i hate space but oh how i love the starlight in your eyes
by nobodys_pearl

Summary

The story of how Adam and Shiro first met, how they fell in love, and how they pretty much adopted Keith - all told from Adam's point of view.

I began writing this fic shortly after watching season 7 because if they couldn't give us their story, then I was going to write one, and it was going to be full of fluff.

Notes

I'm actually really happy with this. I had a lot of fun writing it and I hope that you all enjoy.

Also I love Adam with all my heart now :')
Adam didn’t like space. He would look up at the sky with his older sister, listening to her as she pointed out the constellations, and he just wasn’t interested.

Space was dark. Cold. Empty. Suffocating.

Lonely.

Being on Earth was better. Being on Earth was safe. It was home.

When a representative of the Garrison came to Adam’s school with a simulation game, Adam didn’t think much of it. He waited in line like all the other kids, and when it was finally his turn he sat down in the seat and grabbed the joy sticks, looking at the screen full of stars and space rocks.

He got to level ten without really thinking about it, the game followed a pretty simple pattern, and then he noticed that the people around him were looking at him weirdly. He quickly let go of the joy sticks, ending the next level, and moved to stand, offering the seat to someone else before shrinking into the back of the group.

He didn’t want people to look at him like that. Like he was different. The representative was looking at him like that, too.

He hated space. He hated the distance between everything. He hated how obsessed his sister was with it, how everyone around him seemed to be obsessed with it. Space wasn’t special.

He had other reasons, but those reasons he decided to ignore.

The next day the representative from the Garrison came to his house. A few moments later Adam was sitting on the couch between his parents, a sinking feeling in his stomach as he wondered if he was in trouble. He looked up and saw his sister looking down at him from the stairs, peeking her head out from behind her doorframe.

“Your son has incredible talent,” the woman, who introduced herself as Lieutenant Johnson, said, looking at his parents. “Talent that would be put to excellent use at the Garrison.”

“The Garrison?” Adam’s mother asked softly, holding tightly to her son’s hand.

Lieutenant Johnson nodded. “More specifically the space exploration flight program.”

Adam watched as his father clenched his jaw.

“It’s a relatively new program,” Lieutenant Johnson explained. “And very selective. We only take
on six recruits a year -”

“We’re familiar with the program,” Adam’s father said, his tone even. Lieutenant Johnson winced and coughed awkwardly.

“Right, of course. I found the file when I was -” She took a breath and straightened her back. “Regardless, your son should be honored that we’ve decided to accept him. He’ll be a great service to our country. He’ll go on to do things people our age only dreamed of when we were kids.” Her gaze became sympathetic. “I know about the - tragedy - in your past, but this could be -”

“I don’t want to go to space,” Adam interrupted, still holding his mother’s hand. “I want to stay here.”

Lieutenant Johnson looked at him in surprise. “I don’t think that you understand the opportunity that you -”

“I don’t want to go,” Adam said more firmly, getting up from the couch. “And you can’t make me.” He left the room and headed up the stairs, passing by his sister as he went to his room, laying facedown on his bed. He could still hear his parents hushed voices as they talked to Lieutenant Johnson.

He wished that he didn’t do so well on that flight simulator. He wished that this woman had never shown up to his house.

Why would he ever want to go to space, when all that he could ever want was here? Why would he risk all of this for the unknown?

He heard the sound of footsteps coming into his room. Then he felt his bed shift as someone moved to sit down.

“Adam -”

“Go away, June.”

“No, you’re going to listen to me,” she said. He felt her run a comforting hand through his hair, and he made a frustrated huff but let her continue. “I really think that you should participate in this program.”

Adam lifted his face off of his bed to look at her. “Space has always been you and - it’s always been your thing, not mine.”

“And yet you would still come along anyway. You used to like looking at the stars.”

Adam groaned and moved to sit up. “No I didn’t. How could I? After what happened? How can you still love it so much?” He wanted his words to hurt her enough that she would go away, and yet she smiled softly instead.

“Because it makes everything bigger. More important.”

Adam looked at her in confusion. June struggled to come up with something else to say, and then her eyes lit up. “Come with me.” She grabbed Adam’s hand and led him to her room. He looked down the stairs and saw that the woman had left, his parents talking on the couch, their expressions serious. Then he walked into his sister’s room and she sat him on the bed.

“Close your eyes,” she instructed. Adam gave her an unconvinced look. “Do it,” she insisted,
poking his cheek. He rolled his eyes but then he did as he was told. He heard her walk a few steps away and then he heard a soft click. He felt her sit down next to him on the bed. “Now open them and look up.”

Adam opened his eyes and saw that her ceiling was covered in tiny stars. He looked at her and saw the flashlight that she was holding in her hands, a plastic orb attached to the end of it. She had a wide smile on her face.

“There’s so much in this life to experience,” June said wistfully, looking at her ceiling as she held the flashlight steady in her hands. “So many wonderful things waiting for us outside of this house, outside of this town, outside of this universe.”

“And there are bad things too,” Adam pointed out grimly. Home was safe. His town was predictable. The universe? That was out of Adam’s control.

“There are bad things no matter where you are,” she said. “But Adam, you can’t let the fear of those bad things stop you from finding the really good things. Because I can promise you that those really good things are going to change your life forever, and you’re going to wonder how this little house was ever enough.”

Adam looked at her with wide eyes, unsure of what to say. He lifted his head up to look at the stars once more, shining down on him, cutting through the darkness. Maybe all this time he had focused too much on the emptiness, and not enough on the light that filled the dark spaces.

Something filled inside his chest, a sensation that he wasn’t familiar with. He pictured himself holding those stars in his hands, collecting them in his pockets, floating through space surrounded by - everything. It was scary and unknown, but maybe there were things that would make it worth it.

“I miss him, too, you know,” June eventually said, breaking the silence. “Whenever I look at the stars I think of him, and it hurts,” she sighed and looked at Adam. “But he wouldn’t want us to stop doing what we love because of him. He wouldn’t want you to reject a spot at the Garrison because of him.”

“I - I have to think about it,” Adam finally said, moving to stand up, finding it hard to look away from the stars. June smiled and moved to stand as well, walking over to turn on the light.

“At the end of the day it’s your decision. Just know that I’ll always be in your corner.” She ruffled his hair and he smiled and swatted it away.

“Thanks, June.” Adam said, and then he headed out of her room and back to his own, the light from the stars still on the back of his eyelids.

Earth was safe. Space certainly wasn’t. But maybe he could at least give this space exploration program a shot. Maybe June was right, and something really good would happen.

Maybe he could follow in his footsteps.

Adam tugged nervously on the collar of his new Garrison uniform, a duffle bag in his other hand.

“You’ll be visiting home before you know it,” his father said, putting a hand on his shoulder.
“We’re proud of you, son.”

“Make sure to call if you need anything,” his mother told him. He could tell that she was holding back her tears as she smiled. Adam knew that his parents didn’t want to let him go, and yet they had respected his decision. It wasn’t good to think about the past too much.

“I will,” Adam said, his throat tight all of a sudden. He was beginning to have second thoughts. How could he possibly think that space could replace what he had in front of him? But he thought about the stars on June’s ceiling once more. Stars that had made her simple room look magical. He wanted to find that magic, even though he had to sacrifice his home to do so. There were things that he was desperate to understand, things to experience, and after days of thinking it over he knew that his sister was right – he’d never find those things if he stayed.

And he had other reasons, but he kept those to himself.

“You’re going to be amazing,” his sister said, pulling him into a hug and ruffling his hair one last time. Adam adjusted his glasses and smiled at all of them.

“Cadet Wadley?” a voice said behind him, and Adam turned to see an imposing figure walk up to them, a stern look on his face.

“I am Commander Iverson, the director of the SEP. I thought that I should introduce myself.”

Adam saluted, wondering if that was the correct thing to do. By Iverson’s approving look he assumed that it was.

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“Your son is in good hands. We’ll make a fine pilot out of him,” Iverson said, looking at Adam’s parents.

“Make sure to call,” his mom reminded him, kneeling down to give him a hug. His father gave him one last proud look, and then the three of them headed out of the facility.

Adam turned back around to face Iverson. It was only the two of them standing in the front hall of the Garrison.

“Follow me,” Iverson said, and he made a sharp turn and headed down the hall. Adam quickly followed behind, adjusting the strap of his bag. He couldn’t help but notice how bare the walls were, how clean the place was.

It couldn’t feel less like home.

“You’ll be rooming with another cadet in the SEP,” Iverson said, “his name is Takashi Shirogane.” He knocked on the door. The door quickly opened and Adam saw a boy who looked around his age give him a wide smile. He had black hair that was short in the back, but the front part of it flopped in his face a little.

“Hello sir,” he said, saluting and straightening his back as he looked at Iverson.

“At ease, cadet,” Iverson said, and the boy dropped his arm. Then he looked back at Adam.

“I’m Shiro,” he said holding out his hand. Adam took it and was surprised by how enthusiastically Shiro shook it.

“I’m Adam,” Adam said shyly, letting go of Shiro’s hand to adjust the strap on his shoulder. Shiro looked at his duffle bag and his eyes widened.
“Oh! Let me get out of your way,” he said, moving out of the doorway to let Adam inside.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow at 0800 hours,” Iverson said. “Don’t be late.”

“We won’t, sir,” Shiro assured him. Iverson gave him a nod and left.

Adam slumped his shoulders and sighed, walking into his new room. It had a lot more space than he expected. It even had a kitchen and a lounge area. He set his bag down on the couch and sat down, trying to get his bearings.

He was really doing this. Why was he doing this? All of the uncertainty began to press down on him as he closed his eyes, trying not to think about his bedroom, his sister, his mother’s cooking -

“So what level did you get to on that simulation?” Shiro asked. Adam opened his eyes and saw that he was leaning against the kitchen counter, looking at him with interest.

“Uh, level ten,” Adam said. Shiro smiled.

“I got to level twelve.”

Adam felt a twinge of annoyance at that statement. “I could’ve gotten farther but I decided to stop.”

Shiro looked at him with curious eyes. “Why’d you stop?”

Adam huffed and slumped further on the couch, looking at the wall across from him. “Because I wanted to.” He remembered the way that his classmates looked at him, like they expected something from him that he didn’t have. Like his sister looked at him when she told him to come here. What did they want? He would never be like -

“You gave up,” Shiro clarified, and Adam glared at him.

“Why do you even care?”

Shiro smiled and lifted himself off of the counter. “Because I need to be the best cadet in this program.”

Adam’s annoyance turned into confusion. “Why?”

Shiro massaged his wrist and then quickly pulled his hand away, realizing what he was doing. “So that I can meet some aliens,” he joked. Then he gave Adam a teasing salute and headed for his room. “Yours is the one on the left,” he pointed out, gesturing to the closed door next to the one that Shiro was opening. He turned around and gave Adam one last smile. “It was nice to meet you, level ten.” With that he stepped into his room and closed the door.

Adam stared at the door angrily for a few moments, and then he crossed his arms and looked back at the wall. Level ten. He could do way better than that. He’d show him.

Adam hated space. He increased the speed on his treadmill and tried to focus on the burn in his chest as he began to run faster. He’d rather think about anything else instead of Iverson grilling him for his poor flight technique. It wasn’t his fault that Shiro decided to pull that fancy move, where did he even learn that anyway? One moment he was flying through the stars in the simulation ship and the next his wing was clipped and he was hurtling towards a space rock.
“You always have to stay alert, cadet,” Iverson had told him afterward, making an example of him in front of his fellow cadets. “You never know what you might encounter in space.”

‘Encounter? Space is empty,’ Adam wanted to argue. What was the Garrison hoping to find? He wondered what his sister would tell him. She probably believed in aliens, just like someone else he knew.

Then Adam heard the treadmill next to him whirr to life. He looked over and saw Shiro giving him that wide grin that he always seemed to have on.

“Hey level ten,” Shiro said, giving him a small wave of his hand. Adam huffed in annoyance and looked ahead, ignoring him. He increased the speed for good measure. Then he noticed that Shiro was running faster than him. Shiro caught him watching and smiled once more. It didn’t even look like he was breaking a sweat. Adam increased his speed until he was running faster. Shiro laughed and increased his speed as well. Soon they were both full on sprinting, Adam managing to keep going through sheer anger alone.

“Hey! These are not toys!” a woman in a high-ranking uniform said, and Shiro and Adam quickly decreased their speed, looking at her sheepishly.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Shiro said. She gave them one last disapproving look and left. Adam took a moment to catch his breath. “Not bad, level ten, but I was running faster.”

“No you weren’t,” Adam argued.

Shiro laughed again, pulling his shirt up to wipe the sweat off his face. “See you back at the room.” With that he turned off the machine and left the gym. Adam watched him go, running an exasperated hand through his hair, which he noticed was damp at the ends. It was like Shiro came to the gym just to mess with him.

He didn’t know how to feel about that.

Adam squinted as he looked down at the list of flight formations that Iverson had told them all to memorize by tomorrow. There were about fifty of them, but Adam was confident that he had a pretty solid grasp on them all. He just had to look them over one more time.

This was what he was comfortable with. Patterns, directions, structure, there was a reason for everything and once you knew that reason all the rest of it began to make sense. He flipped the page and looked at the next set of formations, his eyes quickly scanning through them. He found himself smiling as he realized that he could do all of these easily. Maybe Iverson would actually compliment him this time.

He heard the door behind him open and kept reviewing his notes as Shiro came to sit down on the opposite end of the couch. Adam snuck a glance and watched as Shiro was reading through the same flight formation packet, his brow furrowed in concentration. It almost looked like he was - frustrated? Adam looked back at his own packet and flipped to the next page.

A minute later Shiro threw his packet angrily on the table in front of him, rubbing his wrist. Shiro caught Adam looking at him and Adam quickly looked away.

“Sorry,” Shiro said, letting out a frustrated noise. “I think I need to go for a walk.”
Adam was tempted to tease him, maybe let him know that ‘level ten’ over here already had the formations memorized, but he saw the look on Shiro’s face and stopped himself. He almost looked ashamed.

Adam pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and moved to stand as well. “I think I’ll join you.”

Shiro looked at him in surprise. Adam began to wonder if he wasn’t welcome. He deflated, about to sit back down, but then Shiro smiled and walked to the door.

“Okay.”

Adam followed Shiro as he weaved his way through the halls. He watched as Shiro stretched his arms, peeking into the open doors of offices and looking out whatever window they came across. There weren’t many. He seemed to look a lot more at ease than when he was back in the room, more like himself.

“Where are we going?” Adam asked. He assumed that Shiro had a destination in mind.

Shiro shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. I’ll know it when I see it.” Adam furrowed his brow. That didn’t make any sense.

“You know, I can help you with the flight formations,” Adam said. “I made up some tricks to help me remember.”

“Who said that I needed any help?” Shiro asked. There wasn’t any harshness behind it, just curiosity. But Adam bristled anyway.

“Fine, just learn it on your own, then,” Adam said, looking anywhere but at Shiro. They turned the corner.

“I have to learn it on my own,” Shiro said quietly. “I need to do these things by myself.”

“That’s stupid. You’ll just make everything harder -”

“Exactly. I need to learn how to get through the hard things. I need to know that I can,” Shiro explained.

“Why?” Adam asked.

“Don’t you want to find out what you’re capable of? Push your limits?”

Adam scoffed. “Not really.” He glanced at Shiro and noticed that he was already looking at him. “I know who I am,” he added, looking away.

“This is it,” Shiro said, and Adam was about to ask him what he was talking about when he looked ahead and saw a large window that looked out on the desert. He didn’t realize that it’d gotten so late - stars filled the night sky, way more stars than he ever saw at home.

Shiro walked forwards until he was a few inches away from the glass, his fingertips touching its surface. Adam joined him.

“My sister would love this,” Adam said quietly, trying to ignore that familiar ache for home.

“I didn’t know that you had a sister,” Shiro said.
“You don’t know a lot of things about me,” Adam replied. Shiro was quiet. Adam realized that he didn’t know a lot about him either. They looked out of the window in silence.

“Patience yields focus,” Adam finally said. Shiro looked at him.

“What?”

Adam sighed and pressed his hand against the glass as well. “Patience yields focus. My sister would always tell me that when she dragged me out to find shooting stars. I would always complain about how I couldn’t see anything, but she told me that if I just sat and waited, they would come. And they did.” Adam watched as the stars seemed to wink at him. “Once I stopped thinking about where I wanted to be, I was finally able to appreciate where I was, and focus on that.” When Shiro didn’t say anything he turned and saw him already looking at him, a peculiar look on his face. Adam quickly looked away, fixing his glasses. “I know that you want to learn the flight formations on your own, but that’s my advice. Just be patient, and you’ll get there.

Adam realized that maybe he needed to be a little more patient as well. He hated to admit it, but he was actually enjoying being in the SEP. He loved the challenge, he loved flying, he loved how it made his world just that much bigger, made him feel like he could be more than he was. Of course he missed home, but he was starting to warm up to the Garrison.

And some of the people there.

“Patience yields focus,” Shiro said to himself, pulling his hand away from the glass. He smiled. “I like that. I may just have to use it sometime.”

“Just never forget who you got it from,” Adam said, straightening his stance. Shiro laughed.

“I won’t.”

“Iverson said over the comms system. Adam quickly adjusted his altitude so that he was at one end of the v-formation. He could see Shiro at the head of it. Adam smiled. It looked like Shiro was able to memorize them after all. He thought back to last night. When they had gotten back to their room Adam had decided to make some tea. He watched as Shiro sat back on the couch, picking the packet back up once more. He could tell that he was getting frustrated again, but then he took a deep breath and turned the page, getting into a stride. By the time the tea was ready he was already on page five.

“Here, have some,” Adam had said, handing over one of the two mugs he had in his hand. Shiro smiled and took it, looking grateful.

“Thanks.”

For the next hour Adam sat at the counter and drank his tea, reading through their textbook on space flight protocol. Every once in a while he snuck a glance Shiro’s way, watching him flip through the packet, looking more and more confident. He didn’t realize that he was staring until Shiro looked back at him. They stared at each other for a moment before they both quickly looked away, going back to what they were doing. Eventually Adam closed his textbook and went to bed, wishing Shiro goodnight.

“Iverson said, and Adam shifted his position so that he was in the middle, the
rest of the trainer jets circled around him. “Nice work, Wadley. It’s obvious that you did your homework.”

Adam struggled to keep his expression neutral. “Thank you, sir.” Finally - he was doing something right. He moved his jet a little faster and watched as the desert flew by him. He was flying, and it felt amazing. It felt right.

“We’re going to get caught, Shiro,” Adam hissed, following his roommate as he weaved through the dimly lit cargo bay.

“Only if you keep talking, level ten,” Shiro said, and Adam huffed and stayed quiet. They weaved through a couple of large planes until Shiro stopped, placing a hand on one of the cruisers.

“And what do you plan to do with that?” Adam asked, looking at him skeptically.

“We,” Shiro emphasized, “are going to explore the desert some more.”

“We?” Adam asked, crossing his arms. “I thought that we were going for another walk, not sneaking out of the Garrison.”

“They won’t even notice that we left,” Shiro assured him. “Besides, I want to see how well you can really fly.”

“You see me fly every day during class,” Adam argued.

Shiro lifted himself onto the cruiser and sat down, grabbing his helmet and putting it on. “That’s not real flying. Haven’t you wondered what you could do if you didn’t have to stick to simple flight formations?”

Adam thought about that for a moment. “This is dangerous,” he said.

“That didn’t sound like a no,” Shiro pointed out. Adam stood there for a moment. Shiro was right - he did want to know what it would be like to fly without any restrictions. But this was all so unpredictable - Shiro was just so unpredictable.

“Wait for me,” Adam said without thinking, and he walked over to the other cruiser and climbed onto the seat, putting on his helmet. They quietly maneuvered their jets out of the bay and soon they were outside of Garrison grounds.

“Race you to that big rock over there!” Shiro called. Adam smiled and increased his speed, blowing by Shiro.

“You’re on!”

He weaved through large rocks and watched as red dust began to kick up around him. The moon was big and bright tonight. He let out of whoop of joy as he pushed the cruiser to go faster. Shiro laughed and then Adam watched as his cruiser moved in front of him, cutting him off.

“Hey!” Adam protested as Shiro took the lead. Soon they were racing up a large rock outcropping, getting closer and closer to the stars. For a moment it felt like they were up there in space, like the sky was theirs and theirs alone. Then Adam looked ahead and saw that the outcropping quickly
ended. It had to be a long way down. He hastily decreased his speed so that he wouldn’t fall off, but then he watched with wide eyes as Shiro only flew faster.

“What are you doing?” Adam yelled into the comms in his helmet, but he didn’t get an answer. He decided to fly after Shiro, although he didn’t know what he was going to do once he caught up to him, but then he saw Shiro’s cruiser fly off of the cliff. He stopped his own cruiser right at the edge and watched as it headed for the ground, quickly pulling up at the last moment and shooting off towards the large rock that Shiro had pointed out earlier.

“Why would you do that?” Adam yelled, exasperated.

“I wanted to see if I could,” Shiro said through the comms.

“So you’d never done that before?” Adam yelled. “Are you crazy?”

“Maybe, but I’m also going to win,” Shiro said, and Adam could hear it in his tone that he had a smug smile on his face. Adam huffed and backed his cruiser up a reasonable distance from the edge. Then he gripped his thruster more tightly in his hand and threw it forward, feeling his cruiser fly faster than he had allowed it to go before. It sped towards the edge, and before Adam could rethink his decision the rock went away and where was only sky. He knew the cruisers weren’t meant to be up this high. Soon he was heading for the ground, and Adam looked at the sharp rocks beneath him with panicked eyes.

‘Patience yields focus,’ he suddenly thought. He took a deep breath and adjusted his grip on the thruster, waiting for the right moment. He watched as the ground came closer, and then when he was certain that he was about to crash he pulled up and felt his cruiser level out, speeding across the desert. He quickly caught up with Shiro’s cruiser, which seemed to have slowed down. He wondered if Shiro saw all that. He smiled to himself and picked up the speed, cutting in front of Shiro and making it to the rock a second before he did.

Adam quickly pulled his helmet off and jumped to the ground. He whooped in victory, sounding a little breathless. He looked back at the cliff he’d just flown off of - it was way higher than he thought it was. He ran a hand through his hair in disbelief. What had possessed him to do that?

He watched as Shiro jumped off of his cruiser as well, taking off his helmet.

“That was -” Shiro began, struggling to come up with something to say.

“I guess you can’t call me ‘level ten’ anymore, huh? Since I just beat you,” Adam teased. Shiro had that same peculiar look on his face and then he rubbed the back of his neck.

“I guess not,” he said, looking away, a soft smile on his face.

Adam felt heat rise in his cheeks as he looked at him. He still couldn’t believe that he did that. He never would’ve assumed that he could. He never thought that he would ever even try something like that.

He hated space. He hated how infinite it was, because it terrified him.

So he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do with this newfound infinity within himself. All he knew for sure was that in this moment -

It was exciting.
They ended up getting caught.

When they brought the cruisers back to the cargo bay Iverson was waiting for them, his jaw clenched in irritation.

“I expect more from you cadets,” he said, and Adam hung his head in shame.

“It was my fault, sir. I convinced Adam to come with me,” Shiro explained, his expression earnest.

Iverson looked at him with interest. “That may be so, but Adam has his own independent will, and he decided to go with you.” He straightened and clasped his hands behind his back. “You are two of our most talented cadets,” he declared. Then he softened a little. “You both can go far, if you learn how to follow orders.”

“It won’t happen again, sir,” Adam said, looking up at him. Iverson nodded.

“I know that it won’t. As for your punishment, you are going to clean the cafeteria.”

“You mean, the kitchen?” Shiro asked.

“No, cadet,” Iverson said, his expression stern. “The entire cafeteria.”

Adam didn’t have an appreciation for how large the cafeteria was until this moment.

“This is going to take forever,” Adam said, slumping his shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” Shiro said, and Adam looked at him. His fists were clenched at his sides, and he couldn’t seem to meet Adam’s gaze.

“Hey, Iverson was right. I was the one who decided to go with you,” Adam said, but Shiro didn’t look convinced. Adam lifted up the mop from the pile of supplies that they had been given and dunked it in the bucket of bright blue cleaning fluid. “Besides, beating you in that race was worth it.”

Shiro looked up at him and crossed his arms. “I let you win.”

Adam rolled his eyes and starting dragging the mop across the floor. “Sure you did. Whatever makes the big hot-shot feel better.”

Shiro grabbed the other mop and dunked it in the cleaning fluid as well. “It’ll never happen again.”

Adam smiled as he looked down at the floor, moving towards the center of the cafeteria. “We’ll see about that.”

Shiro began to mop the floor with quick, precise strokes.

“Hey, I was about to clean that part,” Adam protested as Shiro cut in front of him. He saw Shiro shrug as he looked at his back.

“I guess I was faster.”
Adam huffed and began to mop faster, moving forward and nudging Shiro to the side. Shiro nudged back. Soon they were racing to see who could clean more of the floor, bumping into each other as they mopped across the room. Shiro tried moving his mop in the way so that Adam would trip on it, but he easily hopped over it and stuck his tongue out at him, continuing to mop. They were done in a few minutes. Adam looked at the floor shining back at them. That had to be a record.

Then he watched as Shiro hurried over to one of the garbage bins and pulled out the trash, tying it up before moving on to the next bin. He glanced up at Adam to make sure that he was watching, and Adam saw a challenge in his eyes. Adam grinned and rushed over to the closest bin, pulling out the trash and tying it. Then he went over to the next bin as Shiro was tying up his third. They carried as many bags as they could and raced out the back door to throw them into the dumpster.

“I had four bags,” Adam said as they headed back inside, a smug grin on his face.

“That’s cute,” Shiro said. “I had five.”

Adam angrily adjusted his glasses and grabbed a towel, spraying it with some cleaning fluid before rubbing the towel across the large windows that looked out into the courtyard. Shiro went outside and started cleaning the windows as well. When Adam pulled the towel away he saw Shiro making a scary face and he jumped back in surprise. He watched as Shiro began to laugh and threw his towel at the window, causing Shiro to instinctively hold his hands up in defense. Adam moved on to the next window, and Shiro did the same. Soon they were furiously scrubbing off the dirt, moving down the length of the cafeteria together as they did so. They finished at the same time and Adam went to put the towel back where he got it, waiting for Shiro to come back inside. Then he heard a knock at the window and turned around.

“I’m locked out,” Shiro said, his voice muffled. Adam grinned and walked up to the window where Shiro was.

“What’s the password?” Adam asked.

“Adam - ”

“Nope, I don’t think that’s it,” Adam said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. Then he put his hand in his fist. “Wait, I remember what it is! It’s kind of a long one.” Shiro gave him an unamused look.

“I lost to Adam in our race yesterday.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“Then Iverson is going to be mad when he finds you slacking off,” Adam said, beginning to walk away from the window.

“Then I’ll just tell him that you wouldn’t let me in!” Shiro argued.

Adam smiled. “And then you’ll have to explain to Iverson how you got yourself locked out.”

Shiro glared at him, knowing that he had him there. “I lost to Adam in our race yesterday,” he mumbled. Adam walked back up to the window.

“What was that? I couldn’t quite hear -”

“You won! Okay?” Shiro said, and Adam could tell that he was biting back his grin. Adam nodded his head and opened the door, stepping aside for Shiro to enter.
“I’m going to beat you to the kitchen though!” Shiro yelled, running over to the other side of the cafeteria. Adam let go of the door and chased after him. Shiro managed to get there first, and when Adam stepped inside he was met with a stream of water. He felt the cold soak his shirt and looked up to see Shiro holding the faucet, cackling maniacally. Adam wiped the water from his glasses and rolled up his sleeves.

“Oh, I’m gonna get you for that,” he said, walking towards Shiro. Shiro’s eyes widened and he aimed the faucet back at Adam, spraying water on him once more. Adam ignored it however and kept going. Shiro yelped in surprise and let go of the faucet, running to the other side of the counter.

“Come on, roomie,” Adam said, holding out his arms. “Can’t I get a hug?”

“You better not come any closer,” Shiro said, looking frantically around for something to defend himself with. He grabbed a small whisk and held it out in front of him. “I’m not afraid to use this!”

Adam stopped for a moment and looked at him. Then he burst into laughter, clutching his sides. Shiro looked down at his whisk and began to laugh as well, putting a hand on his forehead.

“A whisk?” Adam said between laughs, feeling tears in his eyes. Shiro was laughing just as much as he was now.

“I was being resourceful,” Shiro said defensively, and they quickly lifted their heads to look at each other.

“You must be resourceful in combat, cadets,” they both said in unison, attempting their best Iverson impression. He used that line practically every day during training sessions. They began to laugh once more. A few moments later their laughter died down and Adam went over to the sink, pulling out a plate and beginning to wash the dishes.

“Come over here and help me,” Adam said over his shoulder, and soon Shiro joined him. “I’ll wash, you dry,” Adam said, handing Shiro the plate in his hands. Shiro grabbed a small towel and went to work. Adam could feel Shiro’s shoulder touching his own as he continued to wash the rest of the dishes. He was warm and strong, and a little taller than him.

They continued cleaning up the kitchen without saying much, but it was a comfortable silence. It felt safe.

Adam smiled to himself as he set down his rag, looking down at the floor he’d just dried from where he was kneeling. He looked over and saw that Shiro had just finished as well.

“Looks like were done,” Shiro said, kneeling on the other side of the floor. Adam looked back at the rest of the kitchen, which was now spotless.

“I guess we are. That wasn’t too bad.”

Shiro stood up and walked over to Adam, offering his hand. “Let’s go home.”

Adam took it and smiled.

Home.
For the first couple of weeks at the Garrison it had been just that for Adam - the Garrison. Home was somewhere else, home was where his family was.

But the room that he shared with Shiro, with its orange tea kettle and three-seater couch and that window that looked out into the desert - that had become home too, without Adam even realizing it.

He got to his feet and looked at Shiro, still holding his hand.

“Yeah, let’s go home.”
Age Sixteen

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the lovely comments. I read each one and appreciate them immensely <3

I hope that you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The year came and went faster than Adam expected it to. Soon he was finding himself packing his duffle bag so that he could spend a few months with his family before the next year of training started.

He and Shiro - well, he wasn’t quite sure what they were. They were rivals, but they were also - friends? They learned a lot together during their first year, and they pushed each other to become better.

He’d never admit this to anyone, but when he was back home in his bed at night, he would begin to miss Shiro’s presence. He missed the idea of Shiro being in the room next door. He missed making tea for the two of them, and going flying together.

He hated space because he thought that it was lonely. And yet space was what brought him and Shiro together.

He loved his family. Although he would never say it out loud, he missed going outside with his sister to look at stars, more of which he could name now thanks to his training. He’d missed family dinners and eating his mom’s cooking. He missed lazy drives with his dad. He had a nice time at home and yet -

He found himself missing the Garrison.

When the day came to pack his bag for the next year in the SEP, he tried to mask his excitement. His sister knew that he made a friend during his time there, and that he learned a lot about flying and now had a deeper knowledge of outer space, but that was about it. There were times where he felt tempted to tell her all about Shiro, about their rivalry, but he would always decide against it. He wasn’t exactly sure why, it just felt like it was their thing. Telling other people would be like sharing a secret.

So yeah, he was excited, but his sister thought that it was only because he was going to learn even more about space exploration, that he was going to get one step closer to seeing space for himself.

But he had other reasons.

His family dropped him off and said goodbye to him like they did last year, except Iverson wasn’t there to greet him this time. He hugged them all goodbye, promised to call them, and then he took his duffle bag and walked down the now familiar halls towards his room. He learned part way through last year that cadets had the same room assignment throughout the duration of the program - it was simpler that way. That meant that he was going to be rooming with Shiro every year.
As he opened the door he wondered if Shiro would be there, sitting on the couch or putting the kettle on the stove - waiting for him.

But no one was there. He decided to ignore his disappointment as he walked to his room, setting down his bag and pulling out his sheets, starting to make his bed. It was as he was in the middle of folding his clothes and putting them in the appropriate drawers that he heard the door to the main room open. Then he could hear the familiar sound of the tea kettle being pulled out of the cabinet.

He smiled to himself and decided to finish unpacking later.

“Hey Shiro,” Adam said, walking out of his room. He watched Shiro jump and turn around, a surprised look on his face that quickly melted into a smile.

“I didn’t know that you were coming back today,” Shiro said, filling the kettle with water.

Adam shifted on his feet. “Yeah, I asked my parents if I could come a day early so I could get settled before classes start up again. How was your break?”

Shiro shrugged and turned around, putting the kettle on the stove. “Average, I guess. I’ve been pretty on edge for classes to start, actually.”

“Same here,” Adam said. Shiro raised a brow. “What?”

Shiro smiled. “It almost sounds like you missed me.”

Adam scoffed and crossed his arms. “I missed beating you, maybe.”

Shiro laughed. “I missed beating you, too.” They both looked at the kettle as it started to whine, and Shiro took it off the stove and went to the cabinet. He pulled out two mugs. Adam couldn’t help but smile. Shiro didn’t even have to ask - he knew that Adam would never say no to tea. He watched as he poured water into both mugs, steam curling upwards as he dropped in two teabags. Adam walked up to the counter and Shiro placed one of the mugs in front of him.

“Thanks,” Adam said, closing his hands around the mug and savoring its warmth.

“So what do you think we’re learning this year?” Shiro asked, blowing on the mug in his hand.

“Year two is usually more advanced flight training, harder space simulations - other than that I’m not sure. My brother -” Adam stopped, clenching his jaw as he looked down at his tea. He could feel panic rising up his chest, its fingers gripping at his throat.

“You’ve never mentioned having a brother,” Shiro said.

“No, I didn’t,” Adam replied as evenly as he could, and Shiro didn’t press the subject.

“Iverson told me that there’s a new kind of training that they’re starting up this year. We’re supposed to be the cadets to test it out.” Adam stopped, clenching his jaw as he looked down at his tea. He could feel panic rising up his chest, its fingers gripping at his throat.

“Did he tell you what it was?”

Shiro put the mug down. “I have no idea.”

Adam took a sip of his tea. It was mint. “I guess that we’ll find out tomorrow.”
“This year we'll will be pairing all of you up,” Iverson said, looking down at his cadets. “You’ve learned how to function as a larger unit, but to be an effective pilot you also need to be able to work one-on-one with your fellow teammate. You will be working with your partner from now until the end of the program, unless a pair has proven to be unable to cooperate and then we will adapt accordingly. Make sure that we don’t have to adapt.” His look became stern. Then he put his hands on his hips. “Before you all began this program we had already paired you up based on the personality assessments that we gave you before you arrived.”

Adam fought the urge to glance at his fellow cadets. He wondered who he was paired up with, who’s personality was apparently compatible with his own. A small part of him hoped that it was one person in particular, but he squashed that hope before it got too big.

“Your flight partner is your roommate,” Iverson said. “That way you would get to know them during your first year before you started working more closely together, and hopefully iron out any problems before this part of the program began.” Adam could feel Shiro’s eyes on him, but he decided to keep looking ahead. He was afraid of what he would see in Shiro’s gaze. Would he be disappointed? Part of him dared to hope that he was just as happy as Adam was.

“Partner training will start at the beginning of next week,” Iverson continued. “You are all dismissed.” They all saluted and filed out of the room. Adam began to wonder what exactly this ‘partner training’ would entail. Was it a series of trust exercises? Would they be doing flying formations together?

Then he began to wonder if his brother ever had to do something like this.

“Hey,” a voice said, and Adam stopped where he was in the hallway and turned to see Shiro looking at him. “Want to grab lunch?”

Adam nodded and together they made their way to the cafeteria. Adam couldn’t help but smile when he looked at the windows, at the door leading to the courtyard, at the kitchens.

“This place just isn’t as clean as it used to be,” Shiro said, shaking his head. Last year Iverson had decided that the perfect punishment for the two of them was to clean the cafeteria, since they did such a good job the first time. Adam didn’t tell his parents this, but they got in trouble a few times. It was a good thing that Iverson seemed to have a soft spot for them.

“Don’t worry, Iverson will get us cleaning this place soon enough,” Adam said dryly, and Shiro laughed. They walked up to the line and Adam picked out a variety of vegetables and some rice. Shiro did the same.

“How about we sit outside today?” Shiro asked. Adam nodded his head and they went out the door to sit on one of the benches in the courtyard. It was cloudy today, but still warm. “I never asked you, how was your time with your family?”

Adam puffed out his cheeks in thought. “It was nice. It’s always good to see them, but,” he paused, trying to come up with the right words. “It just felt, different, being there. I guess I just got so used to living here,” Adam mused.

Shiro nodded his head and chewed on a carrot thoughtfully. “The Garrison is like a different world. It makes everything else seem like -” He stopped.

“Seem like what?”
Shiro sighed and put down his carrot. “I feel bad for saying this, but it makes everything else seem like it’s not enough.”

Adam remembered what his sister had told him when she was trying to convince him to come here. “You’re going to wonder how this little house was ever enough.” He didn’t understand her then, but he thought that he was starting to. “You shouldn’t feel bad for saying that,” Adam assured him. “I was kind of thinking the same thing.”

Shiro looked at him thoughtfully and then reached over to steal one of his carrots.

“Hey!” Adam protested. Shiro took a bite out of it and smiled.

“Looks like your reflexes aren’t what they used to be, level ten,” Shiro teased.

Adam scoffed and reached over to try and steal one of Shiro’s carrots, Shiro blocking his attacks with his arm as he continued to eat the carrot in his hand. Adam huffed in annoyance and grabbed one of his own carrots.

“You want my carrots so much? Have them!” He declared, launching it at Shiro’s face. Shiro looked at him in shock, and then he grinned and threw a carrot back at him. Soon they were were throwing their vegetables at each other, and once Adam ran out of ammo he scooped up a handful of rice.

“Don’t you dare,” Shiro said, holding his last celery stick out in front of him.

“It seems like you didn’t learn your lesson about calling me level ten,” Adam said, feeling the rice squish around in his palm. Then he threw it at Shiro’s chest, getting it all over his uniform. Shiro looked down at it in shock. Then he looked back at Adam, and Adam knew that it was time to run. He quickly stood up from the bench but Shiro tackled him to the ground. He felt something squishy in his hair and saw grains of rice falling in front of his face and onto the ground. He laughed and struggled against Shiro’s hold, shaking his head so that some of the rice landed on him.

“Gross! Shiro complained, laughing as well. Then they heard a cough above them and lifted their heads to see Iverson staring down at them, his eye twitching.

“If you wanted to clean the cafeteria so badly, you could’ve just asked,” Iverson said. “I think the cleaning staff has missed your help.”

Adam and Shiro hung their heads in defeat. Neither of them won the battle, but Iverson certainly won the war.

Now that they were in their second year of training, they were allowed to take cruisers out into the desert. They just had to give advanced notice and make sure to sign the vehicles in and out. Adam was itching to fly. So far all they had done their first week back was review flight techniques and learn more about the terrain of different planets in their solar system.

So at the end of the week he decided to take one of the cruisers back to that rock that he and Shiro had raced to last year.

Once he arrived he got out of the cruiser and took off his helmet, watching as the dust around him
began to settle. He could make out a cabin in the distance, and wondered if anyone lived there. Then he heard the sound of a cruiser behind him, and when he turned around he saw that it was heading in his direction. The cruiser pulled to a stop and Adam watched as Shiro pulled off his helmet, looking at Adam in surprise.

“It looks like we had the same idea,” he said, stepping off of his cruiser and leaning against it. They stayed like that in silence for a while, watching the sky shift from blue to orange, pinks streaking over them and behind the desert mountains. Adam’s thoughts drifted back to the cabin.

“Did you ever notice that cabin over there?” Adam asked, breaking the comfortable silence. Shiro moved to stand next to him.

“Yeah, but only a week ago,” Shiro said. “It seems kind of weird that someone could be living all the way out there.”

“Wait,” Adam said, “you were here a week ago? At the Garrison?” Shiro nodded his head, but Adam could tell that he was beginning to close himself off. He did that every once in a while.

“Didn’t you go home to your family?”

Shiro smirked and crossed his arms, but Adam could tell that he was more tense than he was a few moments before. “I’m a special case,” he said. Adam looked at him in confusion, waiting for him to continue. He watched as Shiro put his helmet back on. “We’re only supposed to use these cruisers for an hour. We should head back. We don’t want to have to clean the cafeteria twice in one week,” he said with a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. Adam wanted to say something, but he nodded his head instead. Shiro didn’t want to be pushed, and he was going to respect that.

But as much as he didn’t want it to, a part of him couldn’t help but be hurt by it. He was beginning to realize just how little he knew about his roommate.

“Only if we get to race back,” Adam finally said, putting on his helmet as well and climbing onto his cruiser. Shiro climbed onto his cruiser as well.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” Shiro said, and this time his smile looked more genuine. “Last one back makes us tea.” With that he sped off, Adam quickly following behind, making sure to yell about how that was blatant cheating. The desert became full of red dust and Shiro’s laughter.

Adam ended up making the tea.

“Okay so you need to make a slight left in order to avoid the rock fragments,” Adam could hear Shiro instructing, his voice somewhere behind him.

“I don’t like this,” Adam said not for the first time, fighting the urge to pull off his blindfold as he tilted his thruster slightly to the left. “Is this okay?”

“No! More!” Shiro said.

Adam tensed and quickly pulled it farther to the left.

“Too much! You’re going to get too close to the planet’s gravitational -”

“I can’t do this!” Adam yelled, moving the thruster back to the right and trying to swallow down
his panic.

“You need to trust me, Adam.”

“I do trust you! It’s just -”

“Remember what you told me, patience yields focus.”

Adam stopped for a moment, surprised that Shiro had remembered. He took a deep breath and nodded his head. “Okay, okay I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?” Shiro asked, and Adam could hear the smile in his voice.

“Yes I’m sure, now tell me what I’m dealing with,” Adam grumbled, readjusting the grip on the thruster as he waited for Shiro’s instructions.

“You’re about to enter an area full of meteors of various sizes,” Shiro began, his voice calm. “But it’s nothing that we can’t handle. I’ll tell you what to do.”

“Okay,” Adam said, taking another deep breath. He felt a lot more at ease.

“Wait, I have an idea,” Shiro said, and Adam could almost hear the gears moving furiously in his head. “Get into formation eight.”

“What?” Adam asked.

“You heard me,” Shiro said. Adam moved the thruster slightly to the right and forward, remembering the necessary movements for that flight formation. He had those movements drilled into his head at this point.

Oh.

“Great idea, Shiro,” Adam said, smiling. “Now what?”

Shiro didn’t say anything for a moment. “Formation forty-two,” he said, and Adam adjusted accordingly.

“Thirty-one!” Shiro said quickly, and Adam hurried to change into that position. “That was a close one, but we’re almost through the worst of it. “Formation two.” Adam pushed the thruster all the way forward and suddenly he heard Shiro let out of whoop of victory that caused him to clutch his ear.

“What’s happening?” Adam asked.

“Great work Shirogane, Wadley. You’re the only pair that managed to get all the way through.” Adam lifted up his blindfold and saw the screen before him blinking the words “Mission Success.” Then he felt two arms wrap around him from behind.

“We did it,” Shiro said, pride obvious in his tone.

Adam smiled. “Although I hate to admit it, we couldn’t have done it without your quick thinking.”

Shiro pulled his arms away. “I can’t take all of the credit. You were willing to trust me.”

Adam kept looking at the words blinking in front of him, finding it hard to get rid of the smile on his face. “It looks like we make a good team.”
“Yeah,” Shiro mused, and there was something in his tone that Adam couldn’t quite place. “I guess we do.”

“Adam. Adam, please, wake up,” Adam felt strong hands on his shoulders shaking him, and he quickly sat up in bed.

“Casey!” Adam yelled, looking around the room with panicked eyes, clutching his bedsheets. Then he squinted to see Shiro looking at him in the darkness, worry on his face.

“What happened I -” Adam began, trying to catch his breath and loosening his grip on his sheets.

“I could hear - yelling - coming from your room,” Shiro said, shifting awkwardly from where he was sitting on the edge of Adam’s bed. “I think you were having a nightmare.”

Adam rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Oh.” He could remember flashes from his dream. Harsh red lights, his sister’s terrified face, the sound of his mother’s sobs, being pulled further and further into a black hole, trying to call for help but unable to make a sound -

“Who’s Casey?” Shiro asked. Adam saw the softness in his gaze and looked away.

“Casey’s my brother,” Adam said, keeping his voice abnormally even. He didn’t want to talk about this, he couldn’t talk about this. His family knew that.

But Shiro didn’t.

“Adam,” Shiro said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You know that you can talk to me, right? I’m here for you.”

Adam didn’t like the way that Shiro was looking at him. Like he was broken. Like he needed saving. Shiro couldn’t fix this, couldn’t fix him. And he was annoyed and confused that he was trying to.

“I mean,” Shiro continued, shifting on the bed. “We’re roommates, we’re flight partners, we’re -”

“Friends?” Adam asked, interrupting him. He could hardly see anything in the dark. “I don’t know anything about you.” He immediately regretted his words once he said them, but he was right. How did Shiro expect him to talk about his life when he knew so little about Shiro’s? He told Shiro that he trusted him, and yet Shiro couldn’t seem to do the same. Shiro stiffened and pulled his hand away. Adam could barely make out his silhouette. “Shiro -”

“It’s probably best if I go,” Shiro said, moving to stand. Adam hadn’t realized how close they were only a moment before. He was already beginning to miss to absence. “Goodnight, Adam.”

“Shiro, wait,” Adam said, and he stopped in the doorway, light peeking into the room. “Thank you for waking me up, but - I’m fine, I promise.”

Shiro nodded his head, rubbing his wrist absentmindedly. With that he left the room and shut the door behind him. Adam was in the dark once more. Alone.
“Wadley! Pay attention!” Iverson barked into the comms, and Adam quickly altered his course so that he sped between the two rocks, just barely missing the one on the left. They had been practicing on this advanced flight track for weeks now, and yet Adam was struggling today. Shiro had been distant all week. He kept wanting to apologize, but Shiro was never around for him to do so. He only ever saw him in class, and Iverson didn’t give them the opportunity to focus on anything other than the lesson at hand.

He was stuck. It was frustrating.

“Wadley!” Iverson yelled again, and Adam realized that he was flying too close to the ground and quickly pulled the thrusters upward. “Okay, you’re done for the day. Get to the ground.” Adam sighed and quickly lowered his training jet to the beginning of the runway, lifting the hatch and hopping out of it. “Where is your mind today, cadet?” he asked, a harshness in his tone.

“I’m sorry, sir, it won’t happen again,” Adam said, and Iverson looked at him suspiciously.

“Make sure that it doesn’t. Shirogane, it’s your turn.” Adam watched as Shiro walked past Adam and into the trainer jet, looking determinedly ahead. He put on his helmet and climbed inside. Adam watched as the jet took off, flying down the runway and entering the training course.

He was flawless. He got through every turn without any criticism from Iverson. By the time he got back Iverson had a wide smile on his face.

“Excellent work, cadet.” He turned to look at Adam. “I hope that you were paying attention.”

Adam clenched his jaw as he looked at Shiro, who still wouldn’t meet his eyes as he walked back to his spot in line. Annoyance flared in his chest. They hadn’t talked in days, and Shiro seemed to be getting along fine. He was doing great actually. Adam bit his lip and looked out at the desert. Fine. He didn’t need Shiro. They were rivals, after all.

“I told you to turn left,” Adam said through gritted teeth.

“You told me to turn right,” Shiro said, and although he was wearing a blindfold, Adam could tell from his tone that he was glaring.

“I said right, then left,” Adam said, his patience wearing thin. “Why aren’t you listening to me?”

“Well what am I supposed to do now?” Shiro yelled, his grip tight on the thruster.

Adam let out an annoyed sigh. “You need to get higher. More than that!”

“How am I supposed to know? I can’t see!”

“Just trust me!”

Shiro made a noise of frustration and Adam watched as he was heading for a very large meteor.

“Go up!” Adam yelled, but it was too late. He looked at the screen as it flashed the words: “Mission Failure.” Adam ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “It’s over.” Shiro took off his blindfold and looked at the screen. Then he stood up and turned on Adam.

“Why didn’t you tell me there was that huge meteor?”
“I tried to!”

“You didn’t try hard enough!”

Adam looked at him in shock, watching as Shiro glared at him. “Why are you acting like this?”

Shiro scoffed. “Why do you care?”

“Because we’re -!” Adam was about to say ‘friends’, but then he remembered that night. It had been weeks at this point, but it still hung heavily between them. Shiro crossed his arms and looked away.

“Shiro, I’m sorry about what I said,” Adam began. This was finally his chance to clear the air. “I didn’t mean it, I was just scared and confused and angry -”

“As long as we can get through these simulations and pass this partner flight training course then it doesn’t matter to me whether you tell me anything about your life,” Shiro said, his voice even. “I have to be the best cadet in this program, so as long as whatever this is doesn’t get in the way of that then we’re fine,” Shiro continued, gesturing to the space between them. “Okay?”

Adam looked at him with wide eyes, something in his chest constricting, but he nodded his head. “Yeah, okay.”

Shiro gave him a tired smile. He didn’t look mad anymore, but he was more distant than ever. “I’ll see you later.” Adam watched him leave the pod, wishing that he could say something but knowing that he didn’t have the right words. He just wanted it to go back to the way it was, but he wasn’t sure if that was possible.

As he looked around the darkened pod, the only light being the words “Mission Failure” flashing on the screen, Adam wondered if this was what being in space was like. Drifting alone in the dark, only you and an infinity to think about your mistakes.

He hated it.

Chapter End Notes

*shrugs* There has to be SOME angst

You can find me @nobodys-pearls :)}
This time around Adam was less excited to return to the Garrison after spending some time home with his family for the summer. He found himself not wanting to leave. He and his sister would catch fireflies together, he would help his mom cook in the kitchen, and his father loved hearing about all of his classes and talking about his days in the army.

It was safe and warm and simple. And it came to an end too quickly.

It was just June who dropped him off this time. He knew that if his parents came too he would start to have second thoughts, so he hugged them goodbye before he left home.

June pulled into the driveway that led to the entrance of the Garrison facility, shutting off the engine and looking at her brother. They hadn’t talked much during the ride there. Adam was too preoccupied with thoughts of the Garrison, of this coming year. “It’s okay to be vulnerable, you know,” she said.

Adam turned to look at her in confusion. She had a soft smile on her face. Then he understood and quickly looked away. He hadn’t talked about his roommate as much this time around, and when she’d ask him about it he just said that they got into a fight and left it at that.

“You’re only seventeen, you’ve still got a lot about yourself that you’re going to figure out,” June began to explain. “And so does everyone else around you. The thing is, you don’t have to do it alone. People are meant to grow together.”

Adam adjusted his glasses and looked out the passenger window, finding himself unable to meet his sister’s gaze. “I’m going to miss you.”

June leaned over and ruffled his hair. Then she pulled him into a hug. “I’m going to miss you too. Say hello to the stars for me.”

Adam nodded his head and got out of the car, grabbing his bag from the trunk. He watched June drive away before he turned around to face the Garrison. Then he took a deep breath and headed for the entrance. He started to make his way towards his room, but he stopped halfway there. He wasn’t ready to see Shiro again, to see the distance between them growing even wider before his eyes. So instead he found his feet carrying him to the large window that they had discovered during their first year. Adam smiled to himself at the memory - it was the first time that they had really gotten along.
He entered the hall and walked up to the window, pressing his hand against the glass as he looked at the desert. The sun was high in the sky. He could see the waves of heat radiating off of the ground. The desert seemed to go on forever, complete emptiness. Then he remembered the cabin. Maybe it wasn’t completely empty.

He was determined to succeed this year. He was going to master the advanced flight courses, he was going to learn everything there was to know about this solar system, and he was going to do well in the partner training classes even if it killed him, and remembering all of the times he and Shiro had failed their simulation missions at the end of last year, that was a possibility.

Because if they kept failing, Iverson would do way worse than make them clean the cafeteria. Adam shuddered at the thought.

The past two years at the Garrison taught him to push himself, to be more than he was, and there was no going back from that. He needed to be more, he needed people to see him.

There was a legacy that he needed to protect.

He picked up his duffle bag and headed towards his room. Better to rip off the bandaid sooner rather than later. He stood in front of the door and clenched his fists. He could do this. He opened the door and saw him sitting at the counter.

“Hey Shir - oh,” Adam said, realizing that it wasn’t Shiro, but one of his fellow cadets - Raj Hingorani. Raj turned to face him and smiled awkwardly. “Am I in the wrong room -?” Adam asked, beginning to make his way back to the door.

“No, actually,” Raj said, standing up. He tugged on his uniform sleeves nervously. “I’m your new roommate.”

“Oh,” Adam said, putting down his bag. Then he began to worry. “Is Shiro okay? What -”

“Iverson made some reassignments,” Raj explained. “He thought that some of the flight partners would do better in their classes if they had some space. Distance makes the heart grow fonder - he didn’t say that, that would be out of character, but I -”

“Was everyone assigned different rooms?” Adam asked. Raj laughed uncomfortably and Adam knew the answer. Iverson had just separated him and Shiro. Honestly, he couldn’t blame him, but that didn’t stop the disappointment that hung heavy in his chest. Not only was he and Shiro no longer friends, but they weren’t even roommates anymore. All the threads that had connected them were snapping one by one. He stowed the thought away and walked up to Raj. “Well, I’m looking forward to rooming with you. Do you want some tea?”

“I would love some, actually,” Raj said appreciatively. Adam smiled and pulled out the tea kettle, happy to see that it was still there. He began to fill it with water. This wouldn’t be too bad. He’d always gotten along with Raj, even though they didn’t talk all that much. Maybe they would become fast friends.

But he couldn’t imagine racing him through the desert, or throwing carrots at him, or sitting on the couch and making jokes about something Iverson had said during class. The kettle began to whine and Adam moved it off of the stove. It felt heavier than usual. This would be fine.
He didn’t see Shiro until class the next morning. He came into the room with Henry Anderson, Raj’s partner and Shiro’s new roommate. They were laughing about something, Henry’s hand on his shoulder, but Shiro stopped smiling when he saw Adam.

“Hey,” Shiro said uncomfortably, nodding his way. Adam nodded back and Shiro walked past him, joining the line.

Iverson came into the room shortly after and stood in front of them all, his hands clasped behind his back. “I hope that you all had a nice vacation, because this year will be harder than the last two. Mistakes are not allowed. Questions are not allowed. Meaningless fights are not allowed.” Adam knew who that last line was directed at. “This is your last year of training before you will begin to be sent out on missions, and only the cadets that we deem competent enough will be sent on those missions. This is not the year to disappoint me.” Adam clenched his fists. He was going to do everything right this year. He had to.

“Today you will be tested on how you can handle zero gravity,” Iverson continued. “This is also a partner assessment. It’s time to see how your teamwork has changed after two months apart. Anderson, Hingorani, you two are up first. The rest of you watch carefully.”

Raj and Henry stepped forward and followed Iverson to a large, clear chamber in the center of the room. Adam watched as they put on special helmets and goggles, and then they stepped inside of the chamber, looking around with interest.

“When I press this button,” Iverson said, holding a remote in his hand for them all to see. “Anderson and Hingorani will experience a enclosed, zero gravity environment. Their objective is to work together to find a way to reach that flag.” Adam looked at the opposite end of the chamber and saw an orange flag sticking up from the ground. That looked easy enough.

“They have sixty seconds,” Iverson said. He pressed a button and suddenly panels shot out at random throughout the chamber, some of them quickly moving in and out, others covered in spikes. Adam was beginning to reconsider his initial thought. Iverson looked back at Henry and Raj, who were waiting for his order. “Your time starts now.” Iverson pressed the button on his remote and a clock began to count down from sixty at the top of the chamber. Adam watched as the two cadets began to float in the air, Raj flailing his arms to try and get his bearings. Henry was hit by one of the panels and was propelled across the room in the opposite direction of the flag. He struggled to stop himself from spinning.

“This is impossible,” Adam said under his breath, watching as Raj and Henry tried to reach for one of the studier panels but couldn’t seem to get close enough. They both managed to get halfway to the flag before the time ran out.

Iverson shook his head and pressed that same button, and Raj and Henry fell to the ground. “It’s like this is your first year in the program,” he said disapprovingly. “Get back in line.”

Raj and Henry took off their helmets and left the chamber, hanging their heads in shame as they went to join the rest of the cadets.

“Park and Wilson, you two are next.” The two female cadets, April and Hannah, entered the chamber. They managed to get farther than Raj and Henry did, but they still ran out of time before they could grab the flag.

Iverson clenched his jaw. “I warned you all that mistakes would not be allowed this year. It seems like you have all failed to grasp the point of this exercise.” He turned to look at Shiro and Adam. “Wadley, Shirogane, if you two fail this as well, the whole class will be doing rudimentary
formation exercises for the rest of the day.” Hannah groaned and then quickly shut her mouth when Iverson shot her a glare.

“We won’t fail, sir,” Shiro said. Adam could tell by the expressions on their fellow cadets’ faces that they didn’t have the same confidence in them, and he didn’t blame them. Everybody knew that they were the worst at partner exercises.

Iverson nodded his head. “Now get in there.” Adam and Shiro walked over to the chamber.

“So what’s the plan?” Adam asked quietly, grabbing one of the helmets.

“I don’t have one.”

Adam stopped where he was, the helmet halfway to his head, but Shiro kept walking.

“What do you mean you don’t have one?” Adam whispered furiously, moving to catch up with him.

“I don’t have one, but I know that you will,” Shiro said simply.

“Oh, yeah, so put all of the blame on me when we fail,” Adam said, rolling his eyes as he stepped into the chamber.

“Adam, concentrate. This is your thing. You must have been thinking about it while we were watching,” Shiro said, putting on his helmet and stepping into the chamber as well.

“I thought that you wanted to be the best? Doesn’t seem very impressive if you can’t figure this out on your own, if you have to depend on someone like me,” Adam said. He was going to stop there, but he could feel something building in his chest. “You’ve always been more of the lone wolf type, haven’t you? Facing the world on your own, not trusting people with your problems.” He hated fighting with Shiro, but he couldn’t help himself. Everything about Shiro just made him so angry now.

He was a reminder of all his mistakes.

“That’s ironic coming from you,” Shiro shot back as they entered the chamber. Then he let out a frustrated sigh. “We don’t have time for this. We can’t afford to keep failing these classes.” A moment later Adam felt himself beginning to float in the air. He heard the timer counting down. Iverson had started the test. Adam tried to move himself forward but just began to spin upside down instead. Shiro wasn’t doing much better.

Adam huffed in frustration and looked at the orange flag on the opposite side of the chamber, mocking him. He hated to admit it, but Shiro was right. They needed to do well this year. And he had thought of a solution when he was watching. He just didn’t realize it until now.

“Grab my hands,” Adam said. It sounded more like a challenge than a request. Shiro looked at him skeptically before reaching out his arms. Adam barely managed to hold on to him. They floated together like that for a moment, spinning slowly in the air. Shiro met Adam’s gaze and Adam couldn’t help but wonder what happened to them, wonder how he managed to mess up so badly. Then he looked back at the flag. He had to stay focused.

“This is a team exercise, so we’re meant to work together,” Adam said, grabbing hold of the nearest panel while still holding on to Shiro. That was the problem that the other teams had, each of them tried to get to the flag on their own. They lost sight of the point of the exercise, just like Iverson said. “I’m going to push you in the direction of that panel there,” Adam directed, nodding
his head in the direction of the closest panel. That’s the first step.”

“Okay.” Still holding on to the first panel, Adam brought his knees to his chest and pushed Shiro away from him. He had to admit there was something satisfying about kicking Shiro in the chest. He watched as he was propelled to the next panel and held on.

“Now you have to grab me,” Adam said, pushing off of his panel and avoiding the panel nearby with spikes on it. He felt Shiro’s arm around his chest as he caught him. They were already more than halfway there, but they were running out of time. “Okay, here’s the tricky part. We’re going to push off as hard as possible, and then once we get as far as we can I’m going to push you the rest of the way there. That was the main problem that the other pairs ran into. The closer you got to the flag, the more dangerous and erratic the panels. They weren’t supposed to depend on them, but on their teammate.

“We won’t have enough time,” Shiro said, glancing at the clock. They had fifteen seconds.

“Don’t look at the clock. Look at me, okay? Patience yields focus.” Adam reminded him. Shiro looked at him once more, something hard to read in his eyes, and then he placed his feet on the panel, bending his legs.

“Ready to push?” he asked. Adam placed his feet on the panel as well and together they pushed themselves off of it, flying towards the flag. They were just out of reach. Adam could hear the clock counting down.

“Here goes nothing,” Adam said under his breath, letting go of Shiro and pushing him towards the flag. Adam floated in the opposite direction and watched as Shiro reached out for the flag, only a few inches away from it. Then his hand closed around the flag, and he pulled it off of the stick.

Adam heard a definitive beep. The timer ran out. He let out of whoop of victory and began to float upside down. Then he felt himself falling and landed on the ground, hard. Now he understood why they had helmets on.

“Ow,” Adam said, and when he opened his eyes he saw Shiro standing over him, holding out his hand. The flag was tucked into his belt. Adam smiled and took it, getting to his feet. They stood like that for a moment, and then Shiro let go of his hand looked away, rubbing the back of his neck.

“That was a good idea,” Shiro said. Adam watched him, and then he realized something.

“You were thinking the same thing, weren’t you?” Adam asked, narrowing his eyes.

Shiro shrugged. “We were on the same page. That’s what Iverson wanted.” He headed out of the chamber, Adam taking off his helmet and following not too far behind.

“I can’t help but say that I’m surprised,” Iverson said, looking almost impressed. “It seems like the room reassignments were a good idea.” Adam looked at the ground. Part of him hated that Iverson was right. He and Shiro were just better off as teammates, nothing more. Today had proved that. “Looks like Shirogane and Wadley got you all out of flight formations, you’re all dismissed.”

Adam watched as Henry clapped a hand on Shiro’s shoulder, his smile wide as he thanked him. Shiro gave him a small smile in return.

“That was very impressive, Adam,” Raj said, moving to stand next to him. “You two worked together really well, which is more than Henry and I could say.”
Adam smiled politely. “If you didn’t have to go first I bet you could’ve figured it out. You’ve always been the best at puzzles.”

Raj furrowed his brow. “Maybe, but it looks like I might have some competition now. This might make us rivals.” Adam laughed and shook his head.

“You’ll have to get in line,” Adam said, looking at Shiro’s back. His smile dimmed.

As much as he enjoyed spending time with Raj, he needed to be alone. He walked up to his usual treadmill at the gym and typed in his settings, placing his towel on the handlebar. He went to choose his usual speed, but then he decided to go up a few levels. Maybe if he ran fast enough he could get rid of this weight on his chest. He began to run, looking at the wall in front of him that had the Garrison’s mission statement written on it in black, blocky lettering.

‘Pushing the limits of science...pushing the limits of humanity...exploring the unknown universe...’

Adam wanted to succeed in his classes, but what for? Did he really want to explore space? Or did he just want to prove that he was good enough? That he was worthy? Growing up his brother had declared the moon to be his, and his sister wanted the stars, but Adam? He was just happy to watch them both. He didn’t need anything. He had everything he wanted already.

Until he didn’t anymore, and then all space was was darkness and loss. He started to run faster. He wish he knew what he wanted. He couldn’t seem to get this thoughts sorted anymore. He heard footsteps somewhere behind him and then saw someone get on the treadmill next to him out of the corner of his eye. He decided to ignore it and keep running. He closed his eyes and tried to go through the new flight techniques Iverson had gave them in his head. Then he moved on to the chemical makeup of Mercury’s atmosphere. He could hear the treadmill next to him begin to move faster, faster than his own. He opened his eyes and saw Shiro running next to him, his head determinitely faced forward. Adam watched him for a moment, and before he realized what he was doing he increased the level on his own treadmill, beginning to run faster. Shiro didn’t look at him, but he increased the level on his as well. Adam huffed and increased his again.

“Not you two again!” a woman said from behind them. Adam turned to look at her in surprise and tripped, falling backwards. He landed hard on the floor. He laid on his back and looked at the ceiling, knowing that he was going to have a few bruises in the morning.

“Adam! Are you okay?” Shiro asked. Adam turned his head and saw that Shiro was kneeling over him, a concerned expression on his face. Adam gave him a thumbs up.

“Never been better. I think I’m going to go to the infirmary now,” he said, moving to sit up. He winced in pain as he did so. Correction, he was going to have a lot of bruises tomorrow. How could he be so stupid? He would’ve felt more embarrassed if he wasn’t aching all over.

“Here, let me help you up,” Shiro said, wrapping Adam’s arm around his shoulders and lifting him to his feet. Adam wanted to argue, to tell him that he didn’t need any help, but he just groaned instead.

“Cadets,” the woman said the word under her breath like it was an insult, rolling her eyes as she looked at the two of them. “You’re not invincible, you know.”

“Sorry, ma’am, we’ll keep that in mind next time,” Shiro said, smiling sheepishly at her. She
shook her head disapprovingly and walked away. “Do you think you can make it to the infirmary? Should I call someone -?”

“I’ll be okay,” Adam said. Then his knees buckled and Shiro held on a little tighter. Adam hung his head and laughed.

“Are you sure that you’re okay -?” Shiro asked, sounding unconvinced.

“Here I am, in the arms of my sworn rival,” Adam said, laughing again. “What a day.”

“I didn’t know that we were rivals,” Shiro said, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Oh yes you did,” Adam said. “I swore it. You may not have been there when I did, but I swore it.” Shiro laughed. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just funny that someone who only got to level ten thinks that they can be my rival,” Shiro said. Adam glared at him.

“I’ll have you know that I -” Adam tried to pull away from Shiro so that he could yell at him properly, but then he winced in pain again.

“Come on, let’s go,” Shiro said, leading him out of the gym.

