“Why not? Don’t pretend you don’t know how it goes. They have trained you to take it. That’s what
you’ve been supposed to do: spread your legs and take it.”

At the same time, Shiro sees that she’s starting to lube her fingers. There’s a strange-looking device standing behind Zethrid, with a dildo attached to it. No, that can’t be. They can’t do it to Keith.

Shiro shouts: “Keith, no! Don’t listen to them!...” when a palm slaps over his mouth.

“One more word, and I’ll tell her to forgo the lube,” - tweets Ezor. - “Zethrid, don’t stall: we don’t have much time!”

She sounds so cheerful; as a girl before the start of her favourite show.

Shiro feels bile gathering in his mouth; he won’t be able to witness this; he’s going to be sick.

Not just that: he’s probably going to die, suffocated by his own vomit since Ezor doesn’t care every which way.

“Please,” - he tries again.

Ezor laughs and slaps Shiro on the mouth once more. He barely feels it.

Keith’s voice is getting more and more high-pitched; he’s horrified, he’s losing himself in his fear, and Shiro can’t do anything.

Zethrid is touching Keith; she’s violating him, and Shiro can’t do a thing.

He wants to close his eyes or to look away, but he can’t; how can he leave Keith all alone in that?

Shiro thinks he can hear Keith weeping.

And then, suddenly, there’s more to the horrors of the day: Shiro can hear gunshots. It gets Shiro to a new level of fear: he knows full well what people with guns can do. Shiro doesn’t pay attention to Ezor or Zethrid anymore. For a second, Shiro even forgets Keith in his overwhelming fear.

The door opens with a bang and there are more shots.

The pitiful coward that he is, Shiro mentally apologizes to Keith and closes his eyes. He can’t make himself watch anymore...

…A familiar self-assured voice tugs Shiro back:

“Keith, you’re safe now. I’m going to untie you.”

“Please, don’t hurt Shiro,” - whimpers Keith, as small and scared as before.

“No, we won’t. He’ll be OK,” - says the man Shiro has last heard from almost half a year ago.

It can’t be. After all this? No, it’d be too much of a miracle.

But then warm, nimble hands feel out his forehead, touch his neck. The sensations are familiar, too, so Shiro dares to open his eyes.

There are people. A lot. In full ammunition. In uniforms.
And there’s Steve, holding onto Shiro’s shoulder, and a sturdy man next to him he is holding Keith bridal-style.

Keith cries out when he sees Shiro meeting his gaze.

I’m alright, Keith, Shiro wants to say. I was fine all this time. No one has touched me. You don’t have to worry about me.

But the words won’t come.

Maybe, because, logically, the next thing Shiro’d want to say is “it’s you who’s suffered”.

But it’s obvious and stupid, and Keith doesn’t need to hear it now.

Keith looks miserable.

Shiro wants to comfort him, knows that it’s his duty to support Keith.

He can’t do anything. Not even tell Keith again that all the things the bastards have told him are not true.

Keith asks something by Mr Fennel, and soon the man holding him brings Keith closer to Shiro’s motionless frame. Keith leans forward slightly and stretches his arm towards Shiro. The world around them blurs, fades out of focus. Shiro can barely breathe.

Keith’s hand touches Shiro’s cheek, so tenderly that it hurts.

Shiro has just proven that he doesn’t deserve Keith’s devotion, yet Keith is still so kind to him.

“M’sorry,” - mutters Shiro and blacks out.

Shiro comes around in his own room. It’s half dark, and he can feel a familiar warm weight on his chest; Ginger. His muscles feel stiff, so Shiro tries to change his position, to turn to the left first. His body is not just stiff, actually: it aches all over. His head, especially. Shiro groans and sits up clumsily, dislocating the kitten, holding onto his forehead with his left hand.

Shiro glances at the nightstand - and there’s only a glass of water. His metal arm is nowhere to see. Has he drunk too much again? Has he lost his prosthetic? No, that’s bullshit. How could that even happen?

A faint murmur is heard from the direction of the corridor. There are voices; Shiro doesn’t recognise the second one. There’s a narrow gap between the door and the doorframe, and the yellowish light from the outside creeps into the room.

“I hope you would’ve been more composed if I was still absent. You need to be more effective than that to clean up after your employer’s ill-considered actions,” - says Mr Fennel coldly.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry,” - replies the second voice. It sounds raw and weak as if the owner is on the verge of tears.

“I have no doubt you are. Back to your request: I’ll let you meet them after you get your nerves under control. They don’t need more strain now. You’ve seen them sleep, peaceful and safe, now go and take good care of yourself. I want you ready before they start asking about you.”
“Yes, sir,” whispers the second voice.

Shoes start clicking away in a familiar rhythm when it hits Shiro: that was Mrs Teffy! Why would Mr Fennel stop her from entering?! Why did she sound that way?

So many questions for once.

Shiro’s head starts pulsing in heavy bursts. He can’t stop a loud moan of pain at that. The next second, somewhere on the bed to his left, a lump of covers and blankets stirs, making Shiro turn his head that way quickly. Of course, the sudden movement brings another bout of a headache, so strong that Shiro has to close his eyes and wait it out. When he is ready to open his eyes again, he can see Keith sitting on the bed about a meter away from him, the blankets still piled up around him.

Shiro’s first reaction is to smile at his partner. Keith doesn’t smile back - he tries, but he doesn’t quite manage to. Only then does Shiro’s tired conscious take in how exhausted and hollow Keith’s face looks, how his lips are bitten raw. Shiro wants to pull Keith in with a practised move and hug him because he knows that’s the best way to calm his boy down. So he tries to do just that. But when Shiro leans forward and stretches out his arm towards Keith, the latter flinches back almost violently, despite the distance between them.

Shiro sits up back straight and lets his arm fall onto the mattress. Keith has grabbed two armfuls of the closest blanket and presses it to his chest, as if hiding behind it from Shiro’s touch. Shiro knows that there must be something seriously wrong with Keith if he behaves that way. Still, seeing Keith avoid his touch hurts more than Shiro would like to admit to himself. He has never done anything cruel to Keith; he deserves his trust, doesn’t he?

Shiro shakes his head ruefully; he knows better. He knows that it doesn’t work that way.

But then, Keith whimpers beside Shiro.

It’s quiet and barely perceptible but to Shiro, it rings like an alarm.

It’s that tiny sound that wakes Shiro’s memory.

Shiro’s brain is suddenly flooded with pictures of him lying naked and defenceless on a gurney, of Keith weeping and begging for mercy; he is reminded once more of the cruel words Ezor and Zethrid have poured at them.

“Keith,” - whispers Shiro brokenly. - “I’m so sorry, baby. I promised no one will hurt you… I’m so sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, baby…”

Shiro realizes he’s been babbling the same phrases in a circle only when there’s a hand on his shoulder and Steve’s voice states firmly:

“Shiro, Keith is safe now. It was not your fault he’s got hurt.”

Hot drops flow down Shiro’s cheeks and fall onto his lap.

He feels so miserable.

Shiro wants to tell Steve that he’s wrong, that it’s Shiro’s task to keep Keith out of harm’s ways, that he wasn’t strong enough, wasn’t attentive enough. It’s totally Shiro’s fault.

But before Shiro can utter a word, Keith starts sobbing in the background. He is practically shaking with how hard he cries. Shiro’s need to comfort Keith is almost physical, but he reigns himself in. He
won’t be able to hold it together if Keith flinches away from him once again.

Mr Fennel circles the bed to stand at Keith’s side of it, but doesn’t make a move to touch Keith either. Only tries to talk to Keith quietly and offer him water. Shiro can’t do even that; what if his voice scares Keith, too?

But Shiro can’t blame Keith.

This situation makes Shiro feel as if he’s drowning; as if he’s the most useless, aimless creature in the universe. There was one precious thing his life has given him, and he couldn’t treasure it for what it’s worth.

He’s made the same mistakes again. He’s thought he can do something; he’s thought he is able to be someone, to help someone; well, life has shown him how wrong he’s been. The headache becomes the core of Shiro’s world; soon, there’s nothing but pain, on the inside and on the outside.

Shiro drops, and drops hard.

The next time Shiro comes to himself, the memories are there already. He doesn’t know whether to be resentful or thankful for that. During his blackout, he’s been tortured by the endless nightmares. A thousand times Shiro had to witness Keith being raped and humiliated, and not even once has Shiro been able to come to his aid. A thousand times he has been strapped to a gurney, has been made to watch Keith’s struggles. In some visions, there was only his corpus left - no arms or legs. And each and every time, after they would start tormenting Keith, he would say: “Don’t hurt Shiro,” and Shiro would scream and stumble from one nightmare to another.

There’s no slow transition from one reality to the other; Shiro just finds himself in his bed with the knowledge that the dreams before have been not real, but the previous events very much were. Shiro doesn’t want to deal with the fallout.

To be true, Shiro’s thoughts are not entirely there yet upon his awakening. Shiro’s body is tired and doesn’t want to move, but Shiro needs to go to the bathroom, so he starts stretching his muscles and turning this way and that, trying to make standing up easier on himself. He’ll feel better as soon as he relieves himself and washes his face. Next to Shiro, someone stirs on the bed, then a tiny murmur follows. Before Shiro can react in any way, a low voice calls out to him from the side:

“Shiro, don’t. Move.”

Steve? He’s still here?

Shiro stills obediently.

Steve leans in and whispers: “I’ll call Lance first, OK? Keith doesn’t sleep when there’s no one close to him in the bed. He’s barely had several hours of rest after your last breakdown, we can’t have him wake up now.”

Shiro only nods. This sounds like a good plan.
His brain is still slow and sluggish, but, somehow, new trains of thoughts start to form, and they are not so thrilling.

Despite the kidnapping, Keith has been in his right mind these last days, right? Seems like he’s been well aware of his surroundings, at least. Why is he still in Shiro’s bedroom? He shouldn’t stay with Shiro. He could have moved to the room he’s shared with the boys or to his “solitude” room. That’s weird. Shiro’s head starts pounding again.

Shiro doesn’t notice Lance entering the bedroom and climbing to the bed from the other side from Keith until the other boy is already lying there. Unafraid, Lance meets Shiro’s gaze. He gently embraces Keith and hides his face in Keith’s neck. Immediately, Keith’s breathing evens out and his body visibly relaxes.

“If you wake him up with your tears again, boy, I’ll replace you with Hunk,” - warns Steve. How does he manage to sound ominous, whispering?

Lance only sends Steve an exasperated, tired glare. Everyone knows that Hunk is the real crier of the two.

Steve tugs onto Shiro’s arm and then helps him to his feet and to the bathroom. There, he waits until Shiro does his thing and ushers him into the shower stall.

Neither of them says another word, and Shiro is mostly grateful for that. He doesn’t think that he’d be able to contain his lingering indignation towards Steve if they start talking. Still, it feels foreign. Yes, he wanted to throw things at Steve and, maybe, wrestle him, but in the end, he wanted to hug him and tell him that they’ve all missed him. Unfortunately, however much he wants it, he can’t just start with the second part and make it better at once.

While they’re still in the bathroom, Steve makes Shiro eat some fruit and only then allows him to return to the bed. To Keith.

Actually, Shiro feels already drained from his short escapade. His bed looks so very tempting. Shiro tiptoes to it and crawls back to his place, very carefully. When he is settled, he meets Lance’s gaze over Keith’s sleeping form. Lance smiles at him, a small, bitter, stiff smile. They look each other in the eyes for several long moments. Lance wordlessly pleads Shiro to not send him away because he can’t leave his friend in such a state, not after he’s been allowed to get close to him, finally, while Shiro tries to convey that Lance doesn’t have to leave, that he totally wants Keith to get all the support he can. Lance gets the message, nods and burrows into the pillows, getting more comfortable.

This is how they stay on the bed, together, guarding Keith’s peace from both sides until Shiro falls asleep, too.

And this is how it goes afterwards: with Shiro sleeping most of the time and never going out of the room farther than his balcony, and Keith only falling asleep when Steve gives him a sedative. Somehow, Shiro misses Keith’s waking hours every day. When Shiro wakes up at night hours, he often sees Lance sleeping there, close to Keith, like on that first night. If Lance is awake at the same time as Shiro is, they never talk, too afraid of unwillingly waking Keith up. Shiro is surprised he never notices him coming and going, or Keith waking up.

Shiro has made some observations: before going to sleep, Keith makes a small blanket nest. Each time the nest is situated a little bit closer to Shiro’s part of the bed (the farthest end of it since Shiro
tries to give Keith as much space as he can), or so it seems. But Keith never lies right next to Shiro or, goddess forbids, puts a limb over him in a way he could have before the kidnapping. Again, this simple fact stings like nothing else.

It’s a paradox; Keith hugs Lance, but never Shiro. Shiro doesn’t ask why. Even without hearing the answer, Shiro feels like the time they spend gaining their powers back, sleeping their exhaustion away, will be the last time he is allowed this close to Keith. Shiro accepts it. He doesn’t deserve Keith; it’s a proven fact now.

Shiro doesn’t know how many nights it has been. He doesn’t really count. More than two or three, most certainly. He feels better physically, but his spirit sours more and more with each passing day.

Shiro suspects (no, he is sure by now) that Mr Fennel has planned for them to not see each other awake. He accepts that, too.

Mr Teffy never visits; Shiro doesn’t ask about her.

Shiro sees Ryan several times (Nadya has offered to come to his place personally, as well, but she is too much of a stranger for that in Shiro’s view right now; they Skype, as before). He refuses to leave his room for that and refuses to talk on the balcony where anyone can look. He and Ryan have to talk in his spacious bathroom, with the door to the bedroom left slightly open, with Keith in view. Shiro tells him that he’s scared, that he feels helpless and, more than once, he cries in Ryan’s arms. But Shiro, and only Shiro, knows that he conceals the things that do really matter from both Ryan and Nadya. He knows that they won’t be able to help him and that he basically wastes their time by feeding them half-truths. But Shiro can’t help it; his indiscretion becomes another, almost unnoticeable little sin in the long line of Shiro’s big and small faults.

In other aspects, Shiro is a good patient. He takes his medication. He listens to Steve. He even eats when he’s told to. It’s an easy enough task to not bother his caretakers with his whims. Shiro doesn’t tell them that his food doesn’t bear any taste for him and it mostly feels like swallowing dirt.

One day, Shiro wakes up and doesn’t see Keith in the room. It’s never happened before. He stands up and checks the bathroom and the balcony, ignoring Mr Fennel who snores away on a chair in a corner. Keith is nowhere to be found.

The thought of looking outside the room doesn’t even occur to Shiro.

This is the day, then, thinks Shiro. It’s good to finally know for sure. Keith has left, and Shiro doesn’t have to hold himself together anymore.

Shiro remembers sliding to the floor, feeling like he’ll just stop functioning forever, and closing his eyes.

Strangely, but the world doesn’t cease to exist when Shiro closes his eyes.

After what feels like a millisecond, Shiro is brought back to reality by Keith’s voice.
Keith seems to be so close. Is it Universe teasing him? Shiro hasn’t heard Keith talking since forever. Shiro will take his chance.

He tries to open his eyes, but the lids seem to be glued together. Shiro struggles for a while, and when he finally manages to take a look at his surroundings, he sees Keith and Lance quarrelling over something right in front of him. Shiro doesn’t concentrate on the topic of their conversation; it’s too much of an effort.

His position is a little unnatural, so Shiro makes a subtle move to sit up, but then he feels a slight sting in his arm and stills. When he looks at the source of the sting, he finds a needle from an IV stuck into his vein. That’s new. Last time he’s been in this bed he didn’t need to be fed through a needle. Shiro decides to stay put, for now. The boys don’t notice him being awake anyway. Shiro feels somehow resigned. He just lies there and listens to Keith and Lance being petty. He doesn’t have much else to do. With some time and effort, Shiro is able to pick out individual lines of their argument.

“No, Keith, you tell him! Or I will!” - threatens Lance agitatedly. He looks determined.

“You idiot, don’t you dare! You should leave it alone!” - hisses Keith with what Shiro recognizes as desperation.

“Oh yeah? And watch you wither away while Shiro here has a panic attack after a panic attack and you can’t even make himself touch him! It’s so… so… dumb, Keith, I don’t even know how to tell you!”

“Lance, stop,” - now Keith sounds outright tortured.

“Or what? You’ll keep denying Shiro skin on skin contact you yourself told us helps him to calm down?”

“Mr Fennel…” - starts Keith barely audibly, but he’s rudely interrupted.

“Is not the one Shiro loves and he can’t stay here forever!” - whisper-shouts Lance. - “And Salomey is still too sick!”

“Lance!...” - almost shrieks Keith. His facial expression pleads Lance to stop.

Shiro surprises himself (not to mention the boys) by asking aloud, a hint of his usual authority present:

“What is it you don’t want to tell me, Keith?”

Keith gulps.

Lance grins evilly and makes a beeline for the door.

This whole situation - it doesn’t feel real. Shiro remembers not talking to Keith since the day he’s first awakened after they have been rescued, then fainting after losing sight of Keith. Must be more than a day, since he’s got a needle up his vein. But Shiro’s mind is more at ease than it has been since the kidnapping. He may even be able to hold a conversation. It’s high time they talk out everything with Keith.

“Shiro, I…” - flounders Keith in front of him. He fiddles with his shirt collar and looks anywhere but
Shiro doesn’t like Keith being out of his depth. So he gives him something to do.

“I’m so thirsty, would you please give me something to drink?” - asks Shiro in his authoritative voice. It comes so naturally that Shiro can’t believe they haven’t communicated for… who knows how long.

Keith hastily starts looking for water and a straw. When Keith brings a glass of water, he places it on the nightstand first. He plucks out the needle carefully, disinfects Shiro’s arm, and only then hands Shiro his drink. Shiro thanks Keith and sips at the straw gratefully. He doesn’t stop observing: Keith looks like he yearns for going to his knees right now, to be allowed to stop thinking. Shiro’s head has cleared enough to know that this is a bad sign for Keith.

That’s why when Shiro’s done drinking, he asks Keith to sit down (they must be at the same level now) and then tells him in what he hopes is a soothing tone:

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Keith, but I’m really curious now. You won’t hurt me more than I’ve been already, I promise. I don’t think it’s possible.”

Keith keeps his quiet.

Shiro chuckles darkly and starts his questioning.

By the end of Shiro’s gentle interrogation, Keith has tears in his eyes. Shiro doesn’t know what makes him keep pushing. Maybe, it’s the knowledge that things can’t stay the same anymore as Lance has said. Shiro’s condition got worse, Keith’s isn’t getting better (what’s with those violet bags under his beautiful eyes and dull skin). They have to get to the root of the problem. Shiro is too resilient to let himself drown completely. They have Ryan and Nadya now, they’ll get professional help. To climb back to normal life for the second time won’t be any easier, but Shiro will try harder this time around. If not for himself, then for all those people who have cared for him while he’s been out cold.

“Baby…” - says Shiro when he starts a new sentence, making Keith look at him wide-eyed. Shiro has been careful not to call Keith by any nicknames during their talk, as to not put additional pressure on him, and now his slip is all too obvious.

“Keith,” - and Shiro knows he’s taking advantage of Keith’s kindness and his devotion to Shiro, but they need to get it over with, he just knows it, - “It hurts me that I can’t talk to you normally. Just tell me what’s wrong. It kills me to be so close and yet away from you, baby…”

Fuck. Again that endearment. Shiro must be still too out of control to slip like that twice.

Shiro is ready to apologize, because what if Keith doesn’t want these things from him at all anymore, but he doesn’t get a chance: Keith starts to cry in front of him. He is mumbling some horrible nonsense, at that:

“Why would you call me that? I’m just a little slut, that’s all I’ll ever be. You’ve seen it. Why do you have to be so tender when I know I can’t... Why do you treat me that way?”

Shiro is overwhelmed by these admissions at first and stays silent. Then it suddenly comes to his mind that Keith may think there’s something wrong with him (not with Shiro, for fuck’s sake!), and that’s such total bullshit that Shiro starts laughing hysterically. Or, the better word would be
hiccuping. It’s so out of character and out of place that Keith stares at Shiro, bewildered. Shiro uses it as his cue to ask the question he’s been dying to ask:

“May I hug you, Keith? For me. Please. If you can handle it.”

Keith lower lip wobbles when he looks at Shiro and the tears start falling with renewed vigour.

“You shouldn’t,” - he mutters, - “I’m dirty, you shouldn’t…”

If it’s not “I don’t want to” or “I can’t”...

Shiro reaches out and slowly takes hold of Keith’s wrist.

“Please, don’t run away. For me. Keith, please.”

Keith trembles under his touch, but doesn’t pull away. Shiro needs the barest tug on Keith’s arm to get his lap full of Keith. His boy is hugging him frantically and keeps babbling into Shiro’s t-shirt.

“You don’t have to be so kind, you should just send me away, I’m so dirty…”

“Keith, baby, stop. Why would you even say that?” - tries Shiro softly. - “Is it connected with that secret?”

Keith tenses, and then whispers:

“You’ll send me away.”

“Why would I do that?” - asks Shiro, a little incredulously. He’s heard that phrase several times by now, and he still can’t think of a reason to do so.

“You’ll know I’m just as filthy as they’ve said.”

“They haven’t said a word of truth.”

Keith sniffles and shakes his head in disagreement.

This is getting kind of annoying. Shiro asks:

“Have you betrayed me somehow?”

Keith’s answer is instantaneous:

“No! How could I?”

“Have you cheated on me?” - asks Shiro again.

“No!” - almost yelps Keith and searches Shiro’s gaze. - “I would never!”

At this point, Shiro knows that he doesn’t care either way. He’ll forgive Keith for cheating if he sees that he’s truly feeling remorseful. Still, Keith’s answer makes Shiro’s heart swell proudly.

“See? What else would ever make me send you away?”

Keith looks like he’s going to pass out any minute. Shiro contemplates letting the topic go, for now, when Keith suddenly exclaims:

“I’ve slept with Lance!”
And stops moving altogether.

Shiro is a little troubled. Since Keith’s said he wasn’t cheating, it must’ve been before they have gotten together. Shiro is actually surprised with how calm he is. But, really, he’s never forbidden his ex-slaves to have sex. Shiro is only glad that Keith has had consensual sex. After all he’s been through, it’s good news, honestly.

Shiro is so gone for this boy.

He would’ve forgiven him for almost anything.

“OK,” - says Shiro slowly. - “And?”

“And!..” - Keith starts talking but clearly doesn’t know how to continue.

Shiro tries to help him restore logic.

“Was it before or after you’ve confessed to me?”

“Before! We’ve stopped doing anything like that in January. How can you even ask that!”

Keith is indignant, and he doesn’t make sense, but Shiro doesn’t tell him that. Instead, he says:

“So it can’t be considered cheating by any means. Next thing. Did both of you want it?”

“Yes,” - mumbles Keith. - “It’s… complicated.”

“Can you talk about that without staining Lance’s honour?”

“Ugh,” - answers Keith eloquently.

“Can I ask Lance later?”

“No!”

“Good, good. Then we just leave this topic. If you tell me how this makes you less dignified.”

“I loved you already! And I still… did those things with Lance and Hunk even if I knew I loved you!”

It’s only getting better. Hunk was there, too. Shiro, at least, knows now that Lance hasn’t cheated on Hunk either. It’s nice to know that he deals with loyal people.

“Having sex doesn’t make you dirty. Neither does it make you closer to any other derogatory term people might have used on you.”

Keith stays silent. Then, when Shiro already worries whether he’ll answer at all, Keith inquires in a very small voice:

“You really think that?”

“Yes, baby, I do. Was it the reason why you’d shy away from me before?”

Keith nods against Shiro’s chest.

“Oh, baby. I wish I knew,” - whispers Shiro, kissing Keith’s temple.
“I still wish you didn’t know any of this,” - admits Keith. He sounds pained by having to share this with Shiro.

Shiro feels the urge to explain his view on their situation. To Shiro, Keith’s reasoning sounds silly in comparison with the crisis Shiro has undergone. He knows it’s untrue, that their feelings in both cases are valid, and yet, it feels like a stupid mockery that Shiro had to doubt everything and wait for Keith to be gone from his life any minute.

“I’ve thought you’ll never want me again, Keith. Because I’ve failed you. But it turns out, you still do.”

It changes everything, Keith still wanting Shiro in his life.

Keith lifts his head and looks at Shiro with wideeyes, as if this is not what he’s been expecting to hear at all.

Shiro continues ruefully:

“Even if I’m a ruin.”

“What!? Don’t you dare call yourself that, Shiro!” - Keith’s hands tighten in Shiro’s t-shirt. Shiro doesn’t object. He won’t say it aloud again when Keith disagrees with him.

They spend some time just sitting on the bed in silence, absorbing the much needed warmth from each other.

Then Keith suddenly leans back to have a better look at Shiro, a crestfallen expression on his face.

“Don’t tell me you wouldn’t come out of your room and barely talked to anyone because you’ve thought that I don’t… Because I was too afraid to get close to you...” - whispers Keith brokenly.

Then, to Shiro’s utter horror, Keith slides from his lap and to the floor, kneels and starts chanting:

“Please, Shiro, if you still want me, I can do whatever, just let me stay. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you. I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I’m sorry... You can do whatever with me, just let me...”

Shiro is too stunned for words, at first, and then a little lost at how to act best. In the end, he summons his leftover willpower and says in his dominant voice.

“Keith, you go back to where you’ve been - on my lap, now. Put your hands on my shoulders.”

Keith does as he’s told, trembling all over.

A tiny, vengeful part of Shiro is pleased to see Keith feeling guilty for distancing from Shiro. The rest of him only wants this misunderstanding to be over. Shiro swears to himself that he won’t ever let Keith withdraw into himself like that, now that he knows about the possible consequences.

Shiro traces soothing patterns on Keith’s back until Keith’s breathing evens out, until his shivering subsides. Then Shiro gives orders:

“I’ll tell you what we are going to do. From now on and until I say otherwise, you don’t leave this room without letting me know beforehand. I won’t make you stay here with me all the time, but I can’t not know, baby. Today, we are going to just cuddle and sleep. And then you’re telling me the whole story, after asking permission from the boys, of course. I’m mostly interested in what you’ve thought and why because I need to understand you better, Keith, for us to work out.”
Then, after some consideration, Shiro adds, seriously:

“A little change of plans. We can’t do the cuddling right now.”

Keith looks at Shiro in confusion, completely out of the loop.

Shiro continues, still in his no-nonsense tone:

“I need to pee very badly but my legs won’t hold me, and I’ll have to go right here if you don’t help me get to the bathroom.”

Keith grinds his teeth and smacks Shiro on the chest with his open palm. It stings, and Shiro complains about Keith’s cruelty while Keith practically drags him to the toilet. Shiro’s whining is promptly ended with a swat to his ass, and Keith’s smirk at Shiro’s stunned expression is a thousand times worth being bitchy.

When Steve comes to check on them, he finds Keith lying on top of Shiro koala-like, while Ginger has made a nest on the pillow right above Shiro’s head. Shiro, who couldn’t fall asleep as easily as Keith, shrugs as much as he can with his shoulders immobilised and grins.