“I was running faster than you, for the record,” Adam said.

“Maybe, but at least I managed not to fly off the treadmill.”

“I’m just that good of a pilot, I don’t even need a jet to fly,” Adam grumbled. Then he felt Shiro’s shoulders shake with laughter.

“You’re ridiculous,” Shiro said. Adam opened his mouth to argue, but as he watched Shiro laugh he couldn’t help but smile. Maybe he was, but if this is what being ridiculous got him, there were worse things to be.

Then he shook his head and pulled away from Shiro, standing up on his own. No. He couldn’t do this again. He had gotten to the point where he accepted what he and Shiro were. He knew when to look away when Henry and Shiro were laughing together, becoming the friends that they used to be. He knew when to look away when he didn’t have to see himself get replaced. He had learned how to use the tea kettle without thinking of his and Shiro’s tea breaks together, when they would talk about random things that happened that day and try out their best Iverson impressions. He found himself doing well in the training courses. He still wasn’t able to beat Shiro’s flight records, but when Iverson said his name he almost sounded proud.

He had finally gotten to a place where he could be fine on his own. And that’s what he had wanted when he pushed Shiro away that night, wasn’t it? He wanted to be alone, to hoard his past suffering all for himself, because he was afraid of what would happen if he let someone help him. If he was being honest a big part of him didn’t want to be helped. He felt like he deserved to be punished.

He did deserve to be punished, because he had managed to turn his friend into his rival. Shiro deserved more than him. His family deserved more than him. Casey wouldn’t have done all of these things, made so many mistakes.

So he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t allow himself to joke around with Shiro like they used to, to pretend for a moment that the tension and awkwardness between them didn’t exist. Because he
knew that that small amount of hope, that small amount of support, would end up breaking him.

“I can get to the infirmary fine on my own,” Adam said, looking at the floor. Then he forced himself to look at Shiro, ignoring the questions in his eyes. “Thanks for helping me.” He turned around and continued down the hall, feeling Shiro’s eyes on him as he left. He wondered if he was making the right decision.

He adjusted his glasses and sighed, summoning all of his will power not to look back.

Thankfully Adam didn’t break anything. He was right - he just had a lot of bruises in the morning. At least they had a day off from flight training today. Once he was done with his lesson on the formation of Saturn’s rings and the many moons that surrounded the planet, he was free to do whatever he wanted.

He decided that he wanted to fly. He signed out a cruiser and went into the desert, passing the cliff that he had flown off of, and then the rock that he and Shiro used to race to. He knew where he wanted to go. He stopped the cruiser and got out, taking off his helmet. He looked at the cabin. It looked abandoned. When he first saw it he pictured a family living there. He wondered why they chose to live in such an isolated area, but maybe they had each other, and that was enough. But as Adam got closer to it he realized that this wasn’t a home anymore. This was the shell of the home it used to be.

He wasn’t sure what drew him to this place. Maybe it was the peculiarity of it all, maybe he missed his own home, maybe it was for no reason at all. All that he knew was that he wanted to see the place for himself, he wanted to see the memories that were contained there. He decided to knock just in case there were still people living there, but when he got no response he pushed on the door. Luckily it was unlocked.

He stepped inside and watched as the dust kicked up around him, light shining on each particle as it floated lazily in the air. The place was so quiet that it was unsettling. He walked further into the house and came across a room full of abandoned things. There was an old couch pushed up against the wall near the windows, a table held up by cinderblocks, and a tall shelf full of electronic equipment. It looked like this place was put together with a bunch of random parts. He loved it.

Then his eyes fell on a picture frame on a little table in the corner of the room. He walked over to it and lifted it up to eye level. In the picture was a man with kind eyes holding a young boy who was holding onto his father’s hair and grinning at the camera. He was missing his two front teeth. Adam smiled as he looked at it. So these were the people who lived here. He wondered what happened to them. He set the frame down and looked around the room once more. Something about this place seemed special, worth protecting. He knew that he would be back.

He left the house, closing the door gently behind him, and hopped back onto the cruiser. He thought about the dad and his son, smiling together. He hoped that nothing bad had happened to them. He wasn’t sure if there was anything worse than broken families. He put on his helmet and sped back to the Garrison - his hour was almost up. He left a trail of red dust behind him.
Adam had been dreading today. He knew that it was coming up, but he’d decided to ignore it until the day finally came, hitting him like a ton of bricks. Seven years. He hated space, and he hated time as well. All space and time ever did was take without replacing what had been lost.

He failed his flight simulation, he almost crashed into April’s jet during formation drills, and he had to bite his tongue to keep himself from talking back to Iverson as he yelled at him for the twentieth time that day. He wanted to be alone. He wanted his family. He wanted to run away. He wanted the world to stop and yet turn faster at the same time, just so that this day could be over.

Iverson made him clean the cafeteria by himself. He wasn’t lying when he said that mistakes wouldn’t be tolerated. At least it was something to do. Adam sighed and grabbed the mop, beginning to scrub at the floors. This was going to take hours. He could still feel his body ache in the places that had hit the ground after he fell off of his treadmill. Shiro had been so nice to him, making sure that he was okay. It reminded him of their first two years together, before things got - complicated. But once Adam had left him in the hallway things went back to the way they were - tense, distant, uncomfortable. He felt like he could scream. He put the mop back and began to clean the windows, seeing his own face reflected in the darkness. He looked tired. His eyes looked dull. His hair was getting too long. He began to scrub the window, wishing that he could scrub the image of himself away as well.

“Hey,” a soft voice said, and Adam turned to see Shiro standing in the doorway. Adam looked back at the window.

“Come to watch me do our usual punishment?” Adam asked bitterly, cleaning the last window. He set the towel down and headed for the kitchen. Shiro followed him.

“Iverson wasn’t in a good mood today,” Shiro said. “I think that he was still mad that we couldn’t get our formations right a few days ago.”

“Probably,” Adam sighed, turning on the faucet and picking up the first dirty plate. Today was mac and cheese day. He’d almost forgotten. He hadn’t been in the mood to eat.

“And,” Shiro said, taking a step forward before stopping himself. “Are you feeling okay? Today - you weren’t on the top of your game.”

Adam scoffed. “Thanks for pointing that out.” He sighed and put the plate down, turning to face him. “I -,” Adam began, but then he looked away, unable to meet Shiro’s eyes.

“Adam,” Shiro said softly, and he could hear the plea in his voice. Adam didn’t want to admit it, but he had been painfully lonely this year. Raj was nice enough, but he liked to keep to himself. Adam didn’t have anyone to talk to, to depend on. He had been missing his family more than ever this week.

And here Shiro was, checking in on him, worrying about him. Adam felt a burn in his throat as he gripped the counter. He didn’t want to be broken, he didn’t want to burden Shiro with his problems, but he couldn’t keep it all inside anymore. Shiro was reaching out his hand, and Adam found himself reaching back.

“Seven years ago today, I lost my brother,” Adam said before he could have second thoughts. Just saying the words made him feel sick. “He was in the SEP, the first class that the Garrison established, actually, and -” Adam bit his lip. He remembered his brother’s gentle hand on his head as he said goodbye. He remembered wrapping his arms around his brother’s neck and telling him not to go, pleading with him. They were a family. They had all that they needed here. Why couldn’t he just stay? His brother simply smiled and told him that he would be back before Adam
even had the chance to miss him. And then he left. Adam wished he knew that would be the last time he saw him. If he did he would’ve held on tighter. “He was the best in his class, he was a natural, apparently, and so they gave him the first available mission. It was a simple one - a few scientists were going to Earth’s moon to collect water samples and run some tests. But something went wrong.” Anger flared up in Adam’s chest. They never even told his family exactly what went wrong. They just sent flowers, a sum of money, and their condolences. “Apparently it was some kind of pilot error. My brother died up there, in that ship, with people he barely even knew.”

Adam hated space, because it took his brother away from him. And yet here he was, following in his footsteps. Space was unforgiving, time was unforgiving, and yet it seemed like Adam was destined to march towards the two.

Adam remembered that night a year ago, when Shiro woke him up from his nightmare. He lifted his head to look at him now. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you before. I just - part of me is ashamed that I’m at the Garrison at all, that I’m daring to do what my brother did, to accomplish what he didn’t have the chance to.” Adam turned around to face the sink, bending over it. “Sometimes I wish that I’d never even gotten to level ten, because once that representative showed up at my house I knew what was about to happen. And for some reason I couldn’t say no.” Adam thought of his sister, of what she told him. Her words made him want to try, but it was really his brother who made the decision for him. A part of him wanted to walk where he walked, to see what his life was like those last few years before he died. It was a selfish wish. Why did he ever think that that would give him back what he’d lost? It was all so unfair.

“My dad was training to be an astronaut,” Shiro said, breaking the silence. “He was the top of his class, a natural flier and a great leader. People looked up to him.”

Adam was quiet for a moment, still facing the sink. “What happened?” he finally asked, because he knew by Shiro’s tone that something went wrong.

“He had this rare disease that didn’t start affecting his body until his late twenties. He didn’t even know that he had it.” Shiro explained. “Once they found out they didn’t let him go on any missions. He was stuck teaching the next generation. He never got to accomplish his dream.” Shiro paused. “He died when I was a baby. And five years ago my mom died in a car accident. I’d been living in a foster home when a representative of the Garrison came to my school. They saw me get to level twelve and they offered me a spot in the program. When they found out that I was in the foster care system they decided that it would be easier if I just stayed here year-round.” Silence settled between the two of them. Adam turned around to look at Shiro, and saw the pain in his eyes.

“So you’re following someone else’s dream, too.” Adam said quietly. Shiro nodded his head.

“I want to do what my dad didn’t get the chance to. Not just for him, but for me too,” Shiro said firmly. Adam leaned back on the sink, trying to process everything that Shiro had told him. He’d managed to put all of Adam’s feelings into two simple sentences. That’s why he was here, too. That’s why he wanted to do his best. He was doing this for Casey, and for himself.

“I guess that we have more in common than I thought,” Adam mused. Then he scoffed, exhaustion creeping into his bones. “Why couldn’t we have just talked about this last year? It would’ve made life a lot easier for the both of us.”

Shiro smiled softly. “Have you met us? When have we ever made anything easier for ourselves?”

“You have a point there,” Adam agreed. Then he puffed out his cheeks and hung his head, feeling guilty. “I’m sorry that I kept making us fail all of those simulations after - you know. I know that
you want to be the best, and I’ve been getting in the way of that.”

Shiro sighed. “It’s my fault too. I was angry and -” he hesitated. "But you had a point - I tend to want to help others without letting people help me in return. But that’s not how friendships are meant to work. I’m starting to understand that.”

Adam lifted his head to sneak a glance at Shiro, trying to summon up the courage for what he was about to ask. “Does this mean that we’re friends now?”

Shiro looked at him, not saying anything for a moment, and then he nodded his head. “Yeah, I think that it does.”

Something in Adam’s chest warmed, and then he grabbed his hand towel and threw it over to Shiro, who caught it on instinct. “Great, that means that you can help me finish cleaning.” He grinned. "That’s what friends are for, right?"

Shiro threw the towel back at him and Adam laughed, lifting his arms up to protect his face.

“You wash, I dry,” Shiro said, moving to stand next to him at the sink. Adam picked up the towel and smiled down at it.

Maybe some things could never be replaced, but Adam was beginning to think that some things could be given to make the loss a little less painful.

Some *people* could be given.

Adam washed, Shiro dried. It was an apology on both sides.

It was acceptance.

Chapter End Notes

Yay they're friends again! :D

You can find me on tumblr @nobodys-pearls :)
Age Eighteen

Chapter Notes

I probably will be updating a little less frequently because of school but don't worry I am going to finish it.

I hope that you guys enjoy this chapter! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adam’s sister dropped him off again just like last year, except this time he knew that he wasn’t coming home for a while. Now that they were about to be assigned flight missions, it was important to be honing their skills as much as possible. That meant that they couldn’t afford to take long breaks that would interrupt their momentum.

Adam had two duffle bags this time, but it wasn’t very hard to manage. He didn’t realize how much stronger he had gotten during the last year at the Garrison until his mother welcomed him home at the start of his break and looked at him with wide eyes.

“You’ve gotten so tall, too,” his mother said. She began to tear up. “You’re practically a man now.” And she wasn’t wrong. Adam’s voice had gotten deeper, he’d filled out more. He wasn’t the short and lanky kid that he was when he first joined the Garrison.

“Say hello to Noah for me,” Adam said, hugging his sister goodbye before she got back in her car. Adam had met Noah over break. Apparently June had met him shortly after Adam returned for his third year at the Garrison. She was starting her first year as a physics professor and he’d offered to give her a tour. Apparently they immediately hit it off.

“Will do. Say hello to Shiro for me,” his sister said with a knowing smile, and Adam glared at her as she laughed and drove away. He had told her how they made up and became good friends last year, but June was under the impression that there was something more there.

“He’s my best friend, June, it’s not a big deal. It’s like you think he’s going to propose or something,” Adam had said, rolling his eyes.

“Maybe not soon, but one day,” she replied in a sing song voice. Instead of replying Adam had decided to simply throw a pillow at her face.

Yeah, he and Shiro had become really close ever since that night in the kitchen. It was a great feeling. He wasn’t a very social kid in school, and because of that he never got too close to any of his classmates. This was all very new to him. New and exciting. He couldn’t help but smile as he made his way to his room.

“Hey Raj,” Adam said, putting his stuff on the couch as Raj came out of the bathroom, toothbrush in his mouth. He quickly pulled it out and smiled.

“Hey Adam. How was your break?”

Adam shrugged. “It was nice to see my family. What about you?”
Raj nodded. “Same here.” Then his expression became fond. “My mother always misses me too much, so she cooked these big dinners for me almost every night. I have some leftovers in the fridge if you want any.”

“Thanks. I’m actually going to stop by Shiro’s room if you want to join me. Is Henry back yet?”

Raj shook his head. “He comes back tomorrow. Shiro actually stopped by earlier, he was wondering if you’d shown up yet. I’m about to take a shower, but you should go, he’ll be happy to see you.”

Adam smiled. Shiro was looking for him. “See you later then, Raj!” Adam called, opening the door and hurrying down the hall towards Shiro’s room. He felt excitement filling up in his chest. He knocked on the door, shifting on the balls of his feet as he waited, and watched as it opened moments later, Shiro looking at him in surprise before a grin spread across his face.

“Level ten, reporting for duty,” Adam said, giving him a sarcastic salute. Shiro quickly saluted as well.

“Level twelve, requesting permission to hug,” he said seriously. Adam laughed and dropped the salute, moving to hug him.

“You’re such a dork,” Adam said, feeling Shiro hug back. Then he pulled away. “So what do you want to do on our last day of freedom before Iverson’s reign begins once again?”

Shiro furrowed his brow in thought, but Adam already knew the answer. “Let’s go fly.”

“I think that we should give this rock a name,” Shiro said, looking out at the horizon as he leaned against his cruiser, crossing his arms.

Adam tapped his finger against his chin, looking at the rock with interest. It was pretty tall, towering over the two of them. It also had a distinct head shape and a squarish body.

“The Red Lion,” Adam finally said, and Shiro looked at him with a raised brow. Adam shrugged. “It’s reddish, it’s shaped kind of like a large cat, and it sounds cool.”

Shiro looked the rock up and down. “I like that. Okay, Red Lion it is.” He looked back at the horizon, and Adam did so as well, his eyes falling on the cabin in the distance.

“I’ve been to that cabin, you know,” Adam said.

“You broke into someone’s house?”

“Hey, I knocked first,” Adam protested. Then his tone became more somber. “But no one lives there anymore.” Shiro looked at the cabin as well. They leaned against their cruisers in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Adam watched as the sun dipped behind the desert mountains. “What’s it like?” Adam eventually asked. “Living with Henry?”

Shiro shrugged. “He’s nice, and funny.” He paused for a moment. “What about you? What’s it like living with Raj?”

“He keeps to himself mostly, but he’s friendly. We drink tea together sometimes.”
“Henry hates tea,” Shiro said, disappointment obvious in his tone. Then he glanced at Adam before looking away. He had a feeling that he knew what Shiro was thinking, mostly because he was thinking the same thing.

He wished they’d never stopped being roommates.

“We should get going,” Shiro said a moment later, grabbing his helmet. “Don’t want to get in trouble on your first day back. Iverson would never let us hear the end of it.”

Adam walked over to his cruiser. “We should make a bet on how many times he’ll make us clean the cafeteria this year.”

“I say at least ten,” Shiro said. Adam groaned and put his helmet on.

“Let’s hope not.”

“I think that I’m going to be sore forever,” Adam complained, sitting down on his couch. He watched as Raj put the tea kettle on the stove.

“At least Iverson was pleased with you and Shiro’s performance. Henry and I had to do three extra simulations after failing the first one,” Raj said, moving to sit on the other end of the couch.

Today they had done partner simulations without the blindfolds. Each person had their own controls but they had to get through the meteor shower and out of the planet’s gravitational pull together, or they would fail. Adam and Shiro did it pretty easily. Adam was able to figure out the best flight path to take, and Shiro would warn him of any unexpected variables, shooting rogue rocks out of the way. Unfortunately, Raj had gotten pulled into the planet’s gravitational field without realizing, so they both failed.

The tea kettle whined and Raj moved to stand, walking over to the kitchen and taking it off of the stove. “Mint or green tea?”

“Mint,” Adam decided, and Raj poured the steaming water into two mugs and dropped in the tea bags. He walked back over and handed one of the mugs to Adam.

“Thanks, Raj,” Adam said, blowing gently on the tea. “And don’t worry about the simulation. You and Henry will figure out your rhythm.”

Raj didn’t look convinced, but he nodded his head appreciatively. “I’m going to go to my room. I still need to do that reading Iverson assigned. Goodnight.”

“See you tomorrow,” Adam said. He heard the gentle click of the door closing. He set his mug on the table and leaned back into the couch, closing his eyes. Not for the first time he wished that Shiro was here. But maybe it was for the best that they weren’t living together. It didn’t end very well last time. On the other hand he really believed that they could make it work. They talked about things now, they knew more about each other. They grew together.

Shiro had him, and he had Shiro. It was simple and yet perfect in its own way.

A small part of him kept wondering if it was too good to last. He stowed that thought away and picked up his mug, blowing on it once more before taking a sip.
Days off had become a rarity, so when Iverson told them that they would have the day off at the end of the week, April proposed watching a movie together the night before.

“It’ll be good bonding time!” April said, looking at them all from her seat at the cafeteria table, a wide grin on her face. Hannah smirked and stabbed a piece of broccoli with her fork.

“I think it’s a great idea, April,” Shiro said, and Adam saw the soft look on his face. He wondered when the last time he had a movie night with friends was. Adam couldn’t believe that he was only realizing this now, but it was probably really lonely once everybody went home for break. There weren’t any other people their age at the Garrison.

“I agree,” Adam said.

“It’s like they have the same brain,” Hannah teased, and April swatted her on the shoulder. Then she looked back at the rest of them and smiled again.

“So everybody meet in our room on Friday at eight, okay?” Everybody nodded their heads in agreement.

“What movie are we going to watch?” Raj asked.

April furrowed her brow for a moment, and then she simply shrugged. “We’ll figure it out.”

Shiro and Adam had been put on snack duty.

“Since you know the cafeteria so well,” Hannah had teased. The Garrison had them all on a strict diet of what Henry liked to call, “vitamins and sadness,” so it was their job to try and swipe some extra provisions after dining hours.

“I can’t believe Iverson just gave you a key,” Adam said quietly, watching as Shiro turned the key in the lock and stepped inside the cafeteria. It was dimly lit but they managed to make their way over to the kitchen.

“We’re in here enough after hours, eventually he didn’t see the point in having to give it to me multiple times,” Shiro explained, opening the door to the kitchen. He grabbed a couple of bags of pretzels. “Let’s not take too much though, I already feel bad enough about breaking in.”

“Think of it as us exploring the unknown,” Adam offered. “Also, I decided not to get my snack and dessert this week, so that we wouldn’t be stealing, exactly. We’ll just be eating the stuff that I didn’t.” Shiro looked at him and smiled. “I felt bad about it, too,” Adam admitted. Then he opened the fridge. “Score! I found the pudding!” He grabbed a few cups, turning around to smile at Shiro. Shiro’s gaze was soft as he looked at him, and Adam could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. He cleared his throat and adjusted the pudding cups in his arms. “Should we go?”

“Oh, yeah,” Shiro said, holding the pretzels in his arms. He opened the kitchen door for Adam and Adam stepped outside, leading the way through the cafeteria and into the hall.
“Time to make a run for it,” Adam said, and the two of them hurried through the halls before they were spotted, coming to stop at Hannah and April’s door. Shiro knocked.

Henry threw open the door. “Shiro!” Then he saw Adam standing behind him. “And Adam, too! Come on in!” They stepped inside and April hurried over, holding a large basket in her arms.

“You can just put that stuff in here,” April said, and they dropped the pretzels and pudding cups inside. Hannah rested her chin on April’s shoulder from behind and began to sift through the basket. She pulled out a pudding cup and walked to the kitchen, grabbing and spoon and sitting down to start eating it.

“I picked three possible movie options,” April said. “They’re mostly old movies - they didn’t have a wide selection in the media room, but I think I got some good ones.”

“I’ll be happy with anything,” Shiro said, “thanks for planning this.” April smiled at him, and Adam felt something twist in his gut. Not only was he not used to having close friends - he also wasn’t used to sharing them. He shrugged the feeling off, knowing that it was ridiculous.

“Do you have anything sci-fi?” Adam asked. He and his family used to watch those kinds of movies together. June would always make the popcorn, and Adam would always bring out the blankets. Casey was usually the one who chose the movie.

“I think we do, actually,” April said. She walked over to the table and looked at the three movies laid out. “Yeah, we do! Henry, Raj? Are you okay with watching a sci-fi movie?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Henry said, leaning back on the couch. Raj nodded his head in agreement, sitting on the floor with his legs folded under him.

“What about you Hannah?” Adam turned to see Hannah lift up her spoon in approval.

“Okay then! I’ll put it in! You two can sit wherever you’d like.”

Shiro looked at Adam and shrugged, sitting on the couch next to Henry. Adam sat on the other side of Shiro, leaning against the armrest.

“Hannah, can you turn off the lights?” April asked. Hannah got out of her chair at the counter and moved to the switch by the door. Soon the room was dark, the screen in front of them their only source of light. Adam watched as April moved to sit in the large chair on the left hand side of the couch, Hannah joining her. They snuggled up together.

“Your breath smells like pudding,” April said with a laugh, and Hannah smiled. Adam glanced at Shiro, who was looking at the screen. Then he looked at the half a foot of space between them. How would Shiro react if he closed that space a little, maybe a few inches? They were friends after all, they were flight partners, even. Shouldn’t they get used to being in close proximity? They never knew when the situation would arise and they would have to work under pressure in close quarters. Adam relaxed and shifted a little closer to Shiro. He didn’t seem to notice. Then a few moments later Shiro put his arm across the back of the couch, and leaned into Adam. Adam looked at him with wide eyes, but Shiro was still looking at the screen. Adam smiled and leaned into Shiro as well, their sides pressed against each other.

Shiro had him, and he had Shiro. It was simple, and it was perfect in its own way.
“Looks like you’ve broken another record, Shirogane,” Iverson called, looking at his stopwatch. Adam watched as Shiro got out of the jet and jogged over to them, a wide smile on his face. “But you’re not too far behind, cadet,” Iverson said, glancing at Adam. Adam swallowed and nodded his head. Iverson was on the edge of sounding proud. “Everybody fall in line,” Iverson directed, and the other cadets hurried over from where they were beside their jets and formed a straight line in front of him. Shiro and Adam did the same, standing next to each other.

“As you already know, this month I will be assigning missions,” Iverson said. “The most challenging missions will be going to the cadets who have proven themselves to be the most capable. With that in mind, I would like Shirogane and Wadley to stay here. The rest of you are dismissed.” Adam felt Hannah put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see her looking at him, impressed. Henry nudged Shiro before leaving the room. They all looked happy for them. Adam smiled and then straightened his back as he turned to face Iverson once more.

Iverson sighed and clasped his hands behind his back. “You two have gotten into a lot of trouble these past three and a half years,” he began, and Adam fought the urge to glance at Shiro. “You have also experienced failure, both independently and as a team.” Adam was beginning to wonder if being told to stay back wasn’t a good thing. Maybe this was just a lecture. Maybe they weren’t going to be assigned any missions this year. “With that said, you have shown me that each of you has something to prove, and you won’t back down until you succeed in your ambitions. These past few months you’ve been acing your written tests, showing incredible improvement in your partner training, passing all of your physical fitness requirements, and setting new flying records.” He looked at them with a stern expression, and then he began to smile. “You two are ready for your first mission.”

Adam struggled to maintain his neutral expression. He did it. He couldn’t wait to tell his family. He was going into space.

Oh my god he was going into space.

“The mission is in two months, and by the time you get back the first stage of the SEP will be over,” Iverson continued. “You’ll be going Titan, Saturn’s largest moon. Our best scientist, Officer Holt, is going there to collect samples of the moon’s surface liquid. I’m putting my trust in you two that you will be able to execute this mission. Don’t disappoint me.”

“We won’t, sir,” Shiro said firmly. Adam just nodded his head in agreement. Iverson looked between the two of them for a moment.

“You two have the potential to do great things,” Iverson said. “I’m curious to see what you will do with that potential. You are dismissed.”

Adam and Shiro turned and walked out of the room, serious expressions on their faces as Iverson watched them leave. Once the door closed behind them and they were in the empty hallway Shiro pulled Adam into a hug, lifting him into the air and laughing.

“We’re going into space!” Shiro said, putting Adam down. He looked thrilled. Adam smiled and adjusted his glasses, still in disbelief. They were really going into space. They were going to one of Saturn’s moons.

He was going to be so far away from his family.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Shiro asked, looking down at him. Adam hadn’t noticed until now, but Shiro had grown a few inches taller since last year. Adam sighed and looked away.
“I’m happy, but I feel like I’m not as happy as I’m supposed to be. I hated space for so long, part of me still does, but now I’m going on a mission, to space. I’ve been in this program for almost four years that’s been training for me to go to space. Sometimes I just don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Did you ever really hate space, though?” Shiro asked. Adam looked at him in surprise.

“It’s the reason I lost my brother,” Adam said, but Shiro didn’t look convinced. Adam crossed his arms.

“Remember when we went to that window during our first year? That night you told me that ‘patience yields focus’?” Shiro asked. Adam nodded his head, unsure of where he was going with this but waiting for him to continue. “The way you looked at the night sky through that window, you didn’t look like you hated it at all. When we would learn about the solar system in class, when we would fly to the Red Lion and you would point out all the constellations - you didn’t look like someone who hated space, so, are you sure that you ever did?”

Adam was at a loss for words. Then he thought about the nights when he and his siblings would go outside and lay in the grass, looking at the stars and arguing over which part of the sky was theirs. June calls dibs on the stars. Casey owned the moon. Adam was just content to watch them. That was how the story went. And yet Adam realized as he was standing in the empty hall with Shiro that that wasn’t quite true. Although he never said it out loud, Adam had wanted the space in between the stars and the moon, connecting them all. That was his, and now that he thought about it, his siblings probably knew that.

He didn’t hate space, even though he wanted to once he got the news about his brother. How could he? His siblings gave it to him.

Adam felt tears in his eyes, and Shiro looked at him with concern.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to -”

Adam reached for Shiro, pulling him into a hug. Shiro was stiff for a moment, most likely confused, but then he hugged back.

“We’re going into space,” Adam said, smiling into Shiro’s chest. Then he pulled away to look at him. Shiro was grinning as well.

“Race you to our rooms, level ten,” he said, and a moment later he took off down the hall. Adam laughed and ran after him.

It ended up being a tie.

The next couple of months they had to do extra training for their mission. They were assigned readings on everything there was to know about Titan, they had to do partner simulations every day, and go to the gym in their free time in order to be in peak physical condition. It was hard work, but at least they got to do it together.

Two weeks before they were scheduled to leave Officer Holt invited them over for dinner at his house.

“Thank you for coming,” he said, opening the door for them and leading them inside. He brought
them to his living room and told them to sit wherever they liked. Adam sat on the two-person couch, and Shiro sat beside him.

“Thank you for inviting us, Officer Holt,” Shiro said, his back straight and his tone formal. Officer Holt laughed.

“Please, call me Sam.” Adam watched as a woman came into the room to sit by her husband. She had a warm smile. “This is my wife, Colleen.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Colleen said.

“Matt? You can come on in,” Sam said, and then he leaned forward in his seat and looked at Shiro and Adam. “You can’t tell him that I told you this, but he’s been dying to meet you two. He wants to get into the science branch of the SEP once he’s old enough.”

Adam watched as a boy who couldn’t be older than twelve came into the room. His hair stuck up in odd places and he was wearing large, round glasses. He also had a wide grin on his face.

“Cadet Shirogane! Cadet Wadley! Wow!” this kid, who Adam assumed was Matt, said excitedly, moving to stand by the couch they were sitting on and grabbing the armrest. “What’s it like being in the program? Is Commander Iverson as strict as people say he is? Is this your first time going into space? Do you think you’ll see any aliens?”

Shiro looked at him with wide eyes and Adam couldn’t help but feel caught off guard as well. Then he smiled. This must’ve been what he was like when he would ask his sister all sorts of questions. “The program is difficult but amazing - it’s an honor to be a part of it. Iverson is strict but he cares about his students. This will be our first time going into space. And Shiro thinks that there are aliens out there but I’m skeptical.”

“Wow,” Matt breathed.

“Your dad told us that you want to be a part of the program,” Adam said. Matt nodded his head enthusiastically.

“I want to be a senior science officer just like he is.”

“You know, Shiro wants to be like his dad, too,” Adam said, looking at Shiro. Shiro smiled and looked at Matt, looking a little less overwhelmed.

“My dad is the reason that I want to go to space,” Shiro agreed. “Keep working towards your dream, and you’ll get there. You look like you have what it takes.”

Matt beamed at him. “Thank you, Mr. Shirogane.”

“Call me Shiro,” he said, and Matt looked at him like had just discovered a brand new planet.

Sam laughed. “Okay, Matt. Can you get your sister for me? We’re going to start eating soon.” Matt grinned at Shiro and Adam one more time before he hurried out of the room, skipping steps as he headed up the stairs.

“My daughter Katie is only eight, but I have a feeling that she’s going to go on to do some great things as well. They’re good kids. I’m lucky to have them,” Sam said, and Colleen covered one of his hands with her own, smiling at him.

“You have a wonderful family, Officer - Sam,” Shiro said.
“We should head to the table,” Sam said, standing up. “I don’t want to keep you here too late. I bet Iverson is working you hard before we leave.” Adam and Shiro followed him into the dining room. Colleen went to the kitchen and came out with a salad bowl in one hand and a basket of rolls in the other.

“Katie? Matt?” Colleen called. “Don’t forget to wash your hands!” A few moments after Adam and Shiro sat down Matt ran into the room, a small girl and a dog on his heels.

“Looks like I beat you again,” Matt said, a smug grin on his face. The girl, Katie, Adam assumed, stuck her tongue out at him and took her seat, fixing her ponytail with an annoyed huff. Adam noticed how her feet didn’t touch the floor.

“Katie, say hello to our guests. They’re the ones who are going to Titan with me,” Sam said. Katie looked at Adam and Shiro with interest.

“Did you know that Titan is the second largest moon in our solar system?” Katie asked. Shiro nodded his head, probably remembering their classes like Adam did.

“We did know that,” Shiro replied, his tone friendly.

“Did you know that its surface temperature is -179°C and the most abundant gas in its atmosphere is nitrogen, creating an organic smog around the moon, along with methane and ethane? And the moon itself is fifty percent larger than our moon, making it one of the largest natural satellites in the solar system?”

Adam blinked at her, surprised by the fact that she knew the word ‘abundant’. “Yes, we do. You know a lot about Titan, huh?”

Katie nodded her head, leaning over to pet her dog. “I also know that the moon was discovered by Christiaan Huygens in 1655.”

“Do you know that Christiaan Huygens not only invented the Huygenian eyepiece, which improved the design of the telescope, but also the pendulum clock, which became the most accurate timekeeper for almost three-hundred years?” Adam asked. For some reason he felt the need to impress this girl.

“Yes, I did,” Katie said, “but most people don’t.” She looked at her father. “I approve of these two.”

Sam laughed as Shiro and Adam looked at Katie in surprise. He was right - his daughter was something special.

The two weeks came and went faster than Adam expected. He sat at the kitchen counter in his room and sipped his tea thoughtfully, running through take-off protocol for about the hundredth time that morning. They were more than prepared, but it didn’t hurt to review.

He heard the door to Raj’s room open and turned to see him walk into the main room, yawning and stretching his arms. He looked at Adam with sleepy eyes.

“When do you leave?” he asked, sitting on the couch.
“I’m heading over in about five minutes. We take off in three hours.” Raj nodded his head. “Why
are you up this early? I thought that Iverson scheduled class for the afternoon today.” Adam
checked the clock - it was 4:15.

“I wanted to say goodbye,” Raj said. “We’re all going to the take off site to watch you go.”

Adam looked at him in surprise. “That’s - really nice of you guys.”

“Of course, you’re all kind of like my second family,” Raj said sleepily. Adam thought about that
for a moment.

“Same here,” Adam agreed, taking another sip of his tea. Raj was right, he’d gotten really close
with these people after almost four years of training. They had overcome a lot together. They were
like his brothers and sisters.

Except Shiro. The thought came into Adam’s mind before he realized that he was thinking it. He
wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t see Shiro as a brother. He was just - in his own category. Adam
didn’t have a word for it.

“Be safe, you guys!” April said, pulling Shiro and Adam into a hug. Adam struggled to breathe as
she squeezed - she had always been stronger than she looked.

“Yeah, don’t get abducted by aliens or something,” Henry added. Hannah nodded her head sagely.

“We’ll try our best,” Shiro said with a smile. Then he looked at Adam. “Ready?”

“Ready,” Adam replied, his helmet tucked under his arm. They gave their fellow cadets one last
goodbye before walking across the open field to the spaceship. Sam was already there, talking with
Iverson, but they stopped their conversation once Shiro and Adam walked up to them.

“All of my equipment has just been loaded up, so I’m ready to go when you two are.”

“We’re as ready as we’ll ever be, Officer Holt,” Adam said. He watched as Sam looked over
towards the viewing deck where they had just left their friends. He could see Colleen holding on to
Katie’s hand, and Matt pressing his nose against the glass window, his eyes wide. It couldn’t be
easy having to say goodbye. It was hard enough for Adam to call his own family to tell them that
he was going into space. He could hear the worry in his mother’s tone as she wished him good
luck. He knew that they were probably thinking about Casey a lot these past couple of weeks,
about the last time that he said goodbye.

Adam felt Shiro nudge his shoulder, giving him a questioning look. Adam just smiled, letting him
know that he was okay.

Iverson checked the watch on his wrist. “It seems like it’s time to board,” he said, all business.
Then he looked at Shiro and Adam. “You’ve been training hard for this, cadets. You’re ready, and
I wouldn’t tell you that if you weren’t.”

“Thank you, sir,” Shiro and Adam said in unison.

“Have fun in space,” Iverson said with a smile. He wished Sam good luck, and then he walked
away, heading for the viewing deck.
“Okay boys, you heard your Commander,” Sam said with a smile, adjusting the straps on his space suit. The three of them headed for the small opening to the spaceship and climbed inside. The trip to Titan was supposed to take roughly five months, and Sam would need a month to collect the samples that he needed on the moon’s surface. That meant that they would be away from Earth for almost a year. They were lucky that it wouldn’t take longer - there was a time where trips to Saturn would take over two years.

Adam sat in one of the pilot seats and looked out the thick glass window, looking at the desert stretched before him. He wondered if the small black speck he could see in the distance was the cabin. He hadn’t had the chance to visit it again, but he wanted to once he got back, if it was still even there.

“I’m going to start running diagnostics,” Shiro said, flicking the appropriate switches. He looked focused. Adam turned in his seat and saw that Sam was holding a tablet in his hands as he looked around the cargo bay, checking to make sure that everything was there. Adam took a deep breath and faced forward in his seat, looking at the desert once more.

“Okay, it looks like we’re ready to launch,” Shiro said. Adam turned to see something shining in Shiro’s eyes.

“We’re really doing this,” Adam said, failing to keep the disbelief out of his voice.

“Yeah, we really are,” Shiro said, sounding amazed himself.

“Looks like you’ll get to live your dream of meeting some aliens,” Adam teased, putting on his helmet.

Shiro laughed and put on his helmet as well. “Finally.”

“We’re launching in five minutes,” Iverson said over the comms.

“Copy that, Commander,” Shiro said. Sam shut the door to the cargo bay and took his seat behind them. He had his helmet on as well. A few minutes later they could hear the countdown. Adam buckled his seatbelt and placed his hands on the thrusters, Shiro doing the same. There wasn’t much for them to do as the ship took off and broke through the Earth’s atmosphere, but after that it was up to them to get on a steady course.

The ship began to rumble as the countdown neared zero. Adam leaned back in his seat and braced himself, stealing one last glance at Shiro, who was looking out the window with a small smile. Adam’s heart began to beat faster as he looked at him, and his cheeks began to warm.

The excitement about this mission must not have really sunk in until now.

Then they could feel the ship being projected into the air, the desert quickly being replaced by a blur of color. Adam closed his eyes. He knew that it wasn’t good to look out of the window while the spaceship was being launched, there were many records of people getting sick because of it. He focused on the way his seat shook and his teeth seemed to vibrate. He kept his breathing steady.

It was like that for what felt like an eternity before Adam felt the ship losing momentum. He opened his eyes and saw that they must be leaving the Earth’s atmosphere. He leaned forward and flicked the appropriate switches - Shiro doing the same. They didn’t have to talk, they had become so in sync this past year that everything about this was second nature. Minutes later their sensors indicated that they had officially left the atmosphere, and when Adam looked out the window he gasped.
Space was right there. In front of him. Surrounding him. The stars glittered, millions of them. He’d really done this. He’d really gotten this far.

It was terrifying and incredible and unbelievable - but most of all, it felt right. It felt so right. For once he wasn’t thinking about his brother, about carrying his legacy, but instead he was beginning to think about his own. This was his moment.

“This is -” Shiro breathed, and Adam moved his head to look at him. This was a moment that he got to share with Shiro.

“I know,” Adam said, and Shiro looked at him with wide eyes before smiling. Together they checked the navigation system and pushed forward on the thrusters, beginning their course towards Saturn. The stars streaked past them as they sped towards their destination, there one moment and then gone the next, star after star after star.

“Welcome to space,” Sam said, a certain fondness in his tone. “She’s been waiting for you.”

Shiro was right. He’d known that for a while now, but this only made it more obvious. Adam never hated space. It was impossible for him to hate it, when it had given him so much.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on tumblr @nobodys-pearls :)
Adam wasn’t going to lie, five months in a spaceship became exhausting, but at least the three of them found ways to make it fun.

Adam and Shiro still had their races on the treadmills, even though it was a lot different being in zero gravity. One time Shiro’s strap broke and he began floating around the training room, Adam holding the handles of the treadmill for support as he doubled over in laughter.

He eventually helped Shiro get down.

Sam would tell them stories about his family. Adam particularly liked the one where Katie managed to hack into Sam and Colleen’s parental control system on the TV so that she and Matt could watch a horror movie. Adam also told stories about his family. Most of them were about the crazy stunts that his sister convinced him to do with her, like making a pulley system out of blankets that would bring her new telescope up onto the roof. Their parents weren’t happy about that one. Shiro seemed to like that story the most.

As fun as it was to tell Sam and Shiro stories about his family, it did make him miss them more, and there were some nights where that familiar ache of missing them weighed him down more than others. One night he was laying in his bunk, staring up at the low ceiling, and he desperately needed the comfort of another person. He’d gotten out of his alcove in the wall and crept over to where Shiro slept on the other side of the room. The curtain was pulled across his bed.

“Shiro,” Adam whispered, his fingertips touching the curtain. “Are you awake?” The next moment the curtain was pulled away and Shiro was looking at him, lifting himself up onto his elbows.

“You couldn’t sleep either, huh?” Shiro asked. He slid over to the opposite side of the bed and looked at Adam expectantly. Adam hesitated for a moment, making sure that it was okay, and then he lifted himself up onto the bed and joined him. There wasn’t meant to be enough room for two people, but they made it work. Adam turned to face him and his eyes were drawn to the pictures on his wall.

Sam had brought along a picture of his family that he kept in his sleeping quarters. Adam had done so as well. He’d been wondering for a while whether Shiro had any pictures put up of his family. He didn’t tell stories about them like Sam and Adam did, only a few pieces of information here and there. Maybe it hurt to remember, he could understand that.

And yet there they were.

There was one of a man dressed in a space suit, a wide grin on his face. He and Shiro had the same smile, the kind of smile that made everyone who looked at it feel important. There was another picture of a pretty woman holding a young child in her arms. His hair was flopping in his face and
he was smiling at the camera, a gap in his teeth. It reminded Adam of the picture he’d found at the cabin. Then his eyes fell on another picture.

“Hey,” Adam said quietly, careful not to wake up Sam. “That’s us.” It was a picture of them in their flight training uniforms, during the end of their third year in the program. Adam had his arm around Shiro, holding out a peace sign. He knew that it was cheesy when he did it, but it made Shiro laugh. He didn’t realize that Shiro had brought this with him.

“Yeah, I’ve always like that picture,” Shiro said softly.

“We’ve known each other for a long time now, haven’t we?” Adam mused, looking up at the ceiling. “I’ve forgotten what it’s like not to have you at my side.” Shiro was quiet, and Adam blushed. “Sorry, I guess that was a weird thing for me to say -”

“No, I know what you mean,” Shiro said, but there was something sad about his tone. “But there might come a day when I’m not by your side anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Adam asked, looking at him, but Shiro wouldn’t meet his gaze. Adam tried not to be hurt by that and instead focused on the way that Shiro began to rub his wrist in thought.

“You know as well as I do that people can be taken away from you, even when it’s unfair, especially when it’s unfair,” Shiro said, his expression grim.

“That’s not going to happen to us,” Adam said firmly, but Shiro still had that pained expression on his face. “I mean it, Shiro. No matter how far you may be, no matter how many galaxies are between us, I will find you, we will see each other again.” Adam watched as Shiro turned to look at him in surprise. “You don’t have a choice in the matter,” Adam finished, crossing his arms angrily and looking back up at the ceiling. He heard Shiro let out a breathy laugh.

“You’re something else, level ten,” Shiro finally said. Adam’s expression softened.

“I really do mean it, Shiro.”

“I know you do,” Shiro said, and Adam could see that something in his eyes had changed, had become a little more hopeful. “Call me Takashi,” he added a moment later.

“What?”

“I want you to call me Takashi,” Shiro said, looking back at the ceiling. Adam remembered Shiro telling him that only his parents called him Takashi. Takashi was saved for the people he truly trusted, the people he cared about. That meant that Adam was one of those people.

“Okay,” Adam said, his voice almost a whisper. A comfortable silence settled over them. Adam knew that he should get back to his own bed, but he found himself not wanting to leave. He had a feeling that Shiro didn’t want him to leave either. “Is it okay if I stay here? Just for tonight?”

Shiro smiled. “Of course.” Adam gave him a grateful look and found himself leaning into his teammate.

“Goodnight, Takashi.”
When Sam and Shiro had set a gray package labeled ‘chocolate pudding cake’ and a long spoon in front of Adam, he looked at them suspiciously.

“What’s this for?” he asked, looking between the two of them.

“Shiro told me that today was a special day,” Sam said, smiling wide. Adam looked at Shiro in confusion.

“Happy Birthday, Adam,” Shiro said, and Adam’s eyes widened. He totally forgot. He was nineteen today.

“Thanks, you guys,” Adam said, a warmth filling his chest. It was days like today that he wished that he could talk to his family, that his sister would ruffle his hair, but he never took Sam and Shiro for granted. They had become his family after five months of traveling in deep space. They had gotten to know a lot about each other. Maybe too much, if he was being honest. “But I’m not eating all of this myself,” he declared, carefully ripping open the package and sticking his spoon inside, a chunk of pudding cake floating out of the package and in front of his face.

“You should have the first bite,” Shiro said, and Adam opened his mouth and tasted the chocolate on his tongue. He had almost forgotten what chocolate tasted like. Then he pulled out more chunks and looked at Shiro and Sam, waiting for them to have some. Together they finished the package. Once it was empty Adam looked up and laughed when he saw Shiro’s face.

“You have some pudding,” Adam began, gesturing to Shiro’s face. He reached out his hand and wiped away the chocolate that was at the corner of his lip. He saw the way that Shiro looked at him in surprise and he blushed. “Sorry, that was -”

Shiro smiled. “Thanks.”

Adam nodded his head, trying to stop his face from heating up. “No problem.” They had been in close quarters for so long, it was hard to remember normal boundaries. He hadn’t realized how intimate he was being until he did it. But Shiro hadn’t seemed to mind.

They reached Titan a week later. Adam looked at the window with wide eyes as he stared at the moon looming in front of them. It was even larger than he imagined, covered in a bluish-green haze that was hard to describe.

It was beautiful.

He could also see Saturn in the distance, surrounded by its beige colored rings, and the light coming from some of the other moons as well.

“I will remind you that the atmosphere on Titan is incredibly cloudy, so we’ll have to make sure to stick together,” Sam said, pulling out his equipment and beginning to organize his work station. Adam watched as Shiro adjusted their trajectory. “The gravity on Titan is also significantly lower than that of Earth’s, which will make it easy to maneuver, but again,” he turned to look at Adam, adjusting the sleeves on his orange suit, “more likely to get lost.”

“Adam,” Shiro called, and Adam came over to join him, leaning over Shiro’s chair to look at what he was doing. “Do you think that we should approach at a steeper angle?” Adam looked at the numbers on the navigation system and did the math in his head.
“Yes. Only 1.2 degrees, though. That should give us a smooth landing.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Shiro said, beginning to press the right buttons. “We should be landing in twenty minutes, Sam.”

“Perfect,” Sam called, walking over to one of his larger drills and inspecting it.

Adam was pleased to see that his calculations had been correct. Together he and Shiro managed to pull off a perfect landing. Iverson would’ve been proud. The three of them put on their helmets and thick protective gloves.

“Once we get outside we are going to attach ourselves to the cables located on the outside of the ship’s hull,” Sam explained. “That way we know how to get back.”

Adam and Shiro helped him carry his equipment outside of the ship. Then they each attached themselves to the cables. Adam looked out at the terrain, but there wasn’t much to see. Literally. He only managed to see what was a few feet in front of him. And Sam was right about the gravity as well, he could feel himself floating slightly in the air. The cables were a good idea.

“Where to now, Sam?” Shiro asked. Adam could see the excitement in Sam’s eyes as he looked at the device that he was holding in his hand.

“The closest source of liquid methane is about a half mile from here,” Sam said. “Follow me.” They began to walk through the haze, and when Adam turned to look behind him he couldn’t see their ship anymore. Sam stopped moving fifteen minutes later. “Here it is.” Adam and Shiro set the equipment down carefully, and Sam got to work. Adam watched as he moved the large drill over a few feet, checking the device in his hand before moving it another foot. “It’ll take about an hour to extract enough methane for testing. I’ll be focused on this particular source for about a week, seeing what data I can find back at my lab station on the ship, and then we’ll move on to a larger source of ethane.” He turned around the face them, a wide smile on his face. “The information that we find here could change - it could change everything. We could find life here.”

Adam glanced at Shiro and saw the look in his eyes, the way that his fists were clenched. He looked - proud. He was finding his purpose. He was grabbing hold of his own life and making sure that he mattered. And Adam was doing the same thing. They were doing it together. Adam smiled as he looked at him.

Then he was struck by a realization, and for a moment he wondered if the gravity on Titan had changed. He quickly looked back at the drill, paying close attention to what Sam was doing as he fought the blush that was rising in his cheeks, praying that Shiro didn’t notice.

The weeks were structured and repetitive, but Adam couldn’t complain too much. Every time he stepped out of the spaceship he was reminded that he was somewhere that no other human had ever been. And he got to spend time with Shiro - even though he was finding it harder and harder to ignore the way his insides felt whenever he looked at him.

One day Adam had asked Sam if their insides could float around because of the change in gravity,
but Sam simply shook his head and chuckled as he left the room, thinking it was a joke.

But whenever Shiro laughed, Adam’s stomach flipped. Whenever Shiro said his name, Adam’s lungs stopped working properly. And whenever Shiro touched him Adam was positive that his heart had just collapsed in on itself.

Maybe it was being in space that was doing this to him. Maybe he had some undiscovered moon sickness. Whatever it was he tried his best to ignore it. This would go away. Patience yields focus.

The weeks continued on smoothly. He and Shiro had come up with lots of ways to pass the time - tic tac toe, arm wrestling - once they even looked out the window in the cockpit and came up with what shapes the hazy clouds of dense nitrogen formed. That was a particularly uneventful day. A few weeks in, the same day that they had moved on to the source of ethane, Sam had decided to turn in early. This time Shiro had come to stand outside of Adam’s bed.

“Hey,” Shiro said softly. “Do you want to go to the window?” Adam wondered how Shiro knew that he was awake. He pulled back the curtain and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, careful to keep quiet so as to not wake Sam. They walked through the living quarters and into the cockpit, sitting down in their pilot seats. They sat like that in silence for a few moments, looking at the darkened haze in front of them.

“What’s your favorite color?” Shiro asked, still looking out the window. Adam looked at him, raising his brow.

“What?”

Shiro shrugged. “I just realized that I’ve never asked.”

“Purple,” Adam said. “What about you?”

“Black.”

“How dark and mysterious of you,” Adam teased. He watched the corner of Shiro’s mouth twitch, and ignored the feeling of weightlessness in his chest. “If you could be anything other than a pilot, what would you be?”

Shiro was quiet for a few moments. “I wouldn’t be anything else.”

“Come on,” Adam pushed. “If you had to pick something.” Shiro furrowed his brow, and Adam knew that he had something in mind.

“It’s not a job, exactly,” Shiro said, obviously stalling. Adam kept waiting. Shiro sighed. “I would adopt a bunch of kids, kids who’ve had a hard time, and I would make sure to give them the best life possible.”

Adam saw the determination on Shiro’s face, and something in his chest squeezed. Then he laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Shiro asked defensively, his mouth turned down as he crossed his arms.

“It’s just, my answer was going to owning my own tea shop. Now it sounds lame.”
Shiro uncrossed his arms and straightened up in his chair, leaning towards Adam. “That isn’t lame!” Then he lowered his voice, looking back towards the living quarters. “That sounds like a great idea.”

“We could open it together,” Adam suggested, the words coming out of his mouth without much thought. “People would come in to have tea and just talk about their day. It would be this place away from the craziness of every day life. It would be safe and peaceful and have soft lighting - and our kids -” Adam choked on the words he was saying and looked at Shiro with panicked eyes, Shiro looking slightly surprised as well. “I mean! Your kids! The ones you’re going to adopt! They could work there too!” Adam whispered quickly, mentally smacking himself for how flustered he sounded. He hoped that Shiro couldn’t see how much he was blushing in the darkness. Moon sickness - it was a crafty killer.

Shiro eventually smiled and leaned back in his chair, looking away. “Yeah, that sounds perfect.” Adam tried to calm his breathing as a silence settled over them once more. “What was your brother like?” Shiro asked, his tone careful. Adam felt the urge to throw a few walls up and around that topic, but he stopped himself. If he was being honest, he hadn’t thought about Casey for a while now, which was odd, since he expected to be thinking about him constantly while he was on this mission on Titan, a mission very similar to the one that his brother went on. He hated talking about Casey, and now he wasn’t even thinking about him. It felt like a disservice to his brother’s memory.

“Casey was - perfect,” Adam began. “And I know that when people - pass - their loved ones always tend to think only of that person’s strengths, like their flaws never existed, but Casey really was perfect. He was smart, and hard working, and kind. He was the one who would take me and June out to look at the sky. It was our thing. He was the one who knew just what to say to get June and I to stop fighting. He would cook dinner with my mom in the kitchen and go to sports games with my dad. He would even pick me up from school when I was little.” Adam looked down at his lap. He could feel that familiar sting in the back of his eyelids. “I’m not exaggerating when I say that I was devastated when he left to join the program at the Garrison. I think we all were. But we were also so proud of him. He was everything to us. And now he was going to go out into the world and other people were going to see how special he was, too. The universe was going to see.” He put his hands on his knees, gripping tightly. He wasn’t sure why he was saying all of this. “Sometimes I wish that it was me who - it shouldn’t have been him. He shouldn’t have been the son that my parents lost.” Adam suddenly felt hands on his shoulders, and when he looked up he saw Shiro kneeling in front of him, his face only a few inches away and his gaze intense.

“Don’t ever think that,” Shiro said angrily. “You’re not allowed to, because, because if that were the case then I never would’ve met you, and I can’t imagine living my life without meeting you.” “Takashi,” Adam breathed, looking at him with wide eyes. Shiro’s gaze became less intense, and he smiled softly.

“You know, between bouncing around foster homes and going through the program at the Garrison, I’ve never had my first kiss.”

Adam continued to look at him in confusion, finding himself unable to make words come out of his mouth. Maybe his lungs had finally floated up and out of his body without him noticing.

“Life has always been so hectic, I had lost so much, that it forced me to grow up really quickly,” Shiro continued. “I always had one goal in mind, and I haven’t lost sight of that goal, but being in space, being away from Earth for so long, reminded me that there’s more to life than what you do for yourself. Life’s also about what you make with other people.”
“I - I haven’t had my first kiss either, actually,” Adam blurted out, not really knowing why he felt the need to say that. He hadn’t really thought about it before. Actually, maybe he had thought about the possibility of kissing someone, but it was a thought that he’d been trying to ignore, because if he thought about it too much, he had a feeling that his heart would finally reach its limit and explode. He watched as Shiro looked at him, his gaze softer than it’d ever been before, his smile small and shy. Adam felt as Shiro’s hands moved up from Adam’s shoulders to gently cup his face, his thumbs on his cheekbones. The next thing he knew, Shiro was leaning into him, and Adam was shocked by how desperately his body wanted it. It felt like every cell in his body was vibrating, being pulled in by Shiro’s presence.

Adam didn’t hate space anymore, but he definitely hated the space between Shiro’s lips and his.

He quickly leaned forward in his seat and pressed his mouth against Shiro’s, hearing Shiro hum in surprise before melting into him, one of his hands moving to hold on to his hair. Adam rested his hands on Shiro’s arms as he deepened the kiss, wanting more, needing more. He stood and guided Shiro to the empty wall, grabbing the front of his shirt as he pressed against him. All of the things that Adam had wanted to tell him, all of the feelings that he had been trying to press down, he desperately wanted to convey all of it with his lips, with his hands. It seemed like Shiro wanted to do the same. A few minutes later they pulled apart to catch their breath, looking at each other with wide eyes.

“We just kissed, on a moon, near Saturn,” Adam said, running a hand through his hair in disbelief. Hair that Shiro had just been running his own hands through. He began to blush.

“Yeah,” Shiro said, still a little breathless. “I guess we did.”

“I fucking love space,” Adam said, pulling Shiro in for another kiss. He could hear Shiro’s laugh before they connected once more.

Chapter End Notes

Part Two should be posted very soon!

You can find me on tumblr @nobodys-pearls :)
They began making preparations to head home before Adam knew it. Sam seemed to be very satisfied with his results, explaining how the data that he collected would be put to great use in the facilities back home. They were also thankful that they hadn’t run into any complications during their time on Titan. There were some close calls, however. The drill almost exploded during one of their trips to the ethane source, and Adam’s cable had snapped, meaning that he and Shiro had to share the same cable for the last week, but, as Sam had said, the mission had been relatively uneventful.

But Adam had noticed Sam look between the two of them with a knowing smile as he said that last word. Adam tried and failed not to blush. Shiro just grinned.

So they were heading back home. It was actually a little hard to believe. He wondered how much had changed since they were gone. As Iverson had said, the first stage of the program would be over by the time they came back. The next stage was working as recruiters and teachers, while going on the occasional mission. He wondered how his family was doing, if June was still dating that history professor.

He was looking forward to going back, but part of him was also hesitant to leave.

He was afraid that things would begin to go back to the way they were. At least they still had five more months until they were back on Earth.

The trip back was similar to the trip to Titan. Shiro and Adam still raced on the treadmills, Sam still had more stories about his family, although he was starting to repeat some of them, and they celebrated Shiro’s birthday with the last packet of pudding cake.

Adam and Shiro would still share a bed some nights, but more frequently. Adam smiled every time he looked at the picture of the two of them.

Adam had become an expert at tic tac toe, beating Shiro pretty much every time, but Shiro would always beat him in arm wrestling. Adam had found him in the gym a lot during the past couple of months. Shiro claimed that it helped to fight off the boredom. Adam told him that it was cheating.

It was during their last week before getting back to Earth that things went wrong. Shiro had come out of the gym, his grin wide when he saw that Adam waiting for him, when his knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground. Adam hurried over to him, helping him get to his feet, but Shiro only fell down again, his limbs shaking.

“Sam!” Adam had called, looking at Shiro with panicked eyes. “Takashi, what’s wrong?”
“I’m fine,” Shiro said, moving to stand, but he only fell again.

“Stop moving!” Adam yelled. He could hear the panic in his voice. He turned to see Sam rushing through the door, looking at the scene with a serious gaze, like he was doing calculations in his head.

“I’ll grab the med kit!” he called a second later, rushing back out of the room.

“I told you I’m fine,” Shiro said through gritted teeth, his arms trembling as he tried to hold himself up.

“Takashi,” Adam began, his voice soft and vulnerable. Shiro’s hands turned into fists and he looked down at the ground.

“Stop looking at me like that!” Shiro yelled, and Adam pulled his hands back in surprise. Shiro made a frustrated noise and said nothing more. Then Sam came running in with the med kit and moved to kneel beside Shiro.

“Adam, check on the navigation system,” Sam instructed.

“But I already -” Adam began.

“Adam,” Sam said firmly, looking at him. Adam hesitated, and then he nodded his head and left the room, shutting the door behind him. He headed for the cockpit and went inside. He walked towards his chair, but then he decided to pace instead, alone with his thoughts.

What was going on? Was Shiro okay? Why was he acting like that?

Why did he push him away?

Sam came into the cockpit an hour later, sitting in Shiro’s seat.

“How is he?” Adam asked, trying to sound casual as he flicked another switch, continuing with the diagnostic that he was in the middle of running.

“He’s fine. He’s resting now,” Sam said, and Adam moved to stand. “He needs to rest, Adam,” he said firmly, and Adam sat back down reluctantly, getting the message.

“What happened?” Adam finally asked, turning on the next switch.

“He was pushing himself too hard, overexerting his muscles,” Sam explained, but Adam found it hard to believe that that was the whole story.

“But it was so sudden -”

“Sometimes it is,” Sam said. Adam sighed and slumped in his seat, pulling his hands away from the console. He could finish the diagnostic later.

“I had no idea what to do, I just - froze,” Adam said quietly. “He’s my flight partner and I -”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” Sam said, his gaze sympathetic. “There wasn’t much that you could do in that situation.”
Adam nodded, but he couldn’t find it in himself to believe him.

Three hours later Adam finally had the opportunity to check on Shiro, Sam having gone to his work station to review some of the data that he’d collected. He went to the living quarters and walked over to Shiro’s bed. The curtain was drawn.

“Takashi,” Adam said softly, his fingertips brushing the edge of the curtain. There was no response. “Please, talk to me.” Silence. Adam sighed and leaned against the wall next to Shiro’s bed. “We still can’t make things easier for ourselves, can we?” Adam asked, a dry smile on his face. Then his expression became serious. “Look, I probably know more than anyone how hard it can be to open up to someone, to let someone support you when you fall,” Adam cringed. “That wasn’t meant to be a joke, I just - it’s different with you, okay? I feel like I can share anything with you, and I want to be that person for you, too. I want to be someone that you can depend on, because, because I think that I -” Adam let out a noise of frustration and pulled the curtain open, but Shiro wasn’t there. Adam looked at the empty bed in surprise, and then with worry. Sam had told him to rest. He was supposed to be right here. Where could he have -?

Adam had an idea, and anger flared up in his chest.

Adam hurried to the training room and threw open the door. He saw Shiro sitting in the corner, lifting weights.

“What are you doing?” Adam asked, failing to keep the accusatory tone out of his voice. At least Shiro had the decency to look guilty.

“Adam, I -”

“No! You should be resting!” Adam said, looking at him in disbelief.

“I’m fine, really -”

“You collapsed!” Adam said. “How is that in any way fine?”

“I was just tired, I was pushing myself too hard -”

“Then why are you here?” Adam demanded, still standing in the doorway.

“Back off, Adam,” Shiro said, firmly. He was beginning to look annoyed. Adam’s eyes widened, hurt by Shiro’s tone, and then they narrowed. Shiro put down his weights and sighed, saying nothing. Adam shook his head angrily.

“I just don’t understand you sometimes.”

Shiro furrowed his brow in frustration, opening his mouth to say something, but then he looked at the floor, a pain in his eyes. “Is this -?” he stopped.

“Is this what?” Adam asked. Shiro looked up at him.
“Are we not - is this just like second year?” Shiro asked, his voice sounding close to breaking. Adam thought of those lonely months after his nightmare, of them not speaking, of the anger and distance and unspoken words. He looked at Shiro in surprise.

“Of course not,” Adam said. “I may be mad at you, but you’re not getting rid of me that easily. I promised you that I’m not going anywhere, remember?” Shiro opened his mouth to say something, but then he stopped, the corners of his mouth quirked up in a small smile. He looked relieved, relieved and exhausted. When Adam thought about it, Shiro looked tired most days these past few weeks. “Let’s go arm wrestle,” Adam finally said, deciding not to push the topic any further. “Maybe I have a better chance of beating you now.” He made his way out of the room, not looking back to see if Shiro was joining him. Shiro laughed and shook his head, getting up to follow him.

They ended up lying together in Adam’s bed, falling asleep as they held hands.

Today was the day that they were due to land. Sam was already very happy with the data that he had collected the past five months, and Adam could tell that he was itching to get to his lab and share what he had found with his team.

“Who knows what we could find on other moons?” Sam had told them, scrolling through his notes on his tablet enthusiastically. Adam was happy that the mission had been so successful.

He found Shiro in the cockpit, looking at the navigation system. He sat down and looked out the window. He could see Earth in front of him, and although they were able to spot Earth weeks ago, he knew that he was never going to get used to this view.

It was weird, seeing Earth from this perspective, thinking about how his home was only a tiny speck on this planet, which was only a tiny speck in this universe. It made him feel small, but it also made him think of the billions of lives that were taking place right before his eyes. Right now, people were being born, people were dying, people were falling in love and learning to walk and laughing.

They were all breathing, together. It was incredible, how precious life could be, how deeply it ran through the veins of this planet, his home. He was looking forward to being back, to breathing with these people once more, to living out his own story.

To living out his story with Shiro.

He snuck a glance at Shiro. His brow was furrowed in concentration as he pressed a few buttons on the console. Shiro must have felt his eyes on him because he lifted up his head to look at Adam.

“Looks like its time to begin our descent,” Shiro said. “Ready to go home?”

Adam smiled and faced forward in his chair. “I’ll do the systems check.”

“Okay, I’ll go tell Sam,” Shiro said, getting up from his chair. He began to head towards the door, but then he stopped and turned around, walking over to Adam’s chair. Adam was about to ask him what was wrong when Shiro pressed his lips to his temple. Then he pulled away and left the room. Adam leaned back in his chair, a grin spreading across his face as a warmth flared up in his cheeks.

A few minutes later Shiro came back, Sam right behind him. They took their seats, strapping themselves in. Shiro put his hands on the thrusters.
“Okay, everyone, time to go back to Earth.” He pushed forward on the thrusters and the ship began to angle downwards. Adam followed the ship’s predicted course on the screen in front of him.

“A little more to the left, Shiro,” Adam directed, and Shiro titled the thrusters slightly. They were beginning to pick up speed. They had to make sure that their trajectory was as precise as possible before the ship reached the Earth’s atmosphere. “Good. We’re heading towards the Garrison landing site,” Adam said. Shiro leaned back in his chair. The ship kept increasing its speed. Adam could feel it begin to shake as he leaned back in his seat as well.

“We’re approaching the Earth’s atmosphere,” Sam said. The ship shuddered more violently and Adam could feel the cockpit increasing in temperature. They watched as Earth came closer into view, and Adam was able to make out mountain ranges and bodies of water through the haze of the clouds.

Then the alarm system went off.

Adam leaned forward in his seat, checking the console in front of them.

“What was that?” Adam asked, seeing nothing that would indicate a problem. Then he heard Sam swear under his breath.

“There must be something wrong in the lab,” Sam said, releasing his straps and moving to stand. “I have to go check on the methane samples. If there was a leak -”

Sam didn’t have to finish his thought, Adam already knew what that meant, and he could tell by Shiro’s expression that he knew it as well.

Methane was a flammable compound. If enough of it was exposed to the air in the ship - the ship could explode.

“I’m coming with you,” Shiro said, getting up as well. He looked down at Adam. “Can you handle the landing by yourself?”

Adam scoffed. “Of course I can. Now go, Takashi. And keep me updated on the comms system.”

Shiro smiled and nodded, and then he and Sam hurried out of the room. It was only once the door closed that Adam let the worry show on his face. Shiro and Sam could handle this, he trusted them. But at the same time he couldn’t help but think of all of the things that could go wrong. A minute later he could hear Sam’s voice on the comms.

“It looks like the drill was knocked over. Something must have been dislodged due to the vibrations of the -” Sam said. “Here, Shiro, help me move these samples out of the way, that way we can -”

There was only silence for a few moments.