In reply, Steve scrunches up his nose in disgust, just like Mrs Teffy.

They are doing everything right then, decides Shiro, smiling at Steve’s retreating back.

Chapter End Notes

It's a long-ass, angsty chapter.
Here's what happens:
1. Keith and Shiro drive to Ezor's mansion. The Department's car doesn't answer their calls.
2. They enter: no one is there. They find the slaves chained to the walls in the pool room, though, weak from dehydration.
3. While Keith and Shiro try to help the ex-slaves, they are abducted by Ezor and Zethrid.
4. Shiro comes to himself in a cellar, he's paralyzed. Keith is strapped to a table and Zethrid plans on fucking him with a dildo.
5. Mr Fennel and some armed people save them.
6. Shiro has depression again because he thinks he is guilty for letting Ezor harm Keith. Keith is so traumatised that he doesn't want to be touched by Shiro.
7. Shiro thinks that Keith has left him for good one day, and he drops very badly. When he comes to it, he has an IV attached to his vein.
8. Keith and Shiro talk finally, and Keith admits to feeling too dirty and bad for Shiro. Shiro tries to calm him down and they make up in the end.

Tell me what you think, please! This chapter is important and planned from the very beginning!
And I'm sorry for hurting your soft hearts!
Talking

Chapter Summary

Shiro has a lot to discuss with his lover, his friends and his employees. So he does the talking.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my dears!

I am glad to post another chapter! There will be only one chapter left, and I'm totally getting cold feet when I think about writing and posting the last chapter. It seems crazy. I'm so used to this verse being my eternal companion.

Anyway, this is a chapter full of dialogues. Literally nothing, but dialogues. It all happens in May, after Shiro and Keith have made up and feel much better.

There is one triggering dialogue, exactly "Shiro, Keith and Steve". It is about Keith's DEAD mother (and in this universe, she is dead for years). Proceed with caution, as always.

Please, enjoy and, maybe, tell me how you've liked my lil experiment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shiro and Steve, No. 1

“I hate you so much, Steve.”

“No, you don’t. I’m sorry I had to lie to you. I’m sorry. But you know I’ve had no choice.”

“Goddess, Steve. I have heard it from you already. I believe you. But you know what? I have survived without you. I didn’t think I could, but I’ve done it.”

“Yes. You did good, Shiro. Actually, I think you did better than me when we’ve been apart.”

“I don’t know how that’d be possible. I had a panic attack after panic attack. Let’s drop the topic. By the way, I meant to ask you all this time. What’s that smell?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t make that face at me. I’ve thought I’ve dreamt it, but the smell is there for real. Care to explain?”

“Oh. Well, if you insist. I’ve started smoking the next week after I’ve left. My comrades are all heavy
smokers. Once, they have offered me a cigarette again, and I knew they were all tired of me always refusing. It was the start.”

“That’s it? You fucking agreed to smoke because your new friends were pissed off at you for not joining in with them?”

“Fuck you, Shiro. Just go to hell.”

“Oh yeah, now you are acting all cranky?”

“You know that I didn’t want to leave, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. It looked like you were losing your pants in your haste to get on the road, finally.”

“Shiro, stop, please.”

“Or what? Are you gonna impose a fine on me, Mr Governor?”

“Just… Urgh.”

“Steve?”

“What?”

“Are you going to put me to prison if I try to put a couple of bruises onto your regal face? My fists are just itching when I see you. Maybe, then I’ll calm down.”

“You can try, and we’ll see how it goes.”

Shiro and Keith, No. 1

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Keith.”

“You’re the nicest boyfriend in the whole world, Shiro.”

“Maybe.”

“You treasure me so much.”

“That I try to.”

“You…”

“Keith, you’ve spent too much time in Steve’s company. Stop this shit and get to business.”

“Shiro, please! Just let me…”

“You and Lance will not go to the city unsupervised to watch a movie. There’s no fucking way I’d let that happen.”
“And here I was, thinking I’m a free person now!”

“Oh? And I was thinking you still trusted me to take care of you and Lance.”

“You’re so aggravating, Shiro!”

“I’ll tell you a secret: that’s because I am right. Keith, you could take Salomey and a guard - you hear me? only one guard! - and go in one of our cars. You could spend the whole day there, get some respite from my boring personality…”

“I take my words back. You’re awful.”

“Keith, baby, I know that Lance is crazy about this premiere. You sure you want to decline my generous offer and stay home instead?”

“You’re… No, I’m sleeping in my old room today!!

“Are you sure? I can take the couch!”

“Arrgh!”

Shiro and Steve, No. 2

“Shiro.”

“Yes?”

“You have to put some ice on it.”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“It’ll bruise.”

“I don’t care.”

“I’ve told you to wait for me and not to try to take Ginger off that tree alone, without a ladder?”

“Are you going to chew me out or disinfect those scratches, finally?”

“I’m doing exactly that. Show me your hand.”

“Steve?”

“What is it, Shiro?”

“Aren’t you busy with your stately duties? How come you spend this warm May afternoon in my humble abode?”

“Phones and Internet are a thing, Shiro. Also, I’ve come here not for fun. I want to recruit some of your best employees to work for me.”
“You sly rat! I tell you right away, I’m not letting Salomey go!”

“Goddess forbid, Shiro, I still like this Mansion a lot to let it perish.”

“As if! But, anyway… Steve…”

“What now?”

“Ouch! It stings, dammit!”

“Ginger hasn’t spared you.”

“She never does! Back then at the cat shelter, I should’ve been choosing more carefully!”

“You’d still choose her.”

“Maybe. Not the point. I had a question for you, Steve.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Have you quitted smoking?”

“No. Stop pestering me.”

“You should quit, Steve. Why would you even start in the first place? Without joking?”

“Because I found myself planning how to kill my dear comrades one by one in such a way that no one would’ve suspected me? Because I’ve felt like I’m coming apart at the seams in the absence of you and Keith? Because…”

“Enough, please. I won’t mention it again. I’m sorry. I get it.”

“No, you don’t, Shiro. And you know what? I’ll say it only this once. You could’ve at least said “thank you” for giving you a chance to be with your boyfriend. I’ve had to leave my cosy home behind and ruin my routine to organize that lousy little rebellion and… and… Let me go of me, Shiro…”

“Thank you, Steve. I’m so, so very grateful to you. We’ll be forever in your debt.”

“That you will.”

“And I promise I won’t ever pester you with anything.

“Good. And Shiro?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe, I would try to stop smoking if you really wanted me to…”

“What would you need from me for that?”

“Let me take Adrianna and Lena.”

“I should’ve known. OK, I’ll let you talk to them and then you’ll quit smoking?”

“They’ve already said they agree if you are OK with that.”
“You know that I’m not OK with that, don’t you?”

“I do. But you want me to be healthy, right? I’m not young anymore…”

“I hate you.”

“You don’t. And you will be glad that you’ve allowed me to headhunt your employees when I make the city and the neighbourhood as ex-slave friendly as possible. The citizens there? They’ll shit themselves from fear of the punishment after only thinking about hurting an ex-slave’s feelings. They’ll have nightmares of being sentenced to years of social service for treating one unfairly…”

“Don’t overdo it.”

“I won’t. You know me, I’m a reasonable man.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what scares me.”

“What? My rationality?”

“Not exactly. The difference between your understanding of rationality and that of others.”

“Majority is never right, Shiro.”

“Whatever. Just fetch the damned cage with the cat. She’s grounded.”

Shiro and Allura, No. 1

“Shiro, I still can’t believe it.”

“No one would’ve been able to, in your place.”

“Shiro, you should know that I’m so sorry! I didn’t know!”

“There’s nothing to apologize for. There was no way for you to guess. So stop it.”

“Oh, Shiro. I can’t believe it all has happened because of him, up until now. That he was the one standing behind Mrs Ezor and her “sisters” - as their mysterious patron, that he was the one who’d abducted people during the last war and that he has organized all those horrible experiments. That he was the one who’s ordered to hurt you. This is so absurd, Shiro!”

“I know, Allura, I know.”

“Oh. I shouldn’t have mentioned it at all! I’m sorry…”

“You haven’t made me upset, don’t worry. You can stop apologizing for every damned thing. He’s been what, shot by one of Steve’s watchdogs on his way to the border? He must be so angry about that somewhere in the depths of hell now - such a hapless death for such a great villain as him. We should just forget about him entirely.”

“You know what?”
“What?”
“I’ve always disliked the sound of “Leonard”.
“Me too.”
“Matt has called again.”
“Mmm.”
“He’s asked me on a date.”
“Oh? That’s unexpected. I wouldn’t have guessed!”
“Stop joking, you! I’m serious. What should I do? You have more experience now, Shiro!”
“Just now? Haven’t I always…”
“Been so annoying? Only from time to time.”
“See, I’m a darling.”
“An absolute sweetheart of a friend.”
“Allura. If you ask me about it for real, then you’ve already considered agreeing to go out with Matt, right? He’s been earnestly pining after you for years, never really daring to hope for a happy ending. It may be worth it, to give the poor boy a chance.”
“I don’t know, Shiro. You’re right, I’ve known him for years and I’ve been always so adamant on staying friends…”
“He’s like a brother to me!!!”
“Stop screeching like a wounded whale and stop mocking me, please. I’m trying here, please, be patient, Shiro!”
“I know. Got a little caught up. Allura, I don’t tell you to start dating right off the bat. I only tell you to not shut Matt down this time. Look at him more closely, listen to him. Get to know him. I don’t think your friendship will be affected if you try.”
“But Shiro. If I know anyone outside my family, that would be you and Matt. I don’t really expect to find something…”
“Allura, my sweet summer child. Even if you think you know someone well, it all changes when you start dating. Your loved one may turn out to be a heavy snorer or hog the blankets or be unable to get up in the morning without…”
“Shiro. I’m thankful for your input and all, but I didn’t need so much info on Keith.”
“You’re welcome. You can talk to me any time. Maybe, in a few months, you will complain about Matt chewing with his mouth open…”
“Ewww! Now I don’t want to date anyone, ever!”
“Tell yourself that. I’ll see you and Matt here together next time… Stop hitting me with your purse, Allura! It’s undignified! Ouch!”
**Shiro and Keith, No. 2**

“Shiro, are you really-really not jealous?”

“What? Have you flirted with someone again without me noticing? I’ll pay attention next time, baby.”

“No-o-o-o, Shiro, not that. I’m talking about Lance.”

“Again? Keith, seriously, if it makes you uncomfortable that I’m not jealous of you on Lance’s account, I can make an effort and act the part.”

“Shiro, I’m serious.”

“OK. You are forbidden from seeing Lance from now on! If I see you together again, I will… Errr...”

“Spank me?”

“Yeah, that! Stop, what?! Keith, no!!!”

**Shiro and Salomey, No. 1**

“Salomey. Are you sure you are OK with Adrianna and Lena leaving?”

“Are you kidding me? I’m fucking ecstatic!”

“What.”

“Back in the day, Mr Fennel has chosen everyone in the “head-quarters” personally, with great care. There are no weak employees among us. But, while none of us would ever go against Mr Fennel or disrupt his work process after he’s left, we didn’t know what to do first. Like, complete hopelessness.”

“You did just fine!”

“As Mr Fennel’s protegee, I’m too well-behaved to roll my eyes at my employer. But I would otherwise, so you know.”

“I just try to reassure you.”

“I appreciate your support, Mr Shirogane. What I’ve been saying is that not all of us worked well together without Mr Fennel (or wanted to). Not all of my colleagues could work well under me particularly. So, when Mr Fennel comes and offers to take away from me the two girls who hate my
guts, and I dare say, the feeling is mutual, I can only applaud enthusiastically and thank him. It’ll be better for everyone that way.”

“Huh.”

“If there are no more questions, am I dismissed? I have loads of work.”

“Yes, you may go, if you need. And, by the way, I’ve told you to call me Shiro.”

“Mr Shirogane is more respectful.”

“Then I’ll have to go back to calling you Mrs Teffy.”

“Please, don’t. I like how my name rolls off your tongue.”

“Salomey? What?! Don’t you dare close that door on me!”

Shiro and Keith, No. 3

“Keith. It’s 1 a.m.”

“Just one more page, Shiro.”

“I’ve heard it, what, 10 times already?”

“Mhm.”

“Keith, I warn you…”

“What are you going to do to me, if I don’t stop? Spank me?”

“You’ve started repeating yourself. In any case, you’d better stop goading me, naughty boy.”

“Or what?”

“Oh? Impudent, aren’t we? I’ve heard little boys are ticklish…”

(sounds of wheezing laughter and fussing)

“Shiro, please! You win!”

(some more helpless wheezing)

“Shiiirooo, pleaaase!”

“Give me that book, Keith.”

“No!”

“Oh, really?”
“Keith, Steve here has some big news for you.”

“Hello, Mr Fennel. I’m glad to see you. Is it about that article I was looking for?”

“Hello, Keith. Glad to see you, too. Let’s sit at the table, shall we?”

“Why are you both so grim? Hey, did something happen?”

“Keith, everyone is alright. It’s about your dead mother.”

“Just… Be careful, Steve.”

“What about her? Mr Fennel, just tell me already.”

“I would have, if not for Shiro’s meddling. Sorry, I’ll get to the point. I’ve thought you’d like to know more about her.”

“Of course, I want to know! My father wouldn’t even tell me her name!”

“He’s been lucky to stay alive after what she’s done.”

“Steve, just go on with it already!”

“Shiro, you can always leave if I make you uncomfortable! It’s about Keith and his mother, not about you!”

“Shiro, please, stay. Mr Fennel, go on, please.”