“Sam? Takashi?” Adam asked, his voice sounding more strident and insistent. He could see waves of heat radiating off of the hull. He gripped the thrusters tightly in his hands.

“We’re fine,” Sam said a moment later, and Adam tried not to sigh in relief. “There is a leak, but it should be fine if we just - watch out!” Adam almost jumped out of his seat, but he restrained himself. He was needed here. He had to stay.

“What’s going on?” Adam asked, his voice sounding more frantic than before.

“We’d managed to secure the drill,” Sam began to explain, but he sounded distracted. “But one of the straps holding it must have snapped. Shiro tried to hold it in place but -”
“But what? Is Shiro okay?”

“Shiro will be fine,” Sam assured him, but Adam didn’t like his use of the future tense.

“It’s okay, Adam. My arm just got pinned by the drill.” Adam visibly relaxed when he heard Shiro’s voice, but he could also tell by the tone of his voice that he was in pain, even though he was trying his best to sound calm. Again Adam had to resist the urge to go and help them. They were getting closer to Earth and they needed to get strapped into their seats before they broke through the atmosphere.

“I’m getting the drill off of him now,” Sam said, his voice strained. Adam could hear the sound of a struggle and equipment moving around. Then he saw the red light on the console begin to blink quickly.

“You need to get back in your seats now,” Adam said. “The ship’s speed is about to increase exponentially.”

“He’s almost free,” Sam said. “Move when I tell you to, okay? Okay, move!” The comms went silent and Adam heard a loud crash coming from deeper within the ship.

“I’m free,” Shiro said. “We’re heading back now.”

“Copy that,” Adam said. He could feel the sweat on his brow. He looked at the flashing red light. They were running out of time. A moment later Sam and Shiro rushed into the room and sat in their seats, strapping themselves back in.

“The labs are secure, we should be fine,” Sam said, sounding a little breathless. Adam glanced over at Shiro to check on him. He was holding on to his hand. Shiro noticed him looking at it.

“I’m fine, really,” Shiro said.

“We’ll have to take him to the infirmary once we land. A bone in his wrist might be broken, but it’s nothing too serious,” Sam explained. Adam hummed but said nothing. He should’ve gone back there to help.

“There was nothing that you could’ve done,” Shiro said firmly. Adam looked stubbornly at the window, but then he nodded his head. Shiro was right.

“Brace yourselves,” Adam said, pulling the thrusters forward. The ship went into a steep incline as they sped towards Earth. Adam could feel himself being pressed into the back of his chair, watching the scene before him in the window blur. The red light stopped blinking. He quickly pulled up on the thrusters and they began to slow down. He checked the navigation system and breathed a sigh of relief. “We’re still heading on the right course.”

The three of them watched as the desert came into view, getting closer with each passing second. Adam saw the wide pavement stretched before them, and the Garrison in the distance. He waited for the right moment and pressed a button to open up the hatch containing the wheels. Once he felt them touch down he pressed another button to release the parachute, feeling the ship slow down. A minute later it came to a complete stop, and Adam allowed himself to relax his shoulders.

“We’re home,” Shiro said, sounding like he almost didn’t believe it. Adam smiled and leaned his head against the chair, looking at the desert in front of him.

“We’re home,” Adam agreed.
“Before we do anything else we should take Shiro to the infirmary to get his wrist checked out,” Sam said, standing up from the chair and taking off his helmet.

“I can take him there, Sam. You go see your family,” Adam said. Sam had told them a few days ago that Colleen had promised that she and the kids would be in the viewing area when they got back. He knew how much Sam had missed them, how hard it was for him to be away. He didn’t want to deprive Sam of his reunion. He knew that Shiro didn’t either.

“But -” Sam began. Shiro moved to stand up as well, still holding on to his hand.

“Please, I can tell the doctors what happened.”

Sam hesitated, looking like he was going to argue, but then he nodded his head. “Thank you. It’s been a pleasure going on this mission with you men, I wouldn’t have wanted anyone else watching my back.”

“Same here,” Adam said. Sam smiled at them both and left the cockpit, most likely heading for the exit hatch to go to his family. Adam released his straps and stood up. Then he looked Shiro up and down, checking for any other injuries. Shiro smiled and rolled his eyes.

“I’m fine, Adam,” Shiro assured him. Adam crossed his arms.

“I can’t believe that you let a drill fall on you,” Adam said disapprovingly.

“I didn’t let it fall on me,” Shiro protested.

“Oh, I see, so it snuck up on you,” Adam said. Shiro opened his mouth, but then he narrowed his eyes. Adam smiled.

“Just take me to the infirmary, level ten,” Shiro said, trying to look serious. Adam laughed and together they made their way towards the exit hatch to go to his family. Adam released his straps and stood up. Then he looked Shiro up and down, checking for any other injuries. Shiro smiled and rolled his eyes.

Once they got to the Garrison they ran into Raj and Henry in the hallway.

“Hey! You’re back!” Henry said, hurrying up to them. Raj smiled. Then they noticed how Shiro was holding his hand.

“We were attacked by aliens,” Shiro said casually. “I have to go to the infirmary, but we’ll catch up later.” Adam forced himself not to laugh as they passed them, their eyes now wide with shock. Once they turned the corner in the hallway Adam gently bumped Shiro with his shoulder.

“Is that the story we’re going with?”

“How long do you think they’ll buy it?” Shiro asked. Adam grinned.

“I think we’re obligated to find out.” They arrived at the infirmary and went inside. It was pretty empty today, and one of the doctors came up to them.

“Ah, cadets, what do we have here?”

“Officer Holt says that it’s probably a broken bone,” Shiro said, gingerly lifting up his wrist for the
doctor to see. He hummed thoughtfully.

“We’ll have to take some x-rays, but it doesn’t look too serious. Come with me.”

“Thank you, Dr. Murphy,” Shiro said. Dr. Murphy walked further into the infirmary, and Shiro and Adam followed him. Dr Murphy stopped when he noticed Adam, however.

“I’m sorry, cadet, but we can’t let non-family members join the patient, it’s against the Garrison code of conduct.”

“Oh, right,” Adam said, taking a step back. “I’ll see you later, then.”

“I’ll find you after,” Shiro assured him, and Adam nodded his head appreciatively, looking at Shiro’s wrist one last time. He headed for the door and walked out of the infirmary, heading towards his room. Then he stopped in the middle of the hallway.

This was the first time in eleven months that he and Shiro had been more than ten feet apart. It was a weird feeling. He gave himself a moment, and then he continued down the hall once more. When he got to his room he noticed that Raj wasn’t there. He made himself a cup of tea and sat on the couch.

Then he waited.

Adam was beginning to wonder if Shiro had really promised that he would find Adam after, or if Adam had imagined it. It had been hours since he left the infirmary. His tea sat on the table by the couch, half-finished and cold. Adam was reading through the files that he had been given almost a year ago about the mission to Titan when he decided to stop by the infirmary. He stood up from the couch and left the room, heading down the hallway. He began to wonder what had been taking Shiro so long. He was beginning to wonder if he’d simply went straight to his room. But Shiro never made promises that he didn’t follow through on. He just wasn’t the type.

When he made it to the infirmary Dr. Murphy told him that Shiro had left about an hour ago. They had given him a cast for his arm. Sam had been right, he did break a bone in his wrist. It would heal in a few months. But Adam could tell from Dr. Murphy’s expression that there was more to the story. They were keeping something from him. He was tempted to push him for answers, but he decided against it. He needed to find Shiro - he would tell him what’s going on. He stopped by his and Henry’s room next, and Henry opened the door, looking at him in surprise.

“Are you looking for Raj?” Henry asked, stepping aside so that Adam could see Raj sitting on the couch, giving him a friendly smile. “We were just hanging out if you wanted to join us.”

Adam smiled politely. “I was actually wondering where Shiro was.”

Henry raised a brow and looked back at Raj, who shrugged his shoulders. “I haven’t seen him yet. I kind of assumed that he was with you.”

Adam furrowed his brow. So Shiro hadn’t stopped by his room yet. “Thanks, see you guys later.”

Henry nodded his head. “Welcome home, Adam. It’s good to have you too back.” Adam smiled appreciatively before walking down the hall. It was as he was rounding the corner that he realized that he had no idea where he was going. He stopped and tried to think.
Shiro wasn’t in the infirmary, or in his room. He couldn’t have taken a cruiser, there’s no way they would’ve let him fly with a cast on this arm - then Adam had an idea. He changed direction and walked down the hall, taking a left. Now statistically speaking it was probably highly unlikely that Shiro was actually there, but Adam had no other leads to go off of, so he took it. Besides, something in his heart was telling him that he was right. It was almost like there was a compass in his heart pointing him to true north - to Shiro.

When he was almost there he began to slow down, losing momentum. What if Shiro was avoiding him? What if he wanted to be alone? He didn’t want to barge in on Shiro’s private moment. Maybe he needed space.

“Adam?” He heard a voice from around the corner, and Adam walked forward to see Shiro turned to look at him, standing in front of the large window that looked out into the desert. He must’ve heard Adam’s footsteps. This part of the facility was quiet. The sun had just begun to set.

“Hey,” Adam said, shifting on the balls of his feet where he stood, at the opposite end of the hall. “Mind if I join you?”

Shiro smiled, and Adam took that as an invitation. He moved to stand next to him, and they both turned to face the window. He felt like he was fifteen again.

“I was going to stop by your room in a little while,” Shiro said. He sounded guilty.

“It’s okay if you needed some time alone, I understand,” Adam said. He laughed and nudged Shiro’s side, careful to stay away from his cast. It was black and stopped about halfway up his forearm. “You were bound to get sick of me at some point. I’m actually surprised that we managed to spend a year in space together without killing each other. I think we’re losing our touch.

Adam watched the corner of Shiro’s mouth quirk up. “It’s not that,” he said, his voice tired. Then he sighed and ran a restless hand through his hair. “We need to talk.”

Something sunk in Adam’s chest. If he was being honest he’d thought that this conversation might happen. What had happened in space - their kiss, the long glances, the way they held on to each other as they fell asleep - he feared that that kind of life was only going to exist in that space shuttle, that it had no place here at the Garrison, or anywhere else on Earth. He just didn’t realize that Shiro would want to end it the moment they got back. He dared to hope that they had more time.

“I get it, Shiro,” Adam said, putting up the walls around himself.

Shiro looked at him. “I don’t think that you do.”

Adam laughed bitterly. “It’s not like this is much of a surprise. We were alone in space, we were forced to be around each other all the time, it’s only natural that we wanted some attention -”

“What are you talking about?” Shiro asked. Adam looked at him in surprise. Was he really going to make him say it? Why was he doing this to him?

“I’m saying that it was - fun, that I understand that you want to stop - to forget about - we can go on as if it never happened. I’m okay with that.”

“Is that what you want?” Shiro asked, searching his eyes for something. Adam looked away, fists clenched at his sides.

“No,” Adam confessed. His voice small.
“It wasn’t just fun for me, Adam,” Shiro began. “I don’t want to forget about a single moment. I’d wanted to kiss you for so long -” Shiro paused, he looked pained. “None of that wasn’t real, okay?”

Adam stared at him, his cheeks beginning to feel warm. “Okay,” he said, nodding his head. He unclenched his fists.

Shiro sighed. “But it should stop - it needs to stop.”

Adam felt like he couldn’t breathe. He had no idea what was going on. It seemed like everything Shiro was saying contradicted itself. His feelings for Adam were real, and yet he wanted it to stop? Why?

“I - I don’t understand,” Adam managed to say. That pain was still in Shiro’s eyes. A flame of anger flared up in Adam’s chest. Why did he have to look so sad? He was the one who wanted to end - whatever this was. This was his choice.

“When I was in the infirmary, they ran some tests to take sure that none of the muscles and tendons in my arms were damaged along with the bone in my wrist,” Shiro explained, looking at his cast. “Both are fine, but -” Shiro stopped. Adam could see his frustration in the way he tensed his shoulders, the way he clenched his jaw. “My muscles, they’re going to get weaker. Maybe not now, maybe not in a few years, but they will.”

Adam furrowed his brow. “But why -?”

“Remember what I told you about my father?” Adam nodded his head. He remembered, even though that night in the cafeteria felt like a forever ago. Shiro had said something about his dad wanting to be an astronaut, and how it didn’t work out because of this disease.

Shiro saw Adam’s expression change and gave him a tired smile.

“It’s genetic. I always knew that there was a chance that I might have it, but I never got tested. I was afraid to. But now I know.”

“When will it -?”

“Most likely a little less than ten years from now, that’s what Dr. Murphy told me at least,” Shiro said. “I’ll be in a wheelchair by age thirty, and then I’ll only have a few years before my body can’t move at all. A few more years until I -”

“Stop,” Adam said, cutting him off. “I get it.” He tried to collect his thoughts, but he felt like the room was spinning around him. “Are they going to stop letting you go on missions?”

Shiro shook his head, and he looked relieved. “Not right now, at least. My body is still in peak physical condition. I still have time.” He looked away from Adam. “But that’s why we need to stay friends. We can’t - I can’t give you the rest of my life knowing that there’s not a lot of it left. That’s not fair to you.”

“That doesn’t matter to me,” Adam said firmly. “I just want you. I would be happy with anything, anything that you’re willing to give. None of it would be too little.”

Shiro smiled sadly. “I’m going to be the next person who leaves you, Adam.” Adam’s eyes widened, feeling like the air in his lungs had just been knocked out of him, but Shiro kept going. “You don’t understand what I would give to make that not true. But there’s one thing that I can do, and that’s this.”
Adam didn’t want to understand, but he did. Shiro wanted to make sure that they ended this before it got too serious, before they started - before they - he wanted to make sure that when their time ran out, it wouldn’t hurt Adam as much as it would if they were to continue this new hue of their relationship.

Shiro didn’t want Adam to lose him like he’d lost Casey. Adam didn’t want that either, god he didn’t want it. The thought of losing Shiro already felt like a ton of bricks were pressing on his chest, pushing him into the ground. He couldn’t imagine what it would feel like if he allowed his feelings to grow deeper. Maybe Shiro was right.

“Okay,” Adam finally said, nodding his head and adjusting his glasses. He could still feel the bricks on his chest. Then he straightened his back and looked at Shiro, narrowing his eyes. “You’re still my best friend, though. That’s non-negotiable.”

A wave of emotions flashed across Shiro’s eyes, and then he smiled. “I can live with that.” Adam could see how tired he was, like his body was weighed down by the news that he’d gotten today. Adam couldn’t blame him. He decided to make a silent promise right there.

No matter what, he would be there for Shiro. He wasn’t going to go through this alone.

“Maybe this is my chance to break all of your records,” Adam offered, and Shiro got him into a headlock with his free arm.

“In your dreams, level ten.”

Adam laughed as he tried to break free, and Shiro began to laugh as well. Then Adam realized something.

“Should I go back to calling you Shiro?” Adam asked, and Shiro was quiet, letting Adam go.

“That’s probably for the best,” Shiro said quietly, and Adam tried to mask his disappointment. Then it really was over. They were going to stay friends. At least it was something. And he was going to hold on to that something for as long as he could.

“Maybe I can call you by a cool new nickname?” Adam said, a smile spreading across his face as he leaned into Shiro. “Like space man, or fringe, or, what’s that name that Iverson likes to call you when he’s mad -?”

“This is not a fringe,” Shiro protested, gesturing to his hair and looking confused.

“Then what do you call this?” Adam said, tugging on the longer locks of his hair near the top of his head playfully, watching it fall into his eyes.

“It’s not a fringe!” Shiro argued, sounding exasperated.

“Whatever you say, level twelve,” Adam teased, beginning to walk down the hallway and back towards his room. He turned around when he noticed that Shiro wasn’t following. “Are you coming? I can make us some tea,” he paused, thinking for a moment. “We haven’t had that in a while, have we?” He’d almost forgotten that this was their first day back on Earth. He still needed to call his family.

Shiro looked back at the window, watching as the sun disappeared behind the desert mountains, and then he looked back at Adam, his mouth turned up in a soft smile. “Yeah, that sounds great.”

Something fluttered in Adam’s chest as he looked at him, silhouetted by the orange desert sky. But
he quickly squashed the feeling and continued down the hall, Shiro moving to catch up with him.

Friends. Best friends. He could do this.

Yeah. He could do this.

Chapter End Notes

This is a sloooooowwww burn my dudes, get comfortable

You can find me on tumblr @nobodys-pearls :)
Adam didn’t know how he felt about kids. He never had a younger sibling, and him and his fellow cadets were the youngest people at the Garrison, so he wasn’t used to being around them. And yet now he was expected to go around to schools in the area and recruit the next generation of pilots. It happened every five years. This would be the fourth class to participate in the SEP.

Kids were - unpredictable, complicated, loud. He pulled on the sleeves of his new gray uniform and took a second to collect himself. He’d been to Titan, he’d seen Saturn’s rings for himself, he’d broken flight records and helped progress the world of science and exploration, and he was only twenty years old. This was going to be simple compared to all of that.

He stepped into the room and the teacher turned to see him enter through the door, a smile on her face. He looked around the classroom and saw kids who were around fourteen look at him with wide, curious eyes. Some of them were whispering to each other, and one of them laughed at something his classmate said. Adam adjusted his glasses self-consciously.

“Please give a warm welcome to Lieutenant Adam Wadley. He’s a representative from the Garrison and wanted to speak with all of you today.” She looked at him expectently, and he moved to stand in front of the students, clearing his throat and trying to smile.

“Hello, everyone,” Adam began, hoping that that didn’t come off as stiff as it sounded in his ears. He could already tell that he was losing their attention. “Do you kids like space?” he asked. He was met with blank stares. He fought to urge to smack himself in the forehead. Nice Adam, you sound like you’re in one of those horrible old infomercials. The same two kids began to whisper and laugh about something. Iverson was going to be mad if Adam couldn’t find at least one promising student.

“I do!” a voice yelled from the front row, and Adam saw one of the boys lean forward in his seat, a wide grin on his face. He was waving his hand in the air excitedly. More of the students began to laugh. Adam felt was a rush of gratitude towards this small child. He nodded and stood up straighter.

“Well, at the Garrison, kids your age get the chance to learn more about our solar system, fly jets, and eventually -” he decided to pause for dramatic effect. “You get to see space for yourself.”

“Fly jets!” he heard one kid exclaim in the back. They all began to whisper excitedly.

“Children, be polite,” the teacher warned. The small kid with the wide grin raised his hand.

“Uh, yes? You have a question?” Adam said, looking at him.
“Have you been to space?” he asked, his blue eyes wide and curious.

Adam couldn’t hide the smugness in his tone. “Yes, I have. I just got back from Saturn’s moon, Titan, about nine months ago.”

“Really?”

“What was it like?”

“Did you fight aliens?”

“They wouldn’t fight aliens, stupid. They would become friends with them -”

“Quiet down now!” the teacher said, trying to get her class under control and looking at Adam apologetically. But he didn’t mind at all. In fact, a pleased smile spread across his face.

Sometimes he forgot what a cool job he had.

“Hey, um, sir?” a voice said, and Adam looked down to see that boy from the front row standing in front of him. He looked up and saw the teacher trying to get two particularly rowdy children under control in the back. Adam looked back down at the boy and smiled.

“You can call me Adam.”

“Oh, okay,” the boy said, nodding his head. “I just wanted to ask - what’s space like?”

Adam furrowed his brow, and then he knelt down, leaning in like he was about to tell a secret. “Space is - incredible.”

“But what is it like?” the boy urged. Adam leaned back, trying to come up with a response. What was space like? He forgot that kids always knew how to ask the tough questions. He wondered what Shiro would say in a situation like this. Then he knew his answer.

“How about you find out for yourself?” Adam said, and the boy looked at Adam like he had brought all the stars down to Earth just for him.

“I will!” he declared. Adam gave him a pleased nod and stood up to his full height.

“I didn’t just come to tell you all about space. I also have a surprise,” Adam said, and that got the students’ attention. “I brought a video game for you all to play.” The class erupted into cheers, and the teacher had a wavering smile on her face. Adam led them outside where he had already set up the simulation test. He looked at it for a moment, remembering when he was sitting in that chair five years ago. He’d just seen it as a game back then. Little did he know that this was the first step towards his future, to finding himself, to meeting Shiro.

When he and Shiro had both been given their own portable simulation tests a few weeks ago, they looked at each other and immediately knew what the other person was thinking. They each took a seat and tried to see who could get to the highest level. Adam had been on level twenty-five when Iverson had found out what they were doing and told them to get back to work.

“I’m still going to call you level ten,” Shiro had said, giving him a smug grin. He’d gotten to level twenty-six.

“I want to play first!” One of the louder kids in the back had declared, running up to sit in the seat. He got to level two before he crashed the ship into a meteor. His shoulders slumped as he got out of
the chair, moving aside for the next person to play. Adam watched them carefully. None of them had managed to get past level three. Iverson had told him that in order to qualify for the program they had to get past level five. Then he noticed that small boy standing in the back, a look of concentration on his face. Adam walked over to him.

“Are you going to play?”

The boy nodded his head. “Yes. But I want to see what other people do first.”

Adam looked at him in surprise, watching as this boy’s eyes flicked across the screen, taking in the patterns and formats of each level. He never thought to do that. Adam hadn’t really taken this whole thing seriously at all. He’d pretty much got into the Garrison on pure luck and ability, and probably because they knew that he was Casey’s younger brother. But this kid was smart. He wanted this, Adam could tell. Soon enough it was his turn, and he watched as the boy sat in the chair, his feet not touching the floor as he grasped the thrusters. His lips were pouted in concentration. Adam watched as he passed the first level with moderate ease, then the second level, then the third. The fourth level was when he began to have some trouble. No one had gotten that far, so he didn’t know what to expect. He managed to get through it, much to the astonishment of his classmates. They began to cheer him on. A smug smile spread across his face as he started the fifth level.

He wasn’t a natural flier, Adam could tell that much. But he was determined to win regardless. He just barely flew out of the way of a meteor and completed the fifth level, the words “level five” flashing in front of him. Then he began the sixth level, but quickly got taken out by a cluster of unpredictable meteors.

Level five, that’s what Iverson had said. This kid passed. Adam watched as he got out of the chair, flashing a smile at some of the female students nearby. They rolled their eyes and began to giggle about something.

“Hey,” Adam said, walking over to kneel in front of him once more. He was the last one to have a turn at the simulation, so the teacher gathered her children into a line, getting them ready to head back to class. “You did a great job. What’s your name?”

“The name’s Lance,” the boy said proudly. Adam could tell that he was basking in the attention, his classmates looking at the two of them with interest. But Adam also saw something else there. His shoulders were slumped slightly. His grin looked a little strained. He almost looked - disappointed. Adam looked at him in curiosity - he had wanted to go even farther. Adam found himself wanting to see that, too.

“Well, Lance,” Adam said, pulling out a card from his front shirt pocket of his uniform. “I know that the Garrison would love to see what else you can do, me included. Ask your guardian if you can stop by tomorrow at 0800, okay?”

Lance took the card from Adam and looked at it with wide eyes. Then he grinned and looked up at Adam, throwing his arms around Adam’s neck. “Okay!”

Adam knelt there in shock for a moment, and then he patted Lance’s back, a soft smile on his face. “I think your class is waiting for you.”

Lance pulled away and hurried over to his teacher, but then he stopped halfway there, turning to look back at Adam. “I’m going to space!”

Adam smiled and waved, watching him and his classmates leave. Some of them began to crowd
around Lance, looking over his shoulder to see what Adam had given him.

Adam still didn’t know how he felt about kids, but he knew that he was going to have a soft spot for Lance. There was something special about him.

He packed up the simulation and got into his car, driving back to the Garrison. He wondered how Shiro’s recruiting went.

“He stole your car?” Adam asked loudly, leaning against his cruiser as he began to laugh.

Shiro smiled sheepishly and looked out at the desert. They had decided that morning to meet up at the Red Lion once they were done visiting schools. “One second he was on level nine of the simulation, and the next he was driving away.”

Adam laughed and shook his head. “I need to become best friends with this kid.”

Shiro smiled. “Well, I invited him to come tomorrow morning.”

“Wait, you chose him, even after he stole your car and your dignity?”

Shiro nudged Adam in the shoulder. “He did not steal my dignity. And you should’ve seen him. He probably could’ve gotten to level twenty if he wanted to.”

“Wow,” Adam said, impressed. “This kid must be something else.”

Shiro nodded his head, and Adam could feel the mood shift. “His teacher told me that he’s in foster care, that he’s never really fit in with the other students.”

Adam watched Shiro for a moment, and saw the soft smile on his face. He knew how much this would mean for him, to become a mentor to someone who’s experienced the same hardships that he has, to show this kid the same world that he got to grow up in. To give him the stars.

“He’s like a younger, cooler version of you,” Adam mused, looking out at the desert wistfully. He yelled in surprise as Shiro got him in a headlock, messing up his hair.

“He’s not cooler than me,” Shiro protested. Adam laughed.

“You drink tea and just took up knitting,” Adam pointed out. Shiro pouted and let go of him, crossing his arms.

“Some people think that’s very cool.”

Adam scoffed. “Maybe people over seventy.” Then he bumped Shiro playfully. “I think your cool.”

Shiro rolled his eyes. “Thanks.” He uncrossed his arms. “Now tell me about the kid you found.”

“I guess he’s kind of the opposite of your kid, actually,” Adam mused. “He only managed to pass level five, but you should’ve seen the fire in his eyes. He’ll be a hard worker, I can tell you that much.”

Shiro nodded his head. Then he sighed. “I can’t believe that we’re going to help teach these kids. I
feel like we just graduated ourselves.”

“I mean, technically we did only a few months ago,” Adam pointed out. It was mostly symbolic, they really graduated the course once they were ready to fly to Titan, but the official graduation had taken place while they were gone, so they didn’t get their diplomas until they got back. And now there were the only ones from their class on Earth to teach the new cadets. April and Hannah were already on their way to Enceladus by the time Adam and Shiro got back, and Henry and Raj were assigned a mission to Europa about two months later. Their hall had gotten lonely. Shiro and Adam still had their own rooms, but they found themselves spending most of their free time in the same room together. They didn’t share a bed though. The last time they did that was on the spaceship, before they had decided to remain friends.

“I have a good feeling about these cadets,” Shiro mused. There was a light in his eyes. “I think they’re going to do some big things.”

“I just can’t wait to be in charge for a change,” Adam said. “I’m going to pull out all of the classic Iverson lines.” He cleared his throat and squinted one of his eyes. “Mistakes won’t be tolerated, it’s like you’ve never flown a jet before, go clean the cafeteria, I haven’t had my coffee this morning, mah.”

Shiro clutched his sides, doubled over in laughter. Adam began to laugh as well. A minute later Shiro straightened up, a grin still on his face. “It’s hard to believe that we’re twenty now.”

Adam crossed his arms. “I’ve decided that I’m not growing up.”

Shiro looked at him for a moment, and then he nodded his head, rubbing his wrist absentmindedly. “Same here.”

Adam watched him carefully, knowing what Shiro was thinking. He felt to urge to reach out and hold his hand, but he stopped himself. He wasn’t sure if that’s what a best friend would do.

Shiro was different ever since they got back from Titan, ever since Dr. Murphy gave him the news. It was subtle, but every once in a while Shiro would get this faraway look in his eye, and Adam was never quite sure how to get him back, how to keep him here. He wasn’t sure if it was his place to even try. He pushed himself off of the crusier’s side and took a few steps forward, looking out at nowhere. He could feel Shiro’s eyes on him.

“Shiro, how important am I to you?” He said the words without thinking, but once he said them he realized that they had been at the back of his mind for a while now. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for, what answer he wanted Shiro to give, he just waited for Shiro to respond.

“What do you mean?”

Adam smiled and looked down, ignoring the stab of disappointment. “Sorry, forget I said anything. I don’t know what I -”

“You’re more important to me than you think, Adam, I can promise you that,” Shiro interrupted, and Adam quickly turned to look at him, and he noticed that Shiro wasn’t holding his wrist anymore. “It scares me, sometimes, how important you are.”

Adam stared at him for a moment, feeling something swell in this chest that he quickly needed to press down, and then walked over to bump Shiro’s shoulder before pulling on his helmet and hopping onto his cruiser. “I know what your new nickname is.”

Shiro stared blankly for a moment, and then he rolled his eyes, a smirk tugging at his lips.
“Anything is better than 'fringe’.”

“I’m going to call you Atlas,” Adam declared. Shiro smiled, a confused look on his face.

“Why Atlas?” Shiro asked, crossing his arms.

“Because you always look like you’re carrying the world on your shoulders - it’s annoying,” Adam said. “But it does have one advantage.”

“And what’s that?”

Adam grinned and revved the engine. “While you’re so busy holding up the world, I’m going to beat all of your records.” With that he sped off. He could hear Shiro’s yelling behind him. He smiled wider as he pushed forward on the thrusters, heading back to the Garrison. He was leaning against his cruiser when Shiro eventually made it back, a pout on his face.

“That race didn’t count, you had a major head start.”

Adam shrugged and put down his helmet. “I’ll break those records one day.”

“How can you be so sure?” Shiro challenged. Adam grinned and put a hand on Shiro’s shoulder.

“There’s this saying I like to live by, maybe you’ve heard of it,” Adam began. “Patience yields focus.”

Shiro laughed and brushed Adam’s hand off of him. “I think I’ve heard that one before, a long time ago.”

“It’s good advice,” Adam said.

“It really is.”

Adam wiped a cloth across the window, looking at the streak that he created by clearing the dust away. He created another streak, and kept going until the entire window was clean and he could look out at the night sky. He set the cloth down on the table and kneeled on the couch that was pressed against the wall right below the window, resting his elbows on the back of it and leaning forward so that he could continue to look at the stars.

He came back to the cabin two days after they returned to the Garrison from Titan. It was even dustier than it was when Adam first came inside years ago, and the ceiling was beginning to sag from the heat. Part of Adam hoped that the family who lived here had returned while Adam was in space, and yet it seemed like Adam was the only person who’d been inside this place for a long time. The cabin was sick and dying, abandoned, but Adam refused to let it fall apart. This place was special to someone - to a family. There were probably important memories made here. He hated to see it go.

Besides, it was nice to feel like he had control over something. Adjusting back to Earth hadn’t been easy. He forgot what it was like to eat real food, his bed was so comfortable that he couldn’t sleep, his room was empty and he had too much space to himself that he didn’t know what to do with it. The hardest part was learning to be alone again. Being in space he and Shiro did almost everything together, but now they didn’t have to. They had to learn how to be independent again, and after
their conversation about staying friends Adam was nervous about demanding too much of Shiro’s time. He didn’t want Shiro to think that he wasn’t respecting their agreement, that he still had those feelings.

So fixing this cabin was the perfect solution. It got to the point where he would come here every day. Since they graduated the program they could use the cruisers for more than an hour, so Adam could stay out here as long as he wanted. But he never slept here, he felt like that would be wrong. He was simply a visitor.

The stars were bright tonight, brighter than they were back at the Garrison. Here the desert was dark and quiet. He could see the silhouettes of the larger rocks in the distance. He moved to sit on the couch, facing the empty wall in front of him. The only light from the cabin came from the small electrical lamp that Adam had brought. It covered the room in a soft glow. He looked over at the side table and saw the picture of the father and his son. He found himself looking at the picture a lot. They looked so happy. It reminded him of home.

He got to his feet and grabbed the broom that he’d rested against the couch, then grabbed the lamp. He made his way into the kitchen, and began to sweep the floor with what little light he had. He made a mental note to check on the ceiling tomorrow afternoon. He’d been able to fix the support beams and added a new coat of drywall two days ago. He had a good feeling that it would hold, but it was always safe to keep an eye on it.

For months Shiro had been asking Adam where he went off to every day, but Adam had decided to keep it a secret. Although it was lonely at first, Adam had come to look forward to this time to himself. He also enjoyed coming up with elaborate excuses as to where he was - it drove Shiro crazy. At this point Shiro was convinced that Adam was living a secret double life as a superhero. Last month Shiro’s theory was that he was an alien who had abducted the real Adam back on Titan.

Adam finished sweeping the floor and grabbed the can of oil that he’d brought along with him, pouring a small amount of it on the hinges of the front door. It had gotten pretty sticky the last week. Once he was done with that he stood up and put his hands on his hips, admiring his work. The place looked clean, almost lived in. He didn’t change anything about the place, the cabin didn’t belong to him after all, but he was trying to preserve the memory of what it was, and he felt comfortable in saying that he was doing just that. He grabbed his supplies and went outside, putting his stuff in the compartment of the cruiser and then putting on his helmet.

His mind drifted back to the evaluations that morning. He was able to see Lance and give him a high-five in the hall, but then Iverson made him and Shiro do paperwork on the other side of the facility - he didn’t want them looking in on the evaluations. Iverson liked to make most of the decisions on his own. He wondered what these kids would be like. He already knew that Lance was the kind of kid who had a lot to prove. Would the rest of them be like him? Or would they be like the student that Shiro recruited, talented but temperamental? Or would each of them be their own special case? He found that intimidating. How was he expected to mentor these kids when he still felt like a kid himself? Maybe Shiro could do most of the work, he was always better at this kind of stuff. He did way better in the preliminary teaching and recruiting courses that they had to take.

Shiro could take the lead on this one. The kids would love him.
When Adam hopped off the cruiser back at the Garrison he found that Shiro was waiting for him.

“So where did you fly off to?” Shiro asked, falling into step with Adam as Adam took off his helmet and weaved between the jets, heading for the hallway. They were expected to be in Iverson’s office in five minutes.

“I found an underground cave system that was full of weird symbols. The people there welcomed as their own and gave me magic powers,” Adam said with a shrug, opening the door into the hallway and taking the first left. Shiro scoffed and shook his head.

“You’re unbelievable,” Shiro said.

“That’s what they said about me too. They also mentioned how effortlessly handsome I was. I think that’s how I managed to gain their trust.”

Shiro laughed and gave him a gentle shove. Adam simply smiled. They reached Iverson’s office with a minute to spare and Shiro knocked.

“Come in, Lieutenants,” Iverson said through the door. Shiro opened the door and they stepped inside. Iverson was sitting at his desk with a serious expression, looking through the thick stack of files in his hands. Then he lifted his chin to look at them, glancing at his watch. “You’re right on time. Try to be early next time.”

Shiro and Adam shared a look before sitting in the two seats across from Iverson. They knew that Iverson had a soft spot for them - even if he’d never admit it. Iverson cleaned his throat and leaned forward in his seat, laying the files in front of him. Adam looked down and saw that they were the files on the new candidates for the SEP. He wondered how Iverson had managed to collect so much information on them already. They had just shown up to the Garrison for their evaluations that morning. Then Adam realized that Iverson probably had a file on him since he was fifteen, maybe even before then.

“I’ve asked the two of you here so that I can go over my selections for this year’s recruits,” Iverson began, rifling through the files until he pulled out one in particular. He opened the file and laid it in front of him for Adam and Shiro to see. Adam leaned over in his seat and saw the nervous smile of a boy with an orange headband tied around his forehead. Adam tried to remember if he met this boy during his school visits, but he couldn’t recognize the face. By Shiro’s expression he didn’t seem to know him either. “Hunk Garret, fourteen,” Iverson said. “I was given a glowing recommendation from a trusted colleague of mine. During evaluations he wasn’t the most - enthusiastic - cadet, but he’s extremely intelligent. He already knows the ins and outs of most of the mechanical systems in our jets, and he has shown a natural talent for team building and cooperation. He could make a fine engineer, and as you know we are in need of those.”

Adam and Shiro nodded their heads in understanding. April and Raj had become their group’s primary engineers, and now they were both gone. Iverson had explained to them earlier that with this next generation of pilots they were trying to diversify their skill sets in order to make more well-rounded, specialized teams. For Adam and Shiro they had been expected to know everything, they didn’t have a specific role, which worked for them, but the Garrison was beginning to understand how that might not be practical in the long-run. People needed to feel like they had a role to fill. Adam watched as Iverson set that file to the side and pulled out another one.

“Violet Park, fourteen,” Iverson continued. Adam looked at the picture of a girl with dark black hair pulled into two braids, a confident glint in her eye. He remembered April telling the team about how she came from a family of space explorers. It was something that she and Adam had in common, except for April it was her entire family, extended family included. The Parks were well-
known in the space flight community. “Although she is April’s cousin, she proved her own merit during evaluations. She is a skilled flier, although she tends to overthink her decisions, and I am confident that she will live up to her family’s legacy.”

Shiro smiled, and Adam could tell what he was thinking, because he was thinking the same thing - they couldn’t wait to tell Violet embarrassing stories about April. Adam looked down at his lap - he missed his teammates. At least he had Shiro.

“Ina Leifsdottir, thirteen,” Iverson said. Adam looked up in surprise - the Garrison didn’t usually take people so young. Iverson saw his expression. “She is young, but her analytical mind is way beyond her years, possibly beyond the ability of most of our current scientists. She is a technical thinker and flier, so the two of you might need to work on refining her interpersonal skills in a team-based and partner-based setting, but I don’t doubt your capability to do so.” He paused as he looked between the two of them, “you did have to learn the hard way, after all, and look at you now.” Adam knew that he was teasing them, but he still had to restrain himself from pouting. He saw the glint in Iverson’s eye before he moved on to the next file. He looked at the file for a moment. “Now I’m not so sure about this one,” he said, placing the file in front of him. Adam saw the wide grin and immediately knew who it was. “Lance McClain, fourteen. He did pass the simulation test, but his skills as a pilot are - clumsy, at best. His performance is inconsistent, even though he did work harder than the rest of the candidates.” He looked at Adam. “If I’m being honest, I probably wouldn’t see him as a worthwhile candidate if you didn’t have so much faith in him. I’m still not convinced that he has what it takes.”

Adam sat up straighter. “Respectfully, Commander, I have to disagree. I could give you many reasons as to why Lance is a perfect candidate for this program, but I don’t think that I need to - Lance will show you himself.” Iverson lifted an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching up in amusement.

“I look forwarding to seeing what you see, Lieutenant,” Iverson said. Then he continued to go over the files, offering his short evaluations on the candidates that he had chosen. Some of them were students that Shiro recommended, some of them were students Adam recommended, and some had been invited based on outside recommendations from Iverson’s closest and most respected peers. Iverson sighed before he opened the last one. They had been in his office for an hour, it was exhausting work, but at least it was almost over. And he had a feeling that he knew who this last candidate was - he noticed the way Shiro sat up straighter in his chair, anticipation obvious in his expression.

“In my opinion this candidate has the most potential,” Iverson said. “He’s an excellent flier, has good leadership skills, and has the potential to handle some of our more difficult missions.” Adam watched as Iverson laid out of the file in front of him. The boy in the picture had brown hair, dark eyes, and a no-nonsense expression. Adam found himself leaning closer to have a better look at the picture - this didn’t look like someone who would steal a car, but he guessed he didn’t know what that would look like. Then he glanced over at Shiro and saw his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “James Griffin, fifteen,” Iverson announced. “I’m surprised that we hadn’t heard of him sooner.”

“Commander,” Shiro said, lifting his head up to look at him. “What about the student that I had at the top of my list? Wasn’t he the one who broke the flying record during evaluations?” Iverson had a sour look on his face. Adam and Shiro might not have been able to watch the evaluations, but they had heard the buzz around the Garrison about the kid who beat Shiro’s record of fastest flying time in a training jet. That was the kid that Shiro had told Adam about - Keith. “Keith Kogane,” Iverson grumbled, crossing his arms. “I will admit that he was the best flier out there, best by far, but his lack of respect for his commanding officers, his lack of interest in his fellow peers, I cannot allow someone like that to join the program. He won’t go far with an attitude like that.”
“Sir, please give him a chance,” Shiro urged, leaning forward in his seat. “He’s got what it takes, I know he does.”

“It’s not good for a teacher to show favoritism, Shirogane,” Iverson warned.

“This isn’t me showing favoritism, Commander, this is me seeing talent in someone, in someone who doesn’t have anyone else to speak on his behalf, just like you did for me.” Shiro paused and took a breath. “If it wasn’t for you I wouldn’t be in this program. I know the other officers thought that I was too much of a risk, but you saw something in me, just like I see something in Keith.” Iverson crossed his arms and looked at Shiro, saying nothing. “I’ll take full responsibility for him,” Shiro continued. “If he doesn’t prove himself to you, then it’s on me. You can even kick me out of the program.”

Adam looked at Shiro with wide eyes. What was he doing? Why was he taking such a risk on a kid he barely knew?

Iverson kept looking at him for a few moments, and then he clasped his hands on the desk in front of him, leaning forward. “Are you serious about this?”

“Yes I am, sir,” Shiro said without hesitation. Iverson nodded his head.

“Okay, then I will let him into the program.” Iverson looked at Adam. “Soon you may be the only Lieutenant left at the Garrison. You may have to teach these cadets on your own.” Adam looked at him and said nothing. What was he supposed to say? “You two are dismissed,” Iverson finally said, picking up the files and putting them in his drawer. “I will notify their guardians and the new cadets will be coming in three months - I hope that you both are ready.”

“We are, Commander,” Adam finally said, and Iverson nodded his head once. Shiro and Adam stood up and made their way out of Iverson’s office, closing the door behind them. Once they were out in the hallway Adam smacked Shiro’s shoulder.

“What was that about?” Adam hissed, watching as one of the science officers walked past them, immersed in the notes on her tablet. Shiro rubbed his arm.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re risking your entire career, your dreams, the rest of your life, on some moody kid who stole your car?”

“He’s worth it, Adam,” Shiro said firmly.

“Why?” Adam asked.

Shiro smirked. “It’s your fault, really.”

Adam crossed his arms and rolled his eyes. “How is this my fault?”

“Because of you I know what it means not to give up on someone, even when things get hard, so I’m not going to give up on Keith.”

Adam’s eyes widened as he looked at Shiro’s soft expression, and then he quickly looked away. “You’re making it hard not to love you,” he muttered under his breath.

“Are you making fun of me, level ten?” Shiro asked with a grin, crossing his arms. Adam smirked and tugged on the top of Shiro’s hair. Adam was now an inch or two taller than him.
“Of course I am, let’s go eat something.”

“Great, you can tell me about that cave system you found,” Shiro teased, bumping Adam’s shoulder with his own.

“Well first I came across some mysterious marking that looked like a tea kettle, so of course I had to explore further -”

Shiro laughed. “Tea, your greatest weakness.” Adam smiled and continued his story, Shiro playing along as they made their way to Adam’s apartment.

In two weeks Adam was going to get to see his family for a little while, and then he and Shiro had the rest of the summer to get ready for the new cadets to arrive. He was looking forward to this summer, this summer on Earth.

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on tumblr @nobodys-pearls :)
Age Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

Sorry that it's been a while since I last updated, had a lot of school stuff to do. But I hope that you like this chapter! It's pretty long! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Today we’ll be going over flight formations,” Shiro said, back straight as he looked at the line of cadets in front of him. “I hope that you all studied.”

Adam tried not to laugh, and he saw Shiro shoot him a glare, a slight pout on his face. But Adam couldn’t help it - he always thought it was funny when Shiro tried to act intimidating in front of the fifteen year olds. Adam composed his expression and looked out at the cadets. Lance was fidgeting with the hem of his uniform, but he looked confident enough. And he should be. When Adam had told the cadets that they could stop by his office if they needed help, he wasn’t sure if anyone would actually come. But Lance did - three times this past week, going over flight formations. He probably knew them better than Adam had when he was Lance’s age.

“Yes, Hunk?” Shiro asked. Adam’s attention shifted to the boy with the orange headband.

“I, uh, actually don’t feel very good right now. Can I just tell you the formation, or, or maybe I could draw...”

Shiro smiled. “Get in the jet, Hunk. You’ll be fine.” Hunk slumped his shoulders. Adam looked at the rest of the cadets - they all looked excited, eager. Adam had caught on by now that they all wanted to impress Shiro, they all thought that he was the coolest person in the Garrison. Adam tried not to be too offended by that, but he couldn’t blame them. Shiro was pretty cool. Then he noticed that one cadet didn’t look all that enthusiastic. If anything he looked bored.

Iverson came into the room and stood beside Shiro and Adam. “Everyone get into your assigned training jet. It’s time to start.” The cadets gave a salute and headed to their jets. Usually they would be chatting and pushing each other around on the way there, but whenever Iverson was watching they knew to do things quickly and efficiently. They definitely caught on faster than Shiro and Adam had. Then Adam noticed Shiro walk up to Keith’s jet, and they began to talk about something. Keith still had that bored expression on his face, and his brow furrowed. Then Shiro put his hand on his shoulder and said something, and Keith finally nodded his head, putting on his helmet and strapping himself in. Shiro came back to stand beside Adam.

“Okay cadets,” Iverson said over the communicator that he was holding in his hand. “Begin to hover, and then place yourselves in the formation that I call out. Mistakes will not be tolerated.” The jets began to hover in the air, and Iverson began to bark out commands, walking a few feet away from Shiro and Adam so that he could get a good view of the cadets. They seemed to be pulling it off.

“So what was that about?” Adam said quietly, looking at Keith’s jet. He seemed to know every formation - although he was taking some creative license getting to each spot.

“Careful, Kogane, and faster reflexes McClain,” Iverson said when Keith sped past Lance’s jet,
Lance barely managing to make room for him to get by. Adam knew that Lance wasn’t going to like that. Keith was a variable that Lance could never study for, and it frustrated Lance to no end. Adam had heard him complain about it quite a few times during their study sessions in his office.

“Keith isn’t very - patient,” Shiro began to explain, still watching the jets fly through the air. “He hasn’t really been challenged yet, and I think it’s been putting him on edge.” Shiro sighed. “I also don’t think that he’s getting along well with his fellow cadets. I’m not sure if he wants to get along with them.”

Adam furrowed his brow. “Teen angst,” he finally said, nodding his head sagely. Shiro laughed and bumped him with his shoulder. Iverson shot them a look and they straightened up, focusing back on the formation training. “But seriously,” Adam said a few minutes later. “He’ll figure it out, just like we did. And he’s got one thing that we didn’t have.”

“What’s that?” Shiro asked, turning to look at him. Adam smiled and kept watching the jets.

“He has you, looking out for him.”

Shiro said nothing, but Adam could see a small smile on his lips out of the corner of his eye. Shiro turned back and they continued to watch the rest of formation practice.

“Can we go over formation thirty-six again?” Lance asked, walking into Adam’s office and throwing his bag on the couch, opening it up and pulling out his notebook. Adam looked up from the papers on his desk in surprise. Then he smiled.

“You were great out there Lance. I’m not sure if you need to study them anymore.”

Lance groaned and opened his notebook, laying it on the desk. “I’m not so sure that Commander Iverson would agree.”

Adam winced and remembered when Iverson yelled at Lance for getting in the wrong spot for formation thirty-six. But that was only because -

“It’s all Keith’s fault!” Lance yelled, throwing his hands in the air. “He kept taking my spots, and then I got confused and couldn’t remember where his spot was -”

“Hey, it’s alright,” Adam said, and Lance sighed and slumped his shoulders.

“I just don’t want to be as bad as Iverson expects me to be,” Lance confessed. Adam looked at him in surprise.

“What makes you say that Iverson thinks you’re going to do badly?”

Lance gave Adam a dry look. “Come on, it’s obvious. You’ve seen how hard he is on me. It’s like everything I do is wrong.”

Adam leaned back in his chair. “Believe me, if Iverson is being hard on you, it means that he sees something in you worth developing. He’s trying to bring it out of you.”

“Bring what out of me? Sounds gross,” Lance said, scrunching up his nose.

Adam leaned forward and clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. “The greatness that I
already know you have,” he said, gesturing to Lance’s chest. Lance looked down and then looked back up at Adam, his eyes slightly wider than before.

“How can you be so sure?” Lance asked, uncertainty in the furrow of his brow.

“Come on, Shiro is my best friend. I’m used to seeing greatness every day. It’s actually kind of annoying,” Adam said, rolling his eyes. Lance laughed.

“You’re right, Shiro is really awesome,” Lance agreed. “But I think you’re cooler than Shiro.”

Adam’s surprised eyes quickly softened, touched by Lance’s words. “Thanks, Lance.” Then he took the stack of papers in front of him and moved them to his desk drawer, putting them out of the way. “Since you’re here, I’ve been meaning to ask - how are you getting along with the other cadets? Besides Keith?” Adam had noticed that whenever he saw Lance he was alone.

Lance pulled on the hem of his shirt and looked away. “Well, I thought that I would become friends with my roommate when I got here, but it’s Keith so obviously that didn’t turn out the way that I expected it to. James can be kind of intense, and I don’t think that he likes me all that much. Ina is nice and super smart but I can’t understand what she’s saying most of the time. The rest of them are, nice, I guess. I don’t know,” Lance said, furrowing his brow. “I guess I’m not sure where exactly I fit in. They’ve all got their own special thing going on.”

“What about Hunk?” Adam asked. He always ran into Hunk in the kitchen, asking the staff what they were making and offering his own advice. The staff seemed to like him, and Adam had noticed that the food tasted a little more flavorful lately. He could tell that Hunk was a good kid.

Lance’ eyes lit up. “Hunk is cool! He’s really nice, even though he throws up in his jet a lot. And he makes the rest of us cookies sometimes. We like some of the same movies too!”

“Then why don’t you spend more time with him?” Adam asked. Lance looked thoughtful. “But I need to work on my formations -”

“Lance,” Adam stopped him. “Yes, you are here to become a pilot, but you’re also only fifteen. Make the most of your time here, and of your time as a kid.”

“I’m not a kid,” Lance protested, pouting. Adam smiled.

“You’re right, but you should still talk to Hunk. I wouldn’t have been able to get through my years of training without Shiro and my other friends. Learning about them helped me to learn more about myself, and it made this program - actually kind of fun.”

“You and Shiro really are best friends?” Lance asked. Adam nodded his head.

“Never underestimate the power of a best friend, Lance. And these years of your life are important, don’t waste them all studying here with me.”

Lance nodded his head, and Adam could tell that he understood. “Can I still come by here sometimes though? To study?”

“Of course. Anytime.”

Then Lance became shy and looked at his lap. “Can I come by to not study too?”

Adam laughed. “I would love that.” Lance looked up at him and smiled. Then he grabbed his
notebook and stuffed it back into his backpack.

“You were right - I do know all of these formations. I’m going to go find Hunk!” With that he waved goodbye and hurried out the door. Adam laughed and shook his head. He was happy for Lance. There were so many good things ahead of him. Adam couldn’t wait to see them all happen.

“I think that Iverson is punishing me for inviting Keith to the Garrison.”

“Oh he totally is,” Adam said, leaning against the doorframe to the kitchen as he watched Shiro clean dishes. Earlier that day Iverson had come up to Shiro, eye twitching, and told him that the papers he submitted were mislabeled, and that he had to clean the kitchen as a punishment. Shiro and Adam later learned that Keith had gotten into a heated argument with James during their flight training that day. Adam doubted that that was a coincidence.

Shiro sighed and put down the plate he was drying, turning to face Adam. Adam could see the small grin on his face as he crossed his arms and said, “So you’re not going to help me? This is kind of something that we do together.”

Adam laughed and shook his head. “Sorry Shiro, but Iverson specifically told me not to help you. I labeled all of my papers correctly.”

Shiro groaned and turned back towards the sink, grabbing another plate and running water over it. “I did label them correctly,” he mumbled to himself as he scrubs it a little more aggressively than necessary.

“I heard that Keith almost broke another one of your records today,” Adam said. Shiro smiled. “Almost. He still has a lot of work to do before he can replace me.” Adam shifted on the doorframe. He didn’t like how Shiro said the word ‘replace’.

“Hey, I’m your rival remember? You should be more worried about me.”

“Oh,” Shiro said, furrowing his brow as he stopped what he was doing. Adam looked at him in confusion.

“What do you mean, ‘oh’?” Adam asked.

Shiro shrugged and went back to his dishwashing. “I forgot that we were rivals.” Adam could hear the teasing edge in his voice and rolled his eyes.

“What, fringe.”

Shiro stuck out his tongue. “Level ten.”

Adam laughed and went to stand beside Shiro, grabbing one of the plates and beginning to wash it off. Shiro looked at him, brow raised.

“Iverson doesn’t need to know,” Adam said like he was sharing a secret, and Shiro smiled and grabbed another plate as well. “So what do you think of Lance?” he asked a few moments later, setting the plate aside for Shiro to dry it.

“He has a lot of energy,” Shiro mused. Adam rolled his eyes. “What?” Shiro asked defensively.
Adam adjusted his glasses and looked down at the sink, which was still full of soap and dishes.

“Can I say something honestly?” Adam asked. Shiro furrowed his brow in confusion.

“I mean, I would prefer that, yes.”

Adam sighed and held a dish in his hands. “Don’t you think that you’re, I don’t know, playing favorites with the cadets?”

“Playing favorites?”

Adam set the plate down and looked at Shiro. “You’re giving Keith all this great advice and guidance and attention, but the other cadets notice, you know? They notice that you’re more focused on Keith than on them. If I was in their shoes it would make me feel - kind of unimportant.”

Shiro was quiet for a few moments. “You’re right,” he finally said. Then he groaned and hung his head. “I’m an idiot.”

Adam bumped him with his shoulder. “No you’re not. It’s just something to keep in mind. Hey, maybe I’m playing favorites myself. It’s hard not to when it comes to the cadet that you vouched for. You feel responsible for them.”

“When did you become so smart?” Shiro asked. Adam smirked.

“Haven’t you noticed, Takashi? I’ve always been this smart.” Adam saw the look of surprise on Shiro’s face, and then he realized what he’d said. “I-I’m sorry it just kind of came out I didn’t think -”

“It’s okay, Adam,” Shiro said with a small smile. “I like when you call me Takashi.”

Adam looked back at the sink and began cleaning another dish. “It’s not right. I shouldn’t be saying it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it means something! You need to save it for someone!” Adam protested. He needed to save it for the person he loved.

“There isn’t going to be anyone else, Adam. You know that,” Shiro said quietly. Adam looked at him in frustration.

“You can’t just give up, Shiro. You can’t let - you know - stop you from finding love and happiness. You’re going to find someone, someone that you can hold on to.”

Shiro was quiet for a moment. Then he gently took the plate out of Adam’s hands and set it aside. “Do you think that we broke up because I wasn’t able to hold on to you?”

Adam shifted uncomfortably where he was standing, realizing how close they were. “I understood your decision, Shiro. We were always meant to be friends. Things got - complicated. Being together would hurt you. It would hurt me too. But that doesn’t mean that love isn’t possible for you. I want it for you,” Adam urged, although the words began to taste awful in his mouth.

“Adam -” Shiro said, taking a small step closer.

“Shirogane! Wadley better not be helping you in there!” a voice called from the cafeteria. Adam
quickly took a step back and moved to duck behind one of the cabinets. They had found all of the best hiding places during their years of cleaning this place up. Adam listened as Iverson walked into the room. He could tell by his footsteps that he was surprised not to see Adam there.

“How’s your night going, Commander?” Shiro asked, and Adam could picture the charismatic grin that was most likely on his face.

“Just peachy, Lieutenant,” Iverson said gruffly. There was silence for a moment. “Make sure to close this place up in an half hour, you should’ve been done by now. And Shirogane, make sure to keep that cadet in line. Next time he slips up there are going to be real consequences.”

“I understand, Commander,” Shiro said, his tone more serious this time. Adam listened as Iverson walked out of the kitchen, closing the door behind him. Adam poked his head out from the cabinet and saw Shiro turned to look at him, a conflicted expression on his face.

“I should probably get going before Iverson catches me, this is a rare opportunity where I’m on his good side,” Adam said, heading for the kitchen door.

“Adam,” Shiro said, and Adam paused, still facing the door.

“I’m starting to get a little jealous that Keith is your favorite too, you know,” Adam said, a small smile on his face. “Soon he might become my new rival.” He heard Shiro scoff and Adam turned to face him properly. “Goodnight, Shiro.”

Shiro looked like he had more to say, but he simply smiled and said, “Goodnight, Adam.”

Adam nodded his head once and opened the door, moving quietly through the cafeteria and making it to his apartment door without being spotted. He turned on the lights and sat at the counter, running a hand through his hair as a sigh escaped his lips.

It was good to get away sometimes. To have his space. But it could also get lonely, like he could feel the emptiness around him. It wasn’t a great feeling, but he was doing this for Shiro. He would do anything for Shiro.

Adam set his pen down and took a sip of his tea, which was starting to get cold. He scanned his eyes over the papers in front of him. The cadets did well on their last exam. He was worried that the physics portion would trip many of them up, but it seemed like they managed to get through it. He smiled when his eyes fell on Lance’s grade. Lance studied really hard for their first exam. He came by Adam’s office almost daily to ask him for help with the sample problems. He deserved the A.

Adam leaned back in his chair. He wondered if the other cadets knew how hard Lance was working. In class he tended to put on this persona that everything came naturally to him, especially when Keith was within earshot. And Adam understood, this group of cadets was different than the ones Adam grew up with. They were a little more competitive with each other, a little hungrier. It made them excellent students, but complicated teenagers.

Adam went to grab Hunk’s exam, reviewing it one last time. Shiro and Adam always did well on their exams, but never this well. Hunk had gotten every question right. His test was perfect. Adam had never seen anything like it. He made a mental note to check in on Hunk sometime this week,
see how his time in the Garrison was going. Adam had a feeling that he was being horribly underestimated. With a mind like this Hunk was going to go far - he just needed to get over his tendency to overthink things.

That’s why he thought Hunk and Lance would be good for each other. They could balance each other out.

James did very well on his exam - Violet did, too. Ina almost got a perfect score, but she had trouble on the situational part of the exam. She needed a little more help on the social aspect of space missions. The last exam in the pile was Keith’s.

He did well enough on the exam, but Adam knew that he could’ve done better. With some of his answers to the open ended questions Adam could tell that was just didn’t try. He even left a few questions blank at the end, like he just lost interest. Keith was an amazing flier, he could execute any drill Iverson threw at him perfectly, even making it harder for himself for the fun of it, but when it came to regular class Adam would always catch him looking out of the window.

He wanted to say something to him, but he felt like it wasn’t his place. Keith was Shiro’s mentee. He had a feeling that Keith wouldn’t listen to him anyway. If Keith wasn’t with Shiro he was always off on his own somewhere. Sometimes when Adam would go to take one of the cruisers out into the desert he would see that Keith had signed one out for the hour. He did that a lot - whenever he didn’t have class, it seemed.

Adam set down his mug and put the exam down, frowning at it. He wished there was something he could do. As talented as Keith was, Iverson was almost at the end of his rope with him. He gathered the exams and put them into a neat stack, and then he stood up and made his way out of his office. Iverson wanted these exams as soon as Adam was done grading them. He made his way down the hall and towards the training jet bay. They were having flight formation practice again today, but they should be wrapping up by now. He opened the door and saw the cadets standing in a line, Iverson towering over them. He didn’t look happy. Adam watched as Iverson stepped away from the cadets to talk to Shiro, and a moment later Keith lunged at James, managing to land a punch before they were pulled apart. Adam watched the scene with wide eyes as Iverson began to yell once more.

“My office! Now!” he barked. Keith angrily looked away, crossing his arms. James glared at him. The two of them followed Iverson towards the door where Adam was standing. “You too, Shirogane,” Iverson said over his shoulder. Shiro’s surprised expression quickly turned serious as he went to follow him as well. “The exams?” Iverson asked, looking at Adam. Adam nodded his head dumbly, unsure of what to say. He glanced at Shiro. “Good,” Iverson said, taking the exams out of Adam’s hands. “At least someone here knows how to follow orders.” With that he opened the door and made his way out of the office, James, Keith, and Shiro trailing behind. Adam opened his mouth to say something to Shiro, but Shiro gave him a smile that said, ‘I’m fine’ and moved past him. Adam watched the door close and then turned around, the rest of the cadets looking at him expectantly.

“Um, you’re all dismissed, I guess,” Adam said, shifting awkwardly where he was.

“Is Keith going to be expelled?” Violet asked, raising her hand.

“There was a 73% chance of that fight happening,” Ina commented, her tone neutral.

“Good riddance,” Lance scoffed, crossing his arms. Hunk just smiled at Adam nervously.

Adam straightened up and walked over to them, his gaze firm. “Actually, you’re not dismissed
yet.” They stopped talking. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose before pulling his hand away. “When Shiro and I were your age, we used to fight all of the time.” They looked at him skeptically.

“But you were flight partners,” Lance pointed out.

“Yes, and we would fight so much that we ended up failing a lot of simulations in the beginning,” Adam explained. “Being a part of this program is - hard - I know that from experience. You put these high expectations on yourself, and you’re expected to do and know things that most kids your age wouldn’t even dream of.” Adam paused. “I had some trouble adjusting to the Garrison. I missed my family, I didn't want to ask for help, and it seemed like I was constantly messing up.” Lance looked down at his shoes. Hunk adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves uncomfortably. “But my fellow cadets and I were in it together. We supported each other. We had fun together. Shiro and I became best friends. I know that you all want to be the best - but you’re also a part of a team. You all need to be there for each other, okay? Even when it can get hard at times, because we all need help, even when it doesn’t seem like it.”

The cadets looked at him in silence. Adam adjusted his glasses and took a breath, nodding his head once. “Okay, now that I said all of that, you’re all dismissed.” He waited for them to start leaving, but none of them moved. Then he heard a snuffle.

“That was so beautiful,” Hunk said, rubbing his sleeve over his eyes. Lance put a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll try to do better, Adam,” Lance said, looking at him. Violet and Ina nodded their heads in agreement. “But Keith still has bad hair, and he’s a hot head, and I’m going to beat him one of these days.”

Adam caught Violet rolling her eyes and he smiled. “I look forward to seeing how far each of you will go. Now go enjoy the rest of your day off. Play outside, or something.”

“Okay, old man,” Violet teased, grinning at him before she headed for the door. Ina followed her.

“Want to play video games?” Hunk asked. Lance nodded his head enthusiastically. Together they raced out of the room. Adam smiled as he watched them all go. Then he felt a sinking feeling in his stomach.

He wondered how Shiro was doing.

Adam ran into Iverson on his way back to his apartment. He stopped where he was and saluted. Iverson scoffed and kept walking.

“I trust you to talk to him, Lieutenant,” he said over his shoulder as he continued down the hall. A moment later Shiro entered the hallway, stopping when he saw Adam. Iverson had already turned the corner and was gone.

“Hey,” Adam said. “How’d it go in there?”

Shiro said nothing for a moment. “Want to go to the Red Lion? We haven’t been in a while.”

Adam saw the look in Shiro’s eyes and agreed.
“He threatened to kick me out of the program,” Shiro finally said, setting his helmet on the seat of his cruiser. Adam took off his own helmet and watched him. Shiro caught him looking and rolled his eyes. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

Shiro walked over to the Red Lion and leaned against it, crossing his arms. “Like you really want to say ‘I told you so’. Like vouching for Keith was a mistake.”

“It wasn’t a mistake,” Adam said firmly. Shiro sighed and leaned his head against the rock, looking up at the sky. It was already dark, and the sky was scattered with stars. For a moment Adam could pretend that they were the last two people on Earth. For an even shorter moment he could pretend that they were back on Titan, when they weren’t expected to be mentors, where Iverson wasn’t constantly pushing them, where he and Shiro had -

The moment ended and Adam found himself unable to meet Shiro’s eyes. He ignored the way his cheeks heated up, silently cursing himself.

“I don’t know what else I can do to get through to him,” Shiro said. “He doesn’t want to let anyone in.”

Now it was Adam’s turn to roll his eyes. “Come on, Shiro.”

“What?” Shiro said defensively, looking at Adam now.

Adam lifted himself up to sit on the front of his cruiser, letting his legs dangle off the edge. “Okay, let’s analyze this. Keith doesn’t get along with his fellow cadets.”

“Yes, that’s pretty clear,” Shiro said.

“He doesn’t listen to Iverson,” Adam continued.

“He does listen, he just chooses to ignore him,” Shiro corrected.

“He prefers to be alone,” Adam said. Shiro nodded his head. Adam looked down at his hands, which were in his lap. “Because alone is easy.” Shiro didn’t say anything, and Adam took a breath and continued. “Alone is uncomplicated. Alone doesn’t hurt. It just - is. You let someone in and they can hurt you, leave you, reject you, and even if at the end of the day it’s no one’s fault, you can still convince yourself that it was because of you. Because of who you are. So you choose alone. Because you can control that. Because it’s easier than having alone forced upon you.” Adam shifted where he was sitting, feeling the smooth metal of the cruiser under his palms. Then he lifted his head to look back at Shiro. “Keith isn’t just going to let someone in. You have to force your way through. I think the two of us know that better than most people.”

“I told him that I’d never give up on him,” Shiro said quietly. Adam nodded his head.

“I think that’s all that Keith wants, really, is for someone to stick with him. He’s just too afraid to ask for it. Most people are.”

Shiro shook his head, a smirk on his lips. “You lied to me,” he said, and Adam looked at him in confusion. Shiro lifted up his chin. “You told me that you weren’t going to grow up, and yet here
we are. It’s like you aged ten years without me.”

Adam grinned. “I wouldn’t go that far. I did tell Lance and Hunk where you keep your secret stash of candy.” He watched as Shiro’s mouth opened in shock.

“The one in the second drawer of my desk?” he asked. Adam shook his head, trying and failing to bite back his grin. He reached for his helmet.

“The one behind our SEP certificate,” he confessed, quickly moving to sit in his cruiser.

“Oh no you don’t!” Shiro yelled, running up to Adam’s cruiser and jumping on top of it, reaching out to grab him. Adam laughed and tried to push him off, but Shiro managed to get him in a headlock.

“I’m sorry!” Adam said.

“No you’re not! But you will be!” Shiro shot back, and they both began to laugh. Eventually Shiro let go and they shared Adam’s seat, leaning back to look at the stars. Shiro’s shoulder was warm against his.