“See, I’ve taught the boy well, after all. Anyway. Keith, your mother. Her name was Krolia. She’s managed to become a part of the single slave uprising we’ve managed to find in the chronicles. It’s been a tough job, I must say; the previous regime has done everything to erase its traces from any
and all history books. Unfortunately, the only thing I’ve been able to dig out concerning Krolia is that she’s been killed after trying to flee the country. She’s been executed by a firing squad. It may be considered an honour, of sorts. A slave, given the right to die as any free prisoner sentenced to death. There’s even a grave. I still have to identify which one on that giant cemetery with hundreds of rows of identical grey stones…”

“Hey, Keith, baby, you alright?”

“No.”

“Shiro, fuck off with your stupid questions!”

“Mr Fennel, it’s OK. Let him worry.”

“We could leave you alone if you need it?”

“No, stay, both of you. Just… will you take me there if you find the grave, Mr Fennel?”

“If you want to, I will.”

“I want to.”

“Then it’s settled, Keith.”

“Thank you, Mr Fennel.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Shiro, will you come with me if… If he finds it.”

“Of course, baby. Of course, I will.”

“Just sit with me for a while, please?”

“Of course, Keith. Neither I nor Steve is going anywhere.”

Shiro and Keith, No. 4

“Something wrong there, in the blanket cocoon?”

“No!”

“You know we have a long day tomorrow, don’t you?”

“Yes…”

“And you know I have to finish this report now? That I’m not staying out of bed just to spite you?”

“I know. It’s not that. It just… a little lonely in your bed without you.”

“It’s our bed. And I was sure Ginger takes half the space!”
“Shiro.”

“Sorry, sorry, a stupid joke. Come here, I’ll sing for you.”

“No-no-no, thank you, Shiro. Now that I think of it: I’ll just close my eyes and fall asleep really fast!”

“I feel rejected.”

“Shiro. You can tell me a story if you want. Just… don’t sing.”

“Do you even love me?”

“I do. More than anything. OK. I will listen to your lullaby if you want it so much, Shiro.”

“Actually, I was thinking a rock ballad… Alright, alright, don’t make that face. Just try to sleep.”

“I love you, Shiro. Get back to work and come to bed as soon as you can. Me and Ginger, we’ll warm up your spot for you.”

“Love you too, Keith. Sleep well.”

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Shiro and Keith, No. 5

“Keith, is Salomey seriously flirting with me? She knows that...”

“Oh my goddess, Shiro.”

“Why would she even? She’s never…”

“Shiro, please. What has she done this time? Anyway, she’s being a shit, is all. She’s goading you.”

“What if she likes me?”

“Then we’ll have to get into a catfight, me and Salomey, and after I’ll win by her…”

“I’m not sure you’ll win.”

“In that case, I have to train harder and only then fight her for your honour.”

“I’d prefer you don’t.”

“Bear her teasing stoically, then.”

“So you think she doesn’t mean it like that?”

“No, she doesn’t. I doubt you’d notice if she did if I’m being honest.”

“Hmm. But if she…”

“If she likes you, she’d better prepare to have her heart broken. I’m not letting go of you, ever.”
“Steve.”

“Tell me about your new boss. Is he as strict as me?”

“No, he’s just batshit crazy.”

“You’re not serious, right?”

“How about no?”

“You’re telling me you’ve given the country over to a lunatic?”

“Revolution leaders are that sort of guys, I tell you.”

“What do you mean by “crazy”, exactly?”

“He’s all about fairness. Like, justice for all.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad?”

“You just wait till he starts to rearrange everything and try to make everyone equal. Very, very equal.”

“Again, Steve, doesn’t sound so horrible. I believe you know what you’re talking about, but…”

“He’s fired a TV host for making one rude comment to a lighting technician on the set. His team are the most polite people ever. He’s made me clean the whole dining room in a secret meeting place of the Agency once, after I’ve spilled a cup of tea on the table and the floor and asked a man of a slightly lesser rank than me to please bring a cloth.”

“You’ve spilled tea? No way!”

“Exactly! That man whom I’ve asked for help was gesturing wildly with his hands and pushed me. It was only respectful if he’d help to clean up the mess!”

“You don’t even know how I miss you every day, Steve.”

“Don’t start it.”

“OK, if you say so. I guess I don’t want to know the details of your new job arrangements, after all.”

“Thank fuck.”

“May I ask a question, still?”

“You may try.”
“How did you even get so far into this mess? I mean, you’ve literally had a simple spying job when you’ve started.”

“Do you really want to hear that story? It’s not for the faint-hearted.”

“Only if you want to talk about it. I won’t pry, you know me, Steve.”

“Remember you’ve got captured during the last war? Don’t look so sour, Shiro, the story starts there. I can stop narrating if it’s too much.”

“Go on. I’ll tell you if I need a break.”

“I hope you’re not pushing yourself, huh?”

“Just tell the story already.”

“As you wish. So, you’ve been goddess knows where and I didn’t know what to do. I’ve contemplated going there myself and looking for you.”

“You did? Seriously, Steve, you did think about that?”

“Yes. But, luckily for you, I’ve done some more thinking and decided that there are people who are trained to do that kind of thing. I just needed to find the right person at the top of the military to make them order their people to go search for you for real. Give a real effort. I’ve spent some time getting closer to that person, then - persuading him to help, and then, after another two weeks of searching, finally, there was news about you coming back home. It just so happened that that guy at the top was a high-ranked member of the Agency at the same time. I couldn’t have known - I’ve been a little more than a pawn at the time. But he’s noticed me and he remembered me. When he needed another service done, he called in a favour - and he enjoyed the quality of my work. The rest is history.”

“You’ve never told me that.”

“You’ve never asked.”

“I’ve just accepted the fact that you’ve saved me. I’ve assumed it’s been a thing you could do…”

“Yeah. Just a thing I could do. Bravo, Shiro. If you only knew how many “favours” for many different people I’ve had to do that year…”

“I suppose I don’t want to know what kind of favours they were?”

“No, you don’t. I can tell you that the sexual ones were the easiest. I mean, look humiliated and moan brokenly…”

“Steve. First, I’ve thought we’ve established that you’ll leave it be. Second, it means that you have, like, fucked people…”

“To get you back here, yes. Don’t look so lost. Takashi, look at me. I tell you, sex was the most innocent thing I’ve done back then.”

“Have you killed someone?”

“I don’t have to tell you a word more.”

“If freeing me has cost this much…”
“To me, it was absolutely worth it. And I am glad I didn’t have to ask for your opinion on this because I would’ve done it all the same.”

“I… I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Just think of Keith being brought to the fucking slave auction five years later after your death in those labs and being bought, I don’t know, by Mrs Ezor? Does it change the perspective somehow? Oh, shit, I’m an idiot. Takashi, Takashi, no, we are not doing this now. Breathe, Takashi, breathe. It’s OK, Keith is safe, you’re safe, everything is OK. Yeah, repeat after me. In and out, slowly. I guess I’ll call him here, yes?”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t. You only love one person more than me - and it’s Keith.”

“No, you dickwad. I don’t love you at all.”

“Um-hmm.”

“Don’t look so smug.”

“OK, Shiro. You don’t love me, but I do love you and it’s all that matters.”

“You’ll love me… against my will?”

“If that’s what it takes. But shush, I can hear Keith’s footsteps. He doesn’t need to know.”

“Steve.”

“What now?”

“Thank you. I’m forever in your debt.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey hey hey
You've made it here, thank you!

So, how did you like it? Was it clear who talks when?

The next chapter will be Shiro's POV, as usual.

Thanks for sticking with me on this crazy ride!
Building from Ashes

Chapter Summary

Shiro participates in the social and charity activities in the region.
Lance and Hunk celebrate their birthdays together.
A lot happens in the mansion.
Keith runs away with Shiro for his birthday and they have a little vacation.
Keith gets a driver's license.
Shiro vows to never take his new life for granted.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone!

This is it! This is the last chapter of Numb!
I can't believe it. I can't believe that what I've started as a little playful one-shot has come to be this pretty monster.
I wanted to play with Shiro having all the power over Keith. But then I learnt that Shiro has PTSD, and Keith is very kind... I wanted them to be happy together, all of a sudden. Steve was born, as well. And so it started...

I want to thank every reader, every person who gave me kudos and commented. The love you gave to my characters, the emotions we've experienced together - it is all precious to me. I hope most of you have found something worth their while in my work.

A special thanks goes, of course, to my most loyal readers - Asimi_Shadowborn, give_it_a_little_nudge and SonicoSenpai. You are awesome! I don't know what I would have done without your constant support. Really, you've made my journey thousand times more enjoyable and meaningful. Thank you!

And now, the last chapter starts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

To Shiro’s utter horror, his social status has become higher than it’s ever been after the swift change of the ruling monarch. By June, he’s unofficially considered the second-most-influential person in the region. Of course, being Steve’s only friend has everything to do with that.

There’s no reason for surprise, actually. What does the society know? That Steve is Shiro’s ex-employee and now, a Governor. It would be enough to draw the attention to Shiro. But then, the kidnapping happens. On his first day in the new status, instead of signing boring papers, Steve personally participates in the rescue mission and saves Shiro from his abductors. His armour is shining and his pistol never misses the mark. Afterwards, Steve literally spends days at Shiro’s sickbed and even lives at the Shirogane Mansion for weeks, keeping an eye on Shiro’s recovery. Shiro and Steve’s relationship becomes the main gossip topic of the city (and Salomey claims, they have made it to some columns outside of the region), all without Shiro being aware of that.
But Shiro is being Shiro and ignores all of that. He knows what he and Steve are to each other, what else does it matter? Them talking out Steve’s mysteries and getting used to being around each other is all he is interested in.

Of course, Shiro makes matters worse by participating in any and all charity projects concerning ex-slaves in the region and turning his mansion into a refuge for everyone who needs help in these tough times (which quickly makes him the local social activism icon). Then, without asking Shiro first, Steve mentions his efforts in one of his speeches, adds that Shiro has only owned five slaves whom he offered jobs on the day the slavery has been abolished and literally says to take Shiro for a model. It doesn’t go unnoticed, and who cares that Shiro does it because of people and not to earn points by the new regime. And of course, people would think that Shiro has more power than he really does, now that he’s best friends with the Governor. Shiro just accepts it and uses his reputation unashamedly. He has found out that helping so many people at once is a very hard job, much tougher than anything he’s come across while developing his businesses. But, as much as it is demanding, it is satisfying - Shiro has never in his life received so much sincere gratitude for things he himself wants to see accomplished.

Shiro would have supported Steve, even if they didn't know each other - Steve's actions speak for themselves. Shiro doesn’t ever want to hear about any ex-slaves who had to suffer at the hands of their ex-owners like Clint and the others did, again. Thanks to Shiro’s intervention, Mrs Ezor’s ex-slaves have survived without lasting damage to their health. After leaving the hospital, they asked to stay in the city. Mr Fennel has found them a place to stay and helped with work search. Naturally, Shiro has invited Clint to work for him in the mansion, but Clint refused, saying that he is too tired of living a sheltered life.

It is worth mentioning that the whole regional Department of Newly Freed Citizens Care Services has to go through a vigorous investigation and the following assessment which, in sum, leads to replacing of the 60% of its staff. The people who’ve been in contact with Lotor, go to prison. Steve makes all parts of the process open to the public; his investigators are as ruthless as they are polite and well-behaved. By the time Shiro gets back on track, the citizens start to call their new Governor the Inquisitor. When Shiro learns about that, he cackles like crazy for almost an hour and then gets a dopey smile every time he remembers the nickname. Steve-the-Inquisitor! Shiro likes the sound of it.

Shiro learns about Salomey’s nervous breakdown and anxiety attacks which followed his and Keith’s capture. He talks to her and explains to her that, in his opinion, Steve shouldn’t have held her away from Shiro while Shiro was ill. He tells Salomey about that time when he heard Steve chastising her and wanted to call out to invite her into his room, but was too weak for that. Salomey cries and lets Shiro hug her. Shiro says her how grateful he is for all her help, and that he knows that she’s reacted the first when no one would answer their phones back then, at Ezor’s mansion; how grateful he is for her work and her support in general. Time and time again, Shiro repeats that what happened was in no way her fault. Ezor’s deeds are Ezor’s deeds. No one has made her do what she’s done. Shiro just hopes that Salomey stops beating herself up, finally.

Hunk had his birthday at the end of May, but he decided to not celebrate it then and wait for Lance’s birthday at the beginning of June instead, to make a party together. When Shiro says that they can arrange the celebration any way they want it, Lance’s eyes start to gleam. Shiro just tells Salomey to keep an eye on the boys and retreats in the shadows.

When Lance’s birthday gets closer, Lance starts teasing Keith about being older than him and does it until Keith absolutely blows up and tells Lance everything he thinks of him and the size of his brain. Shiro is present during the scene; he can’t exactly blame Keith for reacting the way he did (Lance has been told several times to just stop it already) but to see Lance’s baby-blue eyes slowly fill up with tears is soul-wrenching. Keith is in no way immune to them, either. He groans and starts
apologizing profusely, hugging Lance close, while Lance absolutely sobs on his shoulder and complains how stupid and useless he always feels next to Hunk or Keith. Keith only squeezes Lance tighter and tells him that he’s a very smart boy and that he’s proud of him. That Lance can accomplish things neither he nor Hunk could ever dream of. Shiro flees before he tears up himself.

The party is not what Shiro would have expected at all.