“You’re right,” Shiro finally said, his voice soft. Adam turned to look at him. “Most people are too afraid.” Adam looked at the sky, naming all of the constellations in his head.

“Keith will figure it out,” Adam assured him. “They all will.” Shiro hummed in response, closing his eyes. Adam took the opportunity to look at him, fighting the urge to run a comforting hand through his hair, to see if his hand was just as warm as his shoulder, to feel Shiro’s heartbeat against his. Adam’s gaze softened as he watched him, and then he quickly looked away.

Adam would never understand how something could feel so amazing, and yet so heartbreaking all at once.

“Adam!” a voice called, and Adam quickly turned around to see Lance running towards him, Hunk not too far behind.

“Hey, Lance, Hunk, what’s going on?” Adam asked from where he was standing in the middle of the hallway. He was on his way to fix up the cabin; he hadn’t had time to go the past couple of days and was planning on repainting some of the walls where it had begun to peel. He had finally found the right shade. But by the urgency in Lance and Hunk’s expressions it looked like whatever they were about to say was serious.

They stopped in front of him, Lance bouncing a little on his feet. “Hunk told me that he saw you making pastries in the kitchen the other day before the cafeteria opened,” Lance explained.

“Yeah, the staff there likes me so they let me bake in there sometimes,” Adam said, a little confused as to where Lance was going with this.

“So cool,” Hunk said in awe. “Do you think that they would let me do that?” Adam thought for a moment.

“I wouldn’t see why not. Anne is very nice -”
“Yeah, yeah okay but,” Lance interrupted. “Hunk also said that you were using guava paste.”

Adam still wasn’t sure where Lance was going with this. “Yeah, it’s this recipe my mom taught us when we were kids. Pastelitos de -”

“Guayaba?” Lance practically yelled, and an older woman walking by shot him a look as she passed them and left the hallway.

“Yeah -”

“Can you make some for us?” Lance asked. Hunk nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Sure, I can -”

“Let’s go!” Lance declared, and the two of them grabbed Adam’s arms and led him towards the kitchen.

“Oh, okay,” Adam said as he was being pulled along, his glasses slightly askew. It looked like he wasn’t going to the cabin today. He’d just have to paint tomorrow. They made it to the kitchen and Adam saw that someone in a white apron was taking something out of the oven. “Hello Anne.” The woman set the pan down on one of the cooling racks and turned around, a grin spreading across her face as she looked at Adam.

“Cleaning the cafeteria today? It’s a little early,” she said, and Adam smiled and shook his head.

“I’m actually on Iverson’s good side today. I think it’s a record. Actually, these two cadets wanted me to bake them something, but if you’re in the middle I don’t want to -” he saw the look of disappointment on Lance’s face.

“You’re in luck. I’m due for my lunch break,” Anne said, taking off her apron. “Just make sure to clean up after you’re done. I’d tell you where the dish soap is, but I have a feeling that you already know,” she said with a wink. With that she left the kitchen.

“You really did get in trouble a lot, didn’t you?” Hunk asked. Adam scoffed and went over to get them all aprons.

“Put these on,” he instructed, and then he went over to pull out the ingredients that he needed. When he first came in here to bake, he was surprised to find that they had all the stuff that he needed. He later learned that Anne loved to keep her kitchen stocked. ‘Just in case the aliens attack,’ she would always say. Once he had everything set up he turned around the face Lance and Hunk, hands on his hips. Lance quickly adjusted the chef’s hat that was on his head. Adam had no idea where he found it, but he decided not to ask. “Okay cadets,” Adam declared in a gruff voice. “Today you are going to learn how to make Pastelitos de Guayaba. Mistakes won’t be tolerated.”

“Hunk laughed behind his hand. “Hunk,” Adam said, and he straightened his back, moving his hand away. “You’re on puff pastry duty. I want it laid out on that sheet and cut into equal squares.”

“Yes sir,” Hunk said, hurrying over to the large pan and opening the package of puff pastry. They didn’t have the ingredients to make it completely from scratch, but Adam knew how to make it work. Thankfully the dough was already thawed.

“Lance, you and I are going to start cutting up the guava paste.” Adam walked over to the counter and opened the medium-sized tub, carefully sliding the paste onto the cutting board. Lance lifted himself up a little on his toes and looked at it with wide eyes.

“This is the brand my mamá uses,” Lance said, looking at the now empty container.
“Does she make this at home a lot?” Adam asked. Lance nodded his head, then he frowned.

“Well, not a lot. Mostly on holidays and stuff like that. My sister Veronica is really good at making them too.”

“Now you can show them that you can make it as well,” Adam said. Lance looked at him with hopeful eyes. Adam took a knife and cut a sliver out of the paste, about a half-inch thick.

“I can do it!” Lance said, and Adam laughed and handed over the knife. Lance began to cut, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he made sure that the slices were even. Soon they had enough and Hunk placed the slices carefully on the pieces of puff pastry. Then he laid a second layer of puff pastry on top and cut it expertly. Adam had a feeling that Hunk wasn’t a stranger to making food. Adam opened the oven and Lance carefully put the pan inside. Then Adam set the timer for fifteen minutes.

“See? It’s pretty easy.” Lance bent down to look at the oven, watching the pastries cook. Hunk began to walk around the kitchen, opening drawers like he was taking an inventory. Adam smiled as he watched them.

“You’re so cool,” Lance said. “You’re a pilot, you’ve been to outer space, you’re a teacher, and you can cook! You’ve probably had so many girlfriends.”

Adam laughed, but he could tell that it sounded slightly strained. “I had a girlfriend once, a long time ago, but I’m mostly interested in men.” Lance turned his head away from the oven and looked at Adam with wide eyes.

“You like girls - and guys?” Adam nodded his head. He was comfortable with who he was, he’d come out to his family years ago, before he even started SEP, but it still felt a little weird talking about it with his students. He didn’t want them to look at him differently. He watched as Lance furrowed his brow. “So you like both?”

“Yeah, I like both. I haven’t had a crush on a girl in a long time, I will admit, but I like both,” Adam said with a shrug.

“I didn’t know that you could do that,” Lance said quietly, looking back at the oven.

“Do you have a crush on anyone?” Hunk asked from where he was standing by the open fridge, holding a package of eggs. Lance looked at Adam expectantly, obviously curious to know the answer as well. Adam laughed awkwardly and adjusted his glasses.

“Isn’t that kind of a weird question to ask your teacher?” Adam asked.

“That wasn’t a no,” Hunk pointed out.

“That wasn’t a yes, either,” Adam countered. Hunk pouted.

“I think that Lance has a crush on someone, but he won’t tell me either. You two are no fun,” Hunk said, putting the eggs back into the fridge.

“I’ve got an old flame back home. Jennifer would be so mad at me if I started any kind of romance here,” Lance said with what Adam assumed was supposed to be a dashing grin. “I know that I’m depriving my fellow cadets, but it’s a burden that I must bear.”

“It’s a burden that we have to bear too,” Hunk said, rolling his eyes. Lance stuck his tongue out at him and they both laughed. Then they heard the oven beep. Lance quickly put on the oven mitts
that were on the counter and pulled out the pan, laying it on the rack to cool.

“They look awesome,” Lance said, his eyes wide once more as he looked at the pastries, which were now puffed up and golden. He reached out to grab one.

“Patience,” Adam said, and Lance guiltily took his hand away. Then he stepped away from the rack and his usual grin was back on his face.

“Hunk and I were talking and we thought that we should have a movie night, you know, with all of the cadets.” Adam smiled, remembering the pudding cups and popcorn, remembering when Hannah had scared Raj from behind and he almost flipped the couch over, when he and Shiro were so close to holding hands.

“That’s a great idea.”

“I even invited Keith, but who knows if he’ll actually come,” Lance said, rolling his eyes.

“He might surprise you,” Adam offered. Lance didn’t look convinced.

“I think they’re cooled now,” Hunk said, standing over the pan. Adam walked over and sprinkled on some powdered sugar. Lance took one off the pan.

“Warm, but not too hot,” Lance affirmed, then he took a bite. His eyes closed and he hummed happily. He took another bite. Hunk grabbed a pastry for himself and then handed one over to Adam. They started eating as well. Lance finished quickly and Adam noticed the somewhat somber look on his face. He set down his own half-eaten pastry back on the pan.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, and Lance glanced at him before looking away, rubbing his arm.

“I just - miss my family, I guess,” Lance said with a shrug. “It’s lame I know -”

“No it’s not,” Adam said firmly. “I always miss my family.”

“You do?” Lance asked, looking at him.

“I miss my family too,” Hunk said. “Baking with you guys reminds me of home.” Lance looked at the pastries.

“Same here.”

“How about you guys take these for your movie night? I bet the other cadets will be impressed,” Adam said. “And if you give it time, maybe you’ll find that you have family here, too. Besides, you get to visit home in a couple of months, don’t forget that.” Lance and Hunk’s expressions lit up. Then Adam checked his watch. “I actually have to go,” he said. “I’m having dinner with Sam - with Officer Holt.”

“The Officer Holt?” Hunk asked, eyes wide. “He was the one who wrote me a recomendation!” Now it was Adam’s turn to look surprised.

“He was the one who wrote your recommendation? That’s - really impressive, Hunk. Yeah, Sam was the head of the mission that Shiro and I went on.”

“That’s so cool!” Hunk exclaimed, a grin on his face. Lance looked impressed as well. Adam rubbed the back of his neck bashfully.

“Yeah, it is pretty cool. Just wait until it’s your turn. Now let’s clean these dishes so that I won’t be
late and you guys can start your movie night.”

“Okay!” Lance and Hunk said, hurrying over to the sink. Hunk gave Lance a playful shove and he laughed as he began to clean off the cutting board. Adam smiled as he began to put the pastries on a plate.

Adam hummed happily as he took another bite of his pasta, his insides beginning to feel warm. Colleen laughed behind her hand.

“You look like you haven’t had a good meal in weeks,” she commented, and Adam put his fork down, blushing in embarrassment.

“I just really love your food, Mrs. Holt. And Iverson’s been working us so much that it’s hard to find time to eat a proper meal,” Adam confessed. Shiro nodded his head in agreement. Colleen’s eyes widened and she quickly put more pasta on both of their plates.

“Congrats on getting into the science program Matt,” Shiro said from his seat next to Adam, Matt sitting across from him.

“Thanks! Although I wasn’t too worried,” Matt said, a smug grin on his face. Katie rolled her eyes and snuck Bae Bae a small meatball.

“Maybe one day you can come with me on one of my missions,” Sam said. “You too, Katie.” Matt and Katie looked at each other, their eyes lit up by the proposal.

“How is the data coming along, by the way?” Adam asked. Sam smiled.

“Even better than I expected. I submitted an application a few weeks ago for another mission, this time to Earth’s moon. It would be a much shorter mission than the one that we went on, but equally if not more important.”

“When would you be going?” Shiro asked.

“Ideally, a few months from now. Admiral Sanda told me the other day that I should get a response back with an approval in about a week.” He couldn’t help but have a proud grin on his face. Adam couldn’t blame him.

“That’s great, Sam, but who are you going to bring with you?” Adam asked. He and Shiro’s fellow classmates were still on their own missions, so there was currently a short supply of available pilots.

“Actually, I was hoping that you two would come with me. There are no other pilots that I trust as much as the two of you, and you’ve already been through the process so I wouldn’t have to teach a new crew.”

Adam smiled. “It would be an honor, Sam, but Shiro and I have to teach the new cadets. We’re needed here.”

“But if it’s during the summer -” Shiro began, a glint in his eyes that made Adam feel uneasy. Sam leaned back in his chair.
“We can always talk about it more another time. Besides, it’s getting late, and I know how early Iverson is making you two get up for the cadet’s flight exam.”

“I have an exam too!” Matt said like he’d almost forgot, pushing his chair away from the table. He looked at his mom. “Can I go to my room?”

“After you and Katie clean the dishes,” Colleen instructed. Matt quickly picked up his plate and hurried towards the kitchen. Katie stayed put, still picking at her pasta.

“How long will you be gone?” Katie asked quietly, the question obviously directed towards her dad, even though she was looking down at her plate. Sam leaned over to put a hand on her shoulder.

“Three months, four months tops, I promise. This could change the world.”

“I know,” Katie said, lifting her head to look at him. She gave him a smile, although Adam could tell that it was somewhat forced. Then she gave Bae Bae her last meatball and grabbed her plate, walking out of the kitchen. Adam noticed Colleen’s concerned look as she watched Katie go. Sam sighed and moved to stand, the rest of them standing as well.

“Someday she’ll understand why I have to go,” Sam said quietly. Adam glanced at Shiro, who nodded his head.

“Thank you for inviting us over, Sam,” Shiro said, and Sam smiled and walked over to a short cabinet by the table, pulling something out. He straightened up a moment later and was holding a glass bottle in his hand.

“For you two, since you’re officially legal,” he said with a wink, handing the bottle over to Adam. He took it and looked at it with wide eyes. This was an expensive white wine.

“Are you sure?” Adam asked. “Iverson told us -”

“Sometimes rules are meant to be broken,” Colleen assured him, a small smile on her lips. Adam laughed.

“Thank you both, for - a lot of things,” he said. Adam would always be grateful for the fact that the Holts welcomed them into their home, that Sam had become a sort of father figure for the both of them, that Colleen was always concerned about their well-being, that Matt and Katie didn’t see them as teachers but as family, that Bae Bae always wagged her tail when they came over.

They said their goodnights and left the house, stopping to stand outside the door. Adam caught Shiro looking at him and grinned, adjusting his grip on the bottle. They were both thinking the same thing.

They knew that it would be irresponsible to drink the wine way out in the desert, since that would mean they would have to ride their cruisers back to the Garrison drunk, so they opted for the large window in the always empty hall instead.

Shiro took a swig of the wine and handed it over to Adam. There was only about a third of it left. Adam smiled when he saw the flush on Shiro’s cheeks, visible even in the darkened lighting. Shiro laughed and gave him a playful shove.
“Why are you looking at me like that?” Shiro asked. Adam laughed, and then he drank from the bottle before setting it down.

“You’re drunk,” Adam said. Shiro pouted and crossed his arms a little unsteadily.

“No I’m not. See?” Shiro said, taking one of his arms and touching his finger to his nose. He kept repeating the action determinedly and Adam continued to laugh. “Shhh, Iverson will hear us,” Shiro said with a loud whisper. Adam quickly looked behind him for any signs of Iverson and began to laugh again, covering his mouth with his hand. Shiro took the bottle and drank a little more. There were only a few sips left. “I think we’re lightweights,” he said a moment later, looking at the window. It was the middle of the night. The halls were quiet and the stars were shining only for them. Adam nodded his head in agreement.

“The lightest,” he said, and Shiro snorted and rested his head on Adam’s shoulder. Adam ran a hand absentmindedly through Shiro’s hair and he began to hum happily.

“I like this,” Shiro said, a little quieter this time, and Adam felt Shiro reach for his hand. Adam moved to hold it.

“I like us,” Shiro said, and Adam felt Shiro reach for his hand. Adam moved to hold it.

“Me too,” Adam said again, a sleepy feeling washing over him. His thoughts began to float across the dark sky. He thought about Shiro’s laugh, his smile, the way he crossed his arms and drank his tea and cared about the people around him. The starlight in his eyes. In that moment Adam came to a conclusion, although deep down he had known this for a long time. “I love you,” Adam said as if he’d said it a hundred times before. He felt Shiro tense against him and his hazy thoughts became clear for a moment. “I mean, I love us. Our friendship.” He knew that he should be freaking out over the fact that he’d just said that out loud, but his head was still swimming slightly, and so what? He had meant it. He rubbed his thumb against Shiro’s hand. It felt warm. Everything felt warm. Then Shiro shifted to look at him, and Adam moved his head to look back. He gave Shiro’s cheek a gentle poke. “If you weren’t drunk I’d think you were blushing, fringe.” Shiro just kept staring back at him.

“I love you too, Adam,” Shiro said, and Adam grinned lazily at him.

“Oh yeah? And what’re you going to do -?” His words were cut short when Shiro’s lips met his. He could taste the wine as he closed his eyes, adjusting his head to get a better angle. He heard Shiro hum into his mouth. They were still holding hands, Shiro still leaning heavily into Adam’s side. Everything became warmer, softer, lighter as the kiss deepened.

A hazy thought stumbled into Adam’s brain as he continued to kiss Shiro.

This was their first kiss on Earth.

And it was perfect.
Age Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

First off, this is a behemoth of a chapter. It's over 15k words so please take your time with this one. Grab a cozy blanket, make yourself some tea, and don't feel like you have to read all of it in one sitting.

Also, if you've noticed, instead of ten chapters it now says that it's twelve. I realized that I needed a few more chapters in order to finish this story properly lol.

I hope that you enjoy this chapter - it was a lot of fun to write!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Iverson was called into a meeting so Adam and I will be supervising today,” Shiro said, and Adam watched as the cadets visibly relaxed. “That doesn’t mean that this session is going to be easy,” he warned, and Adam could tell that they were trying not to look too disappointed.

“Today you will be doing partner simulations,” Adam said, and he saw Lance and Hunk’s eyes light up as they looked at each other. “Assigned partner simulations,” Adam continued, and they both slumped their shoulders. Adam tried to maintain his serious expression. “When Shiro and I were cadets we began partner simulations in our second year, our partner being the person we would typically go on our official missions with. For this group, however, Iverson has decided to make some changes.” Adam wondered if Iverson simply didn’t want to deal with giving Keith a partner. Shiro wondered that as well. “Neither of us know what changes that will be exactly, but since you won’t be given as much partner training as we were, we’ve decided to let you have at least some practice before you leave for break.”

“The partners will be as followed,” Shiro said. “Keith and Ina, Violet and Lance, and Hunk and James.” Adam watched as Hunk glanced warily at James before quickly looking away. Lance gave Violet a grin and she rolled her eyes. Keith just looked disinterested and Ina didn’t seem to be paying much attention.

“We won’t disappoint you, sir,” James said with a salute, looking at Shiro. He was always looking for Shiro’s approval.

“Thank you, James,” Shiro said with a somewhat uncomfortable smile. “Now everyone to the simulator, we aren’t flying today.” Now Keith looked even more disinterested, but Adam could tell that he was trying, for Shiro’s sake. He hadn’t gotten into any more fights since he was called into Iverson’s office, and even Iverson had begun to take notice of this sudden change. And yet Adam could tell that he was still having a hard time. He still didn’t seem to be getting along with his fellow cadets. Adam wasn’t sure if he was even trying. Shiro led them all to the simulator that they would be using. “First, Adam and I will show you how it’s done,” he said, looking at Adam expectantly. Adam looked back at him in surprise - they hadn’t talked about doing the simulation themselves. He could see the challenge in Shiro’s grin, and it ignited something in Adam’s chest. He felt like he was fifteen again. He fixed his glasses and smiled.

“Let’s do it,” Adam said, moving towards the large machine. He grabbed the blindfold that was on the console, next to the pilot’s chair. “Am I wearing it or are you?” Adam asked, turning to face
Shiro as he held the black fabric in his hands. Shiro crossed his arms.

“How much do you trust me today?” Shiro asked. Adam laughed and threw the blindfold to Shiro, who caught it easily.

“Not enough,” Adam said, and Shiro grinned and moved to sit down, putting the blindfold on. Adam pressed some buttons on the console until the large screen in front of them lit up. Then he turned to make sure that the cadets were still watching. “Shiro is going to have to fly through a meteor shower, and it’s up to me to guide him through it. This is mainly a trust exercise. When you’re in space you’re going to have to depend on the people around you. There is no such thing as a solo mission.” He looked at Keith as he said that last part. His arms were crossed as he looked at the screen.

“Didn’t you fail these a lot?” Lance asked, raising his hand. Shiro lifted up his blindfold to look at Adam.

“Yes, Lance, we did, but then we learned to work as a team. Don’t underestimate this exercise - it’s not easy.” Adam walked over to stand behind Shiro’s chair, and Shiro dropped the blindfold that was covering his eyes once more. Then he grabbed hold of the thrusters.

“Ready flight partner?” Shiro asked, a teasing edge in his voice. Adam fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“Go for it, Taka - Shiro,” Adam said, coughing awkwardly and looking out of the corner of his eye to see if the cadets had heard him. They seemed to be paying more attention to the screen, which was now counting down. A moment later an image of space was in front of them, large meteors slowly drifting by. “Take a left,” Adam began, and Shiro did what he was told without hesitation. “Now go up slightly - no, too far, perfect,” Adam said, his eyes locked on the screen. Now there were more meteors, their movements becoming increasingly more erratic. “Fly down, then to the right. It’ll be a tight fit but if you stay steady you’ll be fine. Just a little more to the right. Okay, there, don’t move anywhere but straight.” They kept going like that for the next couple of minutes, the screen eventually being full of quickly moving rocks of all shapes.

“Woah,” Lance breathed, but Adam didn’t look away from the screen. He thought back to all of the failed simulations - all of the fights, the frustration, the eventual calmness that somehow felt worse. These simulations used to mark a very low point in Adam and Shiro’s relationship, but now it represented something else entirely.

They were on the same page. They trusted each other, depended on each other. There were no more unspoken words or misunderstandings. It felt like they could take on the world. The words ‘Mission Success’ flashed on the screen and Adam put on hand on Shiro’s shoulder. Shiro took the blindfold off and looked at the screen as well.

“That may be a new record for us,” Shiro said, setting the blindfold back down on the console. Adam pulled his hand away and put his hands on his hips, facing the cadets once more.

“Who’s first?” Adam asked, and Violet and James both shot their hands in the air. Adam looked over at Shiro, who moved to stand next to him.

“Let’s have James and Hunk go first,” Shiro decided. “James, I want you to wear the blindfold. Hunk, you’ll be the eyes.” James nodded his head and walked over to the console. Hunk’s face looked paler than usual as he looked at the pilot’s chair.

“Hey man, you’ll do great. It’s like that video game we played last night,” Lance said, putting a
hand on his shoulder. Hunk looked at him, panic still evident on his face, but then he nodded and took a deep breath, moving to tighten the headband around his forehead as he made his way to stand behind the chair. Hunk and James ended up doing a pretty good job, so did Violet and Lance, even though Lance had a hard time giving directions from time to time. Then it was Keith and Ina’s turn.

“You should wear the blindfold,” Ina said, and Keith nodded his head and moved to sit down. The rest of the cadets stood a short distance behind the chair to watch. Shiro and Adam stood off to the side.

“How do you think this is going to go?” Adam asked.

“I believe in them,” Shiro said simply, and then the simulator began. Adam watched with wide eyes as they went through the session perfectly, Ina giving clear guidance and Keith seeming to know what she was going to say before she even said it. It was insane. Out of all the cadets these two were the worst at teamwork, and yet here they were. The simulation ended quickly, the words ‘Mission Success’ flashing on the screen. Adam looked at the score.

“They almost beat our record,” Adam said, and he turned his head to see Shiro smiling, but there was something hard to place in that smile. He really did look happy for them, but there was a sadness there too.

“Maybe we’re losing our touch,” Shiro said. Then he stepped forward. “Great job cadets. You all did good work today, and because of that, you get to leave early.”

Lance grinned and grabbed Hunk’s sleeve. Together they ran off doing who knows what.

“That was really impressive, Ina,” James said. Ina nodded her head appreciatively.

“Yeah, I didn’t want to be the one partnered with Keith, but somehow you managed it,” Violet said, looking over to where Keith was still sitting in the pilot’s chair. The three of them made their way towards the exit.

“Hey Keith,” Shiro said, walking over to put a hand on his shoulder. “That was some great flying. You were really able to trust Ina.”

“I just knew how the meteors would move based on the past simulations. I didn’t really need that much help,” Keith said with a shrug.

“It seems like you didn’t understand the point of the exercise,” Shiro said. Keith furrowed his brow and crossed his arms, looking away.

“I didn’t need anyone helping me. I do better on my own.”

Shiro looked like he didn’t know what to say for a moment. “You can’t just live your life without depending on people, Keith. That’s not how it works.”

Keith stood up from his chair. “For me it does.” Then he hesitated. “Thanks for the advice Shiro, but I’m just not a team player. I don’t think I ever will be.” With that he walked past Shiro and towards the door, not sparing Adam a second glance.

“That was - intense,” Adam said. Shiro still had his back towards him as he faced the simulation.

“He’ll figure it out,” Shiro said. “He just needs to find the right kind of people.” Adam moved to stand next to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.
“He’s already found some of them, he just needs to realize it.”

“I don’t remember being that moody when we were their age,” Shiro said.

“I mean, we could be kind of dramatic. Remember when you told me how ‘all that matters is that I’m the best pilot in this program?’” Shiro laughed.

“I did not sound like that.” Adam crossed his arms, looking unconvinced. Shiro laughed again and gave him a gentle shove. “Come on, we should check in with Iverson, his meeting should be over now.” Together they headed out of the room and into the hall, heading for Iverson’s office. Adam caught a glimpse of Lance and Hunk going into the kitchen and smiled. A few minutes later they made it to Iverson’s door. Shiro knocked.

“Come in,” a voice said, and Adam opened the door to see Iverson sitting behind his desk, holding the bridge of his nose before he looked up at them. “Oh, you two.”

“It’s nice to see you too, Commander,” Adam said, and Iverson huffed and moved some papers around his desk.

“How did the simulation go?” he asked as Shiro and Adam moved to sit down.

“Better than expected actually,” Shiro said. “They all managed to pass.” Iverson lifted a brow.

“All of them?”

“Keith and Ina had the highest score,” Shiro added, and Iverson leaned back in his chair, looking impressed.

“I see,” he said. “Whatever you said to that boy, Shiro, I’m glad that you said it. Maybe we can make a pilot out of him yet.”

“He can do it, Commander,” Shiro said firmly. Iverson looked at Adam.

“And what do you think, Wadley?” Adam shifted in his seat, glancing at Shiro.

“He has a lot of talent,” Adam said. “Easily one of the best fliers this program has ever seen -”

“Come on, Wadley, spit it out,” Iverson said. Adam sighed.

“He needs to be able to work on a team. If he can’t do that - he’s not a good fit for this program.” Adam refused to look at Shiro.

“I agree,” Iverson said, nodding his head. “The Garrison is built on its sense of community. Exploration is build on a sense of dependability. Keith won’t be allowed to go on a mission until he understands this.” He grabbed a stack of papers on his desk and skimmed through it for a moment. “As you already know, there will not be flight partners during their second year. Your class had an unprecedented bond with each other, which is why your skills excelled in partner based training, you know, once you two learned how to get along,” he said, giving them a pointed look. “I still believe that this class would benefit from the same training, but the Admiral has made a change of plans. They will each be given a concentration, a specialty to focus on on top of their regular classes. This will most likely be their role at the Garrison, unless circumstances change.”

“What kind of specialties?” Adam asked.

“Fighter pilot, cargo pilot, and engineer,” Iverson said, and Shiro and Adam looked at each other.
"But cargo pilots don’t go into space -" Shiro began.

"Cargo pilots go where we need them to go," Iverson finished for him. "Everyone has a role to play here, and the Admiral has decided to cut back our number of fighter pilots."

"Won’t that mean that there are less missions?" Shiro asked. "This is a space exploration program why is she -"

"Trust me, Lieutenant, I’ve asked her the same questions, but this is how it’s going to be for right now."

"Have you decided who’s been assigned to what specialty?" Adam asked.

"It’s based entirely on scores," Iverson explained, looking unhappy with this decision as well. "The cadets with the best flight scores are in the fighter pilot concentration. Highest test scores get put in the engineer concentration. And highest situational scores are put in the cargo pilot concentration, since they’re the ones who will have to work with the most people." He paused for a moment, looking between the two of them. "I have a feeling that I will come to regret this, but Keith has been assigned to fighter pilot, along with James. Ina and Hunk will be in the engineer specialty, and Violet and Lance will be in the cargo pilot."

"But Commander," Adam began, but Iverson held up a hand.

"It’s based on scores, Lieutenant. Lance simply has not scored high enough for fighter class. He just missed it, if that makes a difference. Maybe if Keith finally gets kicked out of the program Lance can take his place," he joked, but Shiro and Adam looked at each other uncomfortably. Iverson sighed and leaned forward in his chair. "Honestly, I don’t like this any more than you two do. But this is how it has to be done. I will let them know of their assignments once they get back from break. You both are dismissed." Adam and Shiro stood up and made their way to the door, Shiro opening it.

"You’re doing a great job, Commander," Shiro said, and Iverson gave him an appreciative nod. Shiro stepped into the hall and Adam joined him, closing the door.

"Wow, okay," Adam said, a sinking feeling in his chest. Lance had been working so hard all year. This news was going to crush him. Shiro shook his head.

"This isn’t right," Shiro said. "Why do we need less fighter pilots? Less missions? Does this mean that we’re never going back into space again?"

"I mean, would it be that bad? We got to spend almost a year in space. We got to see Saturn. Isn’t that enough? Shouldn’t we be letting the next generation take our place?"

Shiro rubbed his wrist, a habit that Adam hadn’t seen him do in a long time. "Don’t you think that we’re too young to be retired?"

"We’re not retiring, it’s just - the next step. We’re moving forward," Adam explained, but Shiro didn’t look convinced. "Hey, we’ll figure it out. This isn’t the end of anything." Shiro nodded his head and Adam checked his watch. He was planning on going to the cabin today.

"Hey, I’ve got to get going, but I’m still going to see you later, right?"

Shiro smiled. "Of course. I’ll see you later, level ten." Adam laughed and bumped Shiro’s shoulder as he walked past him, heading for the cruiser bay. When he glanced behind him he saw that Shiro was still standing in the middle of the hall, his gaze a million miles away as he held on to his wrist.
“I thought - mmf - that we would at least make some tea first,” Adam said as he ran his fingers through Shiro’s hair, the feeling of Shiro’s lips against his. Shiro moved to kiss Adam’s neck and Adam let out a laugh, leading him to the couch. Shiro climbed on top of him, continuing to kiss his neck. “This is good too, though.” He felt Shiro smile against his skin. Then Adam reached to tilt up his face, capturing his lips once more. Shiro let out a pleased hum that always made Adam’s insides turn warm. He balled his fist into Shiro’s shirt and kissed him harder.

“It was so hard not to kiss you in front of the cadets,” Shiro admitted, taking off Adam’s glasses and putting them on the table before he resumed kissing Adam once more. Adam pulled away.

“Hey, patience yields focus,” Adam said. Shiro laughed and leaned into Adam, his kisses becoming deeper as he moved his tongue against Adam’s lower lip. Adam sighed and wound his arms around him.

“I can’t believe that it took a bottle of wine to say that I’m in love with you,” Adam said, rubbing gentle circles into Shiro’s back.

“When have we ever made anything easy for ourselves?” Shiro pointed out, sounding a little breathless. “I’m just glad I’ve got you now.”

“Oh, you’ve got me, huh?” Adam said, a challenge in his tone. Shiro smirked and began to kiss Adam’s neck once more.

“I love you,” Shiro said in a low voice, moving on to kiss a lower part of Adam’s neck. “I love you,” he said again, moving his hands underneath Adam’s shirt as he kissed his collarbone. “I love you,” Shiro continued, kissing the exposed part of Adam’s stomach.

“Oh, you’ve got me,” Adam said. Now it was his turn to sound breathless. Shiro smiled up at him and then he pressed his mouth against Adam’s stomach and blew.

“Shiro!” Adam yelled in protest, lifting himself up onto his elbows to get away. He looked at Shiro with wide eyes and then he began to laugh. Shiro grinned. “I can’t believe you just did that,” Adam said, shaking his head and biting back his own grin.

“You’re the one who loves me,” Shiro said. Adam reached out to hold his hand.

“You’re right. I do love you. Now time for tea,” Adam declared, moving to stand up. Shiro groaned and flopped down face first on the couch.

“But I like making out.” Adam laughed and walked up to the sink, filling his kettle with water.

“We have plenty of time to do that after I’ve had my tea.”

“Make mine green, please,” Shiro said, his voice muffled. Adam rolled his eyes, a small smile on his face.

“Sure thing, Takashi.”
Adam’s mom always loved sunflowers. They were her favorite. So when he went to the grocer’s nearby he had to pick up a bouquet of sunflowers.

He smiled as he placed them in a vase that he’d found forgotten in the closet. Then he brought it over to the windowsill in the kitchen. He pulled the curtains back and looked through the window, barely seeing the Garrison in the distance. He took a deep breath, smiling for no one as he turned on the faucet and rinsed off the plates that he’d found collecting dust in the cabinets. After years of cleaning dishes for about a hundred people in the kitchens Adam had become an expert at the sink. He knew the perfect temperature, the perfect pressure, and he never got his clothes wet. He pictured himself doing the dishes in a house of his own. He imagined Shiro standing next to him, drying plates and getting Adam to laugh at some awful joke. He would put sunflowers in the windowsill.

Then he imagined kids running around outside, his kids. He imagined Shiro watching them from the window with his soft eyes. Adam quickly turned off the sink, feeling his cheeks heat up. He was glad that no one else was there. He’d never forgotten the conversation he had with Shiro back in space - about opening up a tea shop and fostering children. Back then they were only kids themselves. That reality seemed about as far as Titan was from Earth. But now - Adam was hit with the realization of how much he wanted that. And they could have that.

They weren’t going to be at the Garrison forever. Adam knew that Shiro didn’t have as much time as most people, but he hoped -

He hoped that Shiro would want to spend the rest of that time with him.

His soft laugh filled the silence of the empty kitchen and he shook his head, making his way to the stairs. This cabin always seemed to fill his head with crazy ideas. He began to make up a tea menu in his head, trying to think of punny names that Shiro would enjoy. Maybe Adam would mention it tonight, just to see if Shiro remembered the plan that they had made so many years ago.

He made it up the stairs and stepped into the first room on the left. It was pretty bare, only a bed meant for two and a small nightstand. There was also a brown jacket hanging from a nail in the wall. It looked about Shiro’s size. His eyes fell on the crib tucked into the corner. It looked old, like it hadn’t been used in years. Adam walked over to the bed and got low to the ground, checking under the bed for mice or other animals. Then he got up and checked the ceiling for mold. He never spent too much time up here. His heart always felt a little hollow after seeing all of the abandoned memories. He moved to walk out, but then something on the bed post caught his eye. Carved into the wood was a heart and the letter K. Surrounding it was a bunch of carved out stars. Adam ran his fingertips across it and smiled, wondering who that heart was for. Then he walked out of the room and went into the only other room on the second floor. This room was smaller, with a bed meant for one. Nothing else of much importance was inside, and yet as bare as it was Adam could tell that it was torn apart by the last person who was inside, before they had left this house for good. When Adam first saw this room his instinct was to clean it, but he felt like whoever had done this did it for a reason, and he wanted to respect it. He carefully stepped over the sheets that were ripped and strewn across the floor, over the pillow next to the broken lamp. He made it to the window with the half-torn down curtains, and carefully lifted up his duster and cleaned them off. He checked under the bed like he did in the last room, and then looked at the ceiling. Everything seemed to be fine - or rather it wasn’t worse. This was Adam’s least favorite part of the house. He could feel the anger, the loss, the grief that had seeped into the wood panels in the floor.

He could see himself in this room.
He quietly walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. Then he walked back down the stairs, hearing every creak as he went. His eyes fell on the sunflowers. That was home. The only things left upstairs were goodbyes and frozen memories.

He took out the wood polish and wiped down the table in the main room, looking at the picture of the dad and son like he always did. Recently something about that photo felt more familiar, although Adam couldn’t quite place it. He reasoned that it was simply because he had looked at it so many times at this point. It almost felt like he’d met these people in real life. He sighed and put the towel and polish in his bag, zipping it closed. He’d be back in a week to see how the sunflowers were holding up, and then he was going back home to see his family. All of the cadets were as well. Well, almost all of them. It was easy to tell that Lance was excited, Hunk too. It’s all they talked about whenever they dragged Adam to the kitchen to make something with them.

Adam closed the door to the cabin and looked out at the sunset. He didn’t realize that he’d been in there for so long. He looked at his cruiser parked a few yards away and adjusted his glasses, not quite ready to take a step forward.

He was about to ask Shiro to come home with him, to meet his family. It was a pretty big deal, at least to Adam. Family. Shiro. Home. Maybe Adam had a few other questions to ask him as well. He smiled to himself and shrugged his backpack onto his shoulder, walking towards the cruiser as the sun continued to fall behind him.

When Adam got to his apartment he was surprised to see that Shiro wasn’t there. A few weeks ago Shiro had decided to just move his stuff back into his old room, since he was spending most nights with Adam anyway. They had laughed about it as they went to Shiro’s apartment to get his bag.

“I still can’t believe we only go to be roommates for two years,” Shiro said. “Think of all the slumber parties we could’ve had, the bad movies we could’ve watched, the tea we could’ve drank together.”

“I drank plenty of tea with Raj,” Adam pointed out. Shiro pouted and began to put his clothes into his bag.

“Raj was so lucky,” Shiro said quietly, and Adam smiled and wrapped his arms around Shiro’s torso from behind, resting his chin on Shiro’s shoulder as he watched him pack up his stuff. It had taken them years to become roommates again, but here they were, and Iverson never mentioned the change, although they weren’t really keeping it a secret.

Adam walked into the now darkened apartment and set his bag down in his room. It was quiet. Then Adam realized that Shiro was probably still in his office. He had mentioned something about Iverson giving him all this work to do. Adam filled the kettle and put it on the stove, deciding to bring Shiro some tea, especially if it was going to be a long night. He waited for the water to boil and filled two mugs with green tea. He even got Shiro’s favorite mug, the one with all the stars on it. Adam had got it for him a few months ago. He lifted the mugs off the counter, watching the steam curl up towards the ceiling, and breathed it in for a moment. He felt - happy, relaxed. Everything was so right, for once. Asking Shiro about meeting his family didn’t seem so scary anymore. He opened the door to his apartment, being careful not to spill, and walked down the hallway towards Shiro’s office. He took a left and could see that the light at the end of the hall was lit up. Adam was right. He smiled and made his way down, hearing his footsteps in the empty hall. Then he began to hear hushed voices coming from inside.
“Are you sure about this, Shiro?” Adam was surprised to hear Sam’s voice. He stopped by the doorway, not sure if he should interrupt. He was about to head back to his apartment when Shiro replied.

“Adam will understand.”

Adam’s eyes widened a fraction and stood still. Understand what?

“And is Iverson okay with -?”

“I already asked him and he said that it would be fine. I’d only miss the first month of their second year, and apparently there will be two new teachers who can fill my place.”

Miss the first month? New teachers? Adam furrowed his brow, trying to understand. It almost sounded like -

“Well, I’m happy to hear that you’ll be able to join me on this mission, Shiro. Titan, Earth’s moon, it’s only the beginning. This project could change the world.”

“And we’ll be changing it together,” Shiro said, and Adam could picture the small smile that was on Shiro’s face as he said those words. Adam found himself quickly walking down the hall before he realized that he was doing it, leaving the light from Shiro’s office behind him. He took a left, and then another left until he found himself standing in front of the large window. He set the mugs down on the thin ledge in front of the window and took a step back, running a hand through his hair as he looked at the black sky. He couldn’t seem to see any stars tonight.

Shiro was leaving. Without him. And he’d never even mentioned that this is what he wanted.

Adam put his palms against his eyes, seeing the darkness on the backs of his eyelids. Then he pulled his hands away and sat down, his mind blank and yet too full of thoughts all at once. He had no idea how to process this.

The tea was long past cold by the time he headed back to the apartment. His footsteps slow and heavy, like he was wandering to nowhere. When he got into bed Shiro was already there, a sleepy smile on his face.

“Hey, level ten,” he said, wrapping his arms around Adam. Adam knew that Shiro was warm, but he couldn’t seem to feel it. He heard Shiro’s breathing become steady as he fell back asleep, and Adam stared at the clock all night, seeing the morning with tired eyes and no clue of what to say.

“So I mixed the coconut milk with the dried coconut flakes for about an hour. My mom says that it makes it more moist,” Hunk explained, pulling a bowl out of the fridge. Lance looked at it in curiosity.

“So this is bread?” Lance asked, following Hunk as he put the bowl on the table and grabbed the flour.

“It’s going to be,” Hunk said. “Now add two cups of flour.” Lance picked up the bag and carefully measured out two cups, although he did spill a little on the table.

“I’ll clean that up I promise,” Lance said, giving Adam and sheepish smile.
“Anne will hunt you down if you don’t,” Adam warned, and he saw the look of fear in Lance’s eyes. “I’m kidding,” Adam assured him with a smile, and Lance grinned and watched as Hunk adding the baking powder. Then Hunk looked around the table, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“I could’ve sworn I pulled out the -”

“Sugar?” Adam asked, handing over the bag that was on the counter next to him. Hunk smiled and took it, adding a few tablespoons to the bowl.

“Now we’ve got to mix it. Did you wash your hands?” Hunk asked, and Lance nodded his head, rolling up his sleeves. Together they began to mix up the contents of the bowl until it became a ball of dough.

“So where is Samoa?” Lance asked as he continued to knead the dough. Hunk pulled a sheet of baking paper out of the drawer next to him and began to rub butter on it.

“It’s kind of half way between Hawaii and New Zealand,” Hunk said. Lance pulled his hands away and Hunk placed the ball of dough on the baking sheet, shaping it a little until he looked satisfied. Then he wrapped the dough in the baking paper.

“What’s it like?”

“You would love it. The water is so blue and there are a bunch of cool waterfalls. I went when I was little so I only remember some of it, but it’s beautiful.”

“Cool,” Lance breathed, and Hunk smiled, putting the bread on a pan. Then he headed towards the oven and opened it. “Let’s make a deal - I’ll show you Cuba if you show me Samoa.” Hunk straightened up and walked back over to Lance, holding out his hand.

“Deal.” They shook on it, grinning at each other. Adam smiled as he watched them, and Lance turned to look at him.

“You can come with us,” Lance said.

“But where would I take you guys?”

“You’ve already given us space, I think that’s enough,” Hunk offered, and Lance nodded his head in agreement.

“Sounds fair to me.”

Adam was surprised to feel his throat tighten up, but then he took a breath and straightened up, adjusting his glasses. “That’s very nice of you guys to say, but I never gave you space. You two went looking for it. That’s why you’re here.”

“Geez, you’re bad at taking compliments,” Lance said, and Adam laughed.

“He’s always been like that, Shiro’s voice said from the doorway, and Adam looked at him in surprise.

“Shiro,” Adam said, staring at him. Adam didn’t want to say that he’d been avoiding him ever since he overheard the conversation in Shiro’s office, but he wouldn’t deny that he felt a rush of relief when Lance and Hunk had dragged him along to bake with them today. It gave him an opportunity to sort through what he was going to say.
But as he looked at Shiro’s smile all the words that he’d planned fluttered away.

“Can I borrow Adam for a minute?” Shiro asked.

“I mean, Lance and I were going to clean these dishes, but if you’re offering to do it for us we can come back once the bread is done baking,” Hunk said, his tone sounding too innocent to be sincere. Shiro laughed and nodded his head.

“Sounds like a plan.” Lance and Hunk left the kitchen, Lance talking about what he loved most about Cuba. Shiro walked over to Adam.

“Hey there,” Shiro said, holding one of Adam’s hands in his own. Adam smiled, but he could tell from the look in Shiro’s eyes that it wasn’t fooling him. “Are you okay?” he asked, and Adam looked away.

“Yeah, I’m just, tired, I guess,” Adam said. He wasn’t sure why he couldn’t bring himself to interrogate Shiro. They would fight, they would explain themselves, and then they would make up, that’s what worked for them. But Adam knew that bringing it up now would make it real. It would make Shiro leaving real. A part of Adam wanted to forget that he’d heard that conversation at all.

“I’ll wash, you dry this time, okay?” Shiro said softly, and then he led Adam over to the sink, still holding his hand. “Lance and Hunk seem to have become fast friends, huh? They kind of remind me of us.” He grabbed the bowl they used for the dough and ran it under the sink.

“They’re nothing like us,” Adam said with a fond smile.

“What do you mean?” Shiro asked, grabbing the soap.

“They’re not rivals, they don’t fight, things are - simple, with them,” Adam said, and he became sad all of a sudden.

“You make our relationship sound pretty bad,” Shiro said with a laugh, nudging Adam’s shoulder with his own and handing the bowl over for him to dry. Adam grabbed a hand towel and took it.

“It’s not. It’s just, different,” Adam said. He felt Shiro lean into him.

“I like our different,” Shiro said, turning his face to kiss Adam’s jaw.

“You don’t like it enough,” Adam said, setting the bowl aside. He could feel Shiro’s confused eyes on him and Adam bent over to grab the counter, hanging his head. “Why are you leaving?” The only sound that could be heard in the kitchen was the sound of the faucet running. A few moments later Shiro turned it off, letting out a sigh.

“Did Sam tell you?” Shiro asked. Adam straightened up, looking at Shiro with angry eyes.

“No, I stopped by your office last night to bring you tea. I thought that you’d want some company,” Adam said, finding himself unable to keep the hurt from his words. He watched Shiro’s eyes tighten, a pained look on his face.

“Adam, I -”

“You could’ve at least told me!” Adam said, throwing his towel on the counter and running a hand through his hair. “When were you going to tell me? Or were you planning on going to space without me noticing?”
“I was going to tell you this week, I wasn’t even sure if I’d be able to go - I didn’t want to worry you if -”

“Worry me?” Adam said in disbelief, taking a step away from Shiro. “We’re supposed to be a team, we’re partners. You didn’t think that I had a right to know?” He shook his head, hating how he always managed to turn everything into a fight, but he couldn’t help it.

“This needed to be my decision, Adam, you know what this means to me, I don’t have a lot of time -”

“I was going to ask you to meet my family, Shiro,” Adam said, and Shiro stopped speaking, his eyes widening as he looked at Adam. “I wanted to take you home with me. God, you talk about how you’re running out of time like it’s not something I think about every day. I know you’re running out of time. We’re running out of time. And you want to go to the moon instead of being with me.”

“Of course I want to be with you, Adam, I love -”

“Then don’t go,” Adam said, and Shiro looked away. Adam thought about the sunflowers in the vase, of family, of the future. It felt farther away than ever. He sighed, the anger that he’d been holding on to leaving his body. “I’m ready to have a life with you, Shiro, one that goes beyond classes and flying and uniforms and space. But you’re not ready for that.”

“Adam -” Shiro tried to interrupt, but Adam raised a hand to stop him.

“And that’s okay. Space is your dream, I’ve always known that. It’s part of the reason that I fell in love with you in the first place. You need to see it again, I understand. I’m not going to stand in that way of that. It would be selfish.”

“You’re not standing in the way of anything,” Shiro said, grabbing hold of Adam’s hands. “I love you, I mean it. I just - I just have to do this.” Adam nodded his head in understanding.

“Sam is lucky to have you,” Adam said. “Just don’t kiss him in space, okay? That’s our thing.” Shiro laughed and pulled Adam closer to him, wrapping his arms around him.

“This is the last mission. After this I’m done,” Shiro said.

Adam smiled into Shiro’s shoulder, his vision blurry as he looked at the empty kitchen. He wanted to believe him more than anything.

Adam shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked at the spaceship in the distance. It was a beautiful day. The sky was a clear blue. The warmth of the summer sunlight was seeping into his clothes. One couldn’t help but feel hopeful on days like these, and that’s what Adam felt, hopeful. Even when faced with a goodbye.

“Thanks Adam for teaching me so much about space! I’ll see you in a few months!” Lance said, a large grin on his face as he waved goodbye to Adam and ran towards his family, who had just gotten out of their car. Then Adam felt two arms wrap around him in a tight hug.

“Bye Adam,” Hunk said, and Adam heard a quiet sniffle.
“Bye Hunk. Make sure to learn more recipes for me, okay? We have a lot more cooking to do.” Hunk beamed at him and nodded his head, pulling his arms away to tighten his headband. He gave Adam a final salute and made his way to his family, his mom waiting for him with open arms and a smile almost as wide as Hunk’s.

Adam watched as they put their bags in their families’ cars along with the rest of the cadets. Then Hunk and Lance hugged each other goodbye. Adam bit back his smile as he watched Lance’s older sister have to pull him away from Hunk. They were having trouble leaving each other, it was sweet. Soon after the cars began pulling out one by one, and the lot in front of the Garrison was empty. Adam sighed and turned to look at the spaceship again. Then he fixed his glasses and headed towards it, fists at his sides.

Shiro wanted to be there with Adam to say goodbye to the cadets, but the ship was due to take off early while the weather was still good. Take off was in half an hour. As Adam approached the ship he saw Sam standing with his family, his spacesuit already on. Katie was hanging onto his arm and Matt was talking a mile a minute, waving his hands excitedly. Colleen just smiled as she watched them. Then Adam spotted Shiro standing closer to the ship. Keith was standing next to him and Shiro seemed to be showing him something.

“Soon you’ll be able to do something like this, too,” Shiro said, and Adam saw something light up in Keith’s eyes, his hands balled into determined fists at his side. Adam wasn’t used to this side of Keith. He looked - excited, happy, even a little hopeful. Adam felt like he was intruding as he walked up to them, but at the same time he couldn’t stay away, not when his time with Shiro was limited.

“Hey guys,” Adam said, walking up to them and giving a friendly wave of his hand. Shiro turned and smiled when he laid eyes on him, making Adam’s heart stutter a little. He hated that Shiro still had that affect on him. Adam had realized a while ago that falling in love with Shiro had been an inevitability - there was nothing that he could’ve done to stop it.

“Hey Adam,” Shiro said. Keith shifted awkwardly where he was standing.

“I’ll, uh, be over there,” Keith said, putting his hands in his pockets and walking over to check out a different part of the ship. Shiro walked up to Adam.

“This ship looks better than the one we got. I’m kind of jealous,” Adam teased.

“I wish you were coming with us,” Shiro said.

“I know, but my place is here with the cadets. I can’t leave them behind when they need me.” Shiro began to look guilty, and Adam put a hand on his shoulder. “That wasn’t meant to be a stab at you, Takashi, we’re fine.” Shiro nodded his head.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” he said. “We’ll have a lot of catching up to do.” He winked and Adam laughed, pushing him gently away.

“You’ll need to catch up to me, if that’s what you mean,” Adam teased. Shiro grabbed Adam’s hand and rubbed his thumb against it.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Adam sighed and took a step closer, leaning his forehead against Shiro’s. “I’m going to miss you, Takashi.” He felt Shiro cup his cheeks. Then Shiro pulled his face away a pressed a kiss on Adam’s forehead.
“I’m going to miss you, too.”

“I’m sorry Adam, but Iverson just told me that we need to get inside the ship,” Sam said from behind them, and Adam turned to look at him and smiled, nodding his head.

“Of course. Take care of him, Sam.”

“I will. And if you could check in on my family -” Sam said, looking back at where his family was watching. Matt waved goodbye.

“You don’t even have to ask,” Adam said, and Sam gave him a grateful smile. Then he walked past them and headed into the ship. Shiro walked over to Keith and put a hand on his shoulder, telling him something that Adam couldn’t hear. Keith clenched his jaw and nodded his head, glancing at Adam. Then Shiro smiled at him and ruffled his hair, causing Keith to smirk and shove him away. Shiro walked back over to Adam.

“This is it,” Shiro said, adjusting one of the straps on his suit. “How do I look?”

“Like a dork,” Adam said, and then he pulled Shiro into a hug. “I love you,” he whispered into Shiro’s ear.

“I love you too,” Shiro said, and then he pulled away and walked into the ship. Adam watched as Shiro looked at him one last time before closing the hatch. Adam took a few steps back to join Sam’s family. Keith went to stand a little bit away from them, his expression hard to read. They all watched as the ship prepared for take off, and then about fifteen minutes later it shot into the air, leaving Earth behind. Adam swallowed the tightness in his throat and fixed his glasses, standing there until he couldn’t see the ship anymore.

“You’re pregnant?” Adam exclaimed, looking at his sister’s stomach in shock as they stood outside of their family home. She laughed and grabbed his hands, nodding her head.

“I wanted to tell you right away but your sister insisted that it should be a surprise,” Noah said as he grabbed Adam’s bag from the back of his car. June rolled her eyes.

“You don’t have do suck up to him anymore babe, we’re already married,” June said, and Noah kissed her on the cheek. Adam was still staring at her stomach.

“How long -?”

“Three months,” June said, putting a hand on her stomach. Adam laughed and gave his sister a hug. Then he nodded his head in Noah’s direction, who couldn’t seem the keep the smile off his face.

“Adam!” Adam’s mother said, opening the door and rushing out to hug her son. Adam hugged back almost as tightly and smiled into her hair. She pulled away and held his shoulders, looking him up and down. Her eyes were watery as she smiled at him. “It’s good to have you home.”

“It’s good to be home,” Adam confessed, and he really meant it. He hadn’t realized just how much he’d been missing home until he was standing in the front yard.

“We’re having cake, and drinking lots of alcohol. I’m too young to be a grandmother,” his mom said with a laugh.
“I guess I’m the designated sober person for the night,” June said dryly, and Adam’s mom smoothed June’s hair, giving her a kiss on the forehead.

“The cake is really for you. Noah told me that you’ve been craving it,” she said, and June beamed. Together they made their way inside, Noah opening the bottle of wine while June handed out glasses. Soon after Adam heard the front door open and his father stepped into the kitchen. Adam was struck by how gray his father’s hair had become.

“Looks like the party started without me,” he said, walking over to give his wife a kiss on the cheek. Then he put his hand on Adam’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

“I want to hear all about the Garrison. How’s the teaching going?”

Adam set down his wine glass. “Better than I expected actually. I think the students have come to like me, and it feels really good passing on what I’ve learned. It kind of feels like this is what I was meant to do.”

Adam’s parents smiled at each other, his father moving to take a seat.

“And how’s Shiro doing?” June asked, giving him a knowing look as she put a forkful of cake in her mouth.

“I’m not sure, he’s on the moon,” Adam said with a shrug. His family looked at him in surprise. “He was assigned to another mission,” he clarified.

“Earth’s moon?” his mom asked, and Adam could hear the shift in her tone. Adam covered her hand with one of his own.

“He’ll be fine, mom. You should see how much the Garrison has upgraded their technology.” His mom nodded her head and looked at the wine glass that she was holding in her hands.

“Why didn’t you go with him?” June asked.

“If I went I would miss the cadets’ first month of their second year,” Adam explained. “I also wanted to see you guys.” His mom smiled and put a hand on his cheek.

“I’m glad that you stayed,” she said, and Adam smiled. He was glad too. He couldn’t imagine anything being more important than this.

“What are you thinking about?” June asked, nudging his shoulder from where she was laying next to him. Adam shrugged.

“Nothing really.” June nudged him again and he laughed. “Okay, fine. I was thinking about the cadets. There are these two cadets in particular who always talk about their families, it’s really nice, and I’m wondering how their break is going. I can imagine Lance telling them these crazy stories. Hopefully his mom won’t get concerned and pull him out of the Garrison,” Adam said with a laugh. June hummed.

“You’ve changed a lot, you know,” June said, and Adam looked at her. She was looking up at the sky.
“How so?” Adam asked, and she shifted her eyes to look at him.

“You’re happier, more open. There was a period of time where you didn’t let yourself be those things.”

“Maybe a part of me didn’t think that I deserved them,” Adam confessed, and June linked her arm through his, moving closer to him.

“Well you do,” June said. “You’re going to be a great uncle.”

Adam put a hand on his forehead. “I still can’t believe that you have a person in there. I also can’t believe that you’ve had sex.” June ripped up a handful of grass and threw it at him. Adam laughed and brushed them off.

“Don’t act like you haven’t had sex before,” June said, and Adam blushed.

“Let’s change the subject,” Adam said. “What’s it like being the department head now?”

June puffed out her cheeks, looking at the stars once more. “It’s a lot more responsibility, but it’s been good so far. I mostly just like teaching though. Part of me wishes that’s all I had to do. But at least they’re giving me maternity leave. They’re letting Noah have some time off as well.”

“Yeah, what’s it like being married to a philosophy professor?” June laughed.

“It’s hard to win an argument, that’s for sure, but we never really fight anyway. He’s a really great guy. He always knows what to say to make me feel better, and not in a manipulative way, you know? He’s kind.” Adam saw the soft look in her eyes as she talked about her husband.

“Remember when you showed me the stars in your room? Before I joined the Garrison?” June nodded her head, a small smile on her lips. “We’ve come a long way.”

“I knew great things were coming our way, I could feel it,” June said.

“I should’ve believed you from the start.”

“What was that?” June asked, holding a hand up to her ear. Adam rolled his eyes.

“You know what I said.”

“No, really, I couldn’t hear because of the baby for a second could you -” Adam laughed and threw some grass on her stomach.

“I don’t think that babies can cause selective hearing, June.”

“It was worth a shot,” June said with a grin, looking at him. Adam looked back at her, trying to find the words that he wanted to say.

“Thank you for being there for me,” he finally said. Her eyes softened.

“Right back at you, little bro.” She turned to look back at the sky. “So your boyfriend is up there, huh?” she asked, looking up at the moon.

“Yup,” Adam said, popping the ‘p’ and lifting up his free arm to rest his head on it. “Right where Casey was. Life is weird like that, isn’t it?”

“He’s coming back, Adam.”
“I know,” he said, but he knew that he didn’t sound convincing.

“It’s a girl,” June said softly, and Adam looked at her in confusion until he saw that her hand was on her stomach.

“Have you thought of names yet?” Adam asked, and June smiled.

“Casey,” she said. “Noah likes it, too.”

They stayed like that for another hour, looking at the stars. When Noah came out to check on them Adam realized that June had fallen asleep, and Noah carried her inside. The house was warm and the starlight from outside stuck to Adam’s clothes as he fell asleep.

Adam turned on the light to his apartment and set his bag on the couch. He wondered how many times he’s gone through those exact same motions at this point. He sat down at the kitchen counter and ran a tired hand through his hair. He missed his family already, but Iverson needed him here. There was still work to be done, and apparently the new teachers were arriving soon and needed to be trained.

When he said goodbye to June in the car he couldn’t help but look at her stomach one last time. She was almost five months pregnant. And she had been right - it was going to be a girl. His parents had gotten him a box of assorted tea bags to take back with him, along with a new kettle. His mother hugged him so hard that he wouldn’t be surprised if he had bruises in the morning. He stood up from his chair and walked over to his bag, pulling out the tea bags. He felt like trying something new. He heard a knock as he began to look through the flavors, and set the box down, looking at the door in confusion. He wasn’t sure who that could be. Probably Iverson. He walked over to the door and opened it, and someone immediately threw their arms around him.

“What’s going on -” Adam said, and his attacker pulled away and he saw April beaming at him, bouncing on the balls on her feet. Hannah stood not too far behind her, a small smirk on her face.

“Oh my god,” Adam breathed, looking at the two of them. They were - adults - now. April’s hair was much shorter than she used to wear it, and something in Hannah’s eyes looked different, a little more mature. He kept staring at them, his mouth open.

“I think we fried his brain,” Hannah said, walking past him and into his apartment. She headed for the kitchen and began to look through the cabinets. “Wow, you really have nothing here.”

“I - what - when -” Adam said, adjusting his glasses. April laughed.

“We got back from our mission a month ago,” April explained.

“Yes, we’re your new coworkers,” Hannah said, popping a handful of cereal in her mouth and leaning against the counter.

“New coworkers -?” Adam began to ask. Then he put it all together. “You’re the new teachers?” He exclaimed. April laughed again and Hannah continued to eat the cereal, nodding her head. Adam kept looking between the two of them, eyes wide, and then he began to smile. “That’s amazing!” He pulled April in for a hug, and she hugged him back tightly. Then he went over to Hannah and hugged her as well, even though she groaned in protest. When he pulled away Hannah was biting back her smile. “It’s so good to see you guys.”
“It’s good to see you too, Adam,” April said, sitting on his couch. “Are you making tea? We have a few years of catching up to do.” Adam laughed and took out his tea kettle, filling it with water and putting it on the stove.

“Tell me about the mission,” Adam said, sitting down next to April. Hannah moved to sit on April’s other side, leaning into her. Adam noticed that they were holding hands. April saw him looking and blushed.

“It was pretty boring, really,” Hannah said. We collected some samples, did some analysis in the ship, and mapped out the entire terrain.”

“We also tested the atmosphere,” April added, and Hannah nodded her head.

“Yes, how could I forget the most exciting part.”

“It doesn’t look like it was entirely uneventful though,” Adam said, and they both smiled and looked at each other.

“What about you? Where’s Shiro?”

“Yeah we stopped by his apartment but he didn’t answer,” Hannah said. Adam heard the kettle whine and stood up to take it off the stove, taking out three mugs.

“He’s not here,” Adam said, pouring the hot water into each mug and then adding the tea bags. Hannah and April went to join him at the counter.

“Not here?” April asked. Adam put his hands on the counter. He let out a sigh and smiled.

“Yeah he went to Earth’s moon with Officer Holt.”

“Without you?” Hannah asked. Adam shrugged.

“I wanted to stay. He wanted to go.”

“Are you two fighting again?” April asked, crossing her arms. Adam blushed and looked at the counter.

“Um, actually -”

“You owe me $20,” April said, holding out her hand in front of Hannah. Hannah sighed and reached into her pocket. Adam looked at them in confusion.

“Wait, did you two make a bet on whether Shiro and I would get together?” he asked. April had the decency to look a little guilty. Hannah did not.

“I thought you two would never get up the courage,” Hannah said. “So thanks to you I’m down $20.” Adam looked at her in disbelief, and then he began to laugh. A small smile formed on Hannah’s face as she crossed her arms and looked away.

“I really missed you guys,” Adam said.

“We missed you too,” April said. Hannah nodded her head, lifting her mug to her lips.

“Now we need to see how much trouble we can get into before the cadets come back and we have to be good role models,” Hannah said, and April swatted her arm.
“Iverson’s gotten a little soft. We could probably get away with a few things,” Adam said. Hannah lifted her fist and Adam bumped it with his own.

“Oh no,” April said, taking a long sip of her tea. Then the three of them began to laugh.

Adam sat in the cruiser for a moment, taking in the view of the desert. He would never get tired of this view. The sun was just rising, the rocks were covered in a pale yellow light, and everything had a softness about it. He stretched his arms and hopped off the cruiser, the dust kicking up around him the moment his feet touched the ground. He grabbed his bag of cleaning supplies and headed for the door of the cabin, a sleepy smile on his face. He didn’t usually go to the cabin in the mornings, but today it just felt right. Besides, he was going to be busy the rest of the week training April and Hannah. This was probably the only alone time that he would have in a while, not that he really minded. If anything he was happy that April and Hannah were back to keep him company. They already had multiple movie nights, and they managed to sneak a jet out of the Garrison late one night without Iverson noticing. It was fun, and it kept him occupied. It was when he was alone that he would realize how cold his bed felt, how he didn’t get to see Shiro’s face in the mornings, how he didn’t take as many trips to the Red Lion. He slung the bag on his shoulder and opened the door to the cabin.

The first thing he noticed was how the sunlight peeked through the kitchen window. He grabbed the vase on the windowsill and filled it with water. Then he placed a new bouquet of flowers gently inside. They were orange tulips this time - June’s favorite. He dropped his backpack on the kitchen chair. Then he went to grab the broom that he left leaning against the counter the last time he was here. He headed into the main room, walking towards the windows. He stopped for a moment when he saw that the curtains were already open. He must’ve forgotten to close them last time. He shrugged and began sweeping the floor for any dust, although it looked relatively clean. Then he noticed that the stack of record players in the corner had fallen over. He set down the broom and walked over to them, beginning to stack them up. He sighed as he did so, hoping that he didn’t have a rat problem on his hands. Once he was done he got to his feet, dusting off his knees.

Then he felt something sharp against his throat.

“What are you doing here?” a voice asked, and Adam lifted up his hands.

“I’m just here to clean -” Adam felt the knife being pressed closer to his throat. “I’m being serious! I just come to clean this place up.”

“Why?” the voice asked, it sounded smaller than before, more confused. Adam opened his mouth to speak but then he realized why the voice sounded so familiar. He crossed his arms and sighed.

“Keith, why do you have a knife?” Adam asked, and he felt the knife being quickly pulled away. Adam turned around and watched as Keith took a few steps away from him, crossing his arms and refusing to meet his gaze. The knife was nowhere to be found, most likely hidden under his clothes. “Keith -” Adam said, his tone serious.

“Why do you come here all the time?” Keith asked, and Adam was taken by surprise.

“I, uh, I don’t really know why,” Adam said, rubbing the back of his neck. “I first saw the place when I was sixteen, and then when I was seventeen and Shiro and I were fighting I just, I don’t know, I felt like I was supposed to be here. This place was cold and run down and I felt like I was
supposed to fix it up I guess.” He sighed. “It sounds crazy, but part of me was always waiting for whoever lived here before to come home. I hated the thought of this place being empty forever.” Keith said nothing and Adam winced. “Just please don’t break into any more houses, okay? I’m a bad influence.”

“I didn’t break in,” Keith said, still not looking at Adam.

“Well yeah I guess I technically didn’t break in either. The door is always open but that doesn’t mean -”

“This was my house,” Keith said quietly, and Adam looked at him with wide eyes.

“You - lived here?” Adam asked. Keith clenched his jaw and said nothing. Then Adam turned and looked at the photo of the father and son. He finally saw the resemblance - he couldn’t believe that he hadn’t figured it out before. It was just that the boy in the picture was grinning - he’d never seen Keith smile like that before. “Keith -”

“So you’ve really just been fixing the place up?” Keith asked. Adam nodded his head. Keith adjusted his stance and nodded towards the kitchen. “I noticed the flowers.” Adam smiled.

“I thought this place needed them.” Keith shrugged, and Adam’s expression turned more serious. “When did you -?”

“My dad died when I was ten,” Keith said.