Lance makes everyone wear white and organizes a giant tea party in the garden, near one of his favourite fountains (which he’s personally tended to). Light jazz fills the air. There’s no alcohol on the tables, only coffee, tea and lemonade. There’s a lot of biscuits, and little pies, and macarons, though, and Lance utterly enjoys finally using the beautiful gazebos and benches at their full capacity. Shiro discreetly asks Hunk whether this is what he wanted for his birthday party at which Hunk says that not having to organize anything (and not risking a surprise party from Pidge) is everything he ever wanted from his birthday celebration. He and Shiro look each other in the eyes and smile in mutual understanding. What amazes Shiro the most is that Pidge is wearing an absolute horror of a jacket (it is bright-green and has more pockets than Shiro can count - they are literally everywhere) and goes around, trying to sell people alcoholic drinks in tiny multi-coloured bottles. Pidge assures her customers that the money will be used to fund the cat shelter Shiro now knows so well. Shiro likes living on the edge. He buys a bottle with something red and blue in it and drinks from it. Immediately, he feels like he’s just eaten some magic mushroom - and what scares him the most is Steve’s smirk from across the lawn. Steve’s eyes gleam red. The party becomes a lot more fun after the first bottle, that’s why Shiro buys another one. Pidge’s image looks a little wobbly after Shiro finishes the second bottle, and Pidge’s jacket suddenly starts changing its colours. Shiro muses whether it’s one of her new inventions when Keith (who’s helped Allura with the cake) finds him leaning on a tree and absolutely unable to move.

Later, both Pidge and Steve call and apologize. Matt (who has drunk a bottle himself) sends a text saying that he feels like demons have eaten his soul. Also, that Pidge is grounded and that she shouldn’t have dealt with questionable liquor dealers. Shiro sends Matt a thumbs-up. He doesn’t feel like texting.

To be honest, Shiro doesn’t feel angry at his friends: he knew that he was drinking some venomous outlandish shit, there’s no one else to blame for his killer-headache but him. He can’t make himself move further than the bathroom for the duration of the whole next day and it’s less than pleasant. On the bright side, being tended to by Keith is nice. Very nice. Shiro doesn’t regret anything.

By the second week of June, Shiro’s mansion receives so many calls concerning his charity activities that they have to look for members of staff willing to answer the phone and guide the people who are looking for help, information, advice or favours. Keith offers Lance to try, and Lance does it brilliantly from the start. Lance knows the mansion like the back of his hand, googles like a pro and, what’s most important, he enjoys the talking part and does it passionately. Salomey makes one of her underlings the “press secretary” of Shiro’s and puts him in charge of Lance and two other “receptionists”. Lance doesn’t appreciate having such a conservative and bureaucratic boss as Salomey’s “agent”, but he has no choice - someone has to keep their cool. They can’t allow Lance to help every single applicant.

But Shiro is one to talk; he may not be such a dispassionate and composed judge of a situation as he himself preferred to think.

That sunny day in June, he manages to render even Keith speechless (and it does say something, what with Keith’s general ability to take anything Shiro-related in stride).
What happens? Long story short: Shiro comes home with the intention to adopt 29 children.

When Keith asks for details, Shiro explains how he came to the Underage Sector of the Department of Newly Freed Citizens Care Services to ask for information on a boy who’s come to his mansion with a group of refugees and there were these kids, newly brought in. The Department’s employee has told him that they will divide them into smaller groups and send to different boarding schools where there are places available. Shiro asked some more questions; the kids have been raised together and consider each other family. Looking at how the poor kids huddled close to one another and watched the adults around them with fear, Shiro just knew he had to do something. He hadn’t come up with any solution other than to adopt the whole group.

His closest circle listens to the news, takes in Shiro’s determined face, collects their jaws from the floor silently and starts planning.

The next day, Shiro, Matt and Keith go back to the city hall with the intention to sign the papers and make sure that the kids don’t get separated. This is quite a special case. The kids have been living in a slave village with literally two adult slaves as their caretakers. It is not how it should be; actually, it’s a direct violation of the laws on underage slaves from the previous regime where it stands black on white that one adult slave can only take care of three kids at the same time. The only exception was being a full-time childcare worker (which was not the case). The ex-owner of the kids involved them in the services and rituals of the cult he’s founded. He didn’t even chip the kids - so sure he was in his control over them. Obviously, not everyone was keen on obeying the law and still, it’s rare to find such an egregious example of overall craziness. The kids have been mostly left to their own devices, alone in a big house and, as a result, they have developed extreme codependency. The more Shiro learns about that case, the creepier it seems. The kids have mentioned something about their friends “going away” during some of those rituals. Shiro doesn’t even want to think what it means. This is the task of Steve’s “inquisitors”. Shiro has another purpose, and he won’t let grim thoughts distract him from taking the kids under his wing. Keith, on the other hand, shows less restraint than Shiro when he hears about that; he has to run to the closest bathroom to vomit.

Strangely, but Shiro meets resistance where he wouldn’t have expected it at all: the woman responsible for ex-slave kids adoptions doesn’t want to give them all to Shiro. They have a contest of wills; Shiro would call Steve but he has a feeling that this woman is one of his favourites (and that Steve wouldn’t approve of the idea at all; Shiro has a suspicion that he is lucky to try and adopt 29 kids only because Steve is in the capital, and Steve’s Big Boss keeps him too busy to pay attention to Shiro’s shenanigans).

While Shiro and the woman talk to each other politely-aggressively, Matt and Keith (still fairly green) sit on visitors’ chairs at the far wall and discuss quietly which building is better suited for the children’s needs.

Shiro’s patience, in the meantime, grows thinner by the second.

“There is no restriction on how many kids I may adopt, Mrs Thinster.”

“It is different when it comes to ex-slave kids. Adoption of ex-slaves belongs to another area of law, that’s why different rules are applied.”

“Can you prove it with a citation from a legal document, please?”

“No, Mr Shirogane, unfortunately, the legal base is still in the making. You will have to believe me as the representative of the state.”

“Is it so? Once again, Mrs Thinster, I highly appreciate your concern for the kids, but I have
excellent conditions to take care of them. I’m a good candidate. Don’t we all want to make their life better?”

“We do, of course, we do. I only want what’s good for my charges. I don’t refuse to let you adopt some of them. But, Mr Shirogane, 29 little boys and girls? That’s too much for one single parent whoever they were.”

“You have to know that they are very close to each other. They are each other’s family. We can’t separate them.”

“It may be good for them in terms of adaptation to the normal life.”

It goes like that for another hour; back and forth, back and forth. Soon, Matt outright naps on Keith’s shoulder while Keith glares at Mrs Thinster with barely veiled contempt.

In the end, Shiro and Mrs Thinster all but shout at each other through gritted teeth.

“Twenty two!”

“No, it’s too many!”

“Twenty-one, Mrs Thinster!”

“No! Be considerate, Mr Shirogane!”

“Twenty!!!”

“Oh goddess the merciful! Take twenty! I’ll be sure to not leave your mansion unattended by our highly-professional social workers! You know, we are very strict when it comes to living conditions of adopted children!”

“That I appreciate! Check up on us all you want! Where do I sign, goddess give me patience!”

“Here! And here! And every time you see a mark!”

“Thank you!”

“You’re highly welcome! Make sure your signature is recognisable!”

“Why don’t you use computer-generated signatures here!”

“Highly-regarded Mr Fennel threatens us with that innovation since his first day here! Now I know where he gets… advice!”

“I’m done! When can I take them home?”

“Have you been to the courses already?”


“If only you gave me a chance to speak. The courses are obligatory for all new parents. It’s another guarantee of your good intentions.”

“How come that I learn about them only now?”

“It’s because if the kids were not adopted today or tomorrow, we’d have sent them to different
schools the day after tomorrow. Now though, knowing their new caretaker, we can leave them here, at our premises, while you receive the necessary knowledge. See, I’m already making you a huge favour, Mr Shirogane.”

“I can’t articulate the depths of my gratitude to you, dear Mrs Thinster.”

“You’re welcome here any time, Mr Shirogane. You can still change your mind, by the way.”

At that note, Shiro stomps out of the room, waking up Matt and making Keith flinch when he sees the unbridled fury on his face.

The evening is spent in the search for adoptive parents for the other nine kids. To Shiro’s great surprise, Lance and Hunk find five families with kids and two families without among the employees of Shiro’s mansion who are willing to take the kids in. Since many of them already have rooms in Shiro’s sleeping quarters for employees, it’s a good solution. Shiro hopes that he’ll be able to let the kids live together for a while and then, with time, help them to be more independent from they so-called siblings.

The whole mansion becomes a whirlwind of preparations; Shiro gives a lot of refugees jobs since his employees can’t handle everything at once.

At night, hugging Keith close and telling him stories to help him fall asleep, Shiro mentally goes through lists what he has to do tomorrow, how he’ll have to drive the seven families to the city hall and go through Mrs Thinster again, how he needs to visit those damned courses every working day for a whole month(!) now. At least, they will be able to visit the premises where the kids live at the moment and get to know them.

Goddess, it’s such a gamble! It seems to be the biggest risk Shiro has ever taken. Yet, Shiro doesn’t feel even an ounce of doubt. He has always been good with kids, with people in general, actually. They’ll make it.

“Go to sleep, you!” - grumbles Keith from under Shiro’s arm, -” You think too loud!”

And Shiro does as he is told. He can’t disturb his boy’s sleep, can he?

Shiro’s “Education Month”, as Keith has called it, is a nightmare. Not only has Shiro to ride there and back every day or stay in a guest room at Steve’s place (which would’ve been great if only Steve was home at the same time), but he also has to prove that he’s a decent person every step on the way. There’s a lot of useful information, a lot of nice instructors, but still, Mrs Thinster doesn’t lose any chance to come, to “observe” and to “guide”.

Shiro doesn’t have a chance to spend enough time at home to do enough work as to not feel unhelpful, which becomes a source of constant frustration. Salomey doesn’t even bother to call him most of the times she has to make an important decision, and Shiro has serious doubts whether he can still be considered the main person in the household. He complains to Steve that Steve’s been the worst housekeeper ever, always doing everything his way, and that Salomey, his apprentice, has become too proud to entertain the property owner with the news about it or consider consulting him. Steve answers, matter-of-factly, that he’s been the best housekeeper in the history of housekeeping and that he’ll make the whole region as neatly organized as Shiro’s mansion is. He adds that Salomey is a good apprentice after all, but she still has a lot to learn, if the owner keeps noticing things that he doesn’t participate in. Shiro doesn’t have a reply to that.
Shiro doesn’t know how other people manage the courses - maybe, they don’t have to do it all in a month? Keith sometimes comes to the city with him and visits the courses. Or Shiro lets Keith visit Steve; he’d never trust anyone else with Keith’s safety. Steve, in his turn, takes Keith with him on business rides through the city and its suburbs. It leaves such a great impression on Keith that he falls asleep, telling Shiro stories about his busy day, for a change. Keith sheer enthusiasm about ordinary things reminds Shiro how much Keith still needs to learn. He keeps forgetting, with how wise Keith is in his 16 years, that he hasn’t seen much other than his village and Shiro’s mansion. Shiro asks Salomey to give Lance and Hunk some errands in the city (with the due escort, of course) to give them the same opportunity to expand their horizons.

Shiro debates the logic (and necessity) of his request when he goes for lunch after a morning portion of courses and sees Lance prancing around a grand fountain on one of the central streets proclaiming that he wants to live in a flat overlooking that beauty. Keith and Hunk seat on a bench just a meter away from it and eat ice-cream, quietly conversing and completely ignoring their impressive friend. When Shiro wants to move closer to scold them properly, he feels a hand at his shoulder. He turns around rapidly, but there’s only a woman in a uniform Shiro instantly recognizes from Steve’s office. The woman smiles at him and tells him to let the boys be; if someone as much as bumps at one of them, it may cause her and her colleagues serious problems so they stay at attention. Shiro looks back at his boys - and he indeed notices people in the same uniforms as the woman lingering around and watching the trio. He sighs and turns back to thank the woman, but she’s gone already. Shiro feels seriously outclassed. With these heavy thoughts, he goes to lunch, alone.

In the evening, Shiro asks Keith how his day was. Keith tells him excitedly how Salomey needed him to collect several things from the city for her and he was able to go with Hunk and Lance. Keith is so happy that Shiro doesn’t have it in him to ruin his joy with boring lectures. He also knows for sure that he’s overreacting. He asks Salomey the next day; she looks at Shiro with resignation and tells him that she’ll do something to herself if anything happens to Keith or the boys, again. Shiro feels the urge to sit her down and tell her that it’s not her fault, but he’s done it already, and Keith has done it, and even Steve has done it… Shiro just smiles at Salomey reassuringly and says that he’s glad his boys are in good hands.

Shiro starts considering giving the boys education. He’s been thinking about it for a while now but has been too afraid to bring it up. He can’t stand the thought of sending them away, even if they go to the city’s university. He’ll have to move to a flat in the city then, too. Shiro thinks that they may have to take some lessons first before they’ll be able to go to a university or a college; this thought calms him a bit.

The “Education Month” is over sooner than Shiro expected. It’s the second week of July, and Shiro finds himself on the steps of the Department building at a loss of what to do. His certificate of a proud adoptive parent is in his hands, finally, and, all of a sudden, Shiro has free time. Anxiety kicks in momentarily. But why? Everything goes well so far; he’s been visiting the kids every day while he was in the city and they seem to recognize him, the date of bringing them home is stated. Looks like Shiro comes to realise what Mrs Thinster tried to tell him all month long: signing papers and actually taking the responsibility for 29 kids are two very different things.

Shiro calls Steve and asks whether he has time to get drunk together. Steve immediately replies that he’ll pick Shiro up in a few minutes. Shiro sits down at a bench nearby, puts his face in his hands and stays like that until Steve comes and tugs him into his car.

When Shiro surfaces from his heavy thoughts, he notices that they are getting closer to Shiro’s mansion. He glances at Steve with confusion.

“I’m not getting you drunk, new father,” - states Steve. - “You have Lucys and Lous coming to you
tomorrow; 13 of the first category, 16 of the second…”

The cultists have only two names for their kids. The reminder makes Shiro close his fists in silent fury. Not that renaming kids now is an option.

Steve participates in a little family dinner where everyone tries to reassure Shiro that they are ready and everything will be fine, then leaves - he has a big opening in the city tomorrow. Shiro is in so much need of a drink, but Keith is merciless and Salomey is watching him, that’s why Shiro stays put and even asks for a sedative himself.

The next day, Shiro is left at home to wait and prepare his speech since he’s white from nerves and kids definitely don’t need their caregiver to look like he’s close to fainting on their way to the new home. Keith goes to the city in his stead.

Shiro catches Ginger and walks in circles in front of the main entrance; the kitten is well-versed in Shiro’s quirks already and endures his break-down patiently. He is ushered inside by Allura who comes with Matt and Pidge an hour before the kids arrive. The cat is set free, and Shiro is given a task to do: Allura has brought 29 gift packages and she makes Shiro write inscriptions on each one. He starts with writing each kid’s name on packages. He finishes quickly, and Allura suddenly decides that every package needs one more inscription; when Shiro finishes writing “Welcome to Your New Home!” for the 27th time, Allura announces that Keith and the kids are on their way, takes over Shiro’s task and sends him back to the entrance.

Shiro thinks that he might faint, for real. He’s never been so scared in his life, or maybe he has, but it was a different kind of fear; anyway, he can’t make himself open the door until Lance and Hunk flank him from both sides and just start moving.

“You can do that, Master Shiro,” - slips Lance. But he barely shrugs when he sees Shiro wince, saying: “Sorry! I kinda got used to calling you like that. Buuuut! These kids don’t have to call you or anyone else by such a title; let’s go out and be happy for the kids together.”

The rest of the morning passes in a blur. Shiro remembers Keith leading kids in pairs from the entrance gates, the smallest girl proudly holding the two oldest boys’ hands and walking at the head of the small procession as a part of the single trio. He remembers the kids huddling close to each other, as they did that day in the Department’s office, Keith saying something, the reassuring warmth of Hunk and Lance from both sides; Shiro remembers Allura laughing her most beautiful laugh when Keith says something funny with a straight face, and Matt glancing at her with adoration. Pidge is running around with a camera, and Salomey is nowhere to be seen. Keith talks to the kids some more, and their replies are either called out in unison or uttered by one of the biggest boys.

Then, suddenly, all attention is on Shiro, and Keith is saying something like: “This is Shiro, he is too trusting and absolutely can’t take care of himself, so fragile he is. But I love him, so, please, don’t hurt poor Shiro.” That’s, at least, what Shiro thinks has been said. According to Keith, it was: “This is Shiro, your new adoptive parent. He is very kind. Please, respect him.” Anyway, what everyone agrees about is that all kids simultaneously drop to their knees and say in unison: “Good morning, Sir Shiro!”

This greeting wakes Shiro up from his daze.

It’s not Shiro’s proudest moment. Caught off guard, he looks at the kids and says in his authoritative voice:
“Up, everyone!”

Shiro overdoes it, with the voice. A whole fucking lot. It meant to be reassuring, but… It’s just not Shiro’s day.

The kids leap to their feet and freeze, wide-eyed. They look paralyzed with fear, and Shiro has the urge to come closer, to comfort them, but Keith shakes his head in the negative. Shiro stays where he is and watches helplessly how Keith communicates with the two oldest boys.

There are not many people at the entrance: they were told to keep it low-profile, no parties, no excessive noise. Except for Shiro and his friends, there are only those of his employees who became adoptive parents at the same time as he (and had to visit the same courses - unfortunately, on another schedule than Shiro). Shiro and they still haven’t decided how to act around the children - according to what the Department’s workers have said, the kids didn’t show any signs of wanting to communicate with anyone outside their circle. They were complacent and well-behaved for as long as they have been allowed to stay together. At an attempt to separate them, most of the kids started to cry, the others would just shut down. The two boys who started acting like the leaders of the small group would go into a rage. When Shiro and others would visit them, they would give monosyllabic answers when asked and ignore them in other cases.

This time, fortunately, Keith is able to make the Lou I and Lou II (as Shiro decides to call them in their head) listen to him and lead their brothers and sisters to their respective rooms.

Shiro and his team have prepared seven bedrooms for the kids, all close to each other, all of them having doors leading to the next bedroom. Keith leads the kids there, the others follow. The kids look like a flock of birds. Despite being dressed in different clothes, they all manage to have similar facial expressions and act like one: when Lou I turns left, everyone turns, when Lou I stops, everyone stops without missing a beat.

Shiro follows the group; he’s fought teeth and nails to get the chance to spare the kids the additional trauma of being separated, and now they are here. He has a thousand pages of instructions and recommendations of how to treat adopted kids, kids who’ve suffered a trauma, kids who used to live in a sect. He has read through them all, and Keith has. Yet, he looks at the kids’ identical expressions and feels like he can’t change anything. Can’t influence their lives more than he’s already had by giving them a place to stay.

And then he hears a girl’s voice squeal happily: “Pussycat! Oh, kitty, kitty, come here!” Shiro speeds up his steps, to be able to save Ginger from aggressive kids, just in case. To his immense relief, when he gets closer to the first room, he sees Keith sitting in a crouch, the cat cradled to Keith’s chest, while one of the many Lucys stands in front of Keith and coos, fully lost in her admiration of the red cat.

The other kids look at her weirdly for some time, but then, one after another, they get closer and watch the cat, too. Ginger purrs and demands Keith’s attention.

“Where is the kitty’s paw?” - asks one boy unexpectedly. He sounds incredulous and a little angry. It’s the loudest Shiro has ever heard these kids speak. Shiro doesn’t even have a second to be glad about it since the little Lou hunches in on himself, as if trying to get smaller, and starts chanting apologies. Immediately, the other girls and boys look panicky and start apologizing, too. Shiro crouches, to be on the same level, and says quietly, looking at the boy:

“It’s OK. You can talk loudly. You hear me, Lou?”

The boy lifts his teary eyes at Shiro and searches for something. He instinctively leans back from
Shiro, while his feet don’t move from the spot. Shiro feels a little sick. He knows rationally that he hasn’t done anything to induce such a reaction, but it doesn’t help much. Shiro knows that look; Shiro knows that he himself had worn that same look many times in the past. The kid is expecting to be hurt.

“Lou, you are safe here. No one will hurt you,” - says Shiro.

Shiro looks around, trying to catch the kids’ gazes; trying to be his charming self from the past; trying to get them to trust him, if even a little. Gaining their full trust will sure as hell take more than that, but there has to be a start, as with everything.

Shiro won’t give up on these children.

“No one will get hurt here. This is your home. If anyone treats you badly, you can always tell me and I will defend you. Everything is alright from now on.”

Shiro notices a few girls and boys smiling at him shyly; some look distrustful and hide behind their friends’ backs. The two oldest boys look like they might cry. Then, Shiro’s gaze lands on Keith.

Keith smiles at him proudly. Shiro has never seen Keith smiling so radiantly as he is now. Despite himself, Shiro helplessly smiles back.

Now he believes himself more - everything will be alright with them.

The next day, Steve comes to visit. He brings Shiro the most unexpected gift ever.

When Shiro meets Steve at the gates, upon his request, he sees how his ex-assistant gets out of his car, moving backwards. He is holding something awkwardly in his outstretched arms. When Steve turns to Shiro, he can see that it’s a huge white cat with brown mittens, a brown tail and a pale-brown face. Steve practically throws the cat at Shiro and frantically starts to tidy his costume from her fur.

Shiro thanks the Universe for his quick reflexes - the cat is caught effortlessly - and glares at Steve. Before he can start a lecture on how to treat cats right, Steve announces:

“Her owner wanted her euthanized because she was leaving the city and didn’t want to take the cat with her. She needs a new home.”

Shiro hugs the cat closer to himself protectively and says: “What trash of a person!” He pets the cat’s head, hears her purring and melts a little on the inside.

“She is called Belladonna,” - informs Steve, aggressively cleaning his jacket with a sticky roller.

“I’ll call her Dina,” - says Shiro, looking with awe in Dina’s azure eyes.

He hears Steve blowing a tiny sigh of relief.

“There were two cats in that situation. I didn’t know which to take. I’m glad you like her.”

At Shiro’s horrified gaze Steve comments:

“My secretary has taken the other one. Actually, I’ve ordered to invent a rule on not killing healthy animals when there is a shelter in the city.”
Shiro doesn’t have words for the overall human indecency. Steve puts a hand on Shiro’s shoulder and says:

“I am actually here only to deliver the cat. I’m going right back now. Are you going to be alright?”

Shiro appreciates such a personal approach to cat-gifting which he tells Steve. They’d go for a hug, but - fur. So Shiro nods to Steve and repeats:

“Thank you for Dina, Steve. She’ll be in good hands.”

“Keep me updated on her life, otherwise, my secretary won’t leave me alone.”

That’s most unexpected, but Shiro has to promise to send Steve a photo of Dina at Midday of every working day before they part.

When Shiro enters his and Keith’s bedroom, Dina in his hands, Keith looks up from his book (he is having a break from the childcare and tries to catch up on his reading) and asks where is Steve. Then he sees the purring cat and his gaze turns uncomprehending.

“That’s Dina. A gift from Steve.”

“Oh. She’s lovely,” - replies Keith, as if it’s a sufficient explanation, kisses Shiro on the cheek and goes back to his book.

Shiro starts to really appreciate Steve’s gift after Ginger promptly leaves him to spend her time with the kids. Most of the kids get scratched and bitten, but their love for Ginger only grows. Shiro can’t fathom such a betrayal - Ginger rarely even comes to their bedroom to sleep now. Keith only tells him that Ginger has taken the hardest role on herself - to make kids communicate with others - and that Shiro should be proud of her deeds. Shiro only hides his face in the fur on Dina’s belly and asks: “Will you betray me, too, one day?” Dina paws at his head tenderly and purrs. That’s her universal response to everything. She is the cuddliest animal in the world. She even managed to turn previously aggressive towards her Ginger into her friend. If it were up to her, she’d never leave Shiro’s lap or arms. Very quickly, Shiro got used to wearing her around on his neck, not unlike an exotic boa.

The kids continue to give Shiro a headache, but with his new furry “accessory” they first start to laugh from joy when he comes in and only then remember that Shiro is an adult and get cautious. There’s one more bonus: Dina never leaves Shiro’s shoulders outside the bedroom. It is strange, taking her affectionate nature into consideration; as if she took Shiro’s pleas not to betray him to heart. She only ever goes to Keith’s arms if Shiro needs to go somewhere without her. This makes petting the cat only possible in one situation: when one gets close to Shiro. Dina is not scary at all, and many kids decide that she is worth nearing “Sir Shiro”.

A psychologist from the Department comes to the mansion every second day and has sessions with the kids. Shiro, or someone else from the adoptive parents, go there and watch. The kids are closed off, scared and don’t want to stay alone, ever. Shiro is worried because often they would all gather up in one bedroom of the seven and make a giant nest of blankets on the floor. As if they will never even learn how to sleep in smaller groups. The kids don’t get scolded, but they are told to fall asleep in their own beds next time.

The mansion staff somehow chooses their favourites. The other adoptive parents stick to their chosen kids, of course, but everyone else tries to see their favourite Lous and Lucys at least once a day.
Shiro has forbidden to bring them treats or initiate contact without asking him or Keith first, but it doesn’t work too well. There are no treats, but people persistently try to make the kids smile or look at them. Hunk and Lance spend their whole free time helping with the kids. Somehow, the three of Shiro’s boys have earned the kids’ trust and found a way to their hearts easily. Shiro thinks that it’s the result of being brought up in somehow similar circumstances. Or maybe it’s just them - open and caring and loveable. Where Keith is all business and talks to the girls and boys like to tiny adults, Lance and Hunk coo at them and spoil them. All kids get shy and blushy when Lance smiles at them and crack up with laughter when he tells them another super-clever joke of his. Everyone wants to be lifted by Hunk and swirled around in his strong hands. Shiro thinks that he haven’t seen Lance and Hunk this happy and self-assured ever before.

Hunk admits that he misses his friends from his boarding school. He and Matt make a request for a search where the ex-slaves from that school have been placed.

At the end of the second week at Shiro’s mansion, Keith manages to lure their kindergarten outside by the promise of cuddling big fluffy dogs and leads them (and their nanny) to the crates with the mansion’s guard dogs. The dogs are, indeed, big and fluffy (most of them). But they are intimidating, too. While Keith goes inside and cuddles and wrestles each and every one of the dogs, the kids barely have enough willpower to not run away from the friendliest Newfoundland dog in existence, Spooky. But Spooky knows what he’s doing. Keith comes out of the last dog crate and sees Spooky sitting inside a circle of kids and playing ball with them. The game consists of one child pushing the ball towards Spooky and Spooky pushing it back. It works surprisingly well, and Keith watches for some time, amazed. For the whole duration of their play, Spooky doesn’t move from his place in the centre, and when Keith announces that they have to go back home, some of the kids come closer to the giant dog, look at it with longing in their eyes and reluctantly go away. Spooky stays in place until the last kid leaves, wagging his tail joyfully. Lous and Lucys can hardly walk straight with how often they twirl their heads back at Spooky.

When Keith retells the events of the day later in the evening, he says that the next time they go to the dogs Lucy-with-Ponytails will definitely pet Spooky and that maybe he’ll introduce the Rottweiler to the kids some time later.