“And your mom -?” Keith didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry that I’ve been coming to your house. I won’t keep coming here anymore, I promise,” Adam said.

“You can keep coming here,” Keith said, crossing his arms tighter to his chest.

“Are you sure?” Keith finally looked at him, and there was something in his eyes that Adam had never seen before. Something vulnerable.

“I, uh, I want you to,” Keith said. Then he dropped his arms and sighed, fists clenched at his sides. “Thank you for taking care of this place, you know, when I couldn’t.” Adam nodded his head.

“I always wanted to meet the people who lived here.” Adam confessed. “There was a lot of love in this house. That’s why I wanted to save it so much.” He took a step towards Keith, and then he stopped, adjusting his glasses. Keith wasn’t quite like the other cadets - he especially wasn’t like Lance and Hunk. He wasn’t really sure what to do in this situation. He wished that Shiro was here more than ever. He sighed and sat on the couch, and Keith watched him with interest, although he was trying to look disinterested. “You miss him too, don’t you?” Adam asked.

Keith looked away and crossed his arms again. “He’s the only one who’s ever fought for me.”

Adam felt guilt tighten his chest as he smiled at the table in front of him. “Yeah, that’s Shiro for you. He told me from the start that he’d never give up on you.” Keith shifted his stance, his eyes softening for an instant before quickly hardening once more.

“But he left,” Keith said simply. “Everyone does.” Adam leaned forward on the couch, holding his hands in his lap.

“People do leave, that’s true. Especially when we don’t want them to,” Adam said. “But
sometimes the mission comes first. The work that Shiro and Officer Holt are doing could help a lot of people. It could change the world as we know it.” He couldn’t help but notice how awful the words tasted in his mouth. He wasn’t sure if he even believed what he was saying, but he noticed Keith nodding his head in agreement.

“The mission comes first,” Keith echoed, and Adam’s eyes tightened. Was that really okay? Weren’t there some things that should be more important than the mission?

“Shiro is coming back, that’s what matters,” Adam said, moving to stand. “And until he comes back, even when he comes back, I’m here for you, okay? I know I’m not Shiro, I know I will never be able to understand everything you’ve been through, but I’m here for you.” Keith stared up at him for a moment, his arms uncrossed but his expression guarded. A moment later he nodded his head.

“Sorry I pulled my knife on you,” Keith said, looking somewhat guilty. Adam laughed.

“No you’re not,” he said, and he saw the ghost of a smile on Keith’s face. “Well now that I have an extra set of hands, want to help me fix some of the floorboards in here? That was the project for today.”

“Okay,” Keith said, a firmness in his tone. Adam went to grab the hammer and some nails.

Hannah furrowed her brow and tapped her chin, deep in thought. Then her eyes lit up and she set down her glass. “April, I dare you to go into Iverson’s office and take his files on us,” Hannah said.

“No!” April yelled, her cheeks flushed. Adam took another sip from his glass and laughed. His room looked soft on the edges and his face felt warm.

“The last time I got like this I made out with Shiro,” Adam said with a grin, and April laughed.

“You have to do it, those are the rules,” Hannah said in a sing-song voice, leaning into April’s side. She rolled her eyes and put her glass on the floor. Then she got to her feet.

“Okay, fine. I’ll be back for you,” April said, pointing at her glass as she made her way to the door of Adam’s apartment.

“Are you okay to go alone?” Adam asked. April waved her arm in a careless gesture.

“I’m tipsy but I’m fine. See?” April said, touching her finger to her nose. Adam laughed.

“Shiro would do that too,” Adam said, and then he looked at his glass in his hands, his smile fading a bit.

“Get Shiro’s file too,” Hannah said, and April gave her a thumbs up before leaving the room. Adam watched her walk down the hall before the door closed behind her. Hannah took another sip from her glass and set it down again, looking at Adam with narrow eyes. “So who’s the best cadet?”

“What?”

“Who’s the best?” Hannah asked again. “Shiro was the best out of all of us, so who’s the new
“Hey, who says that Shiro was the best?” Adam protested. Hannah gave him a look and he
conceded, drinking from his glass. “It’s hard to tell,” he finally said. “Don’t look at me like that
I’m telling the truth! There’s this one cadet who’s an amazing pilot, but he can also be a hothead.
He’s gotten better though. And there’s this other cadet who’s very by-the-book but has a hard time
making his own decisions. I think he’s Iverson’s favorite.”

“Who’s your favorite?”

“Hannah .-“

“You must have one.”

“Teacher’s don’t have favorites, Hannah.”

“You’re no fun,” Hannah said, and Adam laughed and shook his head. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Just don’t go telling the cadets that you have a favorite. Or a least favorite.”

“Yeah, yeah. Remember when I told Henry that he was my least favorite?” Hannah asked, hiding
her grin behind her hand.

“I forgot about that!” Adam said, setting down his glass. “He got so mad!” He started to laugh, and
Hannah giggled as well. Then they both heard the door open.

“I got them!” April said, coming to sit down on the floor next to them once more, a stack of papers
in her lap and a triumphant grin on her face. “It was too easy.” Hannah rubbed her hands together
and smiled.

“Open mine first, I want to know what Iverson thought of me,” Hannah said. April looked through
the files until she found Hannah’s, pulling it out and placing it on top. Then she opened it, flipping
through the pages with a furrowed brow. A moment later her eyes lit up.

“Here we go, ‘Cadet Evaluation: Year Two’.”

“Oh gosh,” Adam said with a laugh. Iverson was at the end of his rope with them by the end of
their second year. April cleared her throat and straightened her back, holding the sheet of paper in
front of her.

“Hannah Wilson is an excellent flier and excels in her classes,” April said, and Hannah quirked her
brow in surprise. “However, she is also easily distracted and doesn’t seem to have the motivation to
reach her full potential.”

“That’s fair,” Hannah said with a nod. April kept reading and then covered her mouth, a laugh
escaping her lips. “What?” Hannah asked, taking the paper out of April’s hands and reading it
herself. “Cadet Wilson also has a habit of sneaking into the kitchen after hours to steal food, among
other things - he knows about the whisk incident?” Hannah yelled, and April laughed more.

“The whisk incident?” Adam asked, and Hannah covered her face with her hands. “Wait! Shiro and
I almost got in trouble for that!” He remembered the day after Shiro and Adam had to clean the
kitchens yet again, towards the end of their second year. At that point they weren’t talking and it
was horribly awkward. Anne had told them that some of her kitchen supplies had gone missing,
and the two of them had to swear on their lives a hundred times to convince her that it wasn’t them.
“It’s April’s fault,” Hannah said. “She dared me to take something from the kitchen. So I took a whisk and we baked baked brownies in our apartment. I brought it back a few days later. I thought that they didn’t figure me out. It was my biggest heist.”

“You two have a thing about stealing, don’t you?” Adam asked, looking between the two of them. April blushed and Hannah pulled her hands away from her face, shrugging her shoulders.

“You and Shiro’s thing is cleaning dishes, ours is larceny,” Hannah said, and April nudged her shoulder.

“We haven’t stolen that many things, and we always put them back,” April clarified.

“Almost always.”

Adam laughed and shook his head. “I can’t wait for the cadets to meet you guys. Things are definitely going to be different this year.”

“A good different,” Hannah said. “Now let’s look through Shiro’s file. I want to know what dirt Iverson’s got on him.”

“There might be some stuff from these past two years. Iverson was never exactly thrilled about Shiro’s cadet recommendation, so he would find little ways to make that clear.”

“He’s the golden boy no longer?” Hannah said with a fake gasp. She opened the file and began to look through it. “Here’s a list of all the records he’s broken, a glowing recommendation from the Lieutenant who visited his school - did he really get a perfect score on this test?” Hannah quickly flipped through the pages and then stopped, her eyes scanning through one page in particular. Adam watched as she read through it again.

“What is it?” April asked, and she put her chin on Hannah’s shoulder and read as well. Her smile fell. Adam watched as Hannah looked up at him.

“What does it say?” Adam asked, finding it harder to breathe properly. By the look on Hannah’s face it was serious.

“Shiro’s sick?” Hannah asked, her voice small, and April lifted her eyes to look at Adam as well. He grabbed his glass, holding it in his hands.

“Yes,” Adam said, and they waited for him to continue. “We found out once we got back from Titan - I mean, I guess a part of him always suspected, but it was news to me.”

“How long -?” April began to ask.

“Not long enough,” Adam said. “He told me that he’s lucky if he makes it past thirty.” He watched as their eyes widened in shock.

“That’s not true,” Hannah said, clenching her jaw. “There must be something -”

“Dr. Murphy is already giving him treatments to slow the disease. He’s good now, but he won’t be forever. There’s really not much else they can do about it.” April pursed her lips and Hannah looked away, an angry look in her eyes. They were all silent for a few moments.

“I’m sorry that you’ve had to face this alone, Adam,” April finally said.

“Don’t worry about me, Shiro’s the one -” April put a hand on his shoulder.
“I’m sorry that you’ve had to face this alone,” she said again, and Adam looked at her with wide eyes. He saw that Hannah was looking at him as well, sympathy in her gaze. A moment he realized that he was crying. He felt April pull him into a hug.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t -” Adam began, but trying to get the words out only made him cry more.

“You should,” Hannah said. “You have every right. And we’re here for you.”

“We’re here for each other,” April said. “We’re a family. We always will be.” Adam nodded his head into her shoulder, hugging her back. He opened his eyes and saw Hannah smiling at him, her eyes teary as well. A few moments later Adam pulled away, lifting his glasses to dry his eyes.

“Let’s read April’s file. I want to know what gossip Iverson’s got on her.” April laughed and Hannah picked up the file, opening it.

“It says here that April got caught sneaking out once,” Hannah said, and April grabbed the file out of her hands.

“No it doesn’t!”

“You’re right, it doesn’t, but it does say that you were written up for a noise complaint...for singing in the shower too loudly after hours.”

“It happened one time!” April said, sounding flustered.

“According to this it was five times,” Hannah said with a grin. April opened her mouth to protest, but then picked up her glass and finished her drink instead. Adam began to laugh, and Hannah and April joined in soon after, holding each other for support as their laughter filled the apartment.

The cadets loved April and Hannah, which Adam wasn’t surprised by in the slightest. Hunk and Hannah hit it off almost immediately, and Violet loved to brag about her cousin, much to April’s embarrassment. In only a week it felt like they had been here the whole time. But that didn’t mean that Adam ever forgot what was missing. He knew that Keith felt it too. They went to the cabin together a few times while the rest of the cadets were gone. They ended up repainting the rooms upstairs and fixing the wooden back porch. They didn’t talk very much, but they didn’t need to. Adam was struck by the subtle ways in which Keith had changed since he first came to the Garrison. He spent more time listening, he didn’t get angry as easily, and he was more focused in his classes. It was like he finally made this goal for himself, and he was running after it. It reminded Adam of someone he knew.

Adam walked down the darkened hallway and made it to the cruiser bay. He wasn’t going to the cabin tonight, he didn’t really have a destination in mind at all, he just wanted to feel the wind on his face as he flew. He noticed that one of the cruisers was missing from the line, and wondered who had the same idea as him. It could be April, but it was most likely Hannah. He hopped on one of the cruisers and left the Garrison, heading for the desert. He saw the outcropping of rocks on his right, the rocks that he and Shiro flew off of during their first year. Adam remembered the feeling of falling through the air, how the stars seemed closer than ever before. Then he saw a shadow heading towards the top of the outcropping and furrowed his brow. He shifted direction and headed for the bottom of the outcropping, looking up. He watched as the cruiser made it’s way to the very edge of the cliff, and then flew off. Adam’s eyes widened as he watched it land.
Something wasn’t right. The cruiser jerked in the air a little as it fell towards the ground, Adam quickly moved his cruiser out of the way and watched as it managed to regain some of its control at the end, hitting one of the rocks and ricocheting a few meters away from Adam. He saw a small amount of smoke begin to come out of the cruiser, and he quickly got off of his own and hurried over.

“Hannah? What are you doing?” Adam asked, but the words died in his throat once he saw who it was. He narrowed his eyes, anger flaring in his chest as he pulled the pilot out of the cruiser and lead him away from it. “Lance,” Adam said, and Lance coughed and looked nervously up at Adam.

“Fancy seeing you out here,” Lance said, an uneasy smile on his face as he shot finger guns Adam’s way. Adam crossed his arms and Lance winced.

“What were you thinking? You couldn’t gotten killed -”

“You did it when you were my age!” Lance protested. “So did Shiro!”

“That doesn’t matter. You aren’t ready to -”

“Keith can do it!” Lance said, and Adam stopped. “I saw it,” Lance added, more quietly this time. Adam sighed.

“That still doesn’t mean that you should put yourself in danger, Lance. You and Keith are on different journeys -”

“Don’t you think I know that!” Lance yelled, crossing his arms and looking away. “Keith gets to be a fighter pilot, while I’m stuck in cargo.” Adam watched Lance’s lip waver a little as he hugged his arms more tightly around his chest. “I follow the rules, I study so much, I work harder than Keith - so why does he get to be a fighter pilot and I don’t? It isn’t fair.” Adam’s gaze softened and he put his hand on Lance’s shoulder.

“Sometimes what we want, isn’t necessarily what we get. It’s a tough pill to swallow, but it doesn’t mean that things are hopeless, okay? You can still be a fighter pilot.” Lanced scoffed and shrugged Adam’s hand away. “You can, Lance. You need to believe in yourself.”

“I do believe in myself,” Lance argued.

“Not enough, not while you’re constantly comparing yourself to others, to Keith.” Adam sighed. “You have your journey, and he has his. You need to focus on your own, and if you’re able to do that, if you want it enough, good things will happen. Maybe not in the way that you expect, or even hope, but no matter what you’ll be amazing.”

Lance uncrossed his arms and looked at Adam, not seeming entirely convinced. “You really think that I can be a fighter pilot?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think. It matters what you think. But between you and me, I really think that you can do it.” Lance smiled at him. “Who knows? The journey that you and Keith are both on, maybe one day they’ll intersect.” Lance made a disgusted face and Adam laughed. “Or maybe not. Now let’s check out that cruiser and see if it can make it back to the Garrison.”

“Thanks for the advice, Adam,” Lance said. Then he kicked some dust and looked at his shoes. “It was nice seeing my family, but I wish that you were there, too.” Adam smiled.

“It’s good to have you back, Lance. Let’s just hope that you didn’t break that cruiser, or else
Iverson will lock you up in the basement.” Lance’s face paled, and Adam laughed. Lance gave him a gentle shove and ran back towards his cruiser, which had thankfully stopped smoking.

Adam paced up and down the viewing area, glancing at the wide window every other second.

“Is he okay?” Matt whispered to his mom, and Colleen shushed him and put a hand on his head.

“Five minutes and thirty-three seconds, mom,” Katie said. “Did you hear that Adam?” Adam nodded his head and gave Katie a smile.

“Thanks, Katie.” He decided to stop pacing. Worrying wouldn’t get Shiro here any faster. He took a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders, walking up to the window. He rested his fingertips against the glass. The sun was high in the sky - it was just past noon. It had been five months since Shiro left. It was meant to be only three, but Iverson told him a few weeks after the cadets returned that Sam had made a breakthrough and needed more time. Adam had dinner with the Holts that night, and Colleen ended up inviting him to dinner every Sunday since. It was good for both of them - knowing that they weren’t going through this alone. Knowing that they were both looking at the moon more than the average person these past couple of months. Adam sighed and dropped his hand from the glass. He felt Colleen give his shoulder a comforting squeeze as she moved to stand beside him.

“They’ll be home soon,” she said, and Adam nodded his head. Then he heard someone behind them clear their throat, and both Colleen and Adam turned around to see Commander Iverson standing by the entrance to the viewing room. Something in his gaze made Adam nervous.

“There have been some - complications,” Iverson said, straightening his back. Adam could tell that he was forcing himself to meet their eyes. Colleen took a step forward.

“What do you mean, complications?” she asked. Katie and Matt looked at Iverson with wide eyes. Iverson’s jaw clenched.

“We can’t get in contact with Officer Holt and Lieutenant Shirogane,” Iverson explained. “And our sensors aren’t picking up the spacecraft.”

“When did this happen?” Adam asked.

“About two hours ago.”

“And you didn’t think to tell us -” Colleen began, her eyes narrowing.

“We are telling you now, Colleen,” Iverson said. “We didn’t want to worry you until we had all of the information.”

“Which is to say you have no information,” Adam clarified, and Iverson grimaced. “You don’t know where they are, you don’t know how they’re doing - they could be suffocating or drifting off into space and you -” He noticed Katie and Matt looking at him and stopped.

“They were fine when we lost communication with them,” Iverson said. “We have our best engineers working on the problem right now. For all we know they could still be on the planned course.”
“Thank you for letting us know, Commander,” Colleen said, putting a hand on both of her children. “Please tell us if anything changes.” She still looked angry, both Adam and Iverson could see that, but Adam knew that she was thinking the same thing as he was - they didn’t want to worry the kids. Iverson nodded his head and made his way out of the visiting area.

“Is Dad coming back?” Katie asked, and Colleen bent down and smoothed her hair, a smile on her face.

“Of course he is, sweetie. He always does.”

“But what if he doesn’t?”

“Well then we’ll just have to go into space and find him ourselves,” Colleen said, glancing at Adam. “And Shiro.”

Adam nodded his head and said nothing, worried that his voice would betray him.

“It would be a space adventure! So cool!” Matt said, bouncing a little. He looked at his sister. “We could be the first family in space!” Katie grinned and poked him in the ribs. Then she laughed and ran away as Matt began to chase her, holding out his arms.

“Be careful,” Colleen said, smiling as she watched them. But Adam could still see the worry in her eyes. He moved to stand beside her once more.

“What are you thinking?” Adam asked quietly, and Colleen sighed.

“He has to come back, they both do.” Adam was quiet for a moment.

“I lost my brother on a similar mission,” Adam said. Colleen nodded her head, her expression sad.

“I know. Sam told me. He’d met Casey before, said that he was a good man. He didn’t think he should mention it -”

Adam smiled. “I understand. I appreciate it.” He felt his smile waver. “I can’t lose him too Colleen. I don’t know what I’d -” Colleen wrapped her arms around him and he melted into it, hugging her back. “I’m sorry, I should be comforting you -”

“I’m a mother, Adam, we’re pretty invincible.” Adam laughed and pulled away, giving her a grateful smile.

“No matter what we’re in this together,” Adam said, and Colleen nodded her head, giving him a smile that he knew was real. Adam turned to face the window once more, looking at the empty blue sky. Waiting was always the worst part. He remembered how his family sat around the telephone, waiting for Casey to call them, to tell them all about his trip to space. But when the phone finally rang it wasn’t him on the line. Adam remembered the way his mother’s smile fell.

He hadn’t really considered the possibility of losing Shiro. Shiro always came across as being so invincible. Sometimes he even forgot that Shiro was sick at all. He knew that one day he would have to exist in a world without him, but Adam had always imagined a hospital bed, a proper goodbye, more than a decade of memories to look back on - it wasn’t supposed to be like this.

If space took Shiro away from him as well, then he would never forgive it. He would hate it forever.

“Look!” Matt said, and Adam was pulled from his thoughts as he looked at the window and saw
something heading towards Earth. Then he heard the door open.

“We were able to get back online,” Iverson said, sounding a little breathless. “They’re on their way home.”

Matt and Katie cheered, and Colleen leaned against the glass, hanging her head as a small, relieved smile tugged at her lips. Adam just watched the ship get larger, unsure if he was even breathing. They all watched as the ship got closer to Earth, and then the parachute was released and it fell out of sight, behind the desert rocks where the landing site was. Adam caught Colleen looking at him and they both began to laugh, holding each other for support.

“They’ll be here in about ten minutes,” Iverson said, and Adam could almost see the ghost of a smile on his face as he left.

Adam was positive that he’d never experienced ten minutes that had lasted so long in his entire life. He began to pace across the room once more, checking his watch so much that Matt gave him nervous looks.

“I think he’s lost it,” Matt said to his sister.

“Oh he lost it a long time ago,” Katie said, and Adam gave her an unamused look and continued to pace. Then the door flew open and Adam watched as Sam ran over to his wife and kids, wrapping them all in a hug as they began to laugh. There were tears in Colleen’s eyes as she held on to her husband. Then Adam looked back at the door and saw Shiro standing in the doorway, looking at Adam with an expression that was hard to read. He took a step forward, and then he was running towards Adam, grabbing him and lifting him in the air.

“Takashi!” Adam yelled in surprise, holding onto him as Shiro spun him around. His panic quickly turned into laughter and Shiro set him down, his hands still on Adam’s waist.

“God I missed you,” Shiro breathed, adjusting Adam’s glasses for him. Adam swatted his shoulder.

“You scared me!” Adam said. “Iverson told us - I thought you -” Shiro rubbed the back of his head, looking guilty. Then Adam grabbed the front of his suit and pressed Shiro’s lips hard against his, pulling away a moment later to see the dazed expression on Shiro’s face. “Don’t do it again.” Shiro grinned.

“I can’t make any -ow! Okay, I promise!” Shiro said, rubbing his arm and laughing. “You’ve gotten more violent while I was gone.” Adam crossed his arms.

“Blame Hannah and April, they’re a bad influence.” Shiro’s eyes widened.

“They’re back?” Adam nodded his head.

“They’ve already gotten me to sneak a jet out of the Garrison, read through Iverson’s files, and make them way too many trays of brownies.” Shiro laughed.

“Looks like you’ve been having fun without me,” he said with a smirk. Adam rolled his eyes.

“It would’ve been better if you were there.”
“Well I’m here now.” Adam looked him up and down, a soft smile on his face.

“Yeah, you’re here now.”

Chapter End Notes

my tumblr: @nobodys-pearls
Age Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

So this one's a little under 15k *sweats* - a lot happens in this chapter. Thank you for being patient with me, it yields focus after all *bu-dum tiss*

I hope that you guys like it! Only two more chapters left!

“I have to say, I’m surprised that Iverson actually gave us a day off,” Shiro said, adjusting the bag that was in his arms as they stood outside of the Garrison.

“You know that he has a secret soft spot for us,” Adam said, looking down the road. The desert sky was large and blue today. “He just refuses to admit it.” Shiro grinned and bumped Adam’s shoulder, causing Adam to turn and look at him and then make a surprised hum in the back of his throat as Shiro began to kiss him. He closed his eyes and cupped Shiro’s cheek, kissing him back. Shiro pulled away a moment later, and Adam saw the smile on his face. He wondered if there would ever be a time when looking at Shiro wouldn’t take his breath away, when kissing him wouldn’t make his heart skip a beat. Then Shiro turned to face the road, looking out at the horizon.

“I decided something last night,” Shiro said, his lips turned into enough of a smirk that it caused Adam’s eyes to narrow in suspicion. He waited for Shiro to continue. “Ten feet,” Shiro said, and Adam’s suspicion shifted into curiosity. Shiro looked at him from the corner of his eye. “I don’t want to be more than ten feet away from you, ever.” Adam titled his head, a bemused smile spreading across his face. Then he laughed and faced the road as well, adjusting the strap of his duffle bag on his shoulder.

“You sound like you’re obsessed with me or something,” Adam teased. “Do you have a crush on me?” Shiro laughed, causing Adam to grin.

“I still remember the first moment when I realized that I had a crush on you,” Shiro said, and Adam looked at him with interest. “We were fifteen. -”

“Wait, you knew when we were fifteen?” Adam asked, his eyes wide. Shiro bumped his shoulder once more.

“Let me finish,” Shiro said, his tone scolding. He cleared his throat and looked out at the desert once more. “It was when you flew off that cliff, the first time we snuck the cruisers out.”

“Why then?”

Shiro turned to look at him, and there was something bright in his eyes. “You should’ve seen the look on your face once you got off that cruiser. You took your helmet off and you were - beaming. I’d never seen you light up like that before. And you followed after me, no, you beat me in the end. It was incredible - you were incredible. And after that I had it bad.” Adam smiled at the memory, and then he scoffed and shook his head. “What?”

“And then we fought, and I messed it up for a while,” Adam said. “You probably hated me then.”
“The thing was I didn’t,” Shiro said. “I wanted to be mad at you, but it was like something was preventing me from doing that.” He let out a breathless laugh. “I figured it out that night in the kitchen, when we made up, when I told you about my dad.”

“You figured out what?”

“That I loved you,” Shiro said, and Adam’s eyes widened.

“But we were so young, how could you know so -?” Adam began. Shiro shrugged.

“I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. I think that loving you was inevitable.” Adam looked at him for a long moment, and then he heard the sound of a car honking. Adam and Shiro turned their heads to see a car driving towards them down the road, kicking up dust. Adam smiled when he saw an arm waving out of the driver’s window. Soon the car pulled up and came to a stop, and June got out of the car and pulled Adam into a tight hug.

“Hey June,” Adam said, smiling into her hair.

“He’s so handsome,” June whispered. Adam blushed as she pulled away, giving Shiro a once over. “I’m June, Adam’s sister. I’m been looking forward to finally meeting you.”

Shiro smiled and held out his hand. “Patience yields focus, right?” June titled her head and grinned, glancing at Adam.

“It looks like my reputation precedes me. I didn’t know that you remembered that line,” June said to Adam. Adam rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah I guess it stuck with me.” Adam admitted. June’s gaze softened and then she clapped her hands together.

“Well let’s get back on the road. Mom can’t wait to see you, and to meet you,” June said, looking back at Shiro. Shiro gave her a nervous smile before looking at Adam. Adam reached out his hand and Shiro held on to it as they made their way to the car.

“So how did it go with the family?” Hannah asked, leaning against Adam’s desk as he graded more papers. He looked out of his office door and saw that he was the last light lit up in the hallway. He didn’t realize how late it was.

“It was good. I think,” Adam said, smiling as he put check marks on Lance’s exam. He did really well on this one.

“You think?” Hannah asked, and Adam could feel her skeptical eyes on him as she put a spoonful of pudding in her mouth. Adam shrugged.

“My parents thought that he was very polite,” Adam began, setting Lance’s exam aside and moving Keith’s in front of him. “June seemed to get along really well with him, even though I could tell that he was super nervous, and Noah and the baby seemed to like him too. Casey liked playing with his hair,” Adam said with a grin, and Hannah snorted and put down her pudding.

“It must’ve been super weird for Shiro,” Hannah said, and Adam looked at her quizzically. “You know, he’s probably not used to being around families anymore.” Adam furrowed his brow.
“He seems fine when we’re at the Holts,” Adam said.

“Yeah, but this is a family that could become *his* family, you know? That’s probably a big deal for him.” Adam set down his pen and thought about that for a moment, crossing his arms.

“I didn’t really consider that. You’re so right.” Hannah picked her pudding back up.

“I usually am.” She continued to eat more of her pudding and Adam began grading Keith’s exam. He did really well too. “So how’s the baby? Casey?” Adam smiled.

“She’s - perfect,” Adam said. “She really is. And she’s already a handful for June and Noah, so I can’t wait until she reaches her teen angst phase.” When Adam finished grading he realized that Keith got a better grade than Lance by one point - Lance was going to hate that. “Then maybe they’ll understand the teen angst that I witness as a teacher.” Hannah laughed.

“Did you see how Keith tried to wear black gloves to class the other day? For a solid five seconds Iverson had no idea how to respond.” Adam shook his head and smiled.

“Kids these days.” Adam grabbed Hunk’s exam next, and Hannah leaned over to see which one he was grading.

“Now this kid doesn’t have an angsty bone in his body,” Hannah pointed out. “He’s a *literal* ray of sunshine and I do not understand.” Hannah paused. “He’s my favorite.”

“Hannah -“ Adam began, putting check marks next to all of Hunk’s answers.

“Come on, Adam, I know that Lance is your favorite, that Keith is Shiro’s favorite, and that April has a soft spot for Ina, and for Violet since she’s her cousin.”

“Where does that leave James?” Adam asked. Hannah rolled her eyes.

“James is Iverson’s favorite, even though James is a little shit -”

“Hannah!” Adam said, looking out the door nervously, even though he knew that the hallway was empty.

“He *is*, though!” Hannah protested. “I can tell that he thinks he’s better than everyone else and it just *bothers* me -”

“Shiro thought that he was the best,” Adam pointed out. Hannah rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, because he actually *was*. That’s different. And he wasn’t rude about it either. All James does is kiss up to Iverson and shoot the other cadets condescending looks.”

“He seems to like Violet and Ina,” Adam pointed out.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Hannah conceded. “It seems like this group divided in two. Or three, I guess, since Keith is kind of in his own group. It’s weird.” Adam sighed.

“This group is definitely different than ours, but they’re similar too, you know? They’re driven, and competitive. They have their own sets of values and their own ways of doing things. And they still have a lot of growing up to do. They might have their - rough patches - as a group, but I think that they will turn out all right. Even James.” Hannah gave him an unconvinced look and scooped out the rest of her pudding. Adam laughed. “Have some faith in them, Hannah.”

“I *do*,” Hannah said, and she sounded sincere. “I guess it’s just - I’ve never been responsible for
people younger than me before. I feel like - I don’t know - if they don’t become everything that they can be, then it’ll be my fault.”

“It’ll be our fault,” Adam corrected her. “And they will, Hannah. We got this. You and April have learned the ropes really quickly. You’re both great teachers.”

“Thanks, Adam,” Hannah said, giving him a smile. She threw her empty pudding cup in the trash from where she was leaning on Adam’s desk. “What do you think April and Shiro are talking about?” Adam shrugged.

“Audit didn’t tell you?”

“She told me that she wanted the three of us to have dinner with Shiro, but she didn’t say what we were going to talk about. She probably just wanted to catch up.” Adam looked at her with interest.

“Three of you? So why are you here?”

“I wanted to spend some quality time with you,” Hannah said with a sweet smile.

“That’s very sweet Hannah, now tell me the real reason.” Hannah slumped her shoulders.

“For the record I do like hanging out with you,” Hannah said. “But I also wanted to ask you something.” Adam stacked the exams into a neat pile and placed them into a manilla folder. Then he looked at Hannah and clasped his hands on his desk, gesturing her to sit in the chair across from him. Hannah scoffed and rolled her eyes, sitting in the chair. Then she began to look nervous.

“How do you do it? You know, you and Shiro?” Adam quirked an eyebrow.

“Do it?”

“Yes! How does it work?” Adam shifted in his chair, beginning to look slightly uncomfortable.

“Isn’t that kind of a personal question? I mean, why do you want to know?” Hannah had a frustrated look on her face.

“Because I want to be everything that April deserves but I don’t know how!”

“Wait - I’m confused. You know that it doesn’t work the same for you and April as it does for me and Shiro, right?”

“I know it’s not perfect, but I still thought that you could give me some advice. I mean, how did you deal with Shiro leaving for so long?” Adam blushed in embarrassment.

“I really don’t think I’m comfortable talking to you about my sex life, Hannah, I wish I could.” He watched as Hannah’s eyes blew wide.

“I’m not asking you about sex!” Hannah yelled, and now it was Adam’s turn to look at her in surprise. “April has been asked to leave for a solo mission that will last six months and she wants my permission to go!” Hannah looked at him in confusion. “You thought I was asking about your sex life?” Adam opened his mouth to respond, and then he closed it, not knowing what to say. Hannah continued to look at him in confusion and then she burst into laughter. Adam began to laugh as well.

“That’s why I was so confused!” Adam finally said, and Hannah laughed even harder.

“Wow! Okay!” Hannah said between laughs, tears in her eyes. They managed to calm down a few
moments later, and Adam saw the conflicted expression on Hannah’s face.

“When would she be leaving?” Adam asked.

“In two months,” Hannah said with a sigh. “I don’t want her to leave, but I also don’t want to be the reason that she stays, you know? I would always feel guilty about it.” Adam nodded his head.

“I understand,” Adam sighed as well and adjusted his glasses. “I’m not going to sugar-coat it, it won’t be easy. But if anyone can do this it’s you.”

“Wait, so you think that I should let her leave?” Hannah asked. Adam smiled.

“Come on, Hannah, you knew what you were going to do before you asked me,” Adam said, and Hannah looked at the floor.

“You’re right,” she admitted. “But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“I know,” Adam said, his voice soft. He thought back to the months when Shiro was gone. He had his family, his friends, his students, and yet nothing could replace the Shiro-shaped void that followed him as he waited, looking at the moon. “Shiro and I will be here for you, just like you and April were there for me. I wish that I could say or do something that would make all of this easier on you, but I can’t. Just know that I’ll be here.”

“Thanks, Adam,” Hannah said, looking up at him. “I guess I’ll tell April tonight.” Then she paused, her gaze turning more curious. “So now that Shiro is back -” she trailed off, and Adam waited for her to continue. “What’s the next step for you guys?”

“Next step?” Adam asked. Hannah leaned forward in her chair.

“Are you going to get married? Have a family? Are you going to keep teaching here?” Adam scoffed and leaned back in his chair. “I’m serious, Adam. Have you thought about the future at all?”

“Trust me, I’ve thought about it a lot,” Adam said. “But it’s too soon. We both have a lot going on and -” Hannah gave him an unconvinced look. “Okay, I’m afraid of bringing it up, okay? I’m not sure what he wants. And I can’t help but think that we’re constantly running out of time, but I don’t want to push him into a situation that he doesn’t want to be in -” Hannah let out a laugh with no real humor in it and Adam stopped.

“We’ve both gotten in too deep, haven’t we?” Hannah said, and Adam grinned and shook his head.

“Way too deep, but I wouldn’t want to give it up for anything.”

“Me neither.” Adam heard a knock on the door and looked up, seeing Keith standing in the doorway, looking unsure.

“I’ll come back later -” Keith said, glancing at Hannah and moving to go back into the hall. Hannah quickly stood up from her chair and headed over to Keith.

“He’s all yours,” Hannah said to him. Then she looked back at Adam, giving him a smile. “See you later, Waddles.” Adam rolled his eyes and smiled, watching as Hannah walked through the open door and into the hall.

“Waddles?” Keith asked, a small smirk on his face.
“Take a seat, Keith,” Adam said, ignoring the question. Keith moved to sit down, playing with the sleeves of his red and white hoodie. Adam gave him a curious look. “This might be the first time that you’ve come to my office.”

“I didn’t really come here to talk about flight techniques,” Keith said, crossing his arms. Adam raised a brow and Keith sighed. “Sorry, I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask away.” Keith tightened his arms against his chest and looked anywhere but at Adam.

“I want to start a garden,” Keith said, and he glanced at Adam. “By the cabin.” Adam looked at him in confusion.

“We’re in the desert,” Adam felt the need to point out. Keith shrugged his shoulders.

“There are some plants that survive in the desert.” Then Adam watched as he pursed his lips, looking away from Adam once more. “I just want something to be living there.” Adam’s gaze softened. He turned on his computer and began to type things in.

“Then let’s do some research,” Adam said. He clicked on an article. “What kind of plants were you thinking?”

“Something that will last,” Keith said. “Something durable.” Adam nodded his head, his glasses reflecting the light of the computer screen.

“There are a lot of different kinds of cacti and succulents that we could get,” Adam said, turning the screen so that Keith could see. Keith leaned forward in his chair.

“I like that one,” Keith said, pointing at the screen. Adam saw where he was looking and scrolled down a little.

“That’s a jade tree,” Adam read. “Aw. It’s also called the ‘friendship tree’. How sweet.” He looked at Keith and watched him roll his eyes, leaning back in his chair.

“I like the red ones,” Keith added, and Adam saw the pictures of the jade tree with red tipped leaves.

“I like them too. I also like the Texas sage.” Adam saw the ghost of a smile on Keith’s lips.

“My dad grew up in Texas,” was all that he said. Adam added those to the list. They continued on like that, pointing out their favorite plants. They ended up with a small variety of plants that seemed relatively easy to take care of. Adam kept sneaking glances at Keith, noticing the way that his eyes would light up. This was good for him. Adam turned the screen back to its proper place and turned the computer off.

“I can probably go into town and pick some of these up this week,” Adam said. Keith nodded.

“Thanks.” Adam leaned forward in his chair. There was something that he’d been meaning to ask Keith, and now was as good a time as any.

“Have you ever thought of moving back into the cabin?” Keith stiffened and Adam quickly realized that it was a sore subject.

“Iverson won’t let me,” Keith said. “I don’t turn eighteen until next year, and apparently the Garrison doesn’t allow minors to live on their own. I have to stay here.” Adam nodded his head in understanding.
“That’s what Shiro did. I think that he would get lonely over the summers, when we all went back home.”

“I don’t get lonely.” Keith said. “I just feel like I’m stuck here.”

“You don’t like it here?” Keith shrugged.

“I like to fly, and it’s better than the foster home I was in, but I’m better on my own. I just want them to give me a mission already. I hate waiting around here.” Adam looked at him for a moment, and then he stood up.

“Let’s go to the cabin,” Adam said, and Keith looked at him in confusion. “We should decide where we want to put this garden before I start buying things.” Keith shrugged and stood up, and together they made their way to the cruiser bay. “I’m tempted to race you there, but I have a feeling that I would just embarrass myself,” Adam said, and Keith smirked.

“Yeah, you would,” he said, and Adam laughed.

“You know, you remind me so much of Shiro when we were kids,” Adam said, and something in Keith’s eyes lit up as he hopped on his cruiser. They headed towards the cabin, Keith getting there before him, although Adam knew that Keith wasn’t going as fast as he normally liked to, and they both hopped off, sand kicking up around them and the moon high and full in the sky. Adam walked towards the cabin, furrowing his brow. “Where were you thinking of putting this garden?” Keith began to walk around the perimeter of the cabin and Adam followed him. He stopped at the back door.

“Right here.” Keith said, and Adam watched as he gestured to the empty space near the kitchen window. Adam smiled, thinking of all the times that he would look out that kitchen window and at the desert horizon. This was the perfect place. “Now why did you really make us come all the way out here?” Keith asked.

“What do you mean?” Keith rolled his eyes, putting a hand on his hip. “Okay, fine.” Adam took a deep breath. “Keith, what do you think about the other cadets?” Keith shrugged.

“I don’t have an opinion,” Keith said, and Adam gave him an unconvinced look. “I don’t really know them.”

“I think that Lance would have a lot of things to say about you,” Adam said dryly. Keith looked at him in confusion.

“Oh, you mean the cargo pilot,” Keith said after a moment, and Adam’s eyes widened.

“You don’t even know their names?”

“Why does it matter?” Keith argued. “We’re not friends.”

“But they could be your friends, Keith. Why do you keep them at a distance?” Keith was silent, and Adam sighed. “I brought you here to remind you of something important.”

“And what’s that?” Keith said. Adam could hear the note of hostility in his voice. He knew that Keith didn’t like to be pushed, but he felt like this was necessary.
“You aren’t stuck on Earth, Keith. There are good memories here, good places, good people. Why are you so eager to leave all this behind?” Keith groaned and kicked a small rock with his shoe.

“Don’t you ever think that there’s something out there that’s greater than all this?” Keith asked, his voice more vulnerable than he’d ever allowed it to be. “Don’t you ever think that you belong out there?” he pushed, gesturing to the sky. Adam looked at him in curiosity, and Keith caught him looking. He dropped his arm and turned to face away from him. “Forget it.”

“There’s another reason that I brought you here,” Adam said, and Keith didn’t respond, his back still turned to him. “I want to move into this place, with Shiro. And I want you to live here with us.” Keith was still for a long moment, and then he turned around to face Adam.

“What?”

“Once you’re eighteen you can live wherever you want, and soon Shiro and I won’t be your teachers anymore. If you wanted to, you could stay here with us.” Keith kept staring at him and Adam rubbed the back of his neck. “Unless you were planning on living here alone. I didn’t mean to imply that I was taking your house from you it’s definitely yours I just thought -”

“You’re serious?” Keith asked in a soft voice. Adam dropped his hand.

“Yes, I am. You shouldn’t feel like you’re stuck anywhere. You deserve a home. And Shiro and I want to be here for you.” Keith’s eyes widened, and then he quickly looked away.

“I’ll have to think about it,” Keith said, and Adam nodded his head.

“There’s no pressure. I just wanted you to know.”

“Does Shiro know about this?”

“I was actually going to talk to him about it tonight,” Adam confessed. “But I’ve caught him reading articles about legal guardianship.” Keith smiled at the ground. Then something hard to place shifted his expression.

“There’s something that Shiro isn’t telling me,” Keith said. “I see him in the infirmary wing a lot, and when I ask him about it he always manages to change the subject. He also has those weird bracelets on his wrists. He mentioned that it helped him with his muscles - is he sick?” Adam raised a brow - he knew about the bracelets, that wasn’t new, but he didn’t know that Shiro had been going to the infirmary more often. Adam sighed, looking at Keith regretfully.

“It’s not my place to tell you, Keith. It’s something that Shiro will have to explain. I’ll talk to him about it.” Keith nodded his head, but his expression still looked conflicted. Then he walked back to the cruisers, and Adam followed him. He watched as Keith looked at the stars, remembering what he had said earlier - that he didn’t belong here, but out there. Seeing that faraway look in his eyes, the way that Shiro used to look at the sky, Adam couldn’t help but agree. Keith belonged in space. But that didn’t mean that he belonged on Earth any less. Adam hopped on the cruiser and Keith did as well. “One more thing,” Adam said, and Keith looked at him warily, holding his helmet in his hands. “If you call Lance ‘the cargo pilot’ he might actually try to murder you, so be careful with that.” Keith barked out a laugh, putting on his helmet.

“I can take him.” With that they sped back towards the Garrison, leaving the stars behind.
Adam flipped to the next page of his book and smiled as he felt Shiro’s cheek nuzzle into his neck, and his arms tighten around Adam’s torso. He rested the book on Shiro’s back as he continued to read and Shiro mumbled something in protest. Adam laughed and began to comb a hand through Shiro’s hair, turning to the next page with his other hand and feeling Shiro’s slow breathing on his chest.

Adam loved these days. The days where he and Shiro could just exist together. When it was just the two of them sitting on the couch in their apartment, and everything was safe and easy. In moments like these, when Adam was reminded that Shiro was back in his arms, not in space or on the moon or anywhere else - it filled him with warmth. It felt right. Then he felt Shiro stiffen on top of him. He watched as Shiro lifted his head to look at Adam, his eyes slightly wider than usual.

“What?” Adam asked, hearing the slight panic in his voice. He moved to check the bracelets on Shiro’s wrists to make sure that there was nothing wrong, but Shiro pulled his hands away.

“Hannah and April are together!” Shiro exclaimed, and Adam looked at him in confusion.

“Yeah, they told us that they would run safety techniques with the cadets today,” Adam said. Hannah didn’t seem thrilled about it, but since April insisted she couldn’t say no. She could never say no to April. On top of that, April was leaving in a week, and Adam knew that Hannah wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. Shiro shifted so that he was lying next to Adam instead of on top of him.

“No, I mean that they’re together. Like, they’re dating.” Adam looked at him for a long moment, seeing the seriousness on Shiro’s expression. Then he set his book down on his chest and began to laugh. “What?” Shiro asked, furrowing his brow.

“You just realized this?” Adam exclaimed, still laughing. Shiro pouted and gave him a gentle shove before crossing his arms. “Takashi, they’ve been together since their mission. They hold hands almost everywhere they go.”

“I thought that that was a friend thing,” Shiro mumbled, and Adam laughed and shook his head.

“This is why it took so long for us to get together,” Adam said. Then he felt Shiro’s hand on his chest, taking the book away and putting it on the table.

“I think that it was worth the wait,” Shiro said, moving to hold Adam’s hand. Adam turned his body towards Shiro and smiled. Then he leaned in and kissed him, feeling Shiro smile against his mouth before kissing him back. Adam felt as Shiro let go of his hand to cup his cheek instead, gently rubbing his cheekbone. Adam lightly balled Shiro’s shirt in his fist and moved to kiss Shiro’s neck, smiling when he heard him gasp.

“It was,” Adam finally said, kissing Shiro’s jawline, then his cheek, and then his lips once more. Shiro pressed further into Adam, deepening the kiss. It was warm and slow and Adam began to get excited that this was going to lead to something more. Then he heard something fall heavily by the door. Adam and Shiro quickly pulled apart and looked over to see Raj standing in the open doorway, his bag on the ground and his eyes wide in shock.

“What’s with that face, space cadet?” Henry asked, moving to stand in the doorway next to him. Then he saw Adam and Shiro and his eyes widened as well. Adam looked at the two of them. Raj was way taller than he’d last seen him, but still as lanky as always. His hair was a little longer, parted in a thick wave. Henry had filled out a lot. He looked sturdy and grown up, very much unlike the teenager who used to crack jokes and get on Hannah’s nerves.
“Um, hey guys,” Adam said, feeling Shiro slowly get off of him to sit on the couch. Adam lifted himself up onto his elbows, adjusting his glasses. “Want some tea?” They looked at Adam with those same shocked expressions for a long moment, and then Henry began to laugh, dropping his bag.

“Looks like I owe April some money,” Henry said, giving Raj a nudge. Raj shook his head and smiled. Adam glanced at Shiro and saw him grinning. Soon he stood up and walked over to Henry and Raj, pulling them into a hug.

“It’s so good to see you guys,” Shiro said. “You’ve been gone forever.” Adam got up as well and headed for the kitchen.

“Sit down. I’m making tea,” Adam said, and he saw Raj give him a grateful nod. The three of them went to sit down, Adam noticing how Raj and Henry decided to avoid the couch and opted for the two seats instead.

“Yeah, the mission took a little longer than expected,” Henry said. “There were some technical difficulties getting there, but thankfully we had Raj there to save the day.” Raj smiled bashfully.

“It was nothing. If it wasn’t for Henry we wouldn’t have found the samples that we were looking for.”

“I guess Iverson did a good job of picking partners,” Henry said, giving Shiro and Adam a look. Adam blushed in embarrassment and leaned against the counter, waiting for the water to boil.

“What was it like? Europa?” Shiro asked, leaning forward on the couch.

“There’s a lot of ice,” Henry said. Raj shivered at the thought.

“That’s part of the reason that our mission took so long,” Raj explained. “We had to break through the layer of ice to collect samples.”

“How thick was the ice?” Adam asked.

“About fifteen miles,” Raj said, and Adam winced. “It’s a good thing that we were given plenty of supplies.”

“I can’t help but feel like Adam and I missed out. We only got eleven months in space, the rest of you had years. That must have been incredible.”

“You also got to go to Earth’s moon,” Adam pointed out. Shiro nodded his head but his expression didn’t change. Adam was secretly glad that he hadn’t been assigned any more missions. He liked space, and he wouldn’t trade that mission to Titan for the world, but that’s all that he needed. He liked being here more. He liked being with his family and his friends and the cadets. And with Shiro.

“So Hannah and April are back?” Raj asked. Adam heard the kettle whine and began pouring water into the mugs, nodding his head.

“Yes. Now we’re all teachers,” Adam said. Then he looked up. “Are you guys going to be trained too?” Henry glanced at Raj.

“Actually, Iverson is giving us a year off,” Henry said. “We’ve been gone for so long - there are a lot of things that we need to readjust to.”
“And we want to see our families,” Raj confessed, and Henry nodded his head.

“Space was amazing,” Henry began, his expression more somber. “But being there for too long - it drives you a little crazy.”

“I don’t think that I could ever get enough of space,” Shiro confessed. Then he caught Adam’s look as he handed out the mugs and coughed awkwardly, looking away. “When are you leaving?”

“We have to download some of our data into the Garrison system, and meet with Iverson and a panel of scientists,” Raj explained. “So probably in about a week.” Then he looked around the apartment. “I assume that I should stay in Henry’s room, however,” he observed, sipping his tea. Adam and Shiro looked at each other, blushing. Henry laughed.

“While we were in space I learned that Raj is the funniest out of all of us, we just never appreciated his humor,” Henry said, and Raj rolled his eyes and smiled, continuing to drink his tea. Then they all heard a knock at the door.

“You two better not be doing anything inappropriate,” Hannah said, opening the door and walking into the room, covering her eyes. April giggled and put a hand on her arm.

“It’s safe. You can look,” April said, and Adam felt his blush deepen. They were acting like he and Shiro had makeout sessions on the couch all of the time. Hannah dropped her arm and her eyes widened when she saw Raj and Henry.

“Holy shit you’re old!” Hannah said, gaping at them. Henry stood up and crossed his arms.

“I bet I don’t look as old as you do, are those wrinkles?” Hannah narrowed her eyes at him as he held his ground, and then they smiled and rushed to meet each other in the middle of the room, Hannah wrapping her arms around him and Henry hugging just as tightly.

“You’re such a dork,” Hannah said. Adam could see her grinning.

“I missed you too,” Henry said. Adam watched as April went up to Raj and pulled him into a hug as well. Soon the four of them were all hugging.

“Get in here, you two,” April said, looking at Shiro and Adam. They looked at each other and then stood up, moving to join the hug.

“We walked in on them making out,” Henry said.

“Yeah they do that,” Hannah said. “April and I do that too.” Adam felt April’s arm move to swat Hannah’s arm. Raj laughed.

“I’m sorry Henry but I think that we’re going to be the only flight partners in a strictly platonic relationship,” Raj said. Henry sighed.

“I’ll learn to deal with it.” They all stayed like that a few moments longer, holding on to each other and laughing. Then Adam went to make more tea and they all sat down, talking and catching up until Shiro checked the time and told them that it was already morning. None of them felt tired, however. How could they, when their family was finally back together?
“Are you and Shiro going to get married?” Lance asked as he rummaged through the kitchen drawers, Adam began to cough and looked at Lance in surprise, Lance’s back still turned away from him. Hunk shot Adam a sideways glance as he moved to preheat the oven. Adam laughed awkwardly.

“What makes you think that Shiro and I are even together?” Lance turned to look at Adam, whisk in hand and an unamused look on his face.

“I’m an expert when it comes to love,” Lance said. Hunk scoffed and then quickly turned around to open some cabinets when Lance shot him a glare. “It’s super obvious.”

“Do the other cadets know?” Adam asked. Lance furrowed his brow in thought.

“I don’t think that Ina, Violet, and James know. I’m not sure about Keith, though,” Lance said, a sour look on his face as he said his declared rival’s name. Adam rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, I think that he’s figured it out,” Adam confessed, and Lance pouted, crossing his arms.

“So are you going to get married?” Hunk asked, closing the cabinets and moving to join them. Lance’s pout was quickly replaced by an excited grin. Adam leaned against the sink and looked at the two of them, trying to decide how to answer. Then he reached his hand into his pocket and pulled out a small black box. Hunk’s eyes widened and Lance dropped the whisk on the floor. Adam looked down on the box, a small smile on his face.

“I’ve had this for a few months now, but I haven’t decided on the right time to ask,” Adam confessed. No time seemed like the right time. He wasn’t even sure if Shiro wanted to get married.

“There’s no rush, you have time,” Hunk said. “It took my dad a year after he bought the ring to summon up the courage to propose to my mom.” Adam’s eyes tightened at the words. Time was a luxury that he didn’t have.

“What do you mean?” Lance exclaimed, looking at Hunk and waving his arms. “He should propose right now! Why wait? It’s true love!” Adam laughed and put the box back in his pocket.

“It’s nothing for you two to worry about,” Adam said. Then he gave them a serious look. “Or to tell anyone about.” Hunk and Lance nodded their heads quickly, and Adam gave them an appreciative smile. He took a moment to look at the two of them. They had grown up a lot since they started this program. Lance was going to be eighteen in less than a year. It was hard not to look at him and still see the small boy with the large, excited eyes, sitting at the front of his class with his hand raised high. “You know, soon enough you two are going to go on your first missions.” Lance slumped his shoulders.

“Yeah, cargo pilots probably have to do something boring.”

“You’ve been doing really well on your exams, Lance. I think Iverson may give you a real mission if you keep it up.” Lance looked at him with hopeful eyes. Then then heard someone cough awkwardly in the kitchen doorway. Adam turned to see Keith standing there, his arms crossed and looking somewhere else. “Oh right,” Adam said, turning to look at Hunk and Lance. “I have to go.”

“Why?” Lance asked, looking at Keith suspiciously. Keith glanced at Adam. Adam could tell that he preferred to keep the cabin between them.

“Keith asked for an extra flight training class,” Adam explained. Lance put his hands on his hips, a smug grin on his face.
“Looks like even the hot shot pilot still needs some help,” Lance said. Hunk rolled his eyes, picking the whisk off of the floor.

“We’re good here,” Hunk said. He gave Keith a smile. “Good luck.” Keith gave him a nod of his head and looked at Adam. Adam quickly washed his hands and the two of them made their way out of the kitchen.

“So you didn’t want to tell them that we’re planting a garden, huh?” Adam asked. Keith grunted in response, heading to the cruiser bay. Adam laughed and followed him.

“They’re good people, you know,” Adam pressed on. “You should get to know them a little more.”

“There’s no point,” Keith said. “When we’re assigned missions we probably won’t see each other for a long time. Isn’t that what happened with your group?” Adam furrowed his brow.

“Yes, but we were excited to see each other. We never stopped being a family.” Keith climbed on to his cruiser, saying nothing.

“Let’s just fly,” Keith said. Adam sighed and got on his own cruiser. They made their way to the cabin, but then Keith took a sharp left. Adam watched in confusion and followed his lead, catching up with him.

“Where are we going?” Adam asked.

“I, uh, saw some cacti here that I want to add to the garden,” Keith explained. “I just don’t know what they’re called. Keith picked up the speed and Adam matched his pace. Soon he could see the Red Lion in the distance, and Keith slowed down right next to the rock. It felt weird being here without Shiro. Adam took off his helmet and hopped off of the cruiser, moving to lean against the rock.

“So which ones did you like? There aren’t many here,” Adam said, looking around. Then he noticed that Keith hadn’t gotten off of his cruiser. Keith looked somewhere behind Adam for a moment and then revved his engine, speeding back the way they came, back towards the Garrison. “Keith! What the hell!” Adam yelled after him, watching the dust cloud forming behind Keith’s cruiser in disbelief. He shook his head. Was this some sort of prank? He didn’t think that Keith had a sense of humor. Then he heard someone clear their throat behind him. He turned around and saw Shiro standing in front of him, moving out from behind the rock. He was wearing a black tailored suit, and damn did he look good in it. “Takashi? What’s going on?” Adam asked, looking at him in confusion. “Not that I’m complaining…” Shiro laughed and took a step forward, reaching out to hold Adam’s hands. Adam continued to look at him in confusion.

“I will never forget the first time you told me that patience yields focus,” Shiro said, and Adam gave him a bemused smile, still unsure of what was going on. “And I think that if the two of us have learned anything since we first met, it’s patience.” Adam laughed and shook his head. Then he saw how intently Shiro was looking at him, and his smile fell, his eyes widening slightly. “And your sister was right, the more patient you are, the more you notice. I began noticing the way you fix your glasses when you begin to feel nervous, and how you always want to impress Iverson, even now, and how you hate green tea but you always make it for me. I noticed when you hit a growth spurt and got taller than me, and how you like washing dishes more than drying them, and how much your family means to you. And the more and more I noticed - the more and more I fell in love.”

“Takashi,” Adam breathed, and Shiro let go of his hands.
“I don’t have a lot of life left in me,” Shiro said, his smile sheepish as she put his hand in his pocket. “But I want to spend the rest of it with you.” Adam watched with wide eyes as Shiro got down on one knee, holding open a small box with a gold band nestled inside. Adam was speechless as he looked at it. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. Shiro shifted nervously where he was kneeling in the dust. “I know that I kind of sprung this on you...” Shiro began to say, and Adam started crying, reaching into his own pocket and pulling out a small box, opening it up for Shiro to see the ring inside.

“I was supposed to propose to you,” Adam wanted to say as he kneeled down as well, but he couldn’t stop himself from crying as he looked at Shiro, a watery smile on his face. Shiro looked at the box in shock, and then back up at Adam. His eyes began to tear up as well.

“Looks like I beat you to it, level ten,” Shiro said with a soft smile, and Adam finally laughed.

“Let’s make a deal,” Adam said. “I’ll marry you if you marry me.” Shiro laughed and nodded his head.

“Deal,” Shiro said, shifting forward so that he was only inches away from Adam’s face. “I’d like to hear you say yes.” Adam smiled and cupped Shiro’s face with his free hand.

“Yes, of course, Takashi. Yes.” Shiro grinned and leaned in to kiss Adam, Adam quickly melting into it. Then they pulled apart and put their rings on each other, unable to keep the wide smiles off of their faces. Adam could still feel the tears in his eyes. He wasn’t sure that this would ever happen, but he should’ve known. Their lives were tied together. Forever and always. It was always going to be Shiro and no one else. He moved to hug Shiro and Shiro hugged him back, nuzzling his face into Adam’s neck. “How’d you get Keith to help you out?” Adam asked, and he could feel Shiro’s laughter.

“I told him that we’d be even for that time he stole my car.” They both started laughing, and crying, and continued to hold on to each for a long time.

“No way!” Hannah said, looking at Adam’s ring with wide eyes as she she sat on his desk in his office. Then she huffed and crossed her arms. “Now I owe April money... again.” Adam noticed the twinge of sadness in her expression. April had left over a month ago and Hannah wasn’t taking it very easy. But she was staying strong.

“Why do you keep placing bets on our relationship?” Adam asked, sounding exasperated.

“Waddles, it’s what gives me the greatest joy in life,” Hannah said, and Adam rolled his eyes.

“Well it seems like April has a better read on Shiro and I than you do,” Adam said. Hannah pouted, and then her eyes softened as she smiled at Adam.

“Congratulations, really. I’m so happy for you guys.” Adam smiled back, setting his hand back down on his desk.

“I still can’t believe that he actually proposed.” Adam said quietly, looking at the ring. Hannah scoffed.

“Come on, he’s been in love with you, like, forever. Way before you realized your feelings for him.”
“You and April really kept a close eye on us when we were cadets, didn’t you?” Hannah shrugged and gave him a grin.

“We don’t get cable here,” Hannah explained, and Adam laughed. Then she lifted herself off of the table, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. “Anyway, I’m going to tell April -” Hannah paused, realization dawning on her face. “I’m going to go back to my room, if that’s alright,” she said, her voice quieter. Adam nodded his head in understanding.

“Of course.” April was the only person that they were unable to tell. They managed to contact Raj and Henry, who were back with their families, but it wasn’t like they could shoot a message out into space. The Garrison would never allow it. They were planning on telling Iverson the news tomorrow, and Adam had already called home, his ears still ringing from June’s excited squeal. It was beginning to feel more real, which left Adam feeling excited and terrified at the same time. He just wished that they could tell April. He could use some of her wise advice.

“I can’t wait to get drunk and make a speech at your wedding,” Hannah said in the doorway, sounding more like herself as she turned to look back at Adam. Adam gave her a stern look. Hannah laughed and gave him a wave of her hand. “See you later, Waddles.”

“Bye Hannah,” Adam said tiredly as she left. He began to scribble in his calendar on his desk, planning out his month. Shiro had mentioned wanting to get married sooner rather than later, but they both agreed that they should wait until the cadets were done with their third year of the program, when things would wind down for a little while. Adam looked up and tapped his pen on his desk, feeling the dopey grin spread across his face. Then he heard a knock on the open door and watched Lance walk into the room.

“I know that your office hours are done, but I was wondering if -”

“Lance,” Adam said, “you know that you can come to me any time.” Lance smiled and moved to sit down in the seat across the desk from him, leaning back in the chair. He began to tap his fingers against the armrests. “What’s going on?” Lance laughed nervously and titled his head up towards the ceiling. Then he looked at Adam.

“I need Keith to leave the Garrison,” Lance said seriously, and Adam looked at him in confusion.

“What did he do?” Lance groaned and slid further down his chair.

“He didn’t do anything, exactly, he just - needs to leave.”

“Lance,” Adam said, his tone disapproving.

“It’s his hair!” Lance exclaimed, sitting up in his chair. “It’s his dumb, floppy hair and his better-than-everyone attitude and the way that he flies off into the desert -” Adam realized what was going on and smiled, leaning back in his chair. “This is serious, Adam! He needs to leave so that I can be a fighter pilot and I won’t be distracted anymore -”

“And why are you so distracted, Lance? Is it his hair?” Adam asked, trying to keep the teasing tone out of his voice. Lance narrowed his eyes at him.

“I feel like you’re making fun of me,” Lance said suspiciously. Adam smiled and shook his head.

“You know, it’s okay if you have a crush on Keith -”

“What?” Lance yelled, leaning even further forward in his seat as he gripped his armrests. “I do not - what makes you think - he’s my rival!” Adam hid his smile behind his hand and composed
“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I guess I misinterpreted.” Lance huffed and crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair once more.

“You got that right. I’m seeing this girl back home anyway, thank you very much.”

“Oh yeah, Jennifer, right?” Adam asked, and Lance nodded his head. “Well I feel like it goes without saying that we can’t kick Keith out of the Garrison because you don’t like his hair -”

“I gave you other reasons!” Lance protested. Adam gave him an unconvinced look. Lance sighed and uncrossed his arms. “It was worth a shot.” He paused for a moment. “I’m just worried that I won’t get to go on any real missions. I came here so that I could see space.”

“I know, Lance,” Adam said. “You just have to be patient. People will see how much potential you have.”

“But when?” Lance asked, waving his arms in a dramatic gesture. Then his expression turned sad as he looked away. “I’m starting to think that whatever you saw in me doesn’t exist.”

“I’ve already told you, Lance, it doesn’t matter what I think,” Adam said. “It matters what you think. You’re only going to be as great as you believe that you can be. And I know that that isn’t easy, hell, it took me years to step away from my brother’s shadow, but it’s not impossible.” Lance sighed.

“I know. I know, really. I guess that the rumors have just got me worried.” Adam looked at him in confusion.

“What rumors?”

“You don’t know? Violet told us that they’re stopping deep space mission for a few years, so that they can focus on training more cadets.”

“No more missions?” Adam asked, his eyes widening slightly. He didn’t feel sad exactly - he wasn’t planning on going on another mission himself, but it just felt - wrong. He wondered if Shiro knew about this. Lance yawned and stretched his arms.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t worry about this so much. The rumors probably aren’t even true anyway - Violet likes being the center of attention sometimes.” Lance stood up. “Thanks for talking to me, or, I guess listening to me rant -” he said, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. Adam was still thinking about the mission termination, and looked distractedly back at Lance.

“Of course, I’m happy that you feel comfortable coming to me.” Lance nodded his head.

“See you in class,” Lance said with a wave of his hand. With that he left the office, leaving Adam alone in the room, looking at the empty doorway. He was going to have to talk to Iverson about this. Things were changing at the Garrison, things they weren’t telling the Lieutenants about. He got up from his desk and gathered his papers. Then he headed back to his apartment. When he opened the door he found Shiro sitting on the couch, rubbing his wrist. Then he looked at Adam and quickly pulled his hand away.

“We should go talk to Iverson,” Adam said, and Shiro looked at him in concern.

“Are you that eager to tell him about our engagement?” Shiro asked, but Adam could tell from his tone that he’d already caught on that there was something more. Adam shook his head.
“There’s something else that we need to talk to him about. Are you coming?” Shiro stood up and walked over to Adam, sliding his hand in his. Adam gave it a squeeze and together they headed towards Iverson’s office. Adam saw that the light was on, and could hear voices coming from inside the room. Then the conversation stopped abruptly and the door opened, Admiral Sanda standing in the doorway and looking at Adam and Shiro in surprise. They quickly stood to attention and saluted her.

“At ease, Lieutenants,” she said, sounding tired. She looked back at Iverson, who was sitting behind his desk with his usual scowl on his face. “I trust that you can explain what’s happening. Somehow this information seems to have leaked to the entire Garrison.” She sighed and walked past them and down the hall, turning the corner.

“Wadley, Shirogane, take a seat,” Iverson said gruffly, rubbing his temples. Adam and Shiro came into the room, Shiro shutting the door behind them.

“Commander,” Adam said, and Iverson furrowed his brow further. “One of the cadets told me -”

“I’m sad to say that it’s true, Lieutenant,” Iverson said. Shiro looked at them both in confusion.

“What are you two talking about?” he asked, absentmindedly massaging a part of his arm. Iverson looked at him and sighed.

“Admiral Sanda has ordered that there be no new missions for the next few years. The SEP has been showing such promising results, that she wants to focus on building up the number of cadets. Our main jobs we’ll be recruiting, training, and teaching, so we can’t send our higher ranking members off into space,” he finished, gesturing to Adam and Shiro. Shiro shook his head, looking confused.

“How are we supposed to keep the current cadets motivated if they know that they won’t be able to go to space? Around this time we were preparing to leave for Titan -”

“They will go to space,” Iverson insisted. “Eventually.” Shiro’s brow furrowed and he looked at the ground. “We all just have to be patient.” Adam scoffed, and Iverson gave him a questioning look.

“That reminds me, we wanted to tell you some good news,” Adam said. He looked at Shiro and Shiro gave him a soft smile, but Adam could tell that he was still frustrated. Shiro looked at Iverson and held up his hand.

“We’re engaged,” Shiro said, and Iverson lifted a brow, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms.

“Congratulations,” Iverson said, nodding his head once. Adam swore that he could see the ghost of a smile on his face. He opened up one of his desk drawers and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. Then he handed it over to Shiro, who looked at it in surprise. “Just don’t let any of the other officers catch you. I recommend that you don’t drink it by the window,” he warned, and Adam and Shiro looked at each other, blushing in embarrassment as they remembered drinking that wine that the Holts had given them years ago. Adam didn’t know that Iverson caught them. By Shiro’s expression he didn’t either.

“Thank you, Commander,” Adam said awkwardly, moving to stand. Shiro stood as well. “We’ll see you tomorrow.” Iverson nodded his head once and the two of the them went into the hallway, Shiro still looking down at the bottle of whiskey.
“He didn’t seem all that surprised that we’re engaged,” Shiro mused. “But I guess he’s noticed a lot of things over the years.”