There’s too much work and volunteering and family business to fit into 24 hours, Shiro doesn’t remember falling asleep and waking up. And yet, when Shiro lies with his beloved in their bed and listens to him talking excitedly about the kids, he thinks that he is the luckiest person alive.

Keith made clear more than a month in advance that a party for his birthday is the last thing he wants. Shiro, of course, took the info into account and they didn’t have to speak about that again. Goddess knows, Shiro is not the one to betray Keith’s trust by surprising him with an unwanted party.

But a present is a different matter entirely. Shiro thinks that Keith may like a present. Maybe. But the birthday seems so far away that Shiro doesn’t feel the need to ask Keith what he wants just now. There’s so much to do and to discuss as is, and then the kidnapping happens, and the recovery takes so much time for both of them...

And then, completely out of the blue, Salomey tells him that Keith’s birthday is in a week. The 27th
of July. To say that Shiro is astounded would be an understatement. With all those troubles with the children, it has somehow completely slipped out of Shiro’s mind that there’s such a thing as Keith’s birthday at all. That same evening, Shiro asks Keith what he wants for his birthday and gets an incredulous stare in response.

“But I have everything I want already!” - says Keith, his brows furrowing.

Shiro doesn’t know whether to be happy to hear such words from Keith or to be disappointed because of not getting any help here. He doesn’t have the slightest idea what to get for Keith’s birthday, and the urge to gift Keith something, anything, is still there.

It needs to be mentioned that Shiro has acquired a weird habit - to come to one of the kids’ bedrooms (the second one, his favourite; yes, Shiro has favourites, don’t judge him) and sit there rambling about his daily problems (the 0+ rated ones, of course). He doesn’t think it’s wise, it just so happens. It started as Shiro talking to Dina (which is another weird thing, but Shiro avoids talking to his cat where someone may overhear so it must be OK). So, this time, Shiro comes to the kids bedroom, too, sits on the floor in his usual spot (he has a special throw pillow there, just for him) and allows the two girls and two boys to pet Dina while the spoiled beauty of a cat purrs and coils her shiny furs this way and that way. When the kids have enough, back off and return to their toys, Shiro starts talking.

This time, he talks about Keith and his birthday. But of course. When he contemplates aloud whether he needs to buy a present or not, Lou-the-Curly comes closer to him and mumbles, watching his feet:

“If you can buy a present, then you should buy it! A present is better than no present!”

The other three echo in unison from where they are building a house from pillows, chairs and giant lego blocks: “Yeah!”

And so it’s settled.

Shiro just has to decide what this present should be, no biggie.

Of course, he says it aloud.

“Buy him a cat!” - says one of the Lucys, the bolder one.

“Yeah! A cat!” - echo the other three, elated.

“But he likes dogs,” - tries Shiro.

“No. A cat. Dogs bark and… Cat is better!”

“Yeah! There are so many dogs and only two cats!”

“Ginger bites! Only Dina is nice!”

“Cats are the coolest!”

Is a cat now like a badge of status in this mansion? - wonders Shiro, making his way to his study afterwards.

Instead of wrecking his mind completely, Shiro texts Keith:

“Baby, my kids think you need a cat for your birthday. What do you say?”
“Another poor stray at the shelter?” - answers Keith immediately. His texting speed is a little crazy.

“No, Goddess forbid! Just an idea. From our kids. For your present.”

“I want a dog.”

“I told them! But now I think that kids will despise me if I don’t give you a cat. Cats are the coolest, they say.”

“So, if you don’t give me a cat, they’ll say you’re a greedy ass, only want to have cats yourself, and will point their little fingers accusingly at you?”

“Language, boy!” - writes Shiro to hide how nervous this mental image really makes him.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll be good!”

Shiro can hear Keith laughing from wherever he is now.

“You better behave,” - writes Shiro, knowing that they both know he is not as scary as he wants to be.

“I will!” - Keith mercifully plays along.

“I know. You’re my most beloved boy ever,” - types Shiro, and this time, it doesn’t come off jokingly.

“Love you too, Shiro. So much!” - comes the answer from Keith.

And second later:

“So you say I’m so good?”

Shiro can feel a trap here. But he can’t lie to Keith, can he?

“Very good, Keith!”

“Then I think I want a cat and a dog,” - replies his boy.

Did Keith really ask for something extra for himself, just now?

Shiro types and hits “send” with record speed:

“Deal!”

“That’s it? No arguments????”

“Two more pets won’t make a difference for our zoo.”

Keith doesn’t answer for several minutes, and Shiro starts working on some business-related emails when his phone rings.

“Even if the dog I want is a wolf-dog breed?” - reads the text from Keith.

Shiro stares at it a little longer than he should.

“You want a WOLF?”
“A quarter-wolf, but yes.”

“OMG. It’ll eat our cats, Keith.”

“No. It’ll be the most docile pet we have.”

“Keith, but a wolf!”

“Shiro. You are not the Red Riding Hood and I am not her Grandma, so chill out!”

“.... Am I not? :P”

Again, there’s a pause in between the responses. And then:

“I’m trying to work here, you!”

Shiro grins so hard right now. Maybe, they can work it out, after all.

“It will need a BIG crate,” - he types.

“It’s he. I’ll call him Cosmo.”

Sounds like a thing Keith has thought about a lot.

“And the cat?”

“You can choose one. Make it a surprise. I promise to cherish it the way it deserves. And I’ll request the crate from Hunk and Pidge.”

Now that the thing with a wolf in his house starts becoming real, Shiro gets nervous again.

“Yay.”

“You don’t sound too merry, Shiro. One more cat in the house, isn’t it awesome!”

Keith is now trying for distraction tactics, sly boy.

But Shiro remembers. It’ one more cat and a wolf.

“I’m scared,” - he admits in the next text.

“Don’t be. I won’t let my wolf eat you, my little Red Riding Hood.”

This is how Shiro ends up using his adjoining bathroom inappropriately that day and how a wolf-proof crate is planned to be built somewhere in the farther part of Shiro’s garden.

Four days prior to his birthday, Keith starts having a nightmare after a nightmare.

Hunk and Lance know what this time of year means for him better than anyone. They, too, look a little lost (and when Pidge comes by that week, Shiro sees her wiping tears away when she leaves).

In the night, Keith keeps dreaming about the boarding school, about losing his father, about hearing his mother leave their house and never catching even a glimpse of her face.

To Shiro, Keith says that the weather a year ago has been the same as at the moment: the sky was
clear, the hot air was quivering under the sun, and Keith was trying to get himself ready to stop being a person indefinitely. He can’t not think about the events of the last year, Keith says. What if Shiro wouldn’t have come to the auction that day? What if Keith stayed there and was sold off to some prick? What if no one bought him and he ended up at one of the worse factories? In most bad scenarios Keith contemplates during the day, Keith and Shiro never meet; Keith’s day-time thoughts come to torture Keith in his nightmares at night. It’s a vicious circle.

Shiro reassures Keith that he is safe now however he can; he lets Keith slip into his submissive state and kneel for him whenever Keith asks for it; he holds him and hugs him at every opportunity. Shiro has to put Keith to sleep every night and then wake him up when he starts whimpering during the night. When one day Keith says wistfully that he’d better just disappear from the mansion for some time so that no one reminds him about the summer of the previous year, even unintentionally, Shiro is happy to oblige.

If Keith wants to disappear, they can make it happen.

Shiro makes a quick overview in his head; seems like there won’t be any hindrances.

Shiro’s “headquarters”, led by Salomey, know what they’re doing (arguably better than their employer). The kids are doing OK. They have at least ten nannies and the whole mansion’s staff (not to mention Lance and Hunk specifically) to take care of them. With Steve as Governor, Shiro doubts he has to worry about some unexpected cataclysms.

When Keith is asked whether he wants to spend three days away from the mansion together with Shiro, he agrees instantly, not asking for details.

Shiro doesn’t have anything fancy in mind. No flights to far-away cities, no mountain climbing or bungee jumping. He just wants to go to a little modern hotel on the other side of the city. Shiro knows about it thanks to Ryan. There’s a swan lake in a ten-minute walk from it and a beautiful river, and it’s so high-tech that it won’t remind Keith of his daily life in a classical mansion.

Shiro only tells Salomey and Steve that he and Keith are leaving. Both don’t argue when they hear about Shiro’s plan but require from Shiro to give them his route and follow it to the letter. They also tell Shiro to keep their phones charged and ready at all times. Shiro has no doubts that his dear friends will track them all the way, but, after what happened, he doesn’t mind at all.

When Keith and Shiro depart, taking one duffle bag with them, Shiro can clearly see another car following them from the gates. Neither he, not Keith comment on it.

They ride quietly through the night. Shiro can tell that both of them think about the night of their crazy escapade. It feels nostalgic to run away again, just him and Keith, together in a car. Keith keeps his hand on Shiro’s knee all the way. Close to the city border, Shiro starts contemplating which road to take next and slows down a bit when Keith suddenly shouts:

“Heat the breaks!”

Shiro does, and they both fall forward, and Keith grabs Shiro’s arm and starts chanting:

“It’s that place, Shiro! That place! We should go there!”

And indeed, there’s that diner by a gasoline station where he and Keith ate burgers a year ago. It’s strange but they haven’t been here together before, especially so late.

Shiro feels weird about visiting it. Unlike him, Keith doesn’t know that they have met Lotor that night; he only knows that Allura’s boyfriend Leonard was Ezor’s patron Lotor at the same time, but
that’s all about it.

But Keith looks at him with so much hope, Shiro has no other choice but to agree.

Shiro still texts Salomey first.

When they enter, Keith announces that he will pay for their burgers this time.

“How chivalrous of you,” - comments Shiro. - “Then I’ll take the biggest one they have.”

Keith smiles proudly, Salomey texts back that everything is fine, and Shiro allows himself to relax.

He is finally having burgers with his boyfriend.

The next morning, they arrive at the hotel and nap until 12 a.m. Then they have breakfast and go for a walk. Keith dares Shiro to outrun him on a passage around the lake, and Shiro loses. Keith makes a victory dance and after that, they just lie in the grass and watch the birds on the lake surface. Keith doesn’t like the swans - says that they are too pretentious. Shiro hum and comments that they choose their partner for the lifetime. This, Keith approves but he still thinks the swans look arrogant. The, they fall silent, both having a lot on their minds.

Shiro can’t remember taking a real vacation in… five years? Six? He’s always been on the run, always had so much energy, always had things to do. And he didn’t mind. No way! He enjoyed being busy. Even the depression couldn’t stop him completely from working hard and striving for perfection. But the latest events have worn even Shiro out, it seems.

Shiro will be sure to go on vacation more often from now on. It’s good to lie here with Keith and exchange lazy kisses knowing that no one will bother them.

And when Keith whispers “I love you” into Shiro’s ear, there’s no other place Shiro would rather be.

The folks at home are not particularly happy with Keith and Shiro running away. Shiro can totally understand them - by the end of the first day, he misses the kids already and starts worrying about little things. Keith barely stops Shiro from writing a series of texts to Salomey and the nannies, telling him to chill out and give everyone a chance to miss him, too.

“We’ll have to pick you a cat on our way back,” - says Shiro.

“Are you so afraid of your kids asking me where my shiny new kitten is and me having no one to show off?”

“You know me so well, Keith.”

“Then we’ll have to leave early on the third day,” - muses Keith.

Shiro gets a distant feeling that Keith is just as willing to go back as Shiro, he just doesn’t want to show it.

Keith’s birthday is a quiet affair. Shiro kisses Keith awake and tells him again, how much he loves him and how precious Keith is. Keith laughs, embarrassed, and grumbles that Shiro is too smooth a
talker so early in the morning. After breakfast, they take a walk to the next village. Shiro notices several other hotel inhabitants walking with them, but he doesn’t mind. He firmly believes that 70% of other residents are Mr Fennel’s employee’s who had to take a quasi-vacation thanks to Shiro’s whim. Shiro hopes that they at least enjoy the setting when they’re not on shift. Then Keith shows him an especially ugly tree along the way, and Shiro forgets everything else.

Shiro suggests buying a cake, and Keith agrees enthusiastically. They find a bakery, and Keith chooses a mixed berry pie. It’s a very modest choice, but what would Shiro know? The fact that it’s Keith’s birthday hasn’t even been mentioned between the two of them today. When they were leaving, Keith has given Shiro his phone to carry. Shiro tells him about missed calls and new texts, naming the senders. He texts back from his own phone, saying “Hi!” from them both and reminding to NOT bother Keith with birthday stuff when they get back. They make photos of the village’s old water well and send them to Lance, to his utter delight. When they get back to their room, Keith insists on eating the pie at the small table in their room. They order tea and enjoy their meal.

In the evening, they go to the lake again. Keith admits that he’s itching to get back home. Shiro can relate. There’s only so much rest a workaholic like him may suffer a week.

They sit on the lake’s shore and share memories, good and bad ones all mixed up. Keith says that he thinks about his father and mother more than ever. There are no photos of his mother left; maybe, he could go to his old village and look for someone who knew her? Now, the villagers are allowed to talk about Krolia. Shiro supports this wish. He tells Keith that simply going there may be good for him. A lot of good things happened to Keith while he lived in that village with his father. Besides, Shiro is very curious to see the place where Keith has been born. Keith only hopes that he’ll be able to visit his mother’s grave; his father has been cremated and the ashes haven’t been preserved.

Keith’s voice wobbles in anger at how they had to erase even the last traces of Keith’s father in this world. Shiro says that while Keith remembers, there will be a trace. Together, they get an idea: what if they make an album of ex-slaves stories? Like Shiro’s collection of elder slaves’ photos that his family has kept over the years, but with much more information on each person. They’ll make is a big social project. Make all free people see the ex-slaves as persons, get to know them, even if it’s too late. Steve will definitely approve.