“That’s why he’s the Commander, I suppose,” Adam said. They looked at the office door and laughed quietly, although Shiro’s laughter seemed somewhat forced. They walked down the hall and towards their apartment, Shiro holding the bottle in his hands. Adam unlocked the door and pushed it open, leading them both inside. The light turned on and Adam moved to sit at the counter. “What would you like to do now, Fiancé? Wow, that sounds too weird. I’m going to stick to Takashi. What do you think -?” Then Adam heard a crash and quickly turned around. He saw Shiro standing in the middle of the room, the bottle shattered on the ground. He looked at the shards with wide eyes, holding his wrist. “Takashi, what happened?” Adam asked, getting up and grabbing a towel. He kneeled over the glass and began to pick up the large shards. Shiro kneeled down and moved to pick them up as well, but Adam swatted his hand away. “You’ll cut yourself.”

“I’m fine,” Shiro said, sounding frustrated. Adam stopped and looked at him. He was rubbing his arm.

“Is it -?”

“I’m fine,” Shiro insisted.

“Don’t give me that Takashi,” Adam said. “I know you too well to be fooled by that. How long has it been like this?” Shiro furrowed his brow and looked angrily away. Then he sighed, slumping his shoulders a little.

“A little over a week,” Shiro confessed. “It usually spikes for a few days and then it goes away, so I thought that I would just ride it through but -” Adam put a hand on his shoulder.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t want to worry you,” Shiro said with feeling, looking at him.

“This is me asking you to worry me more,” Adam said, his gaze steady. “I want to help you. I’d feel stupid if the love of my life was in pain and I was too oblivious to notice.” Shiro sighed and nodded his head.

“Okay.”

“We should go to Dr. Murphy and get this checked out,” Adam said. Then he looked back down at the glass and whiskey. “But maybe I should clean this up first.”

“I was kind of looking forward to getting drunk,” Shiro confessed. Adam laughed as he put the glass in a bag and cleaned up the whiskey with his towel.

“Me too. Maybe Dr. Murphy will hop you up on painkillers,” Adam offered.

“We can only hope,” Shiro said with a tired smile. Adam leaned forward to kiss his cheek.

Adam began to pace outside of the infirmary, checking the door every few seconds. He sighed in frustration. As much as he wanted to stay with Shiro, Dr. Murphy wouldn’t let him. At least the doctor was considerate enough to tell Adam that nothing serious was going on. But that was an
hour ago. He hadn’t seen Shiro since. Adam couldn’t forget the expression on Shiro’s face as he looked down at the broken bottle. He looked surprised and...afraid. Adam never wanted to see Shiro look like that again.

“Is Shiro okay?” a voice asked, and Adam watched as Keith walked up to him, hands shoved in his pockets. Adam could tell that he was trying to mask his concerned expression, and was going for his usual glare instead.

“How did you know -?”

“Why would you be pacing outside of the infirmary otherwise?” Keith asked, crossing his arms.

“Since when could you read me so well?” Adam countered. Keith shrugged in reply and Adam sighed.

“He’s fine, there was just an accident back in the apartment,” Adam explained, trying to be as vague as possible. “Thanks for ditching me in the middle of the desert by the way, for a moment I thought that it was part of some plot to get rid of your teacher.” Keith smirked, putting his hands on his hips.

“Shiro reminded me that I owed him one. And it was easier tricking you than I thought it’d be.” Adam scoffed.

“I just have a lot of trust in you, that’s all,” Adam said, and Keith’s gaze softened for a short moment.

“Hey, congrats. I’m happy for you two,” Keith said, nodding towards the ring on Adam’s finger. Adam smiled and looked at it.

“You know, I’m still serious about you moving in with us. Have you thought about it?” Keith looked away, furrowing his brow.

“Yeah, I have. I -” At that moment the door opened and Dr. Murphy and Shiro stepped into the hall, Shiro fixing his sleeves.

“Thank you Dr. Murphy,” Shiro said, giving him a grateful smile.

“Next time come back sooner rather than later,” Dr. Murphy said, glancing at Adam and Keith. Shiro noticed that Keith was there too, and pulled on his sleeves once more. With that Dr. Murphy gave them all a nod and went back inside the infirmary, closing the door.

“What’s wrong?” Keith asked, his tone accusatory. Shiro rubbed the back of his neck and smiled sheepishly.

“It’s nothing. I just dropped some glass,” Shiro said, glancing at Adam. Adam nodded his head. Keith looked between the two of them with narrowed eyes, and then he crossed his arms.

“I was heading to my room,” Keith said, shifting his stance.

“Goodnight, Keith. See you in class,” Shiro said. Keith nodded once and walked past them and down the hall, disappearing from sight. Adam stepped towards Shiro and held his hand, then he moved Shiro’s sleeve up.

“Don’t -” Shiro said with a wince, and Adam’s eyes widened when he saw the bracelet. Adam moved the other sleeve and checked out the bracelet on his other wrist as well.
“These are different than the other ones,” Adam mused. He still remembered when Dr. Murphy had given Shiro those chunky metal bracelets two years ago, just as a precaution.

“It’s just a precaution,” Shiro said, and Adam frowned.

“It’s getting worse,” Adam said, and Shiro didn’t answer. He gently pulled his hands away, pulling down his sleeves. “You should tell Keith, Shiro. He deserves to know.” Shiro let out a frustrated sigh, running a hand through his hair. “What is it?”

“It took us so long to get together because I was worried that I would hurt you, Adam. I felt guilty about having you get close to me when we knew that I only had so much time left.”

“Yes but I know that, and I choose this,” Adam insisted.

“Yes, you had a choice in all this. I took Keith under my wing - he’s come to depend on me, and I’ve been keeping this from him. Every time I want to tell him I see your face when we were his age, and I remember you telling me about Casey and I just can’t -” Adam put his hands on Shiro’s shoulders.

“Keith is strong. He can handle it. He would want to know.” Shiro sighed, nodding his head.

“You’re right. I’ll tell him.” Adam smiled and took a step closer, winding his arms around Shiro to pull him into a hug. Shiro hugged his back.

“I asked Keith if he’d want to live with us,” Adam said.


“I have a feeling that he wants to say yes, but doesn’t know how. I’m letting him take his time with it.”

“That’s a good call,” Shiro said. Then he pulled away so that he could look at Adam. “You make a lot of good calls.” Adam smirked and crossed his arms.

“Is my rival complimenting me?” Shiro laughed.

“No, but your Fiancé is,” Shiro said. Then he furrowed his brow. “You’re right, that does feel weird to say.” He paused. “I think I’ll like husband more.” Adam grinned and gave him a gentle shove, walking down the hall.

“I still like Atlas,” Adam teased, and Shiro moved to catch up with him, a laugh escaping his lips. “Or fringe.”

“I’ve changed my mind, I’m always going to call you level ten.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Adam said, bumping his shoulder as they walked back to their apartment together. “How about we don’t tell Iverson that we wasted his bottle of whiskey?” Shiro shuddered.

“Agreed.” Adam glanced at Shiro to smile at him, and noticed him rubbing his wrists once more, looking at his arm with a furrowed brow. Adam’s smile faded and he looked back ahead, worry twisting in his gut.
“There was one time, when Shiro and I were on Earth’s moon,” Sam began, letting out a short chuckle as he set down his fork. Shiro covered his face with his hand in embarrassment.

“Sam,” Shiro groaned, but Adam could see the smile tugging at his lips. Adam covered Shiro’s free hand with one of his own.

“Please continue, Sam,” Adam said, giving Shiro a small smirk before turning to look back at Sam at the other end of the table. He noticed that Colleen was hiding her amusement behind her hand.

“Early in the mission, one of our drills came loose without us noticing and floated away. It was completely gone. We searched a little for it but there was no point. I knew that the Garrison wouldn’t be happy when I had to explain to them that we lost thousands of dollars of equipment,” Sam said, shaking his head. Then he looked at Shiro and grinned. “Then one day I was collecting samples while Shiro supervised, and I heard a yell and a flash of light -” Shiro groaned in embarrassment once more.

“Then what happened?” Matt asked, leaning forward in his seat.

“I look up to see Shiro turned around, pointing his blaster at the drill that we lost!” Sam exclaimed. “Apparently it floated back our way and hit him from behind and, well Shiro, you should tell them what you thought.” Shiro mumbled something at the table, looking down.

“What was that?” Adam asked, leaning towards him.

“Yeah, I didn’t quite catch that,” Katie said, an evil grin on her face. Shiro huffed and looked up at Sam.

“I thought that it was an alien,” Shiro said evenly, and Adam snorted and covered his mouth.

“And your first instinct was to shoot at it?” Matt exclaimed. “Shiro!”

“I thought that it was trying to attack us!” Shiro protested, and Colleen began to laugh.

“Long story short the drill was shot to pieces and floated away again,” Sam said. “It’s probably still floating around Earth’s moon.”

“Waiting to sneak up on another unassuming human,” Adam said seriously, and Shiro laughed and bumped his shoulder.

“Well at least I know what to look out for on Kerberos!” Matt said, and then his eyes widened. Katie hit him on the shoulder.

“Kerberos?” Shiro asked, furrowing his brow. Sam sighed.

“Yes, we were going to tell you at a better time. Matt and I are going on a mission to Kerberos.”

“But I thought that Admiral Sanda -”

“I had to twist her arm a little, but she eventually approved of my mission. We’ve been making great strides in my research, and I know that this planet could be the key to understanding extraterrestrial life. It could change the Earth as we know it.” Adam looked at him in surprise.

“And since I’m the only one who completely understands Dad’s research, I get to go too!” Matt said, a smug grin on his face.

“I understand it too,” Katie grumbled.
“But you have to be at least eighteen to go on missions,” Colleen reminded her. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms.

“So it’s just going to be the two of you?” Shiro asked. “Who’s going to fly?”

“Actually,” Sam said. “We do still need a pilot, but Admiral Sanda insisted that she will be the one who gets to choose who it’s going to be. This is going to be a tricky mission.”

“Then wouldn’t two pilots be better?” Shiro asked. Sam shook his head.

“Admiral Sanda is only letting me have one. As you know, she’s trying to build up the program, so she needs as many people as possible at the Garrison to teach.”

“When is she telling you her decision?” Adam asked.

“She’s going to talk to the candidate some time this week, and then she’ll let me know. The mission is scheduled to be four months from now.”

“How long is the mission?” Adam asked.

“It will be three years.”

A tense silence fell in the room. Katie crossed her arms tighter against her chest. Colleen looked down at the table, her expression too composed to be natural.

“But this isn’t good dinner conversation,” Sam said, a smile on his face. He lifted up his glass. “I want to toast you two, on your engagement.” Shiro and Adam looked at each other and smiled.

“I owe Katie money now,” Matt said, and Katie couldn’t help but let a small smile tug at her lips.

“To your happiness,” Sam said, lifting his glass towards the two of them. The rest of the table lifted their glasses as well. Adam snuck a look at Shiro as he drank, and Shiro caught him looking. He gave him a smile, but Adam could tell that he was distracted. He was thinking about something, and from the look on Shiro’s face he could guess what it might be. Adam finished his drink and set it down, feeling the warm buzz of alcohol.

Who was Admiral Sanda going to choose?

Adam knew that it was going to be him. He had a few days since dinner at the Holts to think it over, but he knew once Sam had brought it up. None of the cadets were old enough yet - Keith didn’t turn 18 for another five months. Henry and Raj were on their year-long leave of absence. April would have just gotten back from her mission by the time the ship to Kerberos was due to take off, and it would be unfair to send her on another one. Technically Hannah could go, but Adam wasn’t going to let her and April get split up. It would destroy Hannah. And Shiro - even if Admiral Sanda didn’t know about his condition, about how often he was going to the infirmary, Shiro promised Adam that he wouldn’t go on another mission.

So it was going to be him. He was going to Kerberos. He took a deep breath and kept scrubbing, setting the soapy plate to the side of the sink. Iverson hadn’t punished him with cleaning the kitchens for a while now, but Adam liked to help out every once in a while, especially when he needed to think.
Three years. He’d be gone for three years. Little Casey would be, what? Four? Five? When would he and Shiro get married? Before he leaves? After? When he gets back how much time would Shiro even have left? Adam gripped the counter, leaning forward and hanging his head. Maybe Admiral Sanda could get someone else to do it. But no, it was going to be him, he knew it. And he couldn’t disobey orders.

Sometimes he still hated space. He couldn’t help it.

“Hey,” Shiro said, coming into the kitchen to stand next to him. Adam straightened up and gave him a tired smile, Shiro grabbing the drying towel and picking up the plate that Adam had just set aside. Adam grabbed another dirty plate and resumed washing.

“It’s kind of annoying that Sam is so focused on improving Earth, don’t you think?” Adam said, and Shiro smirked. Then his smile became sad.

“Adam -”

“It’s okay, Shiro,” Adam said. “This is what I signed up for, this is what I trained for, and this is what I’m prepared to do.”

“Adam, I -”

“I don’t want to leave you, Shiro, but I’ll be back before you know it, and then we can -”

“Adam, I’m going to Kerberos,” Shiro said, and Adam stopped washing, looking at Shiro with wide eyes. Then he furrowed his brow.

“That doesn’t make any sense. With your condition, and-and you just got back from a mission, I haven’t been on one in years -”

“It’s already been decided,” Shiro said, and Adam kept looking at him in confusion.

“How do you sound so okay with this?” Adam asked. “You said that you wouldn’t go on another mission -”

“I don’t have a choice, Adam,” Shiro said firmly, setting down the plate he was drying. Adam shook his head. “There has to be someone else who can go -”

“You know that there’s no one else -”

“I can go,” Adam interrupted. “I thought that it was going to be me anyway, so I’ll go to Admiral Sanda and -”

“Don’t,” Shiro said, soft but still firm. Adam dried his hands on a towel and put his hands on his hips.

“It’s three years, Takashi,” Adam said, failing to keep the anger out of his voice. “By the time you come back -”

“We don’t know what’s going to happen,” Shiro said.

“Exactly,” Adam said, running a hand through his hair. “We were finally going to have a life together.”

“We already have a life together -”
“You think this is living?” Adam demanded. Adam saw the hurt in Shiro’s expression and sighed. “That’s not what I meant. I was just ready to have a future together.” He let out a frustrated noise. “I mean, this is your life on the line - our life,” They were going to move into the cabin, Keith was going to live with them, they were going to have a garden and cook in the kitchen and spend time away from the missions and training exercises and high expectations. Adam wanted that more than anything.

“I don’t have a choice,” Shiro repeated, his voice quiet. “I have to do this.” Adam shook his head, taking a step back.

“I-I think that I need to be alone right now,” Adam said, backing away. He looked at Shiro’s resigned look one last time before leaving the kitchen. He made his way out of the cafeteria and through the doors, weaving through the hallways until he made it to an empty stairwell that he didn’t remember ever being in before.

As he sat down under the stairs, being careful to avoid the dust, although the Garrison was always pristine, he realized that he didn’t feel angry. He was just confused.

He should’ve guessed that Admiral Sanda would choose Shiro - he is the best pilot after all. But she must know about his condition, right? It just didn’t make sense.

It should’ve been him. And at the same time, he wished that it wasn’t anyone. Adam felt like a fool for believing that he’d get his happy ending. The Garrison wasn’t a place for happy endings.

“I heard that the plans are changing,” Keith said, standing in the doorway to Adam’s office. Adam sighed and watched as Keith walked in, leaning against the wall to the left of him.

“They’re not changing,” Adam insisted. “They’re just, being set back a little,” he explained, but both he and Keith knew that he didn’t sound all that convincing.

“It should be me,” Keith said, clenching his fists. “I’m more than good enough.”

“You aren’t old enough,” Adam said. “It’s Garrison rules.”

“It’s just a month!” Keith insisted. “What does that matter?”

“They can’t break the rules, Keith.” Keith made a frustrated noise and crossed his arms.

“I’m going to ask Shiro about this,” Keith said, moving towards the door. He stopped to look back at Adam, looking like he wanted to say something, but then he decided against it and left the office, taking a left down the hall. Adam looked at the empty hallway and saw that Keith was already gone. He sighed and walked in the direction of Shiro’s office. That’s where he said that he was going to be. Apparently he was supposed to have a meeting with Sam and Admiral Sanda, which gave Adam even more reason to stop Keith before he did something impulsive. He turned the corner and spotted Keith standing outside of the office. Adam watched in confusion when he saw that Keith wasn’t going in. It looked like he was listening to their conversation. Adam was about to scold him when he heard Admiral Sanda’s voice.
“No, absolutely not!” Admiral Sanda said, her voice firm.

“Why not? He’s cleared all his physicals.” Adam heard Sam say. He moved to hide behind the corner. Something didn’t sound right about this conversation. He clutched his papers to his chest and listened.

“I don’t care what the doctor says,” Admiral Sanda argued. “This man is sick and he shouldn’t be sent on another mission, especially as far away as Kerberos. I have to report this to flight command.” Adam’s eyes widened. So Admiral Sanda didn’t want Shiro to go? But Shiro said -?

“Shiro is the best pilot in the Garrison by far,” Sam said, his voice firm. “He’s saved my bacon in deep space more times than I can count. If he doesn’t go on this mission, neither do I.” There was silence for a moment, and Adam could picture the stern look on Admiral Sanda’s face. She didn’t like when people tried to go against her orders. Then Adam heard footsteps, and he peeked his head into the hall to see Keith hurrying his way, an angry and confused expression on his face. Keith quickly rounded the corner and collided into Adam, looking at him in surprise before his expression quickly changed into something more hostile.

“Keith -”

“You knew that he was sick, really sick,” Keith interrupted. “You knew and you didn’t tell me.”

“I tried to convince Shiro -” Keith shook his head.

“Just stay away from me,” he said, hitting Adam’s shoulder as he moved past him and down the hall, not looking back. Adam sighed in frustration and watched him go, and then he heard Admiral Sanda’s voice once more.

“Lieutenant Wadley would be a much better candidate -”

“I can do this, Admiral Sanda,” Shiro said. “I won’t disappoint you.” There was another moment of tense silence, and then Admiral Sanda sighed.

“Fine,” she said, although she didn’t sound happy about it. “But if there are any signs of your condition taking a toll on your performance these next few months, I am pulling you out of this mission with no further arguments, and Lieutenant Wadley will go instead.”

“Fair enough, Admiral,” Sam said. A moment later Adam heard footsteps in the hall, and he quickly made his way back to his office, his eyes narrowed as he gripped his papers tightly.

Shiro lied to him. Was he so desperate to go back into space, that he look Adam’s spot? Was he so desperate to leave him? Shiro promised. But obviously he was having second thoughts. He placed the papers in his desk, shutting the drawer more forcefully than necessary, and headed back to his apartment. He filled his tea kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. Then he gripped the counter tightly.

‘I won’t disappoint you,’ Shiro had told Admiral Sanda. But what about Adam? Did he care at all about how Adam felt? And how did Sam get involved in all of this too? He remembered Keith’s face as he walked past him. That’s not how Adam wanted him to find out, but he didn’t know what to say to make it better. And now he was the bad guy. He heard the kettle whine and he took it off the stove, pouring it into his mug. He reached for the green tea and then made a noise of frustration, throwing the tea into the trash and choosing the mint tea instead. He sat down and glared at his steaming cup.

Shiro lied to him. Shiro was always going to choose space over him. Just like Casey did. Space was
always more important. Adam hated it. He heard the door open and Shiro let out a sigh, moving to sit down on the couch. Adam managed to put on a composed expression as he turned to look at him. “Everything okay?” he asked, as if he didn’t already know what was going on. He was curious to see what Shiro might say.

“Iverson thinks that I shouldn’t be part of the mission,” Shiro said, his head turned towards the ground as he leaned forward. “Called in the big guns.” Adam quirked an eyebrow up at that. So Iverson was the one who went to Admiral Sanda? “Admiral Sanda showed up and tried to convince Sam to remove me from the crew.”

“Well maybe he’s right,” Adam pointed out. He could feel most of his anger ebbing away. He was just tired. For right now he was just trying to understand, maybe even convince Shiro to stay. “Maybe you shouldn’t go on the mission.” I was supposed to go, Adam thought to himself. “You’ll only be putting yourself at risk.” You’ll be putting our future at risk.

“You know how important this is to me. It’s worth the risk.” Adam felt a flash of anger as he set down his mug.

“Takashi.” Adam said, although the word felt bitter and twisted in his mouth. Did Shiro ever care about him at all? Since when was this mission so important to him? Did Shiro ever tell him anything? This was like the mission to Earth’s moon all over again. He remembered the question that he asked Shiro what felt like an eternity ago, when they had decided to stay friends. “How important am I to you?”

“It scares me sometimes, how important you are,’ Shiro had told him, the desert at his back. “Every mission, every drill, I’ve been right there with you,” Adam continued. Even when he couldn’t be physically there he made sure that Shiro knew that he was waiting for him. He’d promised Shiro that he would never let go of him, no matter what. “But this is more than a mission, this is your life at stake.” Our life. Was it a mistake to hold on to Shiro for so long? Is that what Shiro even wanted? Or had Shiro just been waiting for the opportunity to leave? Was he like Keith, looking up at those stars and thinking that he didn’t belong here? Belong with Adam? How important was he to Shiro?

“Don’t start that again, Adam. You don’t need to protect me,” Shiro said, and Adam stiffened. “This is something that I need to do for myself.”

‘Then why did you propose to me?’ Adam wanted to yell. ‘Why did you have me fall in love with you and lead me to believe that we were going to be together? When all you ever wanted to do was fly off into space?’

“There’s nothing left for you to prove,” Adam insisted, and he could feel some of his resolve begin to crack. “You’ve broken every record there is to break.” He paused. He was losing Shiro, he could feel it, and yet he couldn’t quite understand how all this happened, how everything changed so quickly. It was in that moment he made a decision. He wasn’t going to do this again. He wasn’t going to watch as another person he loved chose space over him, chose to leave with a smile on his face as Adam was left behind. He just couldn’t do it anymore. “I know I can’t stop you,” Adam said, “but I won’t go through this again.” He moved to stand, facing Shiro but finding himself unable to meet his eyes. “So if you decide to go,” he continued, forcing himself to look at Shiro and finding himself unable to decipher the expression that was looking back at him. It didn’t matter. “Don’t expect me to be here when you get back.” Adam grabbed his bag and walked towards the door. “I’ve got a class to teach,” he said quietly, and with that he left the room, Shiro saying nothing to stop him. He closed the door and leaned his back against the wall, a small part of him hoping that Shiro would come after him and explain what was going on. He waited a few
moments, but Shiro never came. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand as he felt the tears well up in his eyes. No, not here. He quickly rubbed his eyes with his sleeve and headed for his office. Once he got there he locked the door and sat in the dark, crying in silence until he felt empty and dry.

He wasn’t important at all. He was beginning to doubt that he ever was.

Chapter End Notes

I mean we all knew that this part was coming, right? *sweats* (don't worry things will get better)

my tumblr: @nobodys-pearls
Age Twenty-Four

Chapter Notes

I wanted to post this chapter before season 8 drops, but I most likely won’t be able to finish this fic until after the show is over :’(

Happy reading and good luck to those who are taking tests! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adam knocked on the door, looking away as he fiddled with the hem of his sleeves. He wasn’t sure why he thought that this was a good idea. It was impulsive and selfish, but before he’d really given himself time to think about it he was already halfway here on his cruiser, a hastily packed bag slung on his shoulders. The door opened and Adam forced himself to look up.

“Adam,” his mom said, a confused smile on her face as she opened the door wider. “I thought that June was supposed to pick you up in a week -” she saw the cruiser parked in the driveway, looking out of place. Adam watched as she knit her eyebrows together, looking back at Adam. “What’s wrong?” Adam opened his mouth to say something, but then he felt the sting of tears in his eyes. He hastily rubbed his sleeve against his face. He felt his mom put a hand on his shoulder, quickly leading him inside. She sat him down at the kitchen table and walked over to the sink. “I’ll make some tea,” she said quietly, sneaking concerned glances Adam’s way. He slumped in his chair and said nothing.

He’d stopped by Iverson’s office right before he left to tell him that he was starting his break early, and to his surprise Iverson didn’t stop him, or even question him. If anything it looked like there was something that he wanted to say, but simply signed the papers and handed them over to Adam, letting him go. He couldn’t help but feel the guilt clawing up his throat. He didn’t even say goodbye to the cadets, to Hannah, to the Holts, to -

The kettle began to whine and Adam ran a tired hand through his hair. He’d be back in a month. And hopefully by then he’d have this all figured out. For now he’d simply have to hold on to that hope. His mom set a mug down in front of him and sat down in one of the empty chairs, blowing on her own mug. They sat like that in silence, his mother sipping on her tea while Adam stared off into space.

“It’ll get cold,” his mother told him. “Don’t tell me I put in the effort of making you tea for nothing.”

“Sorry,” Adam said, sitting up in his chair and lifting the tea to his lips, taking a sip. It was mint. He felt the heat from the mug warm his fingers. This was good. This was familiar. He knew that his mother wasn’t going to press him for answers. She never did when he was growing up. But she was always stubborn. There was never a time where she didn’t eventually get to the bottom of what was going on. She played the long game. Adam sighed and set down his mug, looking at his mom.

“Admiral Sanda has decided to stop the space missions for a while,” Adam said, and he could see the relief in his mom’s eyes, relief that she was trying to hide. “But Sam - Officer Holt is going on one last mission.” His mother tensed but said nothing, staying true to her method. But Adam could guess the question that she wanted to ask. “I’m not going. I should be the one to go on this mission,
but it’s not me.” Adam looked down at his mug, his eyes tightening in pain. “Taka - Shiro is the one who’s going. He went to Admiral Sanda and convinced her that he should go instead of me.” He looked at her and could tell what her next question was going to be. “The mission will be three years. He leaves in a few months.” Silence fell over the darkened kitchen once more, and Adam took a sip of his tea, setting it down and looking at it tiredly. He couldn’t even taste it. He couldn’t feel much of anything. When he looked back up his eyes widened as he saw his mother quietly crying. She quickly wiped away her tears and put her shaking hands in her lap.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head slightly. “It’s horrible, but - I’m glad that it’s not you leaving. I couldn’t - I don’t know what I’d do if I had to let you go again. I don’t think that my heart could take it.” She let out a hollow laugh and began to look more frustrated. “I can’t believe - I’m a selfish person. Shiro is so important to you, he’s such a good man, but I can’t help but be relieved.” Adam kept looking at her in surprise. He was expecting her to comfort him, to tell him that it was going to be okay, that he and Shiro were going to be okay. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

He knew that his mother was worried about him during his mission to Titan, but he didn’t realize that it was this bad. He should’ve though - he should’ve known that his mother was putting on a brave face for his sake. He should’ve known that it wouldn’t be that easy for her to risk losing another son to space. He should’ve known a lot of things. He reached out to hold his mother’s hand.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mom,” he said, and she gave him a tearful smile, placing her free hand on top of his.

“I’m so sorry about Shiro, honey. It’s very brave of him to take your place, especially given his condition.” She smiled, and this time it looked less sad. “When he came to visit - I saw the way he looked at you. He must love you a lot.” Adam looked at her in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

“To take your place, to risk his life so that you don’t have to -” Adam shook his head.

“Taka - Shiro didn’t do this for me. He did it for himself.” Adam watched as his mother bit her lip and looked away. Then she met Adam’s gaze once more, a struggle in her expression. “What?” His mother gave his hand a squeeze and moved to stand, grabbing her mug.

“I only spent the day with Shiro, but he didn’t seem like the type to do things for himself, especially when it would hurt the one he loves.”

“Casey didn’t mean to hurt us,” Adam said quietly, and he watched her fingertips tighten on the mug. Then she leaned down to cup Adam’s cheek. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she just looked at Adam, stroking his cheek with her thumb and giving him a sad smile.

“It’s good to have you home,” she said softly. Her eyes were tired. “I love you, Adam.”

“I love you too, Mom,” Adam said, his throat feeling tight. In that moment he knew that this was the right choice. Even though he felt like he had run away, he had run home. He had run to his family. And it’s what he needed now more than anything.

Maybe he was a coward, but at least he could have this, sitting in his childhood home while his mother told him that she loved him.
A week later June, Noah, and Casey came to visit.

“Hey little bro,” June said, reaching up on her toes to ruffle his hair. Adam laughed and swatted her hand away before pulling her into a hug. “We need to have a talk later,” June said quietly in his ear, and something cold dropped in the pit of Adam’s stomach as he pulled away.

“Nice to see you, Adam,” Noah said with a nod, lifting Casey up and down in the air as she shrieked with laughter. Noah held Casey out for Adam to hold, and Adam took her, laughing as she reached for his glasses.

“I see that you’re still a ball of energy,” Adam said, and Casey clumsily put Adam’s glasses on, looking at the world with large eyes, the glasses crooked and way too big for her face. June laughed behind her hand. Then she looked thoughtful.

“You used to scrunch your nose up like that when you were a kid,” June mused, and Adam looked back at Casey, who began to grin and tug at his hair. “You were a terror, too.”

“Should you be calling our child a terror?” Noah asked, and June wrapped an arm around his shoulders, kissing his cheek.

“She’s already got you wrapped around her finger,” June said with a smile, their faces only inches away from each other. Noah rolled his eyes and kissed her forehead, pulling away and reaching to take Casey back. He gently took off Adam’s glasses and handed them back.

“You got my perfect genes, so you won’t need glasses,” Noah cooed, and Casey clapped her hands. Adam heard June scoff behind him as she moved further into the house.

“Where’s Mom and Dad?” June asked, resting her elbows on the kitchen counter and facing Adam.

“They went to get groceries,” Adam said, and June nodded her head. Adam’s dad had been working some late nights at the hospital recently - apparently they were working on some new project that would revolutionize treatment for coma patients - so he decided to take the day off and spend time with his family. Adam thought back to last week, when he came home early. It was late by the time his dad returned home - his mother had already gone to sleep. He remembered his father walking into the kitchen with tired eyes, and how he jumped when he saw Adam sitting at the table, deep in thought as he held his cup of cold tea. His father complained the next morning about how Adam almost gave him a heart attack, but then Adam’s mother pulled him into their room to talk and he didn’t mention it again. Adam assumed that his mom had caught him up on what happened, since his father kept looking like he wanted to say something but never did. Adam didn’t blame him - what could he say?

“Perfect, let’s go for a drive,” June said, her expression cheery but her tone firm. Adam wasn’t going to be able to talk himself out of this. He sighed and nodded his head.

“Keys, babe?” June asked, and Noah reached into his pocket and pulled them out, handing them over as June walked up to him. He didn’t ask any questions about where they were going. Adam had the sneaking suspicion that they had talked about it on the way up here. It was two against one. Adam really couldn’t talk himself out of this.

“Let’s go,” June said, and Adam sighed again and followed her.

“Help,” Adam whispered to Casey, but she just giggled and reached out for his glasses as he passed.
“You’ll be fine,” Noah said with an amused smile. Adam wasn’t so convinced. June was already in the driver’s seat by the time he made it outside. He slipped into the passenger’s seat and closed the door. Then he heard the familiar rumble of the engine as she backed out of the driveway and into the street. The last time he was in this car Shiro was sitting next to him, a nervous smile on his face. They were holding hands. Adam clenched his fists in his lap, trying to will the memories away.

“I wanted to congratulate you on your engagement in person,” June said, her eyes on the road. “But now I want to hire a hitman to take out your fiancé.” Adam scoffed and leaned back in his seat.

“June -”

“Why the fuck is he going to space?” June asked, her hands tightening around the wheel. “Doesn’t he know - with Casey - and his illness - and you -”

“June -”

“Adam!” June said in disbelief, interrupting him. “It doesn’t make sense!”

“He’s always loved space, I’ve known that from the start, ever since we were fifteen. It was my fault for expecting something else.”

“He’s loves you,” June said. “I know he does. I could feel it.”

“And I love him,” Adam said, his tone defeated. “I love him, June. And I hate him, and I - I have to let him go.” The car was silent for a moment.

“You’re a better person than I am, Adam,” June said quietly, and Adam scoffed.

“Not at all. I’ve just had some time to think. I’m done fighting.” Adam was tired of it. Being with Shiro felt like a constant battle. It was like Shiro couldn’t function if he wasn’t fighting for something - to be the best, to go to space, to push his limits, to win Adam’s heart. The past eight years had been a long war that Adam had just been a foot soldier in. And now he was going to desert before it killed him.

“You didn’t let Casey go that easily,” June said, and Adam looked at her. Her eyes were still fixed on the road, taking them who knows where. “You even slit his tires. Dad was pissed.” Adam laughed, but there wasn’t any real feeling in it.

“I almost forgot about that,” Adam confessed. “I was so mad at him.”

“I was too,” June said.

“No you weren’t,” Adam said with a laugh. “You worshipped the ground Casey walked on.”

“Maybe, but I was also mad that he left us,” June said, and Adam looked at his hands in his lap.

“I thought that I was the only one,” Adam confessed. He remembered the way his mom’s fingers tightened around her mug. He was beginning to realize that maybe that wasn’t the case. Maybe they all were harboring some anger deep down. Anger at Casey leaving, anger at him not coming back, anger at him giving them so much love and happiness and most of all anger at the world for ripping all of that away and sending it to the moon. Anger that the world was going to do this to Adam twice. Very few things in this world seemed fair.

June parked the car and Adam looked out, immediately recognizing where they were.
“But it’s the middle of the day,” Adam said, turning to face June. She shrugged and pulled the keys out of the ignition, getting out of the car. Adam followed suit. June began walking towards the grass, and Adam followed her, looking around at the empty parking lot. Adam couldn’t remember the last time they’d come here. Had it been ten years? More than that? He heard a creak as June went to sit on one of the rusted swings, letting her toes drag in the grass and dirt. Adam sat in the empty swing next to her.

“When we heard that Casey wasn’t coming home, I thought of all of the things that I would never get to tell him,” June said, looking out at the park. “I thought of the drawing I made of him on the moon that he’d never get to see. I thought of my first science fair ribbon. He’d never get to hear about my first physics class. I’d never get to hug him and tell him how much I’ve missed him.” She paused for a moment, furrowing her brow. “Then as we grew up I began to think of the moments that I was going to have that he’d never get to see. He’d never see me graduate high school. I’d never get to show him my degree. He’d never stop by one of my lectures. He’d never see me get married. He’d never get to see my children.” June stopped, and Adam could see the tears in her eyes. “There was so much that he wouldn’t get to see.” She looked at Adam. “I stopped thinking about that as much over time. But then when you went to Titan it happened all over again, and it was you who I couldn’t stop thinking about. I was terrified that you wouldn’t come home and this time it would be my fault, because I was the one who convinced you to go and see the stars in the first place. I felt like an idiot for not thinking about that before.”

“June -”

“I know,” June said, giving Adam a small smile. “Noah helped me through it and I’m okay now, I promise. I just wanted you to know because, as much as I want to punch Shiro in the face, you shouldn’t pretend that he’s not leaving. You can’t ignore this. You have to face it.”

“I am facing it,” Adam insisted.

“No, Adam, you’re running away and you’re giving up,” June said firmly. “You said that you’re done fighting? Adam, fighting is what you do. Fight for Shiro to stay, and if he can’t then make sure that you say everything that you want to say before he leaves.” Adam dug his heels into the dirt, pulling himself back on the swing.

“I don’t know what to say to him,” Adam said in a desperate rush, clutching the chains of the swing.

“That’s okay. Just don’t hold anything back. Don’t go back to the kid you were before you met Shiro, after Casey left. Don’t go back to keeping things to yourself, like we all did. It’ll poison you.” June sighed. “You’ve been so happy these past couple of years, Adam. I just want you to keep being happy. I just don’t know what to do.” Adam lifted his feet off the ground and swung towards June, nudging her as he began to swing gently.

“Don’t worry about me too much,” Adam said. “You’ll start to get gray hairs and then I’ll have to make fun of you.” June laughed and stuck out her tongue.

“I think that it would be a good look one me,” June argued. Then she sighed once more. “I don’t know, maybe it’s because I have a kid of my own now that I’m always in protective mode. I just can’t switch it off. Sorry if I was being a little harsh.”

“No, you’re right,” Adam confessed. “I know that I ran away. But I’ll try and - I’ll try,” was all that Adam could say. June gave him a soft smile.

“That’s the little bro I know,” she said, putting her foot on Adam’s swing and pushing him away
from her. He laughed and collided into her, both of them swinging side to side, wide smiles on their faces.

“I’ve come to kidnap your son!” a voice yelled from outside. Adam heard small rocks being thrown at his window. “And maybe your pudding, if you have any!” Adam looked out of the window to see Hannah standing outside, a determined glint in her eye as she stood in his front lawn, a pile of small rocks in her arms. Adam quickly went down the stairs and opened the front door.

“Stop throwing rocks at my window! It’s the middle of the day why didn’t you knock?” Hannah looked down at her rocks and dropped them on the ground, walking up to Adam.

“It felt right,” Hannah said, and Adam sighed, leaning against the doorframe.

“Are you seriously going to try and kidnap me? We’re almost twenty-four years old,” Adam said, crossing his arms.

“I have a body bag in the back of my cruiser if necessary,” Hannah said, walking past him and into the house. Adam shook his head and closed the door, following her into the main room of the house. She stopped to stand in the middle of it, putting her hands on her hips. At first she looked accusatory, but then she clasped her hands in a desperate plea. “Please come back!”

“Hannah, there’s still another week until the cadets come back. Why would I -?”

“Keith is acting angstier than usual - he wears black leather gloves every day now. And Shiro has been keeping to himself, telling me that he has to train for Kerberos or whatever so I have no one to talk to except Iverson and Iverson officially banned me from stopping by his office unless its an emergency and April doesn’t come back for another three months and I -” At this point Hannah had walked up to Adam, putting her hands on his shoulders as he looked at her with wide eyes. “Waddles, you have to help me, I’m dying.” Adam rolled his eyes.

“You’re not dying -”

“The boredom will kill me and I will blame you for my death if you don’t come back,” Hannah said, narrowing her eyes. They looked at each other for a long moment, neither of them budging, but then Hannah sighed and took her hands off of Adam’s shoulders. “I don’t really understand what happened between you and Shiro, but I know that you’re both hurting and I’m not sure what I can do. April has always been better at this stuff.”

“Hannah -”

“You love each other,” Hannah interrupted. “Don’t you?”

“I do, I did, I -” Adam tried to explain. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “He’s leaving me.”

“And you left him,” Hannah pointed out. “You left for break without saying goodbye to any of us.”

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I didn’t mean to leave you like that. I just -”

“At least go back for Keith,” Hannah said. “He’s been closing himself off. He still goes out into the
But he couldn’t avoid it anymore. He had to face his feelings. He wasn’t fifteen anymore.

“Okay,” Adam said, sighing as he adjusted his glasses. “Let me tell my parents that I’m leaving.”

Hannah nodded her head. “Yeah, we don’t have to leave right away, you know. If you guys were going to have a family dinner or something I wouldn’t want you to cut that short.” Adam grinned. “You can stay for dinner if you want Hannah, then we’ll go back.” Hannah pumped her fist and sat down on his couch.

“I can’t wait to see all of your embarrassing baby photos.”

“Hey, I was a cute baby,” Adam protested, sitting next to her and nudging her shoulder. She bumped him back and they laughed.

Adam’s mom came home shortly later, slightly surprised but very welcoming. The four of them had dinner together once his dad came home, and they swapped stories about Adam, Adam hiding his face behind his hands in embarrassment for most of it. It was a nice distraction for what was waiting for him back at the Garrison.

Hannah had mentioned that Keith was spending more time away from Garrison grounds, and that he never told anyone where he would go, so Adam decided to go to the cabin first. He needed to talk to Keith, and he wasn’t quite ready to see Shiro yet. He slowed his cruiser to a stop and saw the garden in the back of the house. It was coming along nicely. He noticed the rows of jade trees, their red tips catching the sunlight. He couldn’t help but smile as he hopped off his cruiser. Then he saw Keith open the back door and step outside into the sunlight, and his smile faded. Keith noticed him immediately and stopped where he was.

“Hey Keith,” Adam said, rubbing the back of his neck. Keith nodded his head once and walked towards his Texas sage, inspecting the leaves and saying nothing. Adam walked over to him slowly, feeling like he was approaching a feral animal. “The garden looks nice.” Keith said nothing. Adam sighed. He was standing a few feet away from Keith at this point, next to a blooming cactus that was almost as prickly as the boy standing in front of him. “Look, Keith...”

“I’m not mad at you,” Keith said, and Adam looked at him in surprise, Keith finally lifting his eyes to meet his. He pulled his hand away from the sage. Adam noticed that he was wearing the black gloves that Hannah was talking about, and fought the urge to smile. “Shiro explained what’s going on with him, and he told me not to be mad at you, so I’m not mad.”

“Because Shiro told you not to? That doesn’t sound like you,” Adam teased. Keith narrowed his eyes, folding his arms across his chest. Adam was struck by how much older Keith looked. He grew out of his hoodie and was now wearing a cropped red, yellow, and white jacket. His hair was longer, and his face less round around the edges. His eyes didn’t glow with intensity but simmered, like a slow burn. He wasn’t a kid anymore. Adam couldn’t help but feel a pang of sadness.
“You were right, it wasn’t your place to tell me,” Keith said with a shrug of his shoulders, his voice gruff as he looked out at the garden. As much as Keith looked grown up, Adam could still see the slight pout to his lips, the uncertainty in his eyes. There was still a kid there. Adam took a few steps closer, moving to stand next to Keith as he looked at the Texas sage.

“I’m happy that you’re not mad at me, especially since I know that you keep a knife on you,” Adam admitted, and he saw the ghost of a smile on Keith’s lips. “How has -?” Adam began to ask, but he furrowed his brow, looking more closely at the leaves of the plant as he tried to figure out what to say.

“Shiro is fine,” Keith said, and Adam nodded his head. He wasn’t sure what answer he wanted to hear.

“And how are you doing?” Adam asked, and Keith looked at him in confusion.

“Uh, fine?”

“Even with Shiro leaving?”

“He’s not leaving for a few more months, and he’ll be back,” Keith said firmly, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself of something that he didn’t really believe. The mission comes first, right?” Adam winced at those words, words that he told Keith not that long ago.

“Sometimes,” Adam offered, not meeting Keith’s gaze.

“Shiro’s been acting kind of weird and I don’t really know what’s going on. Are you going to talk to him?” Adam sighed and fixed his glasses.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me to do,” Keith said nothing, waiting for him to continue. “I’m afraid to talk to him,” Adam admitted with a tired laugh. “I don’t really like giving people advice, and I’m not good at - comforting people but - Shiro’s been acting kind of weird and I don’t really know what’s going on. Are you going to talk to him?” Adam sighed and fixed his glasses.

“That’s what everyone keeps telling me to do.” Keith said nothing, waiting for him to continue. “I’m afraid to talk to him,” Adam admitted with a tired laugh. “I don’t know what I want anymore and this is all so confusing and everything is moving so quickly -” Adam stopped, seeing how Keith’s eyes widened slightly. “But you shouldn’t worry about this Keith, Shiro and I will figure something out.” Keith didn’t say anything for a moment as he tightened his arms across his chest.

“But I am worried about it,” Keith said, furrowing his brow in again. “You’re my family.” He refused to meet Adam’s gaze, choosing to move farther into the garden, and Adam smiled at his back.

“We are a family,” Adam said, although the words couldn’t help but sound a little devastating on his lips. “Shiro and I will figure this out.”

“Okay,” was all Keith said, his back still turned towards him.

“Is it okay if I help out with the garden? I’d like to avoid my responsibilities for a little longer before Iverson figures out I’m back.” Keith turned towards him, a slight smirk on his face.

“Okay.”
Adam stopped in front of his apartment door and took a deep breath, tightening his grip around the strap of his duffle bag. He had no idea if Shiro was in there, but the idea that he could be terrified him. He reminded himself that this was his room. It had been for almost ten years, it wasn’t like he was going to move out now. He put the key in the door and opened it, stepping inside. He moved to turn on the lights. It was quiet - Shiro wasn’t here. He slumped his shoulders in relief and set his bag down on the couch, moving into the kitchen and opening the cabinets to pull out the box of tea. Then something fell to the ground. He looked down in confusion and picked it up. It was a sticky note.

_I love you._ It said in Shiro’s sharp and neat handwriting. Adam stared at it for a long moment, and then he crumpled it up and put it in his pocket, putting the box of tea on the counter. Then he bent down and opened the lower cabinet to take out the kettle. He saw another sticky note with the same message.

_I love you._ Adam scoffed and pulled it off, crumpling it up and putting it in his pocket as well. Then he walked over to the sink to fill the kettle with water.

_I love you._

_I love you._

One sticky note on the hot faucet, one on the cold. Adam quickly ripped them off and shoved them into his pockets, furrowing his brow in frustration as he filled the kettle with water and brought it over to the stove. He turned the stove on and leaned against the counter with his arms crossed, waiting for it to boil. Where was Shiro? Why did he leave all of those notes around the apartment? Why couldn’t he just leave Adam alone? He huffed in annoyance and adjusted his glasses, staring at the fridge. Then he walked over to the cabinet to pull out a mug. He saw the mug that he got Shiro sitting on the dry rack and quickly looked away from it. When he opened the cabinet his eyes widened in shock.

_I love you._

_I love you._

_I love you._

_I love you._

_I love you._

_I love you._

_I love you._

Every single mug and dish had a stick note attached with the same message. Adam began to feel tears well up in his eyes as he looked at them all, a small smile spreading across his face. Then he shook his head and ripped them all off, throwing them in the trash. The tea kettle began to whine and he clenched his fists as he went over to take it off of the stove.

If Shiro loved him then he wouldn’t be leaving, it was as simple as that.
Adam decided to run off some of his stress. The gym was empty and he set his water bottle and towel down on his favorite treadmill. He turned it on and started with a slow jog, focusing on the way his lungs expanded with each inhale. He still hadn’t seen Shiro yet. He wasn’t sure where Hannah was. Or Keith. And he wasn’t very keen on seeing Iverson yet, since he knew that once he did Iverson would make him catch up on all the paperwork he missed by leaving early. Adam sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he turned the speed up a few levels. Soon he could feel the sweat collecting on his brow. Then he heard someone walking across the gym, and he prayed that it wasn’t who he thought it was. They got on one of the treadmills farther down the line, and he turned to see Keith, who caught his gaze and nodded his head in acknowledgement, setting his stuff down. Adam was surprised to feel disappointment blooming in his chest.

Then he heard someone else walk into the gym and watched as Shiro approached the treadmills. He noticed Adam and stopped for a moment, his eyes wide, and then he went to the treadmill next to Keith. Adam determinedly faced forward, pretending not to notice him. He could hear Shiro mumble something to Keith, who scoffed, and then Shiro began running. Adam could tell that he was running one level higher than he was, and could feel Shiro’s glances. He tried to resist, but he found himself unable to. He put his speed two levels higher. Shiro began running faster as well. Even Keith seemed to be increasing his speed. Soon the three of them were sprinting, Adam and Shiro sneaking glances at each other. They locked eyes, and Adam met Shiro’s smug grin with a narrowed gaze.

“Honestly!” a woman’s voice said, and Adam winced and quickly lowered his speed, Keith and Shiro following suit. He knew that voice. “Now you’re getting a cadet to partake in your reckless habits,” the officer said, shaking her head. She looked older than when Adam last saw her, more wrinkles but the same annoyed gaze.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Shiro said, rubbing his neck sheepishly. The woman scoffed.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, leaving the gym. Adam wondered how she always seemed to stop by just in time to yell and him and Shiro. Adam caught Shiro looking at him. He was biting back his smile. Adam could feel the corners of his mouth turn up as well, but then he looked away and grabbed his water bottle and towel, heading for the exit. He looked at Keith once before leaving, an apology in his eyes. He just couldn’t do this right now. Things couldn’t just go back to normal. This wasn’t like any of their other fights. This one was going to stick, Adam was determined of that. And the thought made him sad as well.

Adam noticed that Shiro had moved his stuff to the other bedroom in the apartment, so he wasn’t completely out of reach but he wasn’t as close as he used to be, which was a good summary of their current relationship. Adam was sitting on the couch, hands in his lap when Shiro opened the door to the apartment. His eyes immediately fell on Adam, and he stayed in the doorway, unsure of where to go.

“You can come in,” Adam said, his tone even. Shiro looked at the ground, and then he walked inside. He started to move towards the couch, but then changed his mind and moved to sit at the chair at the counter instead. Adam couldn’t help but notice the role reversal. Last time he was the one sitting at the counter.
“How is your family?” Shiro asked, his words careful and soft. Adam looked at his hands.

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“Casey is getting bigger. She’s becoming quite the handful,” Adam said with a small smile. “Mom and Dad are doing fine. Mom’s happy that I won’t be going into space.” He couldn’t keep a note of bitterness out of his tone.

“Adam -” Adam heard the chair squeak and Shiro turned to face him.

“I get it, Takashi,” Adam said. “You made a choice. I guess a part of me knew that it would happen eventually.” He heard Shiro get up and walk over to him, sitting on the other side of the couch.

“I love you Adam, and I want to marry you, that has never changed,” Shiro said, his voice cracking slightly. Adam forced himself to look at him.

“Then stay,” Adam said, hearing the desperation in his voice. Shiro looked at him with sad eyes.

“I can’t.”

“You can’t, or you don’t want to?” Shiro looked at him and said nothing, and Adam scoffed and looked away. “As I said, you’ve made your choice.” He stood up. “I’m going to go for a walk.”

“Adam -” Shiro said, and Adam stopped at the door, his hand on the doorknob. He looked back at Shiro, whose eyes were full of conflict. He watched as Shiro opened his mouth to say something, but then he closed it once more, his brow furrowed. Adam smiled, but he knew that it was strained. Then he opened the door and left. He entered the hall and began to walk down it. When he held up his hands he saw that they were shaking. It took everything in his power not to hold on to Shiro and never let go. But he knew that once he gave in Shiro would be ripped away from him, and it would be all Shiro’s decision. He took a deep breath and rounded the corner, bumping in to someone.

“Lieutenant Wadley,” a gruff voice said, and Adam adjusted his glasses to see Iverson standing in front of him, a serious expression on his face. Adam gave him a salute, but there was no real feeling in it.

“Hello Commander Iverson,” Adam said, hearing the exhaustion in his own voice. Iverson raised a brow as he looked at him, arms clasped behind him.

“Come to my office Lieutenant,” Iverson said, and Adam looked at him in surprise.

“Am I in trouble, Commander?” Iverson shook his head and began to walk in the direction of his office, obviously expecting Adam to follow. Adam walked after him. He realized that this was probably going to be about the paperwork that he’d been putting off. They walked to his office in silence and Iverson put his key in the door, unlocking it and turning on the light as he stepped inside.

“Take a seat,” Iverson said, sitting in his chair. Adam sat down and met Iverson’s steady gaze as he sat across from him. Iverson looked at him for a long moment, as if he was going to say something, but then he opened his drawer and pulled out a stack of papers. “Your paperwork,” he said, and Adam looked at it unenthusiastically, reaching out to take it.

“Thank you, Commander,” Adam said. He thought he saw the ghost of a smile on Iverson’s face.

“I also asked you here for another reason,” Iverson said, and Adam set the papers aside for the moment, waiting for him to continue. “The cadets aren’t going to become teachers quite yet, Admiral Sanda wants to give them more training, but she also wants to expand the classes,” Iverson
explained. “That means that there will be more students, but about the same number of teachers.”

Adam’s eyes widened at that. “Raj and Henry will be coming back towards the end of this year,
and April is due back soon as well. So it will be the five of you teaching, as well as Shiro once he
comes back.” Adam’s gaze flickered to the floor for a moment. “Adam, I’m putting my trust in you
to train Raj and Henry, and to lead the teaching program. Of course I am still assigned to teach the
main classes, but I am going to count on you to help me. Will you be up to that?” Adam’s gaze
turned serious.

“It would be an honor, Commander. I will help you with whatever you need.” Iverson gave a
pleased smile and leaned back in his chair.

“I knew that out of your class of cadets, you would have a knack for teaching, Wadley.” Adam
looked at him in surprise.

“Why me? Shiro was the best in the class -”

“Lieutenant Shirogane is still too focused on the stars,” Iverson said. “He’s become so focused on
space that he finds a hard time focusing on what’s in front of him, which isn’t an ideal quality in a
teacher.” Adam scoffed, not arguing with him. “He’s been good for Keith, I can tell that much, but
he still needs to grow before he can become a true leader, until he can inspire a group of people,”
Iverson continued. “But I know that he’s trying his best to do what’s right. He’s cares deeply about
other people, about you.” Adam fought the urge to roll his eyes, trying to ignore the frustration and
sadness tightening in his chest.

“I think that you see more in us than we have to offer, Commander,” Adam said. “Maybe we’ll
always be stuck being the way that we are.” Stubborn. Temperamental. Proud. He wasn’t sure if he
was talking about Shiro or himself. He frowned and looked at Iverson’s bookshelves, feeling the
commander’s gaze on him.

“You’re not the same kid that joined this program, Adam,” Iverson said, and Adam looked at him
in surprise. Iverson had never used his first name before. Iverson’s gaze softened. “You both have
your own infinities to offer the world. And you’re going to see that someday.” Iverson sighed and
leaned forward in his chair. “Don’t be too hard on him.”

“Why shouldn’t I be?” Adam asked. He sounded lost more than critical. He realized that he wanted
Iverson to give him a reason. He didn’t want to be mad at Shiro forever, and yet right now he
couldn’t find it in himself to forgive Shiro for choosing to go. Iverson looked at him with his
familiar steady gaze, searching his eyes for something. Again he looked like there was something
that he wanted to say. He frowned and leaned back in his chair once more.

“I would like those papers finished by the end of the week,” Iverson said, and Adam tried to ignore
the disappointment blooming in his chest as he nodded his head, fixing his glasses. “And think
about what I said. Your role in the Garrison is going to change, Lieutenant. People are counting on
you.”

“Of course, Commander,” Adam said with a slight nod of his head, moving to stand. “Goodnight.”
Iverson nodded his head as well and focused his attention on a file on his desk. Adam opening the
door and stepping outside. He sighed and shook his head, heading back to the apartment. He
opened the door and saw that Shiro wasn’t there, but the door to his bedroom was closed. Adam
walked over to the kitchen and saw a mug of tea on the counter, steam curling out of it. There was
another sticky note on it, but it was longer than the other ones.

_I love you, Adam, and I want to marry you._
I understand if you need space.

That’s okay.

Adam pulled the sticky note off of the mug and planned to crumpled it up, but he stopped. Instead he folded it neatly and put it in his pocket. Then he lifted the mug to his lips and tasted mint tea, his eyes closing as he felt the warmth on his face. He sat at the counter for a while, sipping his tea and thinking. He thought about a lot of things, too many things, one thing in particular -

He hated space. But right now he needed it, too.

Adam was walking down the hall when he saw Lance approaching from the other end, his gaze far away and a large bag slung over his shoulder.

“Hey Lance,” Adam said, and Lance looked up to see Adam, a wide grin spreading across his face. He jogged over to Adam and pulled him into a hug.

“Adam! What happened? I didn’t get to say goodbye to you before I left,” Lance said, pulling away from him. Adam rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Yeah, I decided to visit home a little early. I had to, uh, take care of some things.” Lance nodded his head sagely.

“I missed my family too,” he said, and Adam smiled. Lance adjusted the strap on his shoulder and walked over to one of the apartments in the hall, this being the hall where all of the cadets had their apartments. He put his key in the door and opened it. “Hunk!” Lance exclaimed, poking his head in. “Adam is here!” Adam heard the sound of footsteps and Lance stepped aside, Hunk poking his head out of the doorway and immediately seeing Adam. He grinned and rushed over to pull Adam in a much stronger hug, lifting him into the air. Adam laughed and Hunk set him down. Then Adam looked at the apartment.

“Wait, you two live in the same apartment?” Adam asked, looking back at them. “I thought that Keith was your roommate?” Lance laughed and waved his hand.

“James and Hunk got their own rooms for some reason, so I moved in with Hunk years ago,” Lance explained. Adam wondered why he was only just learning about this. “Although I doubt that Keith even noticed.” He heard the bitterness in Lance’s tone.

“Lance was convinced that Keith was a vampire for the longest time,” Hunk fake-whispered to Adam. Lance huffed, putting his hands on his hips.

“He would always sneak out of the apartment in the middle of the night!” Lance protested. “I tried following him a few times, but he always disappeared. And I swear that I’ve never seen him eat garlic - I’m being serious!” Lance exclaimed, narrowing his eyes as Hunk and Adam began to laugh.

“Looks like he’s still convinced,” Hunk said. Lance looked away from them, putting his nose in the air and closing his eyes.

“Well don’t come crying to me when he tries to drink all of your blood,” Lance said. Then Adam saw Keith at the end of the hall, heading towards his room.
“Hey Keith,” Adam said, and Lance jumped, quickly turning to look at Keith. Keith looked at them with tired eyes.

“Hey Adam,” Keith said, turning his key in the lock and slipping into his apartment. Lance gestured wildly at Keith’s now closed door.

“See?” Lance whispered passionately, and Hunk smiled and shook his head, putting a hand on Lance’s shoulder.

“Okay bud,” Hunk said. Lance pouted, letting his arms fall at his sides.

“It’s good to see you two,” Adam said, and he meant it. “Iverson’s got me catching up on paperwork, but I’ll see you in class tomorrow.”

“See you, Adam,” Lance said, his usual grin back on his face.

“Bye Adam,” Hunk said. Adam smiled at the both of them and continued down the hall. He heard them start to talk about video games as they raced inside the apartment. He shook his head and smiled to himself. They were good kids.

“Iverson told us that you all needed more practice with partner training,” Shiro said, standing in front of the cadets. They were all in the flight simulator. “There will be new cadets arriving next year, and you’ll need to be able to adjust to working with new people. It’s not always easy, but it’s important.” Shiro glanced at Adam, giving him the opportunity to say something. He cleared his throat and stepped forward.

“Starting next year teams of three will be created, one with a fighter pilot, one with an engineer, and one with a communications officer. Those will be the teams that you will be training and running simulations with.” Violet shot up her hand.

“What will happen with the cargo pilots?” she asked. Adam noticed Lance’s gaze on him, waiting for him to answer.

“Iverson hasn’t told us that information yet,” Adam confessed. Violet and Lance deflated a little. “Nothing is set in stone at the Garrison,” he reminded them. “We don’t work with guarantees, which is why Iverson wants you all to practice thinking on your feet and trusting each other.” Lance looked at the floor, his gaze hard to read.

“Even if someone is the absolute worst, you have to be able to work with them during missions. You can settle your differences off the clock,” Hannah said with a grin. Adam gave her a dry look.

“Well said, Hannah. Let’s begin.” Violet shot her hand into the air again. “Yes, Violet?”

“Can we see you and Shiro do it first? Like last time?” Violet asked. Adam’s eyes widened slightly.

“I agree with Violet. We haven’t done partner training in a while. It would be good to see it done correctly, and by the best,” James said, looking at Shiro. Adam noticed Hannah roll her eyes. She hated when James tried to suck up. Then he felt Shiro’s eyes on him. Adam could tell that this would be his decision to make.
“Sure, we can do that,” Adam said as normally as possible, looking at James. Then he turned to face Shiro. “I’ll give the directions.” Shiro nodded his head and moved to get the blindfold, sitting down and putting it on.

“These two used to be the worst at partner training,” Hannah said, leaning against the side wall and out of the way. The cadets crowded around the chair, Keith hung back at little as always.

“It’s hard to understand why we didn’t excel at everything when we had such supportive fellow cadets,” Adam said dryly, looking at Hannah. Hannah bit back her grin. Then Adam turned towards the screen, looking down at Shiro, whose blindfold was fastened around his eyes. “Are you ready?” Adam asked, uncertainty in his voice. They hadn’t done this in a while.

“Always,” Shiro said, placing his hand on the thrusters. Adam took a deep breath and began the simulation. He watched as meteors and stars spread across his vision, deep space stretching out before him on the screen.

“There are meteors on your right, just shift slightly left,” Adam said, and Shiro did as he was told. “Go slowly through this part.” Shiro pulled his thrusters slightly back and Adam scanned the screen. “Turn right!” Adam said quickly, and Shiro barely missed a large meteor. Adam found himself clutching the back of his seat as he leaned forward. He was rusty. He was working with Shiro. He couldn’t help but feel on edge. They managed to get through the simulation, almost breaking their current record, and Adam stared at the flashing words, “Mission Success”. He should’ve felt relieved, proud even, but as he looked at those words he couldn’t help but see angry red ones in its place, spelling out “Pilot Error.”

Pilot Error.

Pilot Error.

He closed his eyes but the words were there too, in the blackness.

“Hannah is going to pair you up,” Adam said, heading for the exit. He caught Hannah’s gaze and she nodded her head in understanding, pushing herself off of the wall. He noticed Lance’s concerned glance before he opened the door and left, standing alone outside of the simulator, in the empty white training space. He exhaled, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes. He needed to get himself together. Iverson was counting on him, the cadets were counting on him. He needed to do better. He almost didn’t notice the door to the simulator open and close.

“Hey,” Shiro said, and Adam could hear his footsteps approaching him. He opened his eyes and put down his hand, seeing Shiro standing only a few feet away, his arm reached out towards him but hesitant. He dropped his arm and looked at Adam in concern. Adam laughed and shook his head, turning away from him.

“I’m okay,” Adam said. “I just needed a breather.” Shiro was quiet for a moment.

“You were great with the simulation,” he said, and Adam smiled tiredly at the floor.

“Thanks.”

“Adam,” Shiro said, taking a step forward. “We should talk about this.” Adam let out a hollow laugh.

“What is there to talk about at this point?” Adam said, finally meeting Shiro’s gaze. “I overheard your conversation with Admiral Sanda, Takashi. She didn’t pick you. It was going to be me.”
“Adam -”

“Why couldn’t you have just let it be me?” Adam asked. “I was prepared to go. I would have gone.”

“That’s exactly why I had to, I -” Shiro began, running a frustrated hand through his hair. “Iverson, the cadets, your family - they need you here. All I have is the Garrison.”

“You have me,” Adam said, taking a step towards him. “Is that not good enough?”

“That’s everything, Adam,” Shiro said, looking at him angrily. “But if I stayed you would’ve had to leave. There wasn’t an option where we were both on Earth together. It had to be me - I knew that you didn’t want to go. That’s why I went to Admiral Sanda.”

“Wait,” Adam said, furrowing his brow. “Is that why you - are you leaving because of me?” Shiro sighed, and Adam’s eyes widened. His mom had been right.

(Of course I want to see space again, to feel like I’m changing the world with as much time as I have left, but I wasn’t lying when I promised you that I wouldn’t go on another mission. I was ready to spend my life with you, here. But then this happened and - I didn’t do this because of you, Adam. I’m doing this for you. I would do anything for you.” Adam could feel tears welling up in his eyes.

“You didn’t have to do this, I never asked for you to,” Adam said.

“I know, but it’s what I needed to do.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” Adam asked. Shiro gave him a sad smile.

“Because you’d never let me leave,” Shiro answered. Then Adam saw the regret in his eyes. “I promised Sam and Iverson not to tell you the truth. I was wrong to do that. I was wrong not to talk to you about all of this from the start.” Adam shook his head. He couldn’t believe this. He didn’t want to believe it. Knowing that Shiro chose him over space instead of the other way around, and that that was the reason that he had to leave - this was somehow worse.

“I’ll ask Admiral Sanda to let us both go, then we won’t have to -” Adam began, but Shiro shook his head.

“She’d never let two pilots go, not when she’s expanding the program. They need you here.”

“Can’t someone else go instead of you?” Adam asked, already knowing the answer.

“The only other candidate is Hannah, and neither of us want to make her do that,” Shiro said. “It’s me or you.” His eyes tightened in pain as he said those words.

“Can’t Sam cancel the mission?” Adam asked, taking another step forward so that they were only a foot apart. But again he knew the answer.

“This could change the world,” Shiro said. He reached out for Adam once more, but hesitated, letting his arm fall again. “I’m sorry that I have to leave.” Adam could tell that Shiro meant it. He could feel tears running down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry that I have to stay,” Adam said with a watery smile. He closed the distance between them, pressing his lips against Shiro’s. It was both a hello and a goodbye, both of them could feel it as they held on to each other. Adam pulled away first, cupping Shiro’s cheek. Shiro smiled,
although Adam could see the promise of tears in his eyes.

“I’m coming back,” Shiro said firmly, holding on to Adam’s free hand. Adam nodded his head.

“I’ll be here,” he promised, and Shiro pulled him in for another kiss, a kiss that said *I missed you*, a kiss that said *I’ll miss you*. A kiss that tasted like starlight and sadness.

And forgiveness.

And love.

“We should probably head back in,” Shiro said, pulling away but looking regretful as he did so. “On my way out I heard Hannah pairing Keith and James together, so I’m pretty sure that she intentionally made the worst pairings possible.” Adam laughed, his tears drying.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

“To Shiro and his last night on Earth,” Hannah said, raising her glass and leaning heavily into April, who smiled as she looked at her, raising her glass as well.

“I’m just sad that I’ve only been here a week and Shiro already has to go,” April said, turning her gaze on him. “I was hoping that we’d have movie nights.”

Just don’t watch the good ones without me,” Shiro said, wrapping his arm around Adam’s shoulders and lifting his glass before taking a sip. Adam looked at the three of them, sitting around him on the floor of his apartment, glasses filled with wine in their hands.

“We’ll have to see how much trouble we can get into while Shiro’s gone,” Hannah said, her cheeks pinks from the alcohol. “By the time you get back you won’t even be able to recognize the Garrison.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Adam said. “And if I get caught doing anything wrong Iverson will shoot me into space, but it will be a one-way mission.” Shiro laughed and kissed his cheek.

“Oh right, I forgot that you’re going to be, like, the principal now,” Hannah teased, taking a long sip of her wine as April shushed her, giggling behind her hand.

“I hope that you get to see aliens this time around,” April teased, looking at Shiro. Shiro grinned and looked at Adam, leaning in to him.

“What do you think? Do you think there are any aliens on Kerberos?” Shiro asked.

“The real question is if we can convince Raj and Henry that you made contact once you get back,” Adam said, and Shiro’s laughed, stretching his arms and smiling at Adam sleepily.

“I think that’s our cue to leave,” April said. “You should get some rest.” She coaxed Hannah to her feet, Hannah still leaning heavily against her.

“I love you,” Hannah said, giving her a dopey grin. April blushed.
“I love you too,” she said, leading them towards the door. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Shiro.” Shiro nodded his head.

“Goodnight,” Shiro said. April opened the door and led Hannah outside with her, giving them both one last smile before closing the door. Shiro sighed and leaned back on his palms. Then he looked at Adam.

“I don’t want to go to sleep.”

“You should be well rested for take off tomorrow,” Adam said, and Shiro groaned. Then he gave Adam a sideways glance, one that spelled mischief, and tackled Adam to the ground, pinning him down so that Adam’s hands were trapped above his head. Shiro looked down at him and smiled. “Takashi -” Adam said sternly. Shiro kissed Adam’s neck, slow enough to illicit a gasp out of Adam before pulling away and looking down at Adam once more.

“You know how I feel when you call me Takashi,” Shiro said, rubbing his thumbs against the sensitive part of Adam’s wrists, which were still being held down. Adam scoffed, trying not to gasp once more when Shiro leaned down to kiss his neck again, heading for his collarbone.

“Shiro,” Adam said, cursing himself for how breathy he sounded. “You should sleep.” He felt more of Shiro’s weight on him and he bit back a groan, pushing his wrists against Shiro’s hands but finding himself unable to break free, not that he found himself really wanting to.

“How can I sleep when I know that this is my last night on Earth with you for a while?” Shiro said. He was trying to sound enticing but his statement both brought them back to reality. This was their last night on Earth together, for a long time. Tomorrow Shiro would be gone, along with Matt and Sam. Adam would have to face the changing Garrison and the new cadets alone. Shiro would travel to Kerberos without Adam by his side. Adam felt Shiro’s grip on his wrists loosen, and he blinked up at him with wide eyes. Then he smiled.

“It’s still early,” Adam said, choosing to keep his wrists where they were. Shiro looked at him in surprise, and then he grinned, leaning down to kiss Adam once more, letting go of his hands to hold his hips. Adam held on to Shiro’s hair as he closed his eyes, pressing up against Shiro and deepening the kiss, letting Shiro know that he wanted it too. “Takashi,” Adam gasped, and Shiro grinned against his lips before kissing him again.

Eventually Shiro did go to sleep, much to Adam’s insistence, and Adam went to bed as well, Shiro holding on to him as he drifted off.

But Adam didn’t sleep at all. All he could do was stare at the clock as it counted down the minutes until morning.

Adam could feel his hands shaking as he left his office and headed for the takeoff site. He adjusted his glasses out of habit and ran a restless hand through his hair, opening the door that led outside. He breathed in the stark fall air, filling his lungs with it and then letting it go. He could see the ship in the distance, and his footsteps felt heavy as he kept moving forward.

“Adam!” Matt spotted him first, waving his hand enthusiastically, his space helmet tucked under his free arm. Adam forced a smile and walked over to him.

“Well look at you,” Adam said, and Matt was beaming. “How are you feeling?”
“Great!” Matt said, pumping his fist. Then he looked over his shoulder, where Katie and Colleen were taking to Sam. He watched as Katie pulled her dad into a tight hug and Sam laughed, patting her long hair. Adam noticed something in Matt’s expression shift. “I’m really looking forward to being in space but - I am going to miss them,” Matt confessed, turning to look back at Adam. Adam gave him a sympathetic smile.

“They’re going to miss you too. I bet Katie will be bored out of her mind without you.” Matt laughed, smiling once more.

“I promised her that I’d bring back a space rock,” Matt said. “And that one day we’ll go on missions together.”

“I bet she’ll like that,” Adam said. Matt nodded his head, still smiling. Then he adjusted his stance, tightening his arm around his helmet.

“I should say goodbye to them, one more time,” Matt said, glancing back at his family once more. “Shiro is on the other side of the ship, going through the checklist one more time.”

“Thanks Matt, good luck out there,” Adam said, putting a hand on his shoulder as he passed him, making his way over to the ship. He spotted Shiro looking at the hull with a serious expression, writing something down. “Hey,” Adam said, and Shiro quickly looked up, lowering his tablet.

“Hey,” Shiro said softly, a small smile on his lips and a tightness around his eyes.

“Where’s Keith?” Adam asked, looking around. He remembered Shiro mentioning that he was going to show Keith around the landing site.

“He already left,” Shiro explained. “He wanted to train.” *He didn’t want to see you leave,* Adam translated.

“How long do you have?” Adam asked, and by Shiro’s expression he knew that it wasn’t long. He swallowed and nodded his head once more, fidgeting with his hands. “Shiro -” Shiro stepped towards him and pulled him into a hug, burying his face in Adam’s neck. Adam held him, feeling Shiro’s warmth.

“I love you so much, Adam,” Shiro said, his voice breathy and close to breaking.

“I love you too, Takashi,” Adam said. “I always will. Even when we fight. Even when you get on my nerves. Even when the world explodes.” Shiro laughed and pulled away, rubbing at his eyes.

“Let’s hope that that doesn’t happen.” Shiro paused for a moment, looking serious, and then he pulled his ring off of his hand. Adam looked at him in surprise as Shiro held it out to him. “I know that I’ve made some mistakes. I should’ve told you that I was going to volunteer for this before I went to Admiral Sanda. I should’ve told you that I wanted to go to Earth’s moon. I should’ve been able to stay here with you. I should’ve done a lot of things.”

“I should’ve been more patient,” Adam said, moving to cup Shiro’s cheek. “I shouldn’t have picked so many fights with you. I shouldn’t have closed myself off for so long, only to blow up time and time again. *We* should’ve done a lot of things. But I wouldn’t change a moment of it.” Shiro smiled and nodded his head, placing his hand over Adam’s, holding Adam’s hand to his cheek. Then he held out the ring once more.

“I want you to hold on to this for me,” Shiro said. “Think of it as a promise. I plan to get it back, unless you change your mind about us.” Adam laughed.
“You won’t get out of marrying me that easily, Takashi,” Adam said. Then his smile dimmed as he took the ring, looking down at it. “Three years,” Adam breathed.

“I’ll be back,” Shiro promised, like he did before.

“And I’ll be here,” Adam answered, looking up at him. They noticed Sam and Matt approaching the ship, having said their last goodbyes. Katie was waving at their backs, her dress moving with the wind. Adam noticed that she was wearing Matt’s glasses. He looked over at Colleen and could tell that there were tears in her eyes. It was time to go.

“Goodbye, Takashi,” Adam said, and he could feel his own tears in his eyes. Shiro leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, holding his hand one last time.

“Goodbye, Adam,” Shiro said. He took a step away, holding Adam’s gaze, and then he turned to walk up the steps, stopping to stand by the hatch. He turned back to give Adam one last smile, lifting his hand in goodbye, his black hair lifted by the breeze. They stayed there for a long moment, and then Shiro opened the hatch and went inside the ship, shortly followed by Sam and Matt, who waved goodbye to Adam one last time, and then to his mom and sister. Then the hatch was closed. Adam moved to step back the appropriate distance, finding himself stopping to stand near Colleen and Katie. Colleen pulled his close, wrapping a motherly arm around his shoulders. Together they watched as the ship took off, a tail of orange light all that was left behind.

And then there was only smoke.

“I wonder what Shiro’s doing right now,” Lance said, his tongue sticking out in concentration as he mixed eggs, water, and flour together in a bowl.

“He should be on Kerberos by now,” Hunk said, retying his apron. “Right, Adam?”

“Yeah, that’s probably right,” Adam said. Iverson had told him that the trip would take a little under a year, much like the trip to Titan had.

“Man, I wish I was going to space,” Lance said, not for the first time.

“Not me, I’m perfectly fine staying here and baking, thank you very much,” Hunk said, taking the bowl from Lance and beating it a little faster. Lance put his hands on his hips and smiled.

“I wonder what the new cadets will be like. I bet they’ll look up to us, since we’ve been in the program for so long,” Lance said, waggling his eyebrows. Adam scoffed and shook his head.

“Looks like Lance wants a Garrison romance,” Hunk teased, pouring the mixture into a pan. “What happened to Jennifer?”

“Oh, uh, we just grew apart,” Lance offered. Hunk gave him a skeptical look, and Lance’s shoulders slumped. “She’s dating this guy from her school who’s a year older,” he admitted.

“You don’t see too broken hearted about it,” Hunk observed, and Lance shrugged, leaning against the kitchen counter. Hunk set the bowl down and turned to face Lance, trying and failing to look innocent as he said, “it almost seems like you’ve already got your eye on someone else.” Adam bit back his smile as he watched Lance’s face turn red.
“No I don’t!” Lance protested, sputtering and crossing his arms. He turned his face away from them, his nose in the air. “Who could I possibly have a crush on anyway?”

“Man, and I thought that maybe you’d fallen in love with me,” Hunk teased, a grin on his face. Lance looked at him and smiled, throwing his arms around him.

“We’re already married, it’s different,” Lance said, and they both laughed. Adam smiled as he watched them. Then he heard a cough in the doorway. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw Iverson standing there, his mouth pressed into a hard line. Lance and Hunk immediately broke apart and stood to attention.

“I didn’t know that you were hosting - baking classes on top of flight classes, Lieutenant,” Iverson said with a frown, but with the years that Adam had spent picking up on Iverson’s expressions he could tell that he was teasing them.

“It’s good practice in following orders, Commander,” Adam said seriously, straightening his back. He saw the ghost of a smile on Iverson’s face, and then he frowned once more. Adam didn’t like that frown.

“We need to talk in my office,” Iverson said, and Adam noticed Lance and Hunk glance at each other, their backs still straight.


“No!” Keith said, barging into the kitchen.

“Cadet -”

“No!” Keith said, his fists clenched at his sides. “He’s - they’re still out there! There’s got to be some error in the system. There’s no way that Shiro -”

“That’s enough, cadet,” Iverson warned, his tone icy.

“No!” Keith said, his head angled down so that his hair was falling in his face. He clenched his fists even tighter. “You have to listen to me, I -” Adam walked up to Keith, reaching out to put a hand on his shoulder but hesitating. Keith looked like a bomb ready to go off. Keith noticed him move however and turned towards him, his eyes wide and fiery. “They said that there was a pilot error on the Kerberos mission, that the crew, that Shiro -”

“I will be debriefing Lieutenant Wadley in my office. If you talk out of turn one more time there will be consequences,” Iverson said, and Keith turned to glare at him.

“Keith -” Adam warned, although he was desperate to understand what was going on. A pilot error? He felt something icy and sharp spreading through his chest. But he had to ignore it for now - he didn’t want Keith to get in any more trouble. “We’ll talk later,” Adam said to Keith. Keith’s back stiffened, but he nodded his head.

“You know where to find me,” Keith said, pushing past Iverson as he left the kitchen. Then the oven beeped.

“I’m just going to -” Hunk said, smiling sheepishly as he put on his oven mitts and slid the pan in, quickly closing it. Lance was looking at Iverson in shock, glancing at Adam every few seconds.

“Is Shiro okay?” Lance asked, his voice small. Iverson sighed.
“A formal statement will be made later,” Iverson said. “Lieutenant Wadley?” He shifted his gaze towards Adam.

“Right,” Adam said, a slight crack in his voice. He took off his apron and handed it to Hunk, giving him a reassuring smile. “I’ll see you guys later. I want to try our bread,” he said, nodding towards the oven. Hunk nodded his head, obviously trying to stay strong for Adam’s sake.

“How could there have been a pilot error?” Adam asked, leaning forward in the chair opposite Iverson, who was sitting behind his desk, a grim look on his face.

“We got the message early this morning,” Iverson explained. “We haven’t been able to make any contact with them since.” Iverson’s eyes looked pained as he clasped his hands on the desk. “They’re gone, Adam.”

“No,” Adam said, shaking his head. “No, they’re not.” Iverson sighed.

“We tried everything we could.”

“Shiro would never - a pilot error is impossible,” Adam argued. “You know that.” Iverson opened his mouth to say something, and then he closed it. “Commander, this is a mistake. Shiro is coming back.”

“I understand if you’ll need some time to process all of this, but Officer Holt, cadet Holt, Lieutenant Shirogane, they are not coming back.” Adam gripped the arms of his chair, anger flaring in his chest. How could Iverson not understand that this just wasn’t true?

“I’ll go find them,” Adam said. “I just need a ship and some supplies and I can -” Iverson shook his head.

“We can’t let you do that, Adam. You’re needed here. Admiral Sanda would never give you the clearance.”

“Would you give me the clearance? If you could?” Adam asked, his voice bordering on desperate. Iverson looked at him for a moment, and then he shook his head.

“You wouldn’t find them,” Iverson said.

“How can you be so sure? This is the Garrison. We’ve done many impossible things.”

“Not like this,” Iverson said, and Adam couldn’t help but get the feeling that there was something he wasn’t being told.

“There’s more to this,” Adam said slowly. Iverson was impossible to read. “There’s something that you’re not telling me.”

“That was all that I needed to tell you. I thought that you deserved to know before the information was made public,” Iverson said, and Adam looked at him with wide eyes. Then he narrowed his gaze, looking at the floor as he stood.

“I’m going to figure out what’s going on,” Adam said, heading for the door.

“Lieutenant,” Iverson said, and Adam stopped, his hand on the doorknob. “Whatever you do, don’t
get the cadets involved. Cadet Kogane is on thin ice as it is.” Adam nodded his head, opening the door. Then he looked back at Iverson, and saw his tired expression.

“You lost a student,” Adam said, looking away, thinking about how he would feel if any of the cadets went missing. “That can’t be easy for you.” Iverson let out a hollow laugh.

“Don’t worry about me, Lieutenant. I’ve seen a lot of things,” Iverson said, and with that Adam turned and left, closing the door behind him and heading for the cruiser bay.

He found Keith in the garden, angrily pulling out what looked like weeds. Keith saw him approaching.

“You don’t believe them, do you?” Keith asked, and Adam entered the garden, arms folded across his chest as he looked out at the horizon.

“There’s something missing,” Adam said slowly, and the fire was back in Keith’s eyes.

“Exactly! Shiro can’t be gone. A pilot error? That’s obviously a lie,” Keith said, running a hand through his hair in frustration, the weeds in a pile at his feet. “We need to get into Admiral Sanda files and -”


“Who cares? Nothing is more important than finding Shiro.”

“We have to think about this carefully, Keith. We can’t just rush in and make impulsive decisions -”

“So you want to wait? You want us to sit around while Shiro’s somewhere up there?” Keith asked, pointing at the sky. He made a noise of disgust and crossed his arms. “It’s like you don’t even love him.”

“Hey,” Adam said firmly, taking a step towards Keith. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. I just don’t want you getting expelled, because then what? You’re meant to be in this program Keith. You can’t throw your life away for a plan that isn’t even going to work -”

“Then I’ll steal a ship!” Keith said. “I’ll take a ship to Kerberos and find him myself. And then when I bring him back and prove that I was right they won’t be able to kick me out.” Adam shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You can’t just steal a ship, Keith, it isn’t a car.” Keith narrowed his eyes and Adam sighed. “We need to work together on this. We’ll figure out something in time -”

“Maybe Shiro doesn’t have time,” Keith cut in. “And besides, I don’t do teams.” Adam laughed in disbelief.

“Do you really not realize how -?” Adam began. He let out a noise of frustration. “I’m on your side, Keith. I have been for a long time. Why can’t we help each other? Don’t you know that I’m hurting too? He was the love of my life!”
“Was?” Keith asked quietly. Adam stopped, his eyes widening. He could feel the familiar sting of tears. Maybe a part of him did believe that Shiro was really gone. He’d rushed over to the cabin before he even gave himself a moment to process all of this. He clenched his fists.

“He is the love of my life, Keith, no matter what’s happened. And I want to find him too.” Keith nodded his head slowly, avoiding his gaze.

“We’ll make a plan,” Keith said, knitting his eyebrows. Then a corner of his lips turned up in a dry smirk. “As Shiro always told me - patience -”

“Yields focus,” Adam finished for him, and Keith met his gaze. His smirk fell.

“He’s not gone,” Keith said.

“No,” Adam said with a sad smile. “He’s not.”

Keith and Adam spent the next couple of weeks trying to figure out how to get more information on the mission. Their only concrete idea was somehow getting into Iverson’s computer and reading his files.

“I’ll do it,” Keith said, leaning against the back wall of the cabin.

“No, I’m doing it,” Adam said. “You don’t have clearance to go into his office.” Keith had wanted to argue, but Adam made a point, which is why Adam was heading towards Iverson’s office, checking up and down the hall to make sure nobody was there to catch him. When he turned the corner he heard two voices arguing.

“You said the space craft went down due to pilot error. I saw the video feeds from your probes. There’s no evidence of a crash anywhere on Kerberos!” The voice sounded familiar.

“Those feeds are classified!” Iverson yelled. “I could charge you for treason for hacking into them.” Adam heard a struggle and hid behind the corner, watching as Iverson dragged the hacker into the hall.

“Katie?” Adam whispered, his eyes wide.

“Where’s my family?” Katie yelled, turning on Iverson once he released her. Iverson pointed at a guard in the hall.

“Escort Ms. Holt off the premises,” Iverson said, and the guard hurried to grab Katie. “And make sure that every guard knows that she’s never allowed on Garrison property ever again.” Adam had never heard Iverson sound so angry before.

“You can’t keep me out!” Katie protested. “I’ll find the truth. I’ll never stop!” With that the guard dragged her down the other end of the hall, and soon they were gone. Iverson sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. Then he walked into his office and closed the door firmly, locking it. Adam stepped out into the hall, not quite understanding what he just saw.

Katie didn’t think that they were dead either? He hurried for Keith’s apartment, knocking on his door. Keith opened it, and immediately straightened up when he saw that it was Adam.
“Did you get into his files?” Keith asked. Adam shook his head.

“No, that plan’s not going to work, but I did find something else out.” Keith looked at him skeptically, but then he opened the door wider, inviting Adam inside.

Keith could only be so patient. Adam should’ve been keeping a closer eye on him.

“Shiro is out there, and the Garrison is hiding something from us! You’re covering up your own mess!” Keith practically growled, getting in Iverson’s face. Iverson’s eye twitched. His temper had been shorter than usual these past few months, what with the failed mission and major recruitments being made - the new cadets were due to arrive in a week.

“Keith -” Adam said, taking a step towards him. The rest of the cadets watched with wide eyes.

“I’m done being patient, Adam,” Keith said through gritted teeth. “There’s something going on, there’s something out there in the desert -” Adam knitted his brow in confusion. He’d never heard Keith mention there being something in the desert before - what did that have to do with anything? “And I’m going to find it, and then I’m going to find Shiro.”

“Lieutenant Shirogane is -” Iverson began, his tone firm.

“Stop lying to us!” Keith said fiercely, grabbing the front of Iverson’s jacket. Adam tried to pull him off, but Keith wouldn’t let go.

“You are expelled,” Iverson said coolly. “Pack your things up and leave.” Keith looked at him with wide eyes, and then he let go of him roughly, taking a step back.

“Fine,” Keith said. “I never wanted to be part of all this anyway.” He gave Adam one last look, a question in his eyes, but when Adam just looked back at him in shock he turned and stormed out of the training room, fists clenched at his sides. Iverson fixed his jacket and looked at Lance.

“Cadet McClain!” he barked, and Lance quickly stepped forward, his eyes wide. “You’re in the fighter pilot program now, congratulations.” With that he left the training room, Lance’s eyes even wider now. No one spoke, and after a long moment Adam turned to face them.

“You’re all dismissed,” he said, and then he left the training room as well, moving to catch up with Iverson.

“Commander Iverson -” Adam said. Iverson whirled to face him, a vein on his forehead popping.

“I swear to god if you defend that boy I will kick you out of the Garrison too,” Iverson said, and Adam shut his mouth. Iverson sighed, clenching his jaw. “Just be careful what you do, Lieutenant.” He left Adam to stand there in the middle of the hall.

The next time he had the opportunity to visit Keith, there were diagrams plastered all over the cabin walls.

“There’s something drawing me here,” Keith said, circling a large area of the desert. “I can feel it.
I know that it means something.”

“There’s no way that Shiro is on Earth,” Adam said. “He would’ve contacted us.” Keith made a noise of frustration.

“I know that, but this is important, okay?” Adam leaned back on the couch, looking over at the picture of Keith and his father.

“What if he doesn’t come back?” Adam asked, and Keith turned to face him, anger in his eyes.

“Are you seriously giving up?”

“No, I’m not, but even if it wasn’t a pilot error, it’s been months,” Adam said. “It’s been months, and nothing. We have no leads -”

“I told you,” Keith said, pointing at the area circled in red. Adam sighed and stood up.

“I know, but we need to prepare ourselves for the worst,” Adam said. Keith shook his head.

“Shiro promised never to give up on me, so I’m never giving up on him.” Adam smiled sadly. He’d made a similar promise.

“Maybe I can talk to Iverson and you can -”

“I’m not going back,” Keith said, turning away from him. “I start going into the desert tomorrow to figure this out. Stay, leave, give up, do whatever you want.” Adam watched as Keith began to write more notes down on his large piece of paper, and he quietly slipped out of the cabin and onto his cruiser. It was the end of summer, but the desert wind felt colder than usual.

Adam wondered how Katie thought that she could possibly convince him that she was Pidge Gunderson. He knew the moment he laid eyes on her at cadet orientation, and Katie knew that he knew as well.

“Something is going on,” Katie whispered to him once the new cadets were broken up into groups. “I had to take matters into my own hands.”

“You sound like someone else I know,” Adam said, but Katie waved off the comment. “I believe you,” he offered, and Katie looked at him. Yes her hair was shorter, and she was wearing boys clothing and Matt’s glasses, but she had the same eyes. The eyes that spoke of curiosity, intelligence, and an indescribable spark. Holt eyes.

“If that’s the case, meet me on the roof tonight,” Katie said, and Adam looked at her in confusion as she slipped away to join her orientation group.

“What is all this?” Adam asked, sitting down next to a tangle of wires and machines that he could tell Katie had made herself. She swatted his hand away as he reached out to touch it.

“Don’t touch,” Katie said, putting a headphone to her ear and looking up at the sky.
“What are you -?” Adam began to ask, but Katie shushed him as she listened. Then she sighed and put the headphones down.

“I’m listening to radio chatter in deep space,” Katie said, and Adam’s eyes widened as he looked up at the sky.

“How deep?” he asked, and a smug grin spread across Katie’s face.

“Deep deep,” she said, and Adam whistled.

“So are you going to come up here every night and listen?” he asked. Katie nodded her head, a determined look in her eye.

“As long as it takes,” she said. “I need to find my family.” Adam said nothing, and Katie glanced at him, folding her hands awkwardly in her lap.

“We’re going to find Shiro, too. He’s a part of the family.” Adam smiled sadly. Then he gave Katie a curious look.

“Does your mom know about all of this?” Katie smiled sheepishly.

“She has no idea. She’s definitely going to kill me.” Adam laughed and shook his head. A comfortable silence fell between them.

An hour had passed of looking at stars and listening to static when Adam pulled a leather necklace out from under his shirt, seeing how the gold band at the end of it caught the moonlight.

He was going to see Shiro again. Keith thought that Adam had given up, but he hadn't. The universe had brought them together - it wouldn’t betray them now. It wouldn’t tear them apart.

The stars winked in response, and Adam held Shiro’s ring tightly in his fist.

This wasn't the end of their story.

Chapter End Notes

my tumblr: @nobodys-pearls
So who else loved how the writers decided to make season 8 made up of entirely adashi and klance double dates? Amazing, right?

In all seriousness I've decided to break this ending up into two parts. I started writing this fic with the goal of fixing season 7, but it looks like I'm gonna have to fix some things about season 8 as well, so get ready for that in the second part lmao.

Also follow me @nobodys-pearls if you wanna yell about voltron or this fic with me ;)

“I need some advice, Takashi,” Adam said from where he was sitting, his legs folded under him. He looked up, a tired smile on his face. “Keith is going to drive himself crazy trying to find you. I stop by the cabin when I can. I make sure that he eats and sleeps, but .” Adam shook his head, that tired smile still on his face. He moved to stand and walked forward, pressing his fingertips on cool metal. “You would’ve been better at this. You would’ve known what to say.” Adam looked at the rectangular plate embedded into the curved wall, a wall full of names and faces of people who were gone. He sighed as he looked at Shiro’s picture, Shiro smiling softly back at him. “What am I supposed to do?” He hung his head, closing his eyes. Shiro’s absence - it felt different this time. When Shiro left for Earth’s moon Adam knew when he was coming back, he knew that Shiro wasn’t all that far away. This, though, not being sure of anything - he felt alone, and he wasn’t sure when this feeling would end.

“I guess I shouldn’t expect words of wisdom from a ghost,” Adam finally said with a rueful smile, pulling his fingertips away. Adam still remembered when the Garrison had made the decision to put up Shiro’s plaque. It was a little more than a week after the pilot error on Kerberos was announced. Adam couldn’t believe that it had been almost a year since that announcement, that it had been almost two years since he and Shiro had said goodbye.

Time was a funny thing. It didn’t give a damn about anyone. It just kept moving forward, and it always had the last laugh. Adam left the dimly lit room, his footsteps filling the silence. He walked into the hall, finding it to be empty as well. Adam wasn’t all that surprised - it was late, definitely past the new curfew placed on the cadets. Then Adam remembered that he wanted to stop by his office. Iverson had told him about “Pidge”, Lance, and Hunk’s failed simulation test, so it was Adam’s responsibility to get them back on track. He could probably fit in some extra training once he looked through their schedules -

He didn’t realize that he was walking past the large window that he and Shiro used to go to until a light flashed in the corner of his vision. He stopped and walked over to the glass, wondering what it might have been. The desert sky was full of stars, but that was nothing out of the ordinary. He should’ve continued on to his office, but something caused him to stay. He took another step towards the glass, still looking at the sky.

It wasn’t easy going to the places that he and Shiro loved, but he quickly found that Shiro left his mark in every place - the kitchen, the training rooms, the apartment, the desert, the sky. Everything reminded Adam of Shiro. It was unavoidable. His eyes caught another flash of light, and he
searched the sky, furrowing his brow. Something felt - off. He couldn’t explain it - it was probably a meteor, or something reflecting off of the glass - and yet he couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away. Then a streak of light fell out of the blackness, and Adam’s eyes widened. It didn’t look like a normal meteor. This was big, and fiery, and heading right outside of Garrison grounds. It almost looked like a ship. No, it was definitely a ship.

Adam quickly turned away from the window and walked down the hall, heading for the cruiser bay. He needed to get a closer look.

“Attention, students,” Iverson’s voice came in through the comms system. Adam stopped in the middle of the hall. “This is not a drill. We are on lockdown! Security situation Zulu Niner. Repeat: all students are to remain in their barracks until further notice.” Adam furrowed his brow. There was something in Iverson’s voice that left him feeling tense and jittery. Something was definitely going on, something that the Garrison didn’t seem prepared for. Adam clenched his fists and continued down the hall, leaving the window behind him and taking a left. He stopped when he saw Iverson talking with one of the guards in hushed tones. The commander was wearing some kind of protective suit. Iverson turned to see Adam, and the corners of his mouth turned down.

“Lieutenant Wadley,” Iverson said. “We’re in lockdown.”

“I heard,” Adam said, approaching him. Iverson looked at the guard and the guard saluted, leaving them. Adam noticed the way that the guard was gripping his gun, like something was going to attack at any moment. “I’m suiting up and heading out there.”

“No, you’re making sure that the cadets don’t leave their rooms,” Iverson said, and Adam couldn’t help but narrow his eyes.

“A ship just crash-landed near the Garrison and you really expect me to stay here?” Adam asked, trying to reign in his frustration.

“I expect you to follow orders,” Iverson said coolly. Adam clenched his fists

“We both know who could be in that ship, commander,” Adam said, but Iverson didn’t look like he was going to back down.

“We have no idea what it could be. That’s why only a select group of highly ranked officers are going to investigate it.”

“You don’t think that I deserve to go?” Adam asked, his gaze softening into hurt as he searched Iverson’s eyes. Iverson sighed, but he kept his gaze steady.

“I never said that. I promise that I will let you know what is going on once I know myself, but for right now we need you and the other teachers to be watching over the cadets.” Adam looked at him for a long moment, wanting to argue, but he knew that Iverson was right. The cadets were his responsibility.

“Okay, fine,” Adam said, conceding. He walked past Iverson and towards the cadets’ apartments. “Just don’t forget your promise.” He didn’t stay long enough to hear Iverson’s answer, turning the corner and striding down the next hallway. He made it to the door that he was heading for and knocked. Then he moved to knock on the door next to that one, but it flew open before he had the chance.

“April and I saw from the window,” Hannah said, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. April came to stand behind her. Both of them were already dressed. “Was that one of ours?”
Adam shook his head. “It was hard to tell, but it was definitely a ship.”

“Could it be -?” April began ask. Then the other door opened and Raj poked his head into the hall, looking at the three of them. He was rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“I’m guessing that we’ve got a job to do?” Raj asked. Adam nodded his head.

“Iverson wants us to check on the cadets, make sure that they don’t get into any trouble during lockdown.” Raj slumped his shoulders.

“Yeah, okay. I’ll wake up Henry.”

“He slept through that announcement? Iverson must’ve been blaring the comms,” Hannah said. Raj shrugged.

“There are many things that I don’t understand about him,” Raj offered, but there was a fondness in his tone. He went back into the room, most likely to get Henry. It only took them about five minutes until the two of them entered the hall, Henry hiding his yawn behind his hand.

“So what do we do if the cadets are out of their rooms? Grab them by their ears and give them a stern talking to?” Henry asked, leaning his hip against the wall and crossing his arms.

“Someone didn’t like being woken up,” Hannah whispered to April. April laughed and they walked into the hall as well, closing the door behind them.

“We’ll give them a warning,” Adam said. “As long as they aren’t getting into too much trouble I don’t really see the harm.”


“Waddles has always been soft,” she said, and Adam rolled his eyes, heading down the hall.

“Come on,” Adam said, and the four of them followed. They weren’t that far away from the cadets’ apartments, so soon they were knocking on doors, making sure that everyone was inside and attempting to answer their questions the best that they could.

“Don’t worry about us. We made sure to follow Iverson’s instructions as soon as we heard them,” James said. Adam gave him a tired smile. He was a good kid, even when he was trying too hard to impress.

“I bet that Iverson appreciates it,” Adam decided to say. He could see James’ roommate Ryan Kinkade sitting on the couch, working on what looked like pieces of a camera. “Just sit tight and Iverson will make another announcement soon enough.” James nodded his head and closed the door.

“Hey, Adam?” Raj asked, and Adam turned to look at him. He was standing in front of Katie’s - Pidge’s - room. She had a room to herself, and it looked like Raj knocked and she didn’t answer. Adam furrowed his brow and made his way to the door. He knocked twice.

“Hey, uh, Pidge, it’s me. We need you to open up.” He waited for an answer, but heard nothing. He wondered if she was on the roof. That’s where she usually was at this time of night, which was very much against the rules, but Adam didn’t have to heart to do anything about it. She was listening for her family after all, and sometimes she’d let Adam listen with her. Adam began to think of what to do when Hannah called his name. He saw that she was standing in front of Lance and Hunk’s door, the same expression on her face that Raj had.
“They aren’t in there?” Adam asked. Hannah shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

Katie, Lance, and Hunk? Adam couldn’t remember the three of them ever doing anything together outside of class. Katie had made it clear that she wasn’t here to make friends, a decision that reminded Adam of someone else he knew, and Hunk hated to break any of the new rules. Lance, though, he wouldn’t be surprised if Lance got the three of them together somehow. But what were they up to?

Adam had a theory.

“Are any of the other cadets missing?” Adam asked. He looked at April and Henry and they both shook their heads. “Then you guys stay here and keep an eye on things. I’ll go find the missing cadets.”

“Good luck, Adam,” April said, giving him a knowing look. They both had an idea of who could be in that ship. They both had a feeling that that’s where he was meant to go. Adam nodded his head.

He decided to check the roof first, just in case Katie was up there listening to radio chatter, oblivious to the chaos that was happening below her, but no one was there. He reached the edge of the roof and saw smoke curling upwards behind a large rock. He could see the headlights of the Garrison vehicles. The night was leading him towards that spot, and he had a strange feeling that that’s where he would find Lance, Hunk, and Katie.

He left the roof and stopped by the cruiser bay, letting out a noise of frustration when he saw that it was locked. It looked like he’d have to go on foot. He fixed his glasses and headed for one of the doors leading out of the Garrison and towards the crash, being careful not to be seen. Once he was outside he quickened his pace, feeling a slight tremor in his hands. He was beginning to worry that he was running out of time.

He went to hide behind on of the larger rocks once he got closer to the crash, peeking around the edge to get a better look at exactly what the Garrison was trying to hide. He could see a hastily made tent next to a few of the Garrison vehicles. The ship that had crashed was tied down to one of those vehicles. Adam was surprised that it looked undamaged. He was also surprised by the fact that it wasn’t a Garrison ship. Actually, Adam wasn’t sure if he’d ever seen a ship that looked like that. He wondered not for the first time what had brought this ship to Earth. He found it hard not to hope that it was because someone had taken the long way home -

Adam quickly pressed his back into the shadows, keeping quiet as a guard passed him, going through his patrol with a blaster held tightly in his arms. He looked jumpy. Adam had noticed that most of the people on the site looked tense and unsure. Once the guard was gone Adam looked over at the tent once more, scanning the faces. Katie, Lance, and Hunk were nowhere to be found. Adam reasoned that it was better if he hadn’t spotted them yet, because if he did see them among all of those faces that would mean that they were in deep trouble.

There was only one more thing to do, the thing that drew Adam to this place since he saw that ship fall from the sky. This feeling - it felt like answers. For the first time in a while, he didn’t feel that same sense of loneliness. Could that mean -? Could he dare to hope that -?
An explosion shook the ground underneath him, and he covered his hands over his ears, looking out from the other side of the rock to see explosions lighting up the horizon, going down in a line. He looked at the scene in surprise, and watched as a few Garrison vehicles went to investigate.

It didn’t make any sense. Why would explosions go off that were completely isolated from the site? It didn’t seem like an attack, more like a -

Adam quickly turned and looked back at the tent, and when he saw the scene in front of him his brow furrowed in confusion.

He watched as Lance and Keith dragged someone out of the tent. Each of them had an arm around a man with a shock of white hair, his body limp. Hunk and Pidge flitted around them in panic as they all headed away from the site. Keith and Lance seemed to be arguing about something. Then Adam saw the face of the man that was leaning heavily on them, and his heart almost stopped.

“Takashi?” Adam breathed, adjusting his glasses and straining his eyes. He looked the same and yet - different. Where did that white hair come from? And did he have a scar on his face? Then he gasped when he saw Shiro’s arm, or rather, his robotic one. He could feel the tears welling up in his eyes. “Takashi,” Adam said again, stepping out from the rock and starting to head towards them, a smile spreading across his face as his hands shook in disbelief. Was it really him? What happened to him? Why were their cadets orchestrating what looked liked some kind of rescue mission?

“Stop,” a gruff voice commanded, and Adam turned enough to see a guard standing behind him, a gun aimed at his back. “You have no authorization to be here.” Adam risked a glance back towards where Keith and the others were taking Shiro. He had to go to them.

“I came here to find some missing cadets,” Adam explained, looking back at the guard. It wasn’t technically a lie.

“I have to take you back to the base,” the guard said, and suddenly there was an alarmed yell. Both of them shifted their attention to the cruiser that was speeding across the desert. He looked back to where Keith and the others had just been and saw that they were gone. He clenched his jaw in frustration.

“Don’t you have more important things to be focusing on?” Adam said, a harshness in his tone. Then he ran over to the nearest vehicle, climbing inside and stepping hard on the gas, chasing after the cruiser. He wasn’t going to lose his chance. He wasn’t going to lose Shiro again, not like this. He could hear other Garrison vehicles not too far behind him, chasing down the cruiser as well. He had to get to Shiro first. He increased his speed and tightened his grip on the wheel. It wasn’t quite like flying, but it was similar enough that he was closing the distance between him and the cruiser. He was going to catch up to them.

He knew better than to underestimate Keith’s flying ability. The people who were driving the other Garrison vehicles, however, didn’t seem to know who they were dealing with. Two of them couldn’t pull off the same sharp turn that the cruiser made and lost control. Then the cruiser jumped from one cliff to another. Adam let out an impressed huff and increased his speed, driving off of the cliff and on to the other, still on the cruiser’s tail. A Garrison vehicle had managed to pass him, but they drove into the cliff once they landed, and Adam quickly passed it. He was the last one following.

“Keith!” Adam called, trying to get his attention, trying to let Keith know that it was him, but Keith didn’t seem to notice. The roar of the engines were too loud. Then his eyes widened when he realized where they were. The cliff. He knew what Keith was about to do. “Keith! Please, stop!”
Adam yelled, although he knew that it was no use. The cruiser picked up speed as it neared the cliff’s edge. He watched as it flew off of the cliff, and he heard the yells of his cadets as it headed towards the ground. A large part of Adam wanted to drive off after them, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to pull it off. He hit the brakes at the last second and skidded to a stop at the very end of the cliff, looking down and watching as the cruiser flew away into the night, his lips pressed into a hard line.

“No,” Adam whispered, resting his forehead against the wheel. “No!” Adam yelled, shutting his eyes tight once he could feel the tears in them. He was so close. Then he felt the vehicle shift, and Adam’s eyes flew open when he felt it begin to tilt. Before he could react he was falling off the edge. It was hard to tell what was desert and what was sky as the world blurred around him, the vehicle he was in turning over and over in the sky.

Was he going to die? It was a pretty long way down. The last thing he saw was a pinprick of light in the distance, getting farther and farther away. Then everything went black.

“Takashi!” Adam yelled, sitting up in bed and clutching his sheets. He felt a pain shoot up his arm and quickly grabbed it, looking down to see a plaster cast. The word ‘Waddles’ was written on it in black marker. He was also wearing a hospital gown. Then he remembered what had happened.

“You’re awake!” April said, scrambling up from her chair to stand at his bedside. He looked around to see the empty cots to the right and left of him. He was in the infirmary.

“How long have I -?” Adam asked. April winced.

“About six hours? It’s almost morning,” April said. “Dr. Murphy says that you may have a mild concussion, along with a broken arm,” she continued, glancing at his cast before looking back at him. “What happened out there?”

“I don’t have time,” Adam said, shaking his head and pushing the covers away so he could stand. He looked around and found his clothes folded into a neat pile on a nearby chair. He grabbed them and started putting them on.

“Adam -” April began, looking at him in concern.

“I saw him!” Adam said, and April’s mouth opened in surprise, immediately knowing who he was talking about. “I need you to help me sneak out of here.” April stared at him for a moment, still looking surprised, and then she nodded her head.

“Let’s go.” Adam put on his glasses and together they walked to the door leading out of the infirmary. April poked her head out into the hall and then looked back at Adam. “It’s clear.” They carefully made their way out of the infirmary and into the hall. Then they heard footsteps, and April quickly pulled Adam around the corner. They peeked their heads out and saw that it was Dr. Murphy. April turned to look at Adam. “You go. I’ll distract him.”

“Thanks, April.” April smiled.

“Just find our Shiro for us, okay?” Then she paused. “I heard that the cruiser ended up escaping. How are you going to find him?”

“I know where he is,” Adam said firmly, and April believed him. She gave him one last
encouraging smile and then ran into the middle of the hall.

“Adam left!” April yelled as Adam slowly made his way down the other hall, her tone panicked. Adam couldn’t help but smile. He never knew that April had a talent for the dramatics. “He said something about heading for his office! I tried to stop him but he wasn’t listening -” Perfect. His office was far away from the cruiser bay. He could hear Dr. Murphy’s sigh.

“I’ll call for some guards to check it out. Thank you for letting me know.” He heard Dr. Murphy close the door to the infirmary, and then Adam quicked his pace, making his way to the cruiser bay door. Thankfully it was unlocked. He quickly slid into the seat of the nearest cruiser and sped out of the garage. He wasn’t as graceful as he usually was, having only one arm to fly with, but he managed to make it out of the Garrison without being spotted. He increased his speed as he headed deeper into the desert.

There was only one place that Keith would take Shiro, but they wouldn’t be there for long. He pushed his cruiser to go faster, leaving red streaks of desert sand in his wake. It didn’t take long to get to the cabin, and he was jumping out of the cruiser before it came to a complete stop, running towards the front door.

“Keith! Takashi! It’s me!” Adam said, grabbing the doorknob and throwing the door open. He made his way into the front room and found it empty. The kitchen was empty too. Then he continued into the house and stopped, his eyes wide when he stepped into the main room.

“Keith,” Adam breathed, looking around at all of the maps and pictures that Keith had plastered over the walls, way more than the last time Adam had visited. The picture frame was still there, and Adam gingerly picked it up, looking at the two smiling faces as he tried not to cry. The cabin was empty. No one was here. He was beginning to think that it was all a dream. He set the frame down on what little empty space was left on the table and almost ended up knocking over a mug half-filled with -

Wait.

Adam picked up the mug and smelled it. It was green tea, and it was still warm. Adam quickly set the mug down and began scanning his eyes around the room. There had to be some sort of clue as to where they’d gone, and they couldn’t be far. Then Adam’s eyes fell on the map pinned to the wall opposite the couch, along with a picture of the desert. There was a red circle around a certain part of the desert horizon, one that Adam hadn’t noticed the last time that he was here. After a moment he realized that he knew where that was, even though he had no clue as to why they would’ve gone there.

He hurried out of the cabin and hopped onto the cruiser, forgetting about the cast on his arm as he gripped the thrusters with both hands, speeding off towards the area that Keith had circled off. He ignored the pain in his arm as he willed himself to go faster. He almost cried in relief when he saw the horizon from the map, and slowed to a stop in front of the rock that Keith was so focused on. As he jumped down from the cruiser he looked around, but no one was there. He walked up to the rock, placing his good hand on it. It didn’t feel like anything special. Then he felt something in his fingertips, a buzzing, insistent energy. An energy that seemed to be leading him to the left. To the left and downwards. He followed the feeling, moving his hand along the rock until he stopped, eyes wide as he saw a cave hidden from plain sight. Something told Adam that that’s where they must have gone.

He quickly made his way down the rocks and walked into the cave, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. There were carvings of cats along the walls, and other animals that Adam had never seen before. Something about this place whispered of an ancient and powerful energy. This place
must’ve been around long before Adam was born, long before anyone was born. Adam took a step forward and realized too late that there was no ground beneath him. He gasped as he fell through the darkness, coming to land in a shallow body of water. He winced as he held his cast, and then moved to stand.

Did the Garrison know about this? Was this what they’d been hiding from Adam this whole time? What did Shiro have to do with this place? Then he looked up and his eyes blew wide. There was an impossibly large, blue mechanical lion sitting in front of him, filling the wide cavern. It was bowed down, it’s mouth open, as something moved inside. Adam squinted to try and make it out, and then he realized that he wasn’t wearing his glasses. He quickly reached into the water and felt them in his hands, moving to put them on. When he looked back at the lion he saw Shiro walking into its mouth, his back turned away from him.

“Takashi!” Adam called out, but the lion closed its mouth the moment that he spoke. Adam waded through the water and towards the lion. “Takashi!” He called out again. He started to hear voices coming from inside of the lion. Hunk? Lance? The lion began to purr. Adam finally reached dry rock and kept moving forward. He needed to get inside of that lion somehow. Then a pulse of energy pushed him backwards, and Adam watched as a blue dome encased the lion, shielding it. “What is this?” Adam whispered, putting his good hand out to rest on the barrier. He pushed but it wouldn’t budge. He thought that he could hear voices again. Keith? “Please,” Adam said, desperation in his voice as he pushed harder against the barrier, using both hands this time and trying to ignore the pain that shot up his arm. “Please let me in.” He looked up at the lion’s yellow eyes, and it was almost like they were looking sadly back. “No ,” Adam said, still looking at the lion as he kept pushing, throwing all his weight into it. “I need to see him. I need him.” The lion continued to look solemnly back. Adam stared at it for a long moment, tightening his eyes in pain. He wasn’t going to see Shiro, not yet. “Please keep him safe,” Adam finally asked. He knew that it was foolish to ask a machine for a favor, but the lion seemed to hum in response. Then it literally roared to life, throwing its head into the air, and Adam watched with wide eyes as it flew upwards, breaking through the rocky ceiling and flooding sunlight into the cavern as it flew into the sky.

Adam held his cast to his chest as he watched it go. He watched it until the lion was only a speck in the sky, until it was nothing. He stayed like that for a while, feeling the weight of all that he’d lost bearing him down. He fell to his knees, the water soaking into his skin.

How many times would he have to lose Shiro to the sky? He wasn’t sure how many more times he could take.

“Thank you for coming to help me, Adam,” Colleen said, titling her can of water over the first row of plants. Adam looked at her between the foliage, watering his own row of plants.

“I’m always happy to help, Colleen,” Adam said easily. Colleen hummed, a small smile on her face as she moved down the row.

“I also wanted to thank you for taking me to your friends’ wedding,” she said. “It was beautiful.”

“I’m happy that you could be my plus one,” Adam replied, feeling the leaves of the plants between his fingertips as he inspected them. “That tower of pudding was something else, wasn’t it? I mean, Hannah told me that that’s what they were going to do instead of a cake, but I didn’t believe her.” Colleen laughed behind her hand.
“I appreciated the freeze-dried food,” she offered. “It was very on the nose.” Adam rolled his eyes, suppressing his grin.

“The two of them wanted to put in as many space puns as possible. April was the one who pointed out how serious the Garrison has become. They wanted to make space fun again.” He smiled at the foliage. They really had made space fun. Adam couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed that much.

“You’re right, the Garrison has become more - tense - lately. But with all of the new cadets being trained maybe Admiral Sanda will start assigning more space missions, and who knows what we’ll find out there?” Colleen moved on to the third row of plants. “It really is amazing, that there’s a whole universe out there waiting for us.”

“It is,” Adam agreed. “Amazing, I mean. And also pretty hard to comprehend.” He thought back to the cave, to the blue lion that he’d seen many months ago. He still wasn’t convinced that that whole thing wasn’t a concussion-induced hallucination. He’d never told anyone about it. He had a feeling that they would force him to go through a psych evaluation before he could resume teaching, and teaching seemed to be the only thing that was keeping him sane. “I meant to ask, what have you been doing with these plants?” Adam said, knowing that Colleen was experimenting with some new genetic modifications to create more sustainable produce. Colleen’s eyes lit up.

“Well with this group I’ve decided to -” as she was explaining the door to the lab opened and someone ran inside, all wide eyes and heavy breathing. Colleen set down her can and looked at them in concern.

“What’s going on?” Adam recognized them as one of the newer cadets.

“A ship just landed nearby,” the cadet said between breaths. “Iverson says that he needs to see the two of you immediately.” Colleen and Adam looked at each other. Then Adam put down his watering can and they made their way to Iverson’s office, finding the door to be open. Admiral Sanda was there.

“Dr. Holt, Lieutenant Wadley,” Iverson said with a short nod. Admiral Sanda looked at them both, her expression hard to read.

“What’s happened?” Colleen asked, and Adam could sense how tense she was. He went to hold her hand and she accepted, looking at Iverson with a steady gaze, ready for whatever he was going to tell them.

Iverson didn’t say anything at first, and then he clasped his hands behind his back, glancing at Admiral Sanda before saying, “Officer Holt has returned to Earth, and it’s time that the two of you were made aware of a few things.”

Adam looked at the four cadets before him, some faces more familiar than others.

“James Griffin, Ina Leifsdottir, Ryan Kinkade, and Nadia Rizavi, the four of you have been chosen to become a new unit of fighter pilots. You will fly the new jets made with the crystal that Officer Holt procured on his journey, and you’ve been given the responsibility of defending this planet from outside invaders,” Adam explained, watching them closely as they all stood to attention. Part of him still couldn’t believe what he was saying. Outside invaders? Alien crystals? He could only
imagine the look on Shiro’s face when he found out that aliens really existed. Adam owed him money. He pushed the thought aside and walked past the cadets, looking ahead. “There is only so much that I can prepare you for. We’re going to be facing enemies that we know very little about, but,” Adam said, stopping where he was and turning to face them. He smiled. “I know that you four are going to do incredible things. I am proud to be your teacher.”

“Thank you, Adam, we won’t let you down,” James said firmly. Adam saw the smile on Nadia’s face, the brightness in Ina and Ryan’s eyes. This was hope, Adam realized. This was hope for the future.

“This is Commander Iverson. Initiate base defense protocol beta five.” Adam ran through the halls and towards his fighter jet outside, putting on his helmet. The MFE pilots weren’t ready yet, this was all happening too quickly, so it was up to Adam and the higher ranking pilots remaining to be the Garrison’s front line. Adam touched the leather band around his neck, feeling Shiro’s ring against his chest. This was his chance to fight.

“Ready Raj? Henry?” Adam called as he climbed up into his jet.

“Ready,” he could hear them both say through the comms. Adam smiled and closed the hatch, putting his hands on the thrusters. “Then you heard the man, we’re up.” His fleet took to the sky, flying past the orange barrier and into open air. Adam couldn’t help but look on in shock for a moment as the alien ships - the Galran ships - were approaching. Then he narrowed his eyes and pressed on, gaining speed. These were the aliens who were responsible for taking Shiro away from him. They were the ones who tortured him and forced him to be their ‘champion’. He remembered every detail that Sam had told him. He practically forced Sam to tell him everything, even though Sam didn’t want to cause him any pain. But pain could be a weapon. It’s what made Adam fly even faster towards the enemy, even though he knew there was little chance of winning. He was going to make the Galra regret taking his family away from him.

He deployed the missiles and watched as they managed to hit one of the ships, but they didn’t seem to do any damage. The turret on the ship aimed itself at the fleet, and a beam of purple light flew towards them. Adam managed to avoid it, but it was close.

“Our weapons have no effect!” Adam yelled into the comms, hoping that Sam was listening and taking notes. “Evasive maneuvers!” Then he heard an explosion and his eyes widened as he saw one of the jets in his fleet go down, and then another one.

“I can’t shake these things! He’s got me on target lock!” One of the pilots in his fleet yelled over the comms. It was Violet - she had just been approved to be a fighter pilot.

“Hang in there! I’m heading your way!” Adam said, moving his thrusters and heading towards her jet. Their formation had been destroyed. He watched as people were being picked off left and right.

“I can’t! No! - ” Adam gasped as he saw Violet’s jet explode in front of him, and he quickly adjusted his angle, getting out of range of the Galra’s weapon. He tightened his grip on the thrusters, trying to ignore the way his heart was clenching. He had to focus, but it felt like he’d just lost one of his own. Images of Violet as an energetic fifteen-year-old flooded his mind. She was
just getting up the nerve to confess her feelings to James, she had been so happy when Iverson promoted her to fighter class, she was going to have a future -

“Be aware, another Galra fleet is launching and approaching,” he heard a woman’s voice say over the comms, back at the base. They weren’t going to win this. The realization felt like cold water running down Adam’s spine. He opened a direct communications link with Raj and Henry. They were the only three left.

“Hey,” Adam said, gritting his teeth as he flew towards the Galran ships. “I’m guessing you know what’s next, right?”

“We die fighting,” Henry said. Adam let out a dry laugh, watching as the Galra turret moved to aim itself at them.

“Unless Raj has any better suggestions?”

“No,” Raj said, sounding grim. There was silence for a moment. “It’s been an honor to call you both my family.”

“Same here,” Henry said. Adam could tell that he was clenching his jaw.

“At least maybe this one time Iverson will be proud of us,” Adam said, and he heard Henry laugh.

“If he doesn’t at least shed a tear I’m going to haunt him forever.”

“That would be a fate worse than death for Iverson,” Raj said with a laugh. Adam could hear the tears in it. “I’ve got a target lock,” Raj said, but then the Galra fired its blaster and Raj’s jet was gone. Henry’s jet was hit shortly after. Adam quickly put his hand around his leather band, fighting back angry tears as he kept flying towards the Galra ship.

“I’m sorry, Takashi,” Adam said, and then he yelled as he pushed forward on the thruster, the beam of purple light heading his way.

For a moment, everything was light, and falling. He felt like a star, crashing to the empty desert.

And then there was nothing.

“You know, you’ve gotten a lot more reckless since Shiro left. I’m not sure if he would be horrified or proud,” a voice said from somewhere on his left. The voice let out a sigh, and Adam could hear them shift. “Thanks for the wedding gift, by the way. The cabin has been really nice. We found a couple of weird maps and notes tucked away into drawers, probably Keith’s, but you were right, it’s really cozy.” There was silence for a moment. “Hannah was the one who saw your jet fall from the sky. We didn’t know that it was you. And then we opened the hatch and -” the voice choked up, and Adam felt someone hold his hand. “Please wake up, Adam. Please keep fighting.” Adam wanted to open his eyes, to tell this voice that it was going to be okay, but blackness crawled its way into his mind once more, and he was being pulled back into nothingness.
“Will the burns ever heal?” a voice asked, this one different. It reminded him of stargazing and empty parks. He could hear a child crying somewhere far away.

“It’s unlikely,” another voice said, one that used to ruffle his hair and put bandages on his knees. “It’s a miracle that he survived at all.”

“Please don’t say that,” a third voice said, one that used to kiss him goodnight. “Hannah, April, thank you for finding him, for bringing him to the hospital.”

“Of course,” a voice said, worry laced through her words. Hannah - that was Hannah’s voice. June, his dad, his mom, he was starting to recognize them. “We never should have left the Garrison. I should have -”

“Hannah,” April said, her voice sad.

“We lost our family, April!” Hannah yelled. Adam had never heard her sound so wild before. “Raj! Henry! Shiro! And we almost lost Adam too!”

“He’s going to pull through,” June said. “He’s a fighter.”

“I know, but I’m not going to take any chances.”

“Hannah, we’ve talked about this. If you get caught -”

“It’s worth the risk,” Hannah said firmly. “Dr. Wadley, if I get you a piece of that crystal, do you think that you can put it to good use?” There was a pause.

“Yes. If I replace the energy source in the chamber with the alien technology, then it should increase Adam’s chances.”

“Then there’s no debate. I’m going,” Hannah said. Adam could hear footsteps and then a door opening and closing.

‘I need to wake up,’ Adam thought, trying to will his muscles to move. He felt a pain in his leg. His arms felt hot and itchy. His eyes felt glued shut. How long had he been unconscious? What happened with the Galra fleet? How many people did they lose? Was Adam really alive? He strained against his unconscious state, but it was no use.

“Wait,” June said, and Adam could feel her fingertips on his arm. “He just moved.”

“Really?” his mother asked, and he could feel her holding his hand. She waited a moment, and Adam tried to call out to her. “Yes! I just felt his hand move!”

“This is a good sign,” his father said, and he could hear his smile, his relief.

“I should tell Hannah,” April said, and Adam could hear her moving away. Then a pain spiked in Adam’s chest, and the blackness around him felt thicker. It began to suffocate him.

“What’s happening?” his mother asked, sounding panicked.

“Give me some space,” his father said. “He’s going into cardiac arrest.”

“No!” his mother yelled.

“June,” his father said, and a moment later Adam couldn’t hear anything.
“Come on, son,” his father said quietly, and Adam felt cool metal on his chest, and then a shock ran through his body. “Come on,” his father said through gritted teeth. Adam could feel the darkness collapsing his throat, pressing down on his chest. Another shock ran through his body, and the darkness recoiled. A few moments later he felt another shock, and the darkness peeled itself away completely.

But the nothingness came once again.

There was a blue light in Adam’s dreams, covering everything. It almost felt like magic, even though Adam knew that magic didn’t exist. And yet he also thought that aliens didn’t exist. It was a soft glow, pulsing around him. All the pain in his body seemed to slowly ebb away, until all he could feel was a buzz of energy under his skin.

He thought of his family, his friends. He thought of Raj and Henry. Of Violet. Of Shiro. Of all the things that he had lost. But the blue light comforted him, filled him with warmth and strength. His dreams became more like memories.

He dreamed of him and Shiro flying across the desert. He dreamed of moonlight shining through the cafeteria windows. He dreamed of Lance and Hunk’s laughter as they threw flour at each other. He dreamed of Keith’s garden. He dreamed of looking at the stars with Katie. Then he dreamed of a blue lion, and then a red one, a green one, a yellow one. Then he saw the eyes of a large black lion looming in front of him.

Adam gasped and his eyes flew open. Then he fell forwards.

“Hey,” a voice said, holding him so that he wouldn’t fall. Adam felt his knees shake as he tried to stand, leaning heavily on whoever was supporting him. He felt his hair being moved away from his face, and then he heard a gasp. Adam looked up and saw a blurry face staring back. He realized that he didn’t have his glasses. “Oh right, here,” the familiar voice said, putting what felt like his glasses into his hands. He took them and hastily put them on, trying to get a good look at whoever was speaking to him. His eyes widened.

“June?” he asked, and she smiled. She looked older than when he last saw her. He could see the beginning of wrinkles in the corner of her eyes. Her hair was cut to her shoulders. The youthful curves of her face had sharpened into mature lines.

“Yeah, it’s me, little bro,” she said softly, tears forming in her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked, and she laughed.

“We thought you were dead,” June said. “The Garrison, we told them that we found you, but then your heart stopped - Dad put you in this healing chamber and Hannah brought this crystal thing -” June shook her head. “We weren’t sure if you were still alive in there. And then the Galra -” her eyes tightened in pain.

“June,” Adam said, looking around. It looked like he was in the hospital basement. The lights were dim and when he turned to look behind him he saw an open chamber, blue light shining out of it. “Was I in there?” June nodded her head. Then they heard a crash coming from above.

“We need to get moving,” June said. “It’s not safe here.”
“June,” Adam said again as June led him towards the door leading into the hall. “How long was I -?”

“We’ll talk about it later, right now we need to get outside.” There was another crash and June’s eyes narrowed in determination. She began to move faster, supporting Adam’s weight the best that she could, but Adam found himself able to stand on his own. Actually, he felt - good. She looked at him in surprise.

“I can keep up,” Adam said, and he hurried for the door at the end of the hall. He opened it and waited for June to hurry through. “What’s going on?” Adam asked, following her.

“The Galra,” June began. “Shortly after we put you in that chamber they took over the hospital. Hannah and April managed to get Casey and I out of there, but Mom and Dad, and Noah -” she clenched her jaw. Adam saw the tears in her eyes as she looked stubbornly ahead. “They’re okay,” June clarified, and Adam felt relief wash over him. “These people came to Earth in this - this robot, and they’ve been fighting back. Everyone’s been fighting back, freeing their loves ones from Galra camps and finding weapons to use. There are rebel forces fighting the Galra in this hospital right now. That’s how I was able to get in and find you.” June ran up the stairs, another blast shaking the building.

“You shouldn’t have put yourself in danger, June,” Adam said firmly. June laughed.

“I’ve been putting myself in danger for the past four years. I joined the rebel forces the first chance I got.” Adam stopped in the middle of the stairwell, looking at her in surprise. June noticed that he wasn’t moving and stopped to look at him in confusion. Then she realized what she’d said. She looked at the railing, her expression grim. “We tried to get you out so many times, but the Galra had this place locked down. We thought you were dead,” she repeated.

“Four years?” Adam asked. June looked at him, smiling sadly.

“And you haven’t aged a day,” she said. Adam’s eyes widened and he ran a hand through his hair, trying to process it all. He had been in that chamber for years?

“What about the Garrison? Colleen -?”

“They’re fighting,” June said. Then she bit her lip, looking like she wanted to say something but was unsure of how to say it. “I was going to tell you this after we got out of the hospital -”

“Just tell me,” Adam said, a note of desperation in his voice.

“Adam,” June said. “Shiro is back. He’s alive, along with the other cadets you mentioned. They’re leading this fight.” Time seemed to stand still around them.

“What?” Adam breathed, and then the building rumbled more forcefully than it did before. He shook his head. “We need to go.” Together they made their way up the rest of the stairs, June opening the door. She quickly stepped back when a beam of purple light flew across the room. Yellow bursts of light retaliated from the opposite direction. Adam heard June curse under her breath.

“We’re stuck,” she said, furrowing her brow. Adam could tell that she was trying to come up with a plan. Then he noticed the abandoned blaster on the ground near where they were standing. Adam lunged forward and picked up the blaster, aiming it in the direction of the purple blast and shooting. He watched as the Galran soldier fell to the ground, dropping his weapon.

“Adam?” a voice said behind him, and he turned to see a young man with a scar on his cheek, his
long hair tied back in a ponytail. He must’ve been part of the rebel forces, but how did he know Adam’s name? The man approached him. He looked like he was only a year or two younger than Adam. The man broke out into a large grin, hurrying to pull Adam into a hug. “Wow, it really is you!”

“Uh, yeah,” Adam said, looking at June for some kind of explanation.

“This is Matt Holt. He’s the one who’s helping lead this attack,” June explained. Matt pulled away from Adam, still holding his shoulders and grinning.

“Oh my god it is you,” Adam said, looking Matt up and down.

“I know, I’ve gotten a lot cooler over the years. That’s probably why it was so hard to recognize me,” Matt said, his grin becoming more smug as he rested his weapon on his shoulder. Adam smiled and rolled his eyes. Then he remembered what Sam had told him.

“Wait, you’ve seen Shiro, haven’t you?” Adam asked.

“Well, Katie told me recently that I only saw a clone of him,” Matt said, and Adam furrowed his brow in confusion. Matt smiled sheepishly. “We have a lot to catch up on, but first we should get out of here.”

“Matt’s right, this place is meant to come down soon,” June said. She headed for the exit door, and Matt and Adam followed her. Adam squinted his eyes, holding his hand in front of his face to block the sun.

“Wow, so I haven’t seen the sun in four years,” Adam breathed. Then he saw a Garrison vehicle not too far in the distance.

“We got him!” June yelled, waving her arm at whoever was in the front seat as they approached. Matt opened the passenger door and helped June inside.

“Everybody’s out. I’m going to detonate once we get out of range,” Matt said, pressing some buttons on his watch. “It’s good to have you back,” Matt added, looking at Adam. Adam nodded his head and made his way into the vehicle. Then he saw who was sitting in the driver’s seat.

“I knew you were still alive, Waddles,” Hannah said, grinning back at Adam. Adam smiled.

“That crystal you stole did the trick,” Adam said, and Hannah looked at him in surprise, glancing at June. “I heard some things when I was in that coma. I was in a coma, right?”

“Yeah, you weren’t responding to anything, and then you had that heart attack -” June said, her voice waverering.

“I’m just grateful that you all fought for me,” Adam said, looking at both of them.

“The Galra has already taken so much from you, Adam, from all of us. I couldn’t let you die,” Hannah said, looking ahead and gripping the wheel more tightly in her hands.

“Okay, time to go,” Matt said, climbing into the back seat. “Do you think that you can get us out of the blast radius in under a minute?” he asked Hannah. Hannah laughed and put her foot on the gas, speeding into the desert.

“I can do it in half that time.”
Adam looked at his face in the rearview mirror, moving his fingertips along the burn that ran down the right side of his nose, from his eyebrow to the middle of his cheek.

“It was a lot worse the last time I saw it,” Hannah said, her eyes on the road. “You had burns everywhere, and your leg was broken.” Adam turned to glance back at June and Matt, who were discussing plans in the backseat. They were far away from the hospital at this point. Apparently they were heading to some sort of safe house to regroup.

“I guess my good looks are gone,” Adam said, facing forwards. Hannah scoffed. Then she scanned her eyes over him.

“You really haven’t aged at all,” Hannah mused. Adam looked at her more closely as well. Her hair was short, barely past her ears. Like June all the youthful roundness in her face was gone, and her eyes spoke of years that Adam had yet to see. Then Adam saw the half-eaten pudding cup in her cupholder and was comforted to know that she hadn’t changed too much. “I hope that crystal didn’t mutate you or something,” Hannah continued. “What if you live forever?”

“Hopefully that’s not the case,” Adam said with an easy smile, looking out of the passenger window. If he was being honest he did feel different, like some of that energy from his dreams was still buzzing in his veins, but it didn’t feel like something as drastic as immortality.

“You know they put your plaque up, at the Garrison,” Hannah said quietly, looking back at the road.

“So you went back? To the Garrison, I mean?” Adam asked. Hannah shrugged.

“April and I went once, to update them on what our unit was doing,” she explained. “It wasn’t easy being back.”

“It is really true? That Takashi’s okay?” Adam asked. He remembered the scar, the robotic arm - maybe Shiro was alive, but how much of him was left? He saw June and Matt looking at each other in the rearview mirror. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Matt assured him. “It’s hard to explain, but, Shiro’s learned a lot about the Galra these past couple of years. He’s fighting the final boss as we speak.” Adam looked worriedly out at the desert.

“And what about Katie? Keith? Lance and Hunk? I saw them fly off into the sky in a blue lion and then…” Matt laughed a little uncomfortably.

“Yeah, they’ve come into close contact with the Galra too,” Matt tried to explain. Then he met Adam’s eyes in the mirror, his expression serious. “They’ve become heroes, Adam, heroes unlike any we’ve seen before.” Adam looked down, feeling competing waves of pride and worry. Then he looked back at Matt.

“Shouldn’t we go help them?” Adam asked.

“That’s what we were doing,” June said. “We’re getting some supplies at the safe house and then we’re going into the cities, offering relief services and driving out the last of the Galra.” June paused. “The war is almost over.”
“Yeah, you really slept through it,” Hannah teased. Adam rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips. Then his expression became serious.

“I’ll do whatever I can,” Adam said firmly. And then he was going to see Shiro, no matter what it took.

It took some time for Adam to comprehend the wreckage of the world that he was in. He saw the smoke, the damaged buildings, the frantic eyes, and ran in with a blaster and a crate of supplies. He took down as many Galra as he could, as many as were left, and then began the task of finding as many people as he could under the rubble. It was as he tended to their injuries that they told him stories.

“There are these five lions that can fly in the sky!” a younger boy said as Adam put some disinfectant on his knee. “I saw them myself! It was so cool!”

“And they can come together and form this big robot!” his older sister explained, twining her fingers together with wide, excited eyes. April giggled and wound some gauze around a cut on the girl’s upper arm.

“They made all of the purple light go away!” another child said, coming over to hold on to Adam’s jacket.

“That sounds pretty cool,” Adam said, a smile tugging at his lips. “I wish that I could’ve seen it for myself.”

“Adam, April,” Matt said, running up to them. Adam noticed how his eyes were wider than usual, how he was holding a communications device loosely in his hand. “They did it. They won.” Adam was still for a moment.

“They won?” Adam asked. Matt grinned, nodding his head.

“It’s over! The Galra are gone!” Matt said, and the children cheered. Adam looked at the ground in disbelief. “We’re going to the Garrison once we finish here. That’s where they’ll all be. They’re a little beaten up but they’ll recover.” Adam kept looking at the ground, not knowing what to say.

“Why are you crying?” the little boy who was holding onto Adam’s jacket asked. “Were you hurt too?” Adam felt the tears in his eyes, and then he looked at the boy and smiled.

“No, I’m alright. I’m happy.” He glanced at Matt and saw him beaming. Then he looked back at the boy. “Now let’s see what I can do about that burn.”

Adam looked on with wide eyes at the huge crowd that had formed.

“This is insane,” Hannah said.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” April agreed. Adam saw humans and aliens alike standing side by side, laughing and talking and crying and cheering.
“When Matt talked about there being five lions that defended the universe, I wasn’t sure if I believed him,” Hannah confessed. “But I guess the proof is right in front of us.” Adam shifted his attention towards the impossibly large lions that were positioned at the front of the crowd, looking over them all. Adam stared at the blue one in particular, the one that seemed to be staring back at him. The one that seemed to have an apology in its eyes. Then the mics crackled to life.

“Today, is a solemn day,” a voice said, and Adam quickly looked at the podium where the voice was coming from, recognizing it immediately. “Today we look back at the lives that have been lost, and the sacrifices that have been made here on Earth and across the universe.”

“Shiro,” April breathed. Adam felt his throat close up. His hair was completely white, and he had a new robotic arm, but it was definitely him. Shiro could look completely different and Adam would be able to recognize him in a heartbeat. He would be able to feel it, like he felt Shiro’s presence now, even though he was so far away.

“There isn’t one of us here today who hasn’t experienced the tragedy of losing someone close.” Something in Shiro’s voice broke Adam’s heart. He didn’t know. He didn’t know that Adam had survived. No one had the chance to tell him. Shiro’s voice sounded older, more tired, like a small part of him was broken beyond repair. He felt Hannah and April each take one of his hands. He looked over and saw the tears in their eyes. They all had lost so much in this war. Friends, students, family - Shiro was right. No one here was a stranger to loss. It had touched them all.

“It truly feels like a light has gone out in our lives, and the sun itself couldn’t reignite it.” Adam forced himself not to call out, not to push through the crowd and run to Shiro in that moment, to hold him close, to never let go. People needed to hear this. Stopping Shiro now would be selfish, no matter how desperately Adam wanted to. “But that light, that fire, has not gone out completely. It is fueled within each of us by the memories and the love of those we’ve lost.” Adam couldn’t help but think of his brother in that moment, of all the love that he gave to his family. He couldn’t help but think of his mom, his dad, of June, Casey, and Noah, who were working to get the hospital back up and running. He thought of all the lonely nights without Shiro, and how it was the memories that they shared that helped him carry on, even when things felt hopeless. “And now we must move forward in their names. And shine that light onto a new path for future generations. Today is a solemn day, but it is also a day of hope.” Adam heard April sob into her free hand, and Hannah moved to hold her close, giving her a watery smile. Adam clenched his jaw and thought of Violet. Of Raj and Henry. Of the future that they helped fight for. “Earth is now stronger than ever, and it stands as a beacon of light to help guide those fighting against tyranny and oppression.”

“When did he get so good at speeches?” Hannah asked quietly, and Adam scoffed, a smile tugging at his lips. April managed a smile as well.

“From here, we will spread peace, and together we will hold strong,” Shiro paused, his expression serious and his fists held determinedly at his sides. “As the defenders of the universe.”

The crowd erupted into applause, and Hannah raised her fist and whooped in victory. April laughed, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“I’m so completely in love with him,” Adam breathed, and Hannah threw an arm around his shoulders.

“We’ve known that for a long time, Waddles. Now it’s time to reunite with your man.” Adam grinned, feeling April hug them both. Then he watched as Shiro left the podium, going to shake hands with some official looking people.

“There are a few other people that I should see first,” Adam decided, although it wasn’t an easy
decision. “Shiro will find me in the med bay. It wouldn’t be fair to him to show up while he’s in the public eye.”

“Yes, but it would be so dramatic,” Hannah argued. April bumped her shoulder, giving her a disapproving look while her eyes betrayed her amusement.

“Adam just knows Shiro too well,” April said. Then she looked at Adam. “We’ll tell him where to find you.”

Adam knocked on the door and entered the room, adjusting his glasses nervously. He saw Sam, Colleen, Matt, a few members of the rebel forces, and -

“Adam!” Katie yelled, looking at him with wide eyes though her round-rimmed glasses. Bae Bae leapt off of her lap to come and sniff Adam.

“Hey, Katie,” Adam said. “I’m guessing that Matt already told you -?”

“Does Shiro know that you’re here? That you’re alive?” Katie asked, searching his eyes as gears turned furiously in her head.

“Not yet,” Adam said, a little caught off guard. He watched as she opened her mouth to protest.

“Adam is figuring it out, honey,” Colleen said, putting a hand on her shoulder. Adam gave her a grateful smile.

“I just wanted to stop by and say that I’ve missed you, and that I’ve heard that you’ve done some pretty amazing things, not that I’m surprised,” Adam said, looking at Katie and then at Sam, whose eyes were shining with pride. Adam looked back at Katie and smiled. “I’m also looking forward to hearing about the grounding that you’re going to get.” Katie’s eyes widened and she looked at her mom, who looked back at her, an evil glint in her eye as she smiled. Adam nodded his head once at Matt and left the room, listening to Katie begin to argue about how saving the world should give her a free pass. He walked to the next door and knocked, finding Lance and Hunk sitting cross-legged in the same bed.

“Shay was here?” Lance exclaimed, putting his hands on his knees. “Man, she really likes you.”

“She’s really amazing,” Hunk confessed. Lance shot him a knowing look and Hunk gave him a playful shove. Then he saw Adam leaning on the doorframe and his mouth opened in surprise. “Adam?” Lance quickly turned to look at the doorway and his eyes blew wide. The two of them scrambled out of the bed and ran over to him, looking at him in shock. Then Adam saw tears in Lance’s eyes right before Lance threw his lanky arms around him.

“You’re alive!” Lance yelled, pulling away to look at him once more, as if he was making sure that Adam was really there. Adam laughed.

“I really should’ve been keeping a closer eye on you two,” Adam said. “You sneak out of your room one night and then you’re gone for six years.” Lance rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“You don’t look like you’ve changed much, though,” Hunk observed, and it was Adam’s turn to look sheepish.
“Yeah, let’s say that I took a four year long nap thanks to an alien crystal,” Adam explained. “Seems like I’ve been twenty-six for a while.”

“Yeah, we were stuck in a quintessence field for five years,” Hunk said with an understanding nod, and Adam finally noticed that they did only look about a year older than they were when they left the Garrison. It seemed like they all knew what it was like for the world to age without them.

Then Lance seemed to realize something.

“Have you seen Shiro yet?” Lance asked, and Adam shook his head.

“I didn’t want to catch him off guard in front of all those important people,” Adam explained. Lance laughed.

“Oh, you would be more than catching him off guard. He never stopped talking about you in space, and when he found out that you were -” Lance stopped, the teasing tone gone from his voice.

“You should see him,” Hunk said. Adam’s expression became serious.

“I will.” He paused for a moment. “If I’m being honest, part of me is kind of nervous to see him,” Adam confessed. “So much has changed -”

Lance shook his head. “Trust me, you have nothing to be worried about.” Then he looked like he had an idea. “Have you seen Keith yet?” It was Adam’s turn to shake his head. “We should go see him. Maybe I’ll get to see his first ever smile.”

“Lance just wants an excuse to visit Keith,” Hunk teased, and Lance jabbed him with his elbow.

“I’m just looking out for our team leader. I know that he missed Adam too.” Lance led him into the hall, Hunk following close behind.

“Team leader, huh?” Adam asked, grinning at Lance. Lance rolled his eyes, letting out a huff.

“You two are unbelievable.” They made it to Keith’s door, which was open half-way. Lance knocked twice and stepped inside. “Hunk and I have a present for you,” he said, pulling Adam into the room. Adam saw Keith sitting in his cot, staring out of the window. A woman who didn’t look human was sitting by the window, quiet as well. Keith had a thick bandage wrapped around his head. He turned and met Adam’s gaze, and Adam saw Keith’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Adam,” Keith said quietly, moving to sit up straighter in bed. He tried to stand, but the woman put a gentle hand on his shoulder. Adam noticed the mark that ran along Keith’s cheek. Then he looked at the woman again, and saw the resemblance.

“This is my mom, Krolia. Mom, this is Adam.”

“Ah yes, I remember Shiro mentioning him,” Krolia said, giving him a nod of acknowledgment. “Thank you for looking out for my son.”

“Looks like you were meant for the stars,” Adam mused. Keith looked at the woman, then back at Adam, understanding what he meant.

“This is my mom, Kroilia. Mom, this is Adam.”

“Ah yes, I remember Shiro mentioning him,” Kroilia said, giving him a nod of acknowledgment. “Thank you for looking out for my son.”

“He’s always been a good kid,” Adam said. “Although he doesn’t look like a kid anymore.” Keith smirked. Then he looked closely at Adam’s face.
“Nice scar,” he said.

“You too.”

“You don’t look as old as you should be,” Keith observed.

“You don’t look like you’re the right age either,” Adam countered, and Keith crossed his arms, the corner of his lips tugged up in amusement.

“Pidge told me that there was someone that I should meet,” a beautiful young woman said, walking into the room with Katie at her side. She had long silver hair and multi-colored eyes, and what looked like two pink markings on her cheeks.

“This is Allura,” Lance said, looking proudly at the woman. “She’s the paladin of the blue lion, and she’s a princess.” Allura scoffed and smiled.

“I’m not really a princess, not anymore.” She approached Adam. “It is lovely to meet you. Are you a friend of Keith’s?”

“Uh, actually, this is Adam,” Hunk explained, and Allura’s eyes widened.

“Does Shiro know that you are here?” she asked.

“No, he doesn’t,” Pidge, Lance, and Hunk said in unison, sounding disapproving. Keith furrowed his brow, looking at Adam.

“Do I know that who’s here?” a voice asked, coming to stand in the doorway. Adam met Shiro’s eyes and Shiro looked back at him in shock. It was like Shiro was looking at a ghost, which, Adam reasoned, Shiro probably thought that that’s exactly what he was looking at. “Adam?” he asked, his voice softer than Adam had ever heard it. Adam couldn’t resist the smile that spread across his face as he nodded his head, adjusting his glasses nervously.

“The Garrison really needs to fact check because the whole ‘me being dead’ thing wasn’t quite -” Adam began, but then the wind was knocked out of him as Shiro pulled him into a tight hug, burying his head in Adam’s neck. Adam saw all of the white hair up close, and then he hugged him back.

“Is it really you?” Shiro asked quietly, his voice sounding like it would break at any moment. Adam let out a tearful laugh.

“It’s me, Takashi.” Shiro pulled away to get a closer look at Adam. He gingerly moved his fingertips across Adam’s scar. Then he smiled, looking into Adam’s eyes.

“I promised that I would come back,” he said. Adam laughed again, touching Shiro’s forehead with his own.

“And I promised that I would be here.” Shiro lifted his eyes to look at Adam, drinking him in, and then he tilted up his chin and kissed him. It wasn’t a deep kiss, but it was filled with more emotion and love and longing than Adam had ever remembered feeling before. He heard Lance let out a whoop somewhere behind them, and he smiled against Shiro’s lips, cupping his cheek. He felt Shiro’s laughter as he pulled away.

“You know I just made this whole speech about loss,” Shiro said. “I made it thinking that I lost you forever.” Adam rubbed his thumb against Shiro’s cheek, looking into his eyes.
“It was a beautiful speech,” Adam assured him, “and maybe you did lose me, maybe we did lose each other, but we also *found* each other. That’s what we’ve always done.”

“Patience yields focus,” Shiro said, and Adam laughed. Finally everything felt right again. He could feel that buzzing energy under his skin, but this was a different energy than the one that the blue light gave him. This was family. This was love. This was a new beginning.

Chapter End Notes

The last chapter has some salt, cute adashi moments in space, and maybe a *cough cough* wedding, so stay tuned :)
So this is it folks! This chapter is a little over 20k works, so please don't pressure yourself to read the whole thing in one go <3

Also, I added a link to a song towards the end of the chapter. Without giving too much away, let's just say that two characters sing a song and if you click on the word 'strum' you will be directed to a youtube video of the song. Feel free to listen to it while that scene is playing :)

Thank you to everyone who has read, given kudos, or written comments. You're all lovely and I appreciate you taking the time to enjoy this story <3

“So let me get this straight -” Adam said, furrowing his brow as he looked at the floor, palms rested on his knees as he folded his legs under him.

“Straight isn’t really your expertise,” Shiro said, and Adam shot Shiro an unamused look as he bit back his grin, sitting cross-legged next to him. Then Adam went back to looking at the floor intensely.

“So you - died,” Adam said, finding that word hard to say, hating the way it felt in his mouth. “And you were stuck in this -”

“The Black Lion’s consciousness, the infinite void, whatever you’d prefer to call it,” Shiro finished, and Adam gave him a tired look. He let out a sigh and continued.

“And there was this clone that took your place.” He watched as Shiro winced.

“Yeah, apparently he was being controlled by Haggar -”

“And that’s the scary witch lady? The one that you need to fight?” Adam asked, and Shiro nodded his head.

“Okay, right,” Adam said, shaking his head slightly. This was a lot to process. “Okay. And then your clone fought Keith and Keith, uh, killed your clone?” Shiro frowned and Adam had his answer. “Yikes.” Adam watched Shiro carefully, making sure that it was okay for him to continue, and when he decided that Shiro was alright he pressed on. “And then the princess - Allura - used magic to put your consciousness into the body of your clone, and your hair turned white.”

“And eventually I woke up,” Shiro finished simply. “And I don’t have my illness anymore,” he added. Adam looked at him in disbelief, searching his eyes. Then he reached out and held a white lock of Shiro’s hair between his fingers, looking at it with a frown.

“You don’t like it?” Shiro asked, a teasing edge in his voice. Adam met his gaze and let go of Shiro’s hair, putting his hands in his lap.

“It’s an old man fringe now,” Adam said seriously, and that got a laugh out of Shiro.
“You’re one to talk, aren’t you almost a year older than me now?” Shiro asked, and Adam furrowed his brow.

“Honestly I have no clue anymore,” Adam said. “That sounds about right.” Then he shook his head, a bemused smile on his face. “This is crazy. All of this is crazy.” He heard Shiro sigh.

“I know.” Adam looked over and watched as Shiro shifted his attention to the large window, his gaze far away.

“Hey,” Adam said, reaching out to hold Shiro’s hand. Shiro tore his eyes away from the morning sky to look at Adam, a small smile on his face. Adam fought to keep the tears out of his eyes. Having Shiro back was a miracle. And now that his illness was gone - they could finally have what they both had wanted for so long - a future together. They just had to finish this war.

“I’m okay,” Shiro said, giving Adam’s hand a squeeze. Then he moved to stand, looking down at him. “We should go to the meeting room, to talk about the final preparations before the launch.” He offered his hand, and Adam took it, Shiro lifting him to his feet. Adam didn’t let go of his hand, nor did Shiro look like he wanted him to. Together they walked down the hall and away from the window. Adam guessed that everyone was already gathered to hear Shiro’s briefing.

One more day on Earth, and then back to space.

Adam couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed as he stood at the back of the room, arms crossed and leaning against the wall as he looked around at all of the people listening to Shiro speak.

“Everyone, welcome to our final briefing here on Earth,” Shiro said, standing confidently in front of them. Lance’s sister, Veronica, was standing at his side. Adam had never gotten the chance to meet her before Voltron made its way back to Earth, given that he was in a magical coma and all, but they hit it off pretty immediately. Apparently Lance told his family a lot of stories about Adam during their breaks, so Veronica liked Adam before she’d even met him. “It’s been several months since we began to rebuild, and tomorrow we launch and continue our liberation efforts across all planets still under Galra rule.”

Gosh, Adam wanted to make out with him so badly. Shiro caught Adam’s look and seemed to read his mind, blushing and quickly looking away from him. He cleared his throat and stood up straighter.

“Commander Holt, what’s the latest from your team?” Adam shifted his gaze towards where Sam was sitting next to Katie - next to Pidge. Adam had to keep reminding himself that she liked being called Pidge now.

“We’ve confirmed that there’s still no Galra activity within several galaxies of the Milky Way,” Sam said. Adam found himself finding it hard to pay attention, looking around the room at all of the different faces. He saw Keith’s mom, standing next to another Galra who was introduced to him as Kolivan. Matt was standing with his rebel group, one of which was his new girlfriend. He couldn’t decide which he found more surprising - Keith being part alien or Matt finding a girlfriend in space. Adam smiled to himself - when he really thought about it both things made sense.

All of the cadets - or rather, paladins - were sitting at the table, the MFE pilots standing behind them. He watched as Lance leaned forward in his chair, listening intently. He looked so much
older, so much more mature, and yet Adam could still see the shine in his eyes that he had all those years ago, when he was sitting in the front of his classroom telling Adam that he loved space. A lot had changed, but not everything.

Adam looked at the room as a whole, the mirth in his eyes dimming. He wished that April and Hannah were here, but there were helping his family with the rebuilding efforts that were still underway. He remembered the last time he visited them, only a few days ago. They were taking good care of the cabin, and they seemed happy. Adam had to tell Keith that he kind of gave his place away to them as a wedding gift, explaining that he wasn’t sure if Keith was ever coming back, but Keith just smiled and told him that it was okay. Keith offered that this made them even after the whole ‘stealing Shiro and taking him to space without getting to see Adam’ business.

Adam also wished that Henry and Raj were here. He went to visit the wall, their pictures and names embedded into it. Raj’s expression was all seriousness, but there was a brightness in his eyes. Henry was fighting back a smirk in his. Violet’s was there too, but Adam found it too hard to look at. He’d laid down flowers and left. What he would give for things to have been different, but Adam supposed that he should be grateful. He could’ve died, too. Yet even with that in mind it was hard not to feel guilty. Feelings crept into his mind, feelings that he confessed to Shiro years ago, on Titan.

*It should’ve been me.*

“I have one more item to discuss,” Shiro said, and Adam’s attention snapped back towards him, towards the conversation at hand. “It’s our last night on Earth and we’ve got a lot of hard work ahead of us. We may not be back home for years.” Adam smirked, trying not to roll his eyes. That was Shiro was for you, the man who never stopped working. At least he was being realistic about how long he was going to be gone. “So I’m ordering you -” Shiro began, and then Shiro’s eyes fell on Adam, a soft smile on his face. “To take some time for yourselves. Be with the ones you love. You’ve earned it.” Adam’s heart stuttered in his chest as people began to clap, and then a small smile spread across Adam’s face.

‘You’ve earned it Takashi,’ he thought, watching as people began to file out of the room.

“Woah,” Adam breathed, stepping into the control room. Purple light filled the space, leading towards a black chair, thrusters on either side. Holographic panels sprung up in front of the windows that looked out at the desert. The sun was going to set soon. “So your brain was stuck in here?” he asked, and he heard Keith scoff as he moved past him, going to sit in his chair. Shiro moved to stand next to Adam, who was still looking around with wide eyes.

“It was a little more complicated than that,” Shiro said, a smirk tugging at his lips. “But yeah, this is the Black Lion.”

“She’s - amazing,” Adam breathed, and he could feel a sensation that made his skin buzz, almost like a purring in the back of his mind. It spoke of clear skies and promises made to last, something dependable, something durable. “So Keith, you’re her pilot now?” Keith turned his chair to face them and nodded. Adam looked at him, impressed.

“You’ve come a long way, haven’t you?” Adam observed, looking him over. “You seem so much older, not just in a literal way. You seem - more centered.” He glanced over at Shiro and saw him looking at Keith, a proud shine in his eyes. Then he looked back at Keith and saw him
determinedly looking away from them, an almost flustered look on his face.

“You guys taught me a lot. Everyone I’ve met has taught me something.” Keith said. Then he looked at Adam, a determined furrow in his brow. “I know now that I can’t accomplish much on my own, that it’s okay to depend on people.” Adam smiled, resting his hip on the interior wall as he crossed his arms. Then he noticed something.

“You emo gloves,” Adam said, his eyes widening a fraction. Keith looked at his bare hands in confusion, a slight pout on his face as his hair fell into his eyes. Adam shook his head, turning to face Shiro. “I won’t accept this. Keith leaves Earth speeding in a cruiser wearing a cropped jacket and black fingerless gloves and he comes back a level-headed adult. I think I need to sit down.” Keith rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. Shiro laughed, putting his hands on his hips as his shoulders shook.

“I still have that knife on me, you know,” Keith warned. “It can turn into a blade now. And I have another sword.” In that moment blue light expanded next to Keith and a large wolf-like creature - Kosmo, Shiro had told Adam, curled up next to Keith, Keith patting his head before shooting Adam a stubborn look, daring him to make a teasing remark. Adam watched the exchange with a measured gaze, Keith running his hand through Kosmo’s fur.

“This makes sense,” Adam decided. He saw the ghost of a smile on Keith’s face as Kosmo nuzzled into his leg. His hardened gaze softened as he turned to look at Adam.

“I’m glad that you’re coming with us,” Keith said, and Adam nodded his head, a grin tugging at his lips as he glanced at Shiro, who was quietly watching them talk with a small smile of his own.

“Me too, Keith.” Then Adam stretched and fixed his glasses. “Takashi and I were going to do some flying if you wanted to join us.”

Keith smiled and shook his head. “I’m going to stay here a little longer. I want to watch the sunset, think about some things.” Adam understood.

“See you tomorrow, then,” Adam said, looping his arm through Shiro’s and leading him out of the lion. “This thing is huge,” Adam whispered, and Shiro let out a soft laugh.

“Yeah, it was a super roomy place for my consciousness to exist,” Shiro joked, and Adam poked his ribs as they stepped out of the lion and into the soft light of the waning day. Shiro got him into a headlock and Adam laughed, struggling to get out of his grip as they headed for their cruisers.

“I’m just now appreciating the dramatic irony of this rock,” Adam said, looking up at the Red Lion where he stood. Shiro scoffed, crossing his arms and looking at it as well. Adam gave him a sideways glance. “Also, Atlas?” Shiro laughed.

“That was Sam’s idea. When I found out the ship’s name I couldn’t decide if I felt like laughing or crying,” Shiro confessed. Adam grabbed his hand, twining Shiro’s fingers with his own, reminding him that he was here, that Adam didn’t die in that Galra attack. Then Adam shifted his stance, looking at the skyline.

“I had an idea,” Adam began, feeling Shiro’s eyes on him. He brought his free hand to his collarbone and grabbed hold of his leather necklace, pulling it out of his shirt and watching Shiro’s ring catching the fading light, making it glow red and orange. Adam looked at it more closely,
narrowing his eyes as he seemed to see sparks of blue light as well. He took the necklace off and held it out towards Shiro. “I kept this safe for you,” Adam said, and Shiro smiled at it. Adam untied the necklace and dropped the ring into his palm, his own ring still on his finger, where it always was. Then he looked into Shiro’s confused eyes. “I want to marry you, right now.” He watched Shiro’s eyes widen.

“Now?” Shiro asked quietly, wonder in his voice. Adam nodded his head, his gaze firm. Shiro looked at him for a moment that seemed to stretch on, and then he grinned, holding out his hand. Adam slipped the ring onto Shiro’s finger, his fingertips lingering on Shiro’s palm before moving to hold his hands.

“Takashi,” Adam said, straightening his back. “Will you take me, level ten, to be your husband?” Shiro laughed, sounding a little breathless as he looked at Adam. There was a shine in his eyes, one that Adam didn’t seem to see in the med bay when they had finally been reunited. Adam felt a warmth in his chest as he realized that Shiro was letting himself be happy, was letting himself have hope.

“I do,” Shiro said, fondness in his voice. Then he gave Adam’s hands a squeeze. “Adam, will you take me -” Shiro paused for a moment, Adam looking at him expectantly. “Fringe, level twelve, Atlas, whatever you’d like to call me,” Adam’s shoulders shook with laughter and Shiro tried and failed to bite back his smile. “Will you take me to be your husband?” Adam leaned into him, looking at Shiro’s lips before he met his gaze.

“Absolutely I do,” Adam said under his breath, and Shiro put his hand on the small of Adam’s back, pulling him close.

“Then you may now kiss the husband,” Shiro said, deepening his voice. Adam laughed and tried to squirm out of Shiro’s embrace as Shiro peppered his face with kisses.

“You’re such a dork!” Adam protested, and Shiro’s lips formed a grin on his neck before he pulled back to rest his forehead against Adam’s. Adam sighed as he looked into those kind eyes. Eyes that had seen a lot - too much, in Adam’s opinion - but were still kind nonetheless. “I love you so much,” Adam said, and then he moved forward to slot Shiro’s lips with his, Shiro letting out a pleased hum that Adam would never get tired of hearing. A sound that he wanted to keep hearing for the rest of his life.

The world was coming down, a world that still made Adam’s head hurt when he looked at it. A white hole, seriously? That sort of thing seemed like something that Adam would read about in one of Casey’s old science fiction novels that he liked, not something that he would see right in front of him, tendrils curling between the stars and throughout space, electric purple light violently snapping and flying around them. This wasn’t the space that Adam had learned about at the Garrison, that was for sure.

“The white hole’s energy is collapsing into a gravity surge,” Veronica said, and Adam looked over from where he was sitting to see Shiro standing at the center control panel, shoulders hunched and a frustrated clench to his jaw. “There’s no way that we’ll hit escape velocity,” she continued, scanning through the data on the hologram in front of her.

“At this point, our only hope for escape is via wormhole,” Coran said, turning slightly to address Shiro.
“How long do we have?” Shiro asked, looking at Veronica.

“Minutes? Seconds?” Veronica offered. “It’s impossible to be sure with these surges.” Shiro’s lips were pressed into a firm line, and he clutched his control panel as he looked out of the front window of the Atlas. Adam could tell that he wasn’t sure of what to do, that he felt helpless in this situation, and that he was starting to close up. Most people saw Shiro as this infallible leader, the man everyone could always rely on, who always knew just what to say. Shiro was an amazing leader, Adam had seen that this past few months on the Atlas, but Adam also knew Shiro well enough to know when he was straining under the pressure of everyone’s expectations. People seemed to forget that the weight of the world was a burden no one could nor should bear alone, even Shiro.

“Coran, move us into position to intercept,” Adam said, getting up from his seat to stand next to Shiro. Coran looked surprised for a moment, glancing at Shiro, but then he nodded his head and did what Adam said. “Hey,” Adam said quietly, putting a hand on Shiro’s shoulder. “We’ve got this.” He could feel Shiro’s body relax under Adam’s touch, and Shiro gave him a grateful smile.

“Sam, I need every ounce of power that you can give us,” Shiro said, and Sam gave him an affirmation. “They’ll come,” Shiro said firmly, looking out at the white hole. Adam didn’t move his hand from Shiro’s shoulder.

“The white hole is about to collapse!” Veronica alerted the control room. Adam caught Curtis looking out the window with wide eyes, hands frozen in front of his hologram. Iverson grimaced at the ground, like he didn’t want to watch. “They’ll come,” Shiro said so quietly that only Adam heard it.

“They will,” Adam said firmly. “You guys have a knack for pulling off the unbelievable. It’s part of the reason that I’ve experienced three ulcers in my young adult life.” Shiro scoffed, his white hair falling in his eyes as he looked down at his control panel. Adam gently moved Shiro’s hair out of his face.

“They’re here!” Coran suddenly yelled. Shiro and Adam quickly snapped their heads up towards the wide window to see the five lions flying towards them and away from the white hole.

“Coran we need to wormhole now!” Shiro said quickly. His eyes burned as he watched the lions fly through the chaos. A wormhole opened up in front of them and the ship flew threw it, the lions close behind. They were going to be okay. Adam let out a sigh of relief as they entered a quiet part of deep space, using Shiro’s control panel to hold himself up as he waited for his heartbeat to steady.

“Why are you sighing like that?” Shiro yelled at him, and when Adam looked up he saw that Shiro’s eyes were wide and incredulous. “I thought you were convinced that they would be alright!”

“Of course I wasn’t!” Adam yelled back, straightening up and waving his arms. “They were in a white hole fighting a magical witch!”

“She’s an alien!” Shiro corrected. “Not magical!”

“A magical alien!” Adam compromised. “And I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t panic!”

“I wasn’t panicking!” Shiro argued, exasperated. “I am perfectly level-headed in every situation.” Adam could hear Shiro’s voice rise in pitch as he said that last part.
“Yes, Allura, we’re fine here, just a lovers’ spat,” Coran said, talking into the comms system, a mirth in his eyes. Adam and Shiro looked at each other, and then Shiro cracked a smile, tension leaving his shoulders. Adam rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly and avoided everyone else’s amused looks as he moved away from the platform and back to his own chair.

“It was hardly a spat, Coran,” Shiro argued once Adam was seated, a slight pout to his lips.

“Seemed like it was almost an all-out brawl to me,” Veronica said under her breath, raising her eyebrows as she slowly turned her chair back to the hologram in front of her.

“Trust me, this is nothing new,” Iverson said, the corners of his mouth quirking up in amusement. “Try to imagine what it was like for me when they were teenagers.” Veronica and Curtis hummed in sympathy and Adam shot them both a glare, crossing his arms. Then he caught Shiro looking at him and his eyes softened. Shiro smiled, and Adam couldn’t help but smile as well. Then Adam looked out of the window and saw the yellow glow of a galaxy surrounding them, the stars winking in the distance as they kept flying forward.

Adam set his tray down at the cafeteria table, taking a seat.

“Do you think that Iverson will make you clean this place up too?” Lance asked, sliding into the seat next to Adam and setting down his own tray. Adam saw his grin and rolled his eyes, a smirk tugging at his lips as he picked at his food.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” Adam answered honestly. Then he paused. “I saw Hunk making something in the kitchen earlier. It’s nice to see that not everything has changed.” Lance stretched his long arms, nodding his head.

“Yeah, there may be lions and aliens and this whole war and stuff, but Hunk is Hunk.” There was a fondness in Lance’s voice, one that made Adam smile.

“What was it like? You know, when it was just the five of you, and Allura and Coran,” Adam asked. Lance stopped stretching and leaned forward in his chair.

“Well it took some time for me to figure out that Pidge is a girl for starters,” Lance said, and when Adam laughed he turned to look at him with wide eyes. “Did you know?”

“Allura seems great,” Adam said, his smile warm. Then he thought through his next words
carefully. He knew how Lance was about his crushes. “Do you - still - like Allura that way?”
Lance dragged his fork through his food, making improvised swirls.

“Nah, she’s still really important to me and we care a lot about each other, but I guess my crush just turned into a deep respect,” he furrowed his brow, seeming to think his words over. “We tried going on a date, but we both agreed that there weren’t any romantic feelings there.” Lance looked at Adam, his eyes alight. “But she’s one of my best friends, and she’s still beautiful and kind and brave -” Adam laughed and Lance stopped, a grin on his face. Then Adam looked at his food, his expression turning more serious.

“What was Takashi like?” he asked, his voice soft. He heard Lance shift in his seat.

“Shiro was a great leader, still is, though I guess Keith is technically the leader now -” Lance began, and Adam watched as he furrowed his brow in confusion. Then he brightened up and met Adam’s gaze. “When Shiro was the pilot of the Black Lion he’d tell us these really cheesy things about teamwork in order to inspire us, and even though they were so cheesy the way he said them always made us believe in ourselves a little more,” Lance said, looking slightly surprised, as though he’d just come to that conclusion. He looked at his tray thoughtfully. “He was the one who held us together when it felt like we were going to fall apart.”


“It’s just that - I should’ve known,” Lance said, “that a clone had taken Shiro’s place. He was our teacher, our friend, one of my role models, and I had no idea.” Lance became quiet, looking at his hands in his lap, his brow pinched. “He called out to me, when we were all together in the consciousnesses of our lions, tried to warn me - and then his clone confided in me, telling me that something felt wrong and I just - I didn’t do anything about it. I didn’t know what to do. And then Keith had to fight him and he could’ve died and fighting this version of Shiro must’ve been so hard for him and I can’t help but feel like -”

“Hey,” Adam said, and Lance turned his wide blue eyes on him, despair obvious in the way his mouth was pressed into a firm line. Adam looked at him for a moment, searching his eyes, and then a small smile spread across his lips when he found what he was looking for. He shook his head slightly, leaning forward and clasping his hands in front of him on the cafeteria table. “Shiro went to you for a reason, Lance, he saw it. But more importantly, it seems like you’ve finally seen it as well.” Lance looked at him in confusion.

“What do you mean by ‘it’?” Adam turned his head to look at him.

“That greatness that I told you has always been there,” Adam said. Then he paused. “Shiro is not very good at depending on other people, so the fact that he sought you out really means a lot, and the fact that you feel this responsibility for your friends means that you know that you have what it takes to get up and do amazing things for the people you care about.” Adam’s gaze softened as he looked at the boy he’d watch grow up into the brave paladin that was sitting next to him. “Don’t blame yourself for the things that were out of your control, Lance. Instead focus on how the people around you are finally understanding what you’re capable of. I am so proud of you.” Lance looked at him in shock, his wide blue eyes only widening further, then he turned and scrubbed furiously at his cheeks before turning back to pull Adam into a hug.

“Thank you,” Lance said firmly, and Adam smiled as Lance tucked his chin over Adam’s shoulder, not seeming like he was going to let go anytime soon. A few moments later Lance eventually did pull away, suddenly finding it difficult to meet Adam’s gaze as he began to pick at his food. He cleared his throat awkwardly, and Adam could sense the mood shift. The air around Lance still felt
a little tense, but his seemed like a different sort of tension.

“Speaking of Keith, actually,” Lance finally said, giving Adam a sheepish smile before looking at his tray. “I’ve been thinking about this a lot, recently, way too much, um, I mean, I haven’t been obsessing over it of course I’m totally focused on Voltron and the mission and -” he stopped and shot Adam another glance, scraping his fork against his tray nervously. Then he put down the fork and sighed, running a run through his hair. “I think that you were right, I mean, about me and -”

“Lance! Adam! What’s up?” Nadia asked loudly, shooting them finger guns as she approached their table. Lance looked at her with large, surprised eyes and quickly shut his mouth. Adam watched as Ryan joined her, shooting her a skeptical look as he pointed his camera at them.

“Hello Nadia, Ryan,” Adam said, giving them a polite smile. “Lance and I are just catching up.” He glanced at the camera. “What are you two up to?” He didn’t realize that he was using his teacher voice until Ryan began to shift his stance, looking like he was just got caught breaking the rules. Nadia had never been as affected by Adam’s teacher voice, however.

“We’re here to ask you some questions!” Nadia declared, pointing at the two of them as a grin spread across her face. Ryan shot her an unamused look but she pretended not to notice as she walked over to Adam’s side, looking at the camera. “So, teach? What’s it like having a fiancé who’s such a big deal? I mean, the crown jewel of the SEP, former paladin and leader of Voltron, captain of the Atlas - you really snagged a good one, don’t you think?” Adam tried not to laugh at the phrase ‘crown jewel of the SEP’. He was definitely going to tell Shiro that one later - he couldn’t wait to see the blush on his face.

“Hey, I think that Shiro found quite a catch as well,” Lance protested. “Adam broke a few of Shiro’s records, he was the head teacher at the Garrison, Iverson pretty much trusted him with everything, and he trained you guys too, right? That’s pretty awesome.” Adam watched as Lance stuck his fork into a piece of broccoli and put it in his mouth, chewing aggressively as he stared down Nadia, waiting for her to argue.

“Thank you, Lance,” Adam said, and Lance nodded his head once as he continued to chew. Then Adam looked into the camera. “Takashi is an incredible man. He’s my best friend and I’m not even amazed anymore by all of the new things that he accomplishes because that’s just who he is, a fact that used to drive me crazy when we were younger.” He noticed Ryan smile behind the camera. Then Adam looked at Nadia. “Except you may need to check your information a little more carefully. Takashi is not my fiancé - he’s my husband.” Lance choked, leaning forward and coughing violently as he grabbed the cup of water next to him. Once his throat was clear he turned wild eyes on Adam.

“When did you two get married?” he asked, shocked. Adam shrugged. “We went to the Red Lion, I put his ring on his finger, and we said ‘I do’.” He noticed as Nadia moved to stand behind the camera, a look of absolute glee on her face as she gave Ryan a nudge. Ryan looked like he was unsure if he should keep filming.

“What?” Lance exclaimed. It was at that moment that Adam noticed Curtis enter with a book in his hand. He took one look at Lance, then at Ryan’s camera, and then he caught Adam looking at him. He gave Adam a sheepish smile and quietly crept out of the room and back the way that he’d entered. Then Adam quickly shifted his attention back to Lance when he slammed his palms against the table, shaking his head. “No. No, no, no, no - Hunk and I did not spend months at the Garrison planning your wedding for you two to - I cannot believe -” Lance shot Adam an angry look as he picked up his tray, moving to stand. Then he took a deep breath, looking more calm than he did a moment before. “I am finding Hunk and the two of us are going to discuss how to handle
this. Don’t think that this conversation is over,” he warned, looking at Adam with narrowed eyes before he walked briskly out of the cafeteria. Adam watched him go with surprised eyes, and then he smiled and shook his head, sticking his fork into his food and continuing to eat. When he glanced up at Nadia and Ryan he noticed that they both looked like they were unsure of how to proceed.

“Coran is in the control room if you want to talk to him - I bet he’ll give you something interesting,” Adam offered, and Nadia nodded her head, finding that to be a great idea.

“Let’s go,” she said, looking at Ryan. There was a spark in her eyes. Ryan gave her a tired look but was ready to follow her lead. “Thanks for the drama, Adam!” Nadia called as they headed out of the cafeteria, waving her hand in goodbye. Adam gave her a short wave in return, letting out a snort as he finished his food in the empty cafeteria. Then he remembered what Lance had been about to tell him, and he looked thoughtfully at the door through which Lance had left.

Adam had a feeling he knew what Lance was about to confess, but he was content to wait. He understood more than most that things like this could take time.

It looked like cotton candy, but Adam had learned not to trust every instinct when it came to deep space. They may be at a carnival with rides and games and prizes, but that did not mean that this was cotton candy. He picked at the blue substance as he moved into the large tent in front of him, noticing the way cobalt particles floated into the air as he rubbed pieces between his fingertips.

“You’re old like me. Those kids would break you in half, mechanical arm or not.” Adam picked his head up at the mention of a mechanical arm, spotting Shiro in the crowd. The alien who was standing next to him had been the one who was talking, and Adam noticed Shiro frown as he looked down at him.

‘Here we go,’ Adam thought, trying not to roll his eyes as he stuck a piece of the not-cotton-candy on his tongue. He furrowed his brow when he tasted salt. He’d been expecting some kind of sugary substance. He should have known better.

“Is it too late to sign up?” Shiro asked. Adam could hear the seriousness in Shiro’s voice as he placed his fist in the open palm of his mechanical arm. Adam moved to approach them, a teasing remark about Shiro’s white hair already on his lips, but then he stopped, thinking for a moment. Maybe it would be fun to hang back, to see this version of Shiro. To see what Shiro was like when Adam wasn’t watching, or at least when Shiro didn’t know that Adam was watching. He smiled and crept into the shadowy area of the tent, a place near the back but still with a view of the lighted arena in the center. He popped another piece of the not-cotton-candy in his mouth. The flavor was growing on him.

“That’s my husband!” Adam yelled excitedly, his eyes wide with delight as he watched Shiro slam the much larger alien’s hand down on the table. Wow he was so turned on right now. Shiro’s eyes lit up as he looked out at the crowd, a large smile on his face as he waved at the people in the front row. Shiro hadn’t noticed Adam yet, mostly because Adam was still trying not to be seen.
Adam had to admit, he liked getting to be one of Shiro’s fans in the crowd. Adam had heard stories of Shiro fighting in space and being this symbol of hope for those around him, but it was nice to see it for himself - to see how Shiro shined in front of everyone, like he always did. Shiro may have grown a lot since Adam last saw him, had experienced hardships that Adam wished he could’ve been there to help him through, and yet even with all of that change Adam could’ve sworn that he was looking at fifteen-year-old Shiro as he watched him move towards the edge of the arena, hyping himself up for his last match, shaking his shoulders as he tried and failed to bite back his grin.

So yes, Adam liked being just a fan in the crowd for that reason. He also really liked being loud and obnoxious in his absolute adoration for his husband.

“God, look at those arms!” Adam yelled, nudging the person next to him who looked just as excited as he was. He popped one of the last pieces of the not-cotton-candy into his mouth. This piece was spicy, something Adam realized this food had the potential of doing a couple pieces in. He fanned his face as the heat made his cheeks flush. “Arrest him for arson because this man is so hot he’s setting me on fire!” Adam yelled. He could’ve sworn that he saw Shiro blush as he looked into the crowd, trying to find the fan who was yelling such outrageous things. Adam snickered and moved back into the shadows a little more. Then he noticed a couple of familiar figures in paladin armor making their way towards the front of the crowd, their eyes wide with surprise. Adam smiled as he watched them, glad that they had made it just in time.

“Ladies and burrowmen, are you ready to crown an arm wrestling champion?” The alien from earlier asked, mic in hand as he stood in the middle of the arena. His voice echoed throughout the tent and people began to cheer. “First up is our challenger, former paladin of Voltron and the current captain of the IGF Atlas.”

“That is Shiro!” Adam heard Lance yell, his blue eyes wide as he looked at their former leader. Adam watched as Lance bumped Keith’s shoulder, grinning at him. Keith gave him a smirk before looking back at the arena with crossed arms.

“Hailing from some tiny planet no one has ever heard of...it’s Shiro!” The alien pointed at Shiro, the spotlight shining down on him, and the crowd erupted into cheers and whoops. Shiro raised his mechanical arm into the air and brought it down, clenching his fist and smirking at the crowd - and boy did that do things to Adam. He adjusted his glasses as he blushed furiously, trying to get back the stability that he seemed to have lost when Shiro gave the crowd that look. Gosh, did he even know how handsome he was? And Shiro was his husband. Adam shook his head in disbelief, wondering how he got so lucky. Nadia was right - he really did snag a good one.

“Let’s go Shiro!” Keith yelled, and Adam was brought back to reality, watching as Shiro and his competitor - an unfamiliar Galra - locked arms, the contest about to begin. Then Adam watched on in confusion as the two of them seemed to be talking.

“The truth is I thought you guys ruined my life, but really, you saved me,” the Galra said, and Adam saw the surprised expression on Shiro’s face.

“That’s Shiro for you, isn’t it? Saving people without even realizing it,” a voice said next to Adam. Adam quickly turned to see Curtis standing next to him, his gaze trained on the arena. “They’re all so amazing,” he said, and Adam knew that he was talking about the paladins.

Yeah,” Adam said, looking back at the arena. The contest had finally begun, Shiro’s brow furrowed in concentration as he struggled to bring the Galra’s fist down. “They really are.”

“It’s an honor to be apart of it,” Curtis said, a certain brightness in his eyes. Adam understood what
he meant. He felt the same way. He offered Curtis the last piece of his not-cotton-candy and Curtis looked down at it in surprise. Then he gave Adam an appreciative smile and took it, popping it in his mouth. Adam watched in amusement as Curtis’ lips puckered in surprise.

“It is supposed to be salty?” Curtis asked, letting out a small cough. Adam laughed. Curtis met his gaze and laughed as well. Then they both turned their attention back towards the arena when they heard the crowd get louder. It looked like Shiro might win this.

“Come on, number one!” Coran yelled, his fist clenched by his face.

“Let’s go Shiro!” Pidge and Hunk yelled, holding onto each other as they jumped a little on the balls of their feet. “You got this!” Pidge added.

“Rip his arm off!” Lance called out, waving his own arms in the air. Keith bared his teeth in a smile as he watched Shiro’s every move. Then Adam watched with wide, excited eyes as Shiro let out a yell, lifting the Galra’s fist and burying it in the table. The crowd exploded. Lance practically jumped onto Keith’s shoulders, Keith letting out a startled laugh as he tried to get him off. Hunk started crying.

“Now I’m even more turned on,” Adam breathed as Shiro was lifted into the air, confetti falling around him as something gold and shiny was fastened to his arm. Curtis laughed behind his hand and Adam fought back his blush when he realized that he must have heard that. And yet if Adam was being honest he didn’t mind if anyone heard him. Shiro was incredible, and he was Adam’s.

And Adam was so, completely his.

Adam had been having strange dreams ever since he boarded the Atlas for this mission. If he was being honest, he’d been having strange dreams ever since June got him out of that healing chamber. He just didn’t want to admit to himself that there was any kind of relationship between the two. He was afraid of what that might mean.

The dream usually went like this - he would see a blue light in the distance, a condensed ball of energy that seemed to call his name. It didn’t seem threatening, and something would always pull Adam towards it. He would step through the darkness, and as he drew closer, the buzzing under his skin became more insistent, until it felt white hot in his veins. His hand would reach out for the blue light, and just as he was about to close his fingers around it he would jolt awake, his heart pounding and his vision blurry as he looked wildly around the room without his glasses. He found himself looking for that blue light, even though it only existed in his dreams.

At first he would only have that dream every so often. It was rare enough that it seemed like a strange coincidence. But recently it had been happening every night. It wasn’t a coincidence anymore - it was a message. It was a warning. And this night in particular had left Adam wide awake and nervous.

Because when he had woken up, he could’ve sworn that he saw tendrils of blue light weaving around his fingertips.

He heard the sound of his own soft footsteps as he walked down the darkened hall, brushing his hands against the smooth walls of the Atlas. These hallways reminded him so much of the Garrison that he felt a weird sense of homesickness. There were a lot of things that he missed on Earth - a lot
of people that he missed. But he didn’t regret being here - he was determined to see this through with Shiro, and besides, something deep inside of him was telling him that this was where he was meant to be. He found himself checking his fingertips, wondering if he would see those blue tendrils once more, tendrils that looked like the tails of stars.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who wanders the halls at night,” a voice said, and Adam turned around to see Allura, her hair loose around her shoulders. She was wearing a simple white dress for sleeping, making her look like a specter coming to haunt him. “Bad dreams?” she asked, a polite smile gracing her lips.

“Kind of,” Adam confessed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Same here,” Allura said, her gaze soft. Adam felt some of his unease melt away. He hadn’t realized how on edge he’d been walking through these halls alone, trying to decipher what he had seen. He watched as Allura walked up to him, her brow furrowed. “May I ask - what was your dream was about?” Adam cracked a smile.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” he said, and Allura’s polite smile shifted into a more amused one.

“I have seen many crazy things,” Allura said. Then her eyes widened a little. “But do not feel pressured to tell me your dream, it was rude of me even to ask -”

“I keep dreaming of a blue light?” Adam admitted, wincing at how ridiculous his own words sounded, but Allura waited for him to continue. “I can feel it calling to me. It’s like it - it’s like it’s alive and it wants me to touch it but whenever I reach out I wake up.” He decided not to tell her about what he saw on his fingertips when he woke up this time. He didn’t want her to tell Shiro and have him get worried over Adam’s mental state. Shiro had enough things to worry about than silly tricks of the light. Then Adam noticed that Allura had been staring at him for a long moment, saying nothing. Maybe she already thought that Adam was crazy.

“You are sure that it was blue?” she asked, and Adam furrowed his brow in confusion, nodding his head.

“Yeah, a kind of lightish blue, very bright -” he stopped when he saw Allura’s expression. She looked like she was thinking deeply about something. “Is something wrong with me?” Adam asked, and he hated how small his voice sounded.

“No,” Allura said quietly, still lost in her thoughts. Then she looked at Adam. “No, you’re fine,” she said, more firmly this time. “I was worried at first when you talked of a ball of light, but you said that it was blue, not purple, so this shouldn’t have anything to do with Honerva’s entity.”

Right. Adam hadn’t even considered that. He remembered Shiro explaining how Allura took the entity inside of her, how that’s how her and the other paladins were going to track Honerva down. He should’ve considered that the blue light could be evil, could be part of the witch’s plans, but Adam had never been under the impression that the light was anything dangerous, that it was going to hurt Adam in any way. It felt - right.

“Do you have any guesses as to what it could be?” Adam asked. Allura looked away, thinking for another moment.

“I mean, it sounds a lot like Altean magic;” Allura reasoned, “but that would be - you’re not Altean, are you?”
“I don’t have the cheek marks last time I checked,” Adam said, looking at the pink marks on Allura’s face. Allura smiled.

“No, of course not. It wouldn’t make any sense, anyway.” She continued to look at Adam, her eyes simmering with curiosity. Adam tried not to fidget. There was more that he should probably tell her, but he was afraid to say it out loud. He was afraid as to what it could mean. But he could see the kindness in her eyes, her desire to help, so he decided that he could confide in her.

“I haven’t exactly told Takashi all of this, I never really thought that it was all that important, but,” Adam hesitated, and Allura waited patiently. “My friend Hannah took a piece of that Altean crystal that was used to power this ship, and, well, my dad used it as the energy source for my healing chamber.” Adam let out a quiet laugh, anything to break the tension that was quickly rising. “It worked really well, maybe too well? I was in there for four years, and when I came out I hadn’t aged, and the only injury left was this scar,” Adam explained, pointing to the burn mark on his face. Allura eyes widened slightly. Then she composed her expression. “You must be having these dreams because you spent so much time exposed to the crystal,” Allura said, a reassuring smile on her face. “You’re just experiencing the after-effects of the exposure. That’s perfectly normal, especially since you were in stasis for four years.” Adam nodded his head slowly, looking down at his fingertips. There were tendril-free. Then he looked back at Allura. “You’re right. I guess the healing chamber just messed with my head a little.” Allura smiled. Then she looked behind her and down the hall before turning to face Adam.

“I should probably get some sleep, you as well. It’s a big day tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Adam said. Tomorrow was when the paladins would be leaving the Atlas in their lions and attempting to enter Honerva’s mind. This felt like the end, whatever the end was. Allura turned to leave. “Allura?” She looked back at him, a question in her eyes. “Thank you.” That soft smile was back on Allura’s face, a smile that looked so much like the ones that Shiro would wear.

“Of course, Adam.” She lingered there, seeming to know that Adam had more to say. “Not just for tonight,” Adam continued, clenching his fists at his sides. “Thank you for taking care of them, for helping them become the heroes that they were meant to be. I look at them now and - I can tell that you were the one who inspired them with your own strength.” Allura’s gaze softened. “I am touched by your kind words,” she said. Then she paused, a fondness in her eyes as she looked at the empty space in the hall. “It would be a lie if I claimed that they haven’t inspired me as well. We have all made each other better, stronger.” Adam understood what she meant by that. He understood the importance of letting people in, of finding the ability to grow in the light of others, and offering your light as well. There were few things more beautiful than that, few things more important. Then he felt his throat threaten to close, the promise of tears stinging his eyes. There was one more thank you that he needed to give her. A very important thank you.

“And thank you for saving Shiro,” Adam said, hearing his voice catch as he said the words in a desperate rush, thick with meaning. He could see emotion filling Allura’s eyes as well.

“It was an honor,” she said firmly, fists clenched at her sides as she kept her back straight. Then she gave him one last smile. “Goodnight, Adam.” Adam smiled back.

“Goodnight, Allura,” Adam finally said. He watched as she walked quietly down the hall, heading back to her room. She still reminded Adam of a specter, but not one that had come to haunt him. She had simply come to bring light to the darkness.
Adam was in the nightmare scenario. He opened the cabinets once more, eyes scanning through all of the shelves. *Nothing.* He closed them and began to pace around the kitchen, eyes wandering around the space hoping that he would get lucky and somehow find what he desperately needed.

“Uh, Adam, is everything alright?” Curtis asked, poking his head into the kitchen. Adam stopped where he was.

“No!” Adam said, waving his arms in the air and giving Curtis a look of disbelief. How could he think that things were possibly alright? Curtis’ eyes widened a fraction and he nodded his head.

“Right, of course, I’m just going to get Shiro and -” he closed the door to the kitchen, and Adam was left alone to pace once more. He couldn’t quite ignore the unsettling feeling of wrongness that was pooling in his gut. He needed to calm down, that’s why he’d come here in the first place, but how was he supposed to calm down if he couldn’t -

“Adam?” Shiro asked, stepping into the kitchen and approaching Adam like he was a wild animal. “Uh, what’s going on?” His eyebrows were knit together in concern, adorably so, Adam noticed, but then Adam shook the thought away. There was a more important matter at hand.

“Takashi,” Adam said gravely. “There’s no more tea left.” Shiro looked at him in surprise for a moment, and then he began to laugh, moving to hold the counter for support. “I’m being serious!” Adam exclaimed, although he couldn’t quite keep the amusement out of his tone. “How am I supposed to relax while our cadets are out in space willingly going into that crazy witch’s mind?” Shiro straightened up, now understanding what this was all about. Then he looked over at the sink, which was half-full of dishes.

“You wash, I dry,” Shiro said, picking up a hand towel and walking over to the sink.

“I can’t believe that you’re giving me extra chores at a time like this,” Adam grumbled, but he felt a warmth in his chest as he stood next to Shiro at the sink, turning on the faucet. A large part of Adam was grateful that Curtis had sent Shiro. Shiro was what Adam really needed right now, not tea, but he was reluctant to ask for Shiro’s time when he had more important matters to be dealing with. He picked up a bowl and started to rinse off the odd green residue.

“I’ve been worrying about them too,” Shiro admitted, taking the bowl from Adam. “I wasn’t thrilled about this idea. The infinite void is -” he stopped, and Adam could tell that he was remembering things that were better left forgotten.

“Hey, don’t start slacking on me,” Adam said, holding a plate in front of Shiro. A smile flickered on Shiro’s face and he accepted it, drying it off with his towel. “But I still trust them,” Adam said firmly, and Shiro nodded his head in agreement.

“This war isn’t going to last much longer,” Shiro said, although it sounded like he didn’t quite believe it. “This is the final battle. I just hope that we’re ready.” Adam turned off the sink and reached to hold Shiro’s hand.

“We are ready,” Adam assured him, and he watched as Shiro searched his eyes. Then Shiro leaned forward and pressed his lips against Adam’s, Adam easily melting into it. Shiro pulled away a moment later, giving him a small smile.

“Do you think you’ll be able to survive without tea for a little while longer?” he asked, his voice
low and his face only inches away from Adam’s. Adam bunched his fists into Shiro’s uniform, taking a step closer to him and never breaking eye contact.

“When you look at me like that I can survive anything,” Adam said softly, and Shiro smiled wider before pressing a gentle kiss on Adam’s forehead.

“Same here.”

Adam stood up from his chair, walking towards the window and looking out of it with wide eyes. White tendrils of light stretched towards and past his vision, beautiful tails of energy that seemed to pulse like heartbeats, millions of them, an infinity of them. They all seemed to extend from this central point, brighter and more brilliant than anything that Adam had seen before.

“What is this place?” Adam breathed. He turned just in time to see Shiro wince in pain, and then the ship - this Atlas and Voltron hybrid that Adam still couldn’t wrap his head around - flew violently away from the light, spinning in the air. Adam quickly held on to Iverson’s chair for support.

“No,” Shiro said through gritted teeth, hunched over his control panel. “She’s going to try and destroy all realities.” Adam looked back out of the window. These were realities? Then he watched with horrified eyes as Honerva’s ship aimed a purple beam of energy towards one of the tendrils, causing an explosion. The tendril seemed to recoil and disappear, and then a wave of energy hit them.

Both familiar and unfamiliar scenes flashed violently across Adam’s vision. He saw himself falling out of the sky in a fiery ball, Galra ships filling the horizon, except Hannah and April didn’t come out of the cabin to find him. Nobody found him. There wasn’t anything left of him to be found. He saw Lance look at Keith in anger as they seemed to be floating in deep space, heavy bags under his eyes and venom in his words. He watched as Lance and Allura seemed to be having a tearful goodbye in a strange white void. These scenes hurt to look at. They felt horrible and wrong in his gut. But there were also moments of laughter and love and hope in this world, this world that was on the tip of Adam’s tongue and yet felt too foreign to be his. And then they all went away.

“What is she doing?” Adam asked, looking back at Shiro for some kind of explanation. Then he remembered what Shiro had said. Honerva was going to destroy all of these timelines, she was going to wipe away existence itself. Adam shook his head. Then his grip on Iverson’s chair tightened as the ship moved to attack Honerva. They managed to block her next beam of light, preventing another reality from being destroyed, but Honerva simply moved around them, refusing to back down. They couldn’t win like this. Adam gripped Iverson’s chair even more tightly in his hand, his knuckles turning white. “No, she can’t do this,” Adam said firmly, looking out the window in frustration. He gritted his teeth, feeling his anger burning in his eyes. “I won’t let her do this.” They were so close. They couldn’t lose now, not when there was so much at stake. Not when everything was at stake. Then something strange and yet completely familiar caught his eye, and when he looked down at the hand clutching Iverson’s seat his eyes widened in surprise. Those blue tendrils of light from his dreams wove around his fingertips. The energy that he had felt before was buzzing more insistently than ever before, so much that the light crackled up his hand, reaching his forearm. He quickly took his hand away from Iverson’s chair and held it up to his face. Then he narrowed his eyes, letting his anger pool and simmer in his chest, spreading throughout his veins until everything felt white hot and ready to burst.
No one was going to take the people he cared about away from him ever again. He was done losing. He was done suffering. He was done waiting. This was the end - but for Adam it was the beginning. This was the moment when he would finally have a say in what fate tried to decide for him. This was the moment when he would do what he was born to do - to fight, to rage, to never let go and to never give in. The stars were watching, space was watching, all of existence was watching, and Adam was determined to let them all see just how brightly he could burn. He ran over to Shiro’s control panel, the blue light snapping and vibrating in excitement.

“Adam, what are you -?” Shiro began to ask, looking down at Adam’s arm with wide eyes, and Adam stood next to him, giving him a determined look before slamming his hand into the control panel. Blue light traveled out of his palm and spread throughout the room, threading its way through the entire ship. He could hear the paladins’ cries of confusion and alarm. Then the ship couldn’t seem to contain the energy anymore, and the blue light shone out of the window, spreading across space and clinging to all of the tendrils of reality, making the tails of light hum with its same frequency. Adam watched as Honerva moved to attack the white light, slicing her sword through the air, but it cut harmlessly through and the tendril remained. She tried another one, but got the same result. Then Adam’s fingertips burned once more, and he saw that there was more blue light, ready to be unleashed. He had no idea that he had this much energy stored inside of him - for four years this Altean magic had been filling Adam to the brim, waiting for this moment, and Adam was happy to comply. He dug his fingers into the control panel once more, and light flooded out of him at rapid speed, until everything became blue light - the room, the ship, the entirety of space. Everything was blue light, intense blue light that got brighter and brighter until it seemed to turn white.

Everything was still, and quiet. Adam realized that his eyes were closed, and he slowly opened them to find that he was standing in an unfamiliar place blanketed in pure white - he wasn’t in the ship anymore. He didn’t seem to be anywhere anymore. Then he noticed a figure hunched over on the ground a few feet ahead of him.

“How did you -?” the figure began, its voice ragged and raw. Adam looked around at the small balls of light that glowed in the white space and floated around him. Then he looked down at his fingertips, watching the blue light disappear for good. He clenched his fists. “Where are we?” the figure demanded, and Adam had an idea of who this person might be. He took a step towards her, clenching his jaw, but then a voice stopped him.

“We’re in the connected consciousness of all existence,” Allura said, and Adam turned to see her standing behind him, along with the rest of the paladins. He watched as Shiro looked at Honerva with angry eyes. They all seemed to look through him, as if he wasn’t there.

“You think you’re safe here?” Honerva asked, incredulous. “Soon all will cease to exist.” Adam looked at her with angry eyes, and yet she didn’t seem to see him either. What was going on?

“You have to stop this,” Hunk said softly, and Adam turned to look at him. “All these worlds, all these realities, they deserve to live.” Adam’s gaze softened as he listened to him. Hunk - as kind and sincere as ever, always thinking of others, always finding ways to make everyone happy. He had shown Adam what it meant to be hard by being soft.

“Those realities are flawed and weak, living out the same pathetic cycle of war and pain,” Honerva argued, her voice sharp and grating. Allura stepped forward, walking through Adam and towards Honerva. Adam clutched his chest in surprise, and then Allura spoke, her back facing him.

“There is beauty in their flaws,” she said. “I lost my father, my mother, my planet, to this war, but I’ve gained a new family and a purpose stronger than any I could’ve imagined.” Adam felt tears in
his eyes as she said those words. He wasn’t a stranger to loss - no one here was, and Allura understood loss more than most, and yet she was still determined to do what was right and to save others. Adam had learned things about strength these past couple of months from watching her, things he’d never understood before, things that he may never understand as deeply as she did.

“Humans began very flawed.” Pidge said, and Adam turned to look at her. No longer was she the little girl that Adam had met at the dinner table, her legs dangling from her chair. “There were wars, hate, but with each mistake, they learned and grew.” She was right, Adam knew that from personal experience. He had made so many mistakes throughout his life, and yet love and hope still managed to shine through, even in the darkness. And as they shone through, Adam was given the ability to become something greater than he’d been before, something better, and he was still changing.

“And now we reach out to other worlds to pass on those same lessons and spread them across the entire universe, like your people once did.” Takashi. Adam’s tears finally spilled over when he heard him speak. To see him like this - determined and wise and strong - Adam’s chest was filled to the brim with so much love and admiration and respect and fondness that he was worried that it would all spill out of him and onto this infinite floor of white.

“And with every new world touched, the lesson grows,” Hunk finished, firm and solid and unyielding.

“Every world, every reality. We wouldn’t exist without the others,” Keith said, a softness in his voice that Adam wasn’t used to but sounded right in his ears all the same.

“Our differences are what makes us stronger,” Lance said firmly, fists clenched at his sides. The two of them really had grown up. Keith - the boy forged in pain and loss easily accepting the good with the bad, understanding the importance of being a part of a greater whole. And Lance - Lance - the boy with the wide smile and big blue eyes and small stature stood now with his back straight and his gaze steady and sure, knowing that he had something special to offer, something that made this world brighter and kinder and happier and warm. He didn’t have to compare himself to anyone else anymore - he could stand on his own.

He was so proud of them. No, it wasn’t that. Adam was grateful, grateful that he had come to know these people - to care about these people. To learn from and be inspired by these beacons of light.

“You think your words mean anything to me?” Honerva spat, and Adam whipped around to face her, that white hot anger back in his eyes.

‘How dare you,’ Adam thought.

“I’ve lived multiple lifetimes, and all of them filled with pain and loss,” she continued. “If I cannot experience the simple joys of life, why should anyone else?” Adam wanted to yell at her, to scream.

‘You do not have a monopoly on pain and loss,’ Adam wanted to say, his muscles coiled with rage, but when he opened his mouth no sound came out. Frustration burned in his veins. If only she could see all that Adam had suffered. If only she could understand how many times Adam had to overcome the unjust moments in his life. That thought ran through his mind, bright and hot and aggressive. Then the white world around them began to shift.

“Please don’t leave,” ten-year-old Adam said, tugging on his brother’s sleeve. He scrubbed away the tears that were welling up in his eyes with the back of his wrists.
“I’ll be back before you can even miss me,” Casey said, his face hazy and vague in the memory.

*Pilot Error.*

His mother’s sobs. His father’s lips pressed into a firm line, devastation obvious in the wrinkle of his brow. A slammed door as June locked herself inside. An empty space that would never be filled. A shadow that clung to Adam’s side as he grew up, reminding him every day of what he had lost.

It should’ve been me.

Then Shiro leaving. Shiro leaving and leaving and *leaving* so many times that Adam had memorized the curve of his spine as he walked away. The light in Shiro’s eyes dimming as he rubbed his wrists. An empty window for Adam look out of and wonder if Shiro was ever coming back. Shiro coming back, only for him to be ripped away again.

*Pilot Error.*

A cool metal wall full of faces of people who were gone. Shiro’s face. Dying flowers. Keith’s anger simmering and boiling and simmering until it finally exploded and Adam had to watch him leave as well. An empty side of the bed, cold and abandoned, a side that Adam never filled with his own body, choosing to watch the seconds tick by on his clock instead, eyes tired and dry and full of nothing.

A spark of hope at seeing Shiro again, the