After they have enough of gloomy topics, Keith and Shiro start making plans for the future. Keith wants to go literally everywhere, and Shiro promises to take Keith with him when he starts doing business trips again. He hasn’t been to the capital since Steve’s retreat as his Chief Assistant and he’ll have to go there soon. Once the kids feel at home in the mansion, maybe. They will also go to the other cities, with time. Abroad, too.

But first, Keith needs to receive a proper driver’s licence. Keith claims that he could hold a driver's license exam right now. They hold a bet; Shiro texts Steve asking if they could try it tomorrow on their way through the city. Steve replies: “Sure thing. I’ll be really disappointed if Keith doesn’t succeed on his first try.” Shiro shows the text to Keith and receives a sheepish glance in return.

“Gosh, Keith. I shouldn’t have shown Steve’s message to you.”

Keith shrugs melancholically and says, looking at the clouds:

“Oh, Shiro. Mr Fennel’s disappointment always stings worse than anything else.”

Shiro feels cranky. Why does Steve’s opinion influence Keith’s moods so much? Shiro mopes until Keith dares him to catch him (again!) and immediately breaks into a run. Shiro knows that he has no chance, knows that Keith had a head-start, but he still starts running after his mischievous boy. Unexpectedly for Shiro though, Keith lets himself be caught right at the hotel’s entrance. Shiro is full of adrenaline, so he doesn’t register what he does until he hears Keith moan under him. Turns out,
he’s pushed Keith to the wall, caged him between his arms and started nearly frotting. When Shiro realises what he does, he stops. He’d like to say immediately, but that would be a lie: Keith is irresistible.

Shiro looks at Keith’s dazed expression and tries to come up with a plan on how to not fuck it all up even worse.

“Baby,” - Shiro whispers to Keith. - “Are you going to be good for me?”

And he mouths at Keith’s neck. Selfish, weak-willed bastard.

Keith whines for him, again. It’s needy and a little broken, and Shiro has to chant: “Seventeen, seventeen, seventeen, sex is not important, get a grip, Shiro, he’s seventeen …” until he remembers where they are and what is happening.

As his last-ditch attempt, Shiro imagines Steve’s face when he prepares to make sure that Shiro is not a threat to adolescent boys anymore. Finally, the fog in his head dissipates a little, and Shiro gives an order:

“You will go to our room now and you’ll have exactly five minutes to get off. When I enter in six minutes, you’d better be in the shower already. Can you do that for me?”

Keith nods frantically, and Shiro sends him upstairs.

As expected, his order has been obeyed and he can hear the shower next door.

Shiro sits down on the bed and contemplates his life choices until Keith comes out, dressed in his pyjama and absolutely beaming. Shiro smiles at him and thinks about the next year with dread.

When they lie in bed at night, Shiro whispers that it feels like they are like an old couple - it’s as if he knows Keith all his life. Keith snorts and replies that his first thought was that Shiro means that they just kiss, go to sleep in one bed every night and that’s it, they just sleep. Like a very old couple would. Shiro tries grumbling that if Keith thinks he is too old, then… but he is promptly shut up with another kiss.

They both know that not going further than kissing and cuddling is better for now. Keith is not over the kidnapping thing, Shiro feels guilty enough for being in a relationship with an underaged guy as it is. If they are not careful enough in building their relationship, everything can go down the hill very quickly. There’s something they both don’t doubt: what they feel is true and pure. And healing. They will do their best to make it work.

Guilty conscience doesn’t stop Shiro from being naughty and slipping out of the bed after Keith falls asleep. Shiro may have lost some brain cells after his own orgasm in the shower. For the longest time, Shiro can’t fall asleep afterwards; his dick pretends that Shiro is 17 again, too, and urges Shiro to just do something. Thanks goddess that Shiro can function with fewer hours of sleep than other humans.

The next morning, they collect their duffle bag and head off. It’s been happy and peaceful two days, but they both miss their home and feel like they have been on vacation for ages. On their way through the city, they make a stop to let Keith try for a driving license. Keith mentions that back then, Mr Fennel has promised him the punishment of his lifetime if he ever sees Keith speeding or being a reckless driver. He is still scared by that promise enough to want to stay on the safe side. Shiro is a little disconcerted by the story until Keith says that, if not for Mr Fennel, he’d definitely drive racer-
style. Looking at how Keith’s eyes acquire an unhealthy shine when he talks about racing, Shiro decides that maybe, just maybe, this one time Steve has been right with threatening Keith with discipline.

When Keith is called to start on the driving test, Steve finally comes to greet Shiro after talking to the employees of the certification centre. Steve hugs Shiro first and meanly teases him immediately after that, distracting him from worrying about Keith.

Keith does the first part excellently. Unlike Shiro, Keith didn’t have even a hint of doubt in himself when it comes to driving. Shiro is absurdly proud of him. Shiro is just bursting with pride for Keith. It’s silly but it looks like Steve feels the same. Shiro elbows him, smirking, but Steve only shoots him a mildly annoyed look and continues watching Keith who is now out of the car and shaking the instructor’s hand.

The “written” part (the rules itself) doesn’t seem a big deal to Shiro, but they seem to be for Keith. Keith gets somehow jittery. He and other participants have to go to a computer class and take a test. Shiro catches Keith’s gaze before he heads inside and levels him with his best Dom look. When Keith straightens his spine reflexively, Shiro smiles at him the same way as when he calls Keith his good boy and sees Keith gulping air, no more anxiety in his body language. Shiro just hopes that Keith will concentrate on the right things. Then Shiro notices Steve watching Shiro with a smirk of his own. Shiro just flips him the bird.

Keith does the second part just as good.

Everyone breathes out a sigh of relief.

Before Keith and Shiro can thank Steve for arranging it all, again, and head back to their car, not tearing the Governor away from his actual duties anymore, Steve asks them to follow him. Keith and Shiro look at each other in surprise and go after Mr Fennel into one of the office buildings. They come to the director’s room and Steve spills it: he has big news.

The grave of Keith’s mother has been identified.

“You take as much time as you need,” - says Steve. - “We will take care of the cemetery, and you can always visit it. Whenever you deem appropriate.”

Shiro just watches Keith standing there, mute and frozen as if struck by a lightning and takes the initiative.

“Thank you, Steve. It means a lot. But I really hoped to make it home till dusk. We should get going. And you, uhmm, you have work too, right?” - says Shiro, a little awkwardly in the silence of the room.

Steve doesn’t reply. Instead, he comes to Keith, bends down and says something to his ear, very quiet. Keith looks at Steve like at a lifeline. There are tears in the corners of his eyes. Then Steve takes a step back, nods at Shiro and heads out.

Shiro takes his retreat as a clue to come closer to Keith and drag him into a hug.

They forgo visiting the cat-shelter and head straight to the mansion.

Keith is silent on the ride back. He doesn’t comment when they drive past that fateful diner. He doesn’t ask Shiro unexpected questions out of the blue. He doesn’t put his hand onto Shiro’s knee. If not for the seat belt, he might have climbed all the way up onto the seat and curled up there. Shiro gives him space. Even if he knows how it may feel, no one experiences grief in the same way as the
others. Shiro will wait for Keith to come at him and ask for help, or to get over it on his own.

When the car pulls to the entrance gate, Keith breaks.

“I can’t go there!”

“Then you won’t,” - replies Shiro calmly.

“But it’s my mother!”

As if it explains everything.

“I’ve been dreaming of meeting her all my life! And now… there’s the grave, it’s real, I can go there! And I can’t.”

“Why is it so, baby?” - asks Shiro as soothing as he can. They have arrived, and their friends wait for them already, but let them wait. Shiro will stay inside the car for as long as it takes to have this conversation with Keith.

It takes Keith several minutes to push the words out of his mouth.

“When I imagine it, I feel like I’m going numb all over. I can’t move. Or I can, I, I don’t know!” - cries out Keith in frustration. - “It’s like everything freezes, and I move through some terrible green goo! And I knew she was dead before, but now she will be really-really dead, and...”

“Keith. Breathe with me for a bit here, yeah? Calm breaths, in and out. Follow me, yeah, like that…”

When Keith calms down, Shiro takes his hand and kisses it.

“Keith. It’s a lot. You said so yourself - she’s been more of a fairy-tail than a real woman, right? And now she becomes more than that. It’s OK that you are overwhelmed. And... I’m sorry it happened that way.”

Keith looks up at Shiro, and he looks so young and vulnerable that Shiro wants to put him inside a blanket burrito and never leave alone.

In that moment, someone knocks at the car window, startling them.

It’s Pidge.

Shiro takes a deep breath and dials the window down.

Pidge tells them:

“Your kids have enriched Dina’s palette, a little.”

Shiro’s eyes go wide. He can hear Keith behind him making a little squeaking sound.

In a matter-of-fact tone, Pidge assures Shiro that Dina has endured the dyeing of her fur in all the colours of the rainbow by felt-tip pens without arguing or acting stressed by the treatment.

Shiro doesn’t know whether to be angry at the kids or to be amused by all this. He looks at Pidge questioningly and waves his hands around, trying to ask: “How?...” Pidge seems to guess correctly since she says:

“The nanny was absent for 10 minutes. Got caught up in another bedroom. When she came in,
Ginger was sitting on top of the wardrobe and licking herself lazily, while Dina was lying in the middle of the kids’ circle who was painting her with felt-tip pens. The nanny claims, Dina has sighed resignedly when their eyes have met.”

Shiro finally finds his voice:

“But why would she even go there?”

Pidge shrugs. Shiro finally decides to exit the car, Keith follows suit.

Salomey approaches them, slowly. She looks like she expects to be scolded and grounded. Hunk and Lance stand awkwardly to the side, not daring to look at Shiro directly. Do they all think it’s their fault his cat has been in trouble? Is this why they have sent Pidge to be the messenger? Is Shiro feared that much?

Keith saves the day.

He comes at Salomey and offers, deadpan:

“We should dye your hair green, as a punishment.”

Salomey lifts her head, automatically, to give a reply (and Shiro thinks she was inclined to agree to whatever punishment Keith would invent), then sees Keith’s eyes, shining with mirth and glares at him, instead.

Pidge snorts, whispers to Hunk something like: “See, not so scary, after all,” Hunk snorts, too, and everyone is back to normal.

They talk for a while on their way to the mansion when Keith turns to Shiro and starts laughing, all of a sudden.

Shiro is a little baffled. What prompted such a reaction?

By his side, Keith practically wheezes from laughter. Everyone else just stares at Keith, uncomprehending and smiling awkwardly.

When Keith’s fit is finally over, he wipes at his eyes and explains, looking at Shiro:

“I’ve just imagined you with your hair dyed pink-and-blue”.

And he starts laughing anew. That must be caused by the overall stress of the day, Shiro thinks tiredly. Just that.

Then Salomey starts talking about work. They haven’t even entered the house, but Shiro misses their vacation so badly already.

Coming back is nice, though. Shiro reads his favourite kids a bedtime story, cuddles the shit out of both Ginger and Dina (she looks a little like an impressionist painting, poor girl), looks the mansion over briefly - everything seems to be alright. He ends up walking to the glass library in the dark. But when he comes close to it, he sees lights on the second floor.

Keith is sitting on a pillow on his usual spot. He smiles at Shiro dreamily.

Shiro turns the lights out and joins Keith on the floor - the pillow turns out to be big enough for two.
They lean onto the bench behind them and watch the stars through the glass ceiling. The night sky won’t ever cease to amaze Shiro.

Shiro tugs Keith close to himself and lets him hide on his chest.

Just imagine, says Shiro to himself, a year ago you could’ve sat here, all alone, without hope, without any wish to go on, without a chance at happiness. Your home has been sterile and empty. And look around now: haven’t your dreams come true?

Shiro thinks about his little boys and girls who grow calmer (and naughtier) with every day they spend in the mansion, about Hunk and Lance who take care of the buildings and gardens with so much love as if they belong to them. He thinks about all the plans that have been made, about all the projects he and Steve have already started.

Shiro is happy.

Shiro is happy and he is not scared.

His life promises to give him a lot of challenges every day. He and Keith have so much to work through. But it's alright, it's how it should be.

Shiro vows to himself that every time he’ll start doubting himself or his life choices or his commitment to Keith, he’ll think about this moment in the glass library and remember what is important in his life.

And then he kisses Keith, just because he can.

This is Shiro’s life now. It's time to get used to it.

Chapter End Notes

It is officially over.
I don't know how to feel. This chapter has been a monster, yeah?
I already miss thinking with Shiro.

If you want to read the continuation in Keith's POV later, you can subscribe to the series (or to my profile, who knows!).
I hope I will write it in a month or two. The more people will tell me they want to read it, the better the chance of me writing it, hey))]

Thank you all again for your time! See you!

End Notes

Upd. 14.06.19 - now with a Glossary!
Check here: Facts about the "Numb" AU
19.07.18, 101 kudos.
24.09.18, 201 kudos.
25.12.18, 301 kudos! ^--^ My record now))
Thank you all so much for your support, for reading and commenting!
I'd be very glad to make new friends:
on Twitter [Falka-tyan](https://twitter.com/Falka-tyan)
or on Tumblr [Falka-tyan](https://falka-tyan.tumblr.com)

Works inspired by this one: [Facts about the “Numb” AU](https://archiveofourown.org/works/15925800) by [Falka_tyan](https://archiveofourown.org/users/Falka_tyan), [The Stim Toy](https://archiveofourown.org/works/16282878) by [Falka_tyan](https://archiveofourown.org/users/Falka_tyan)

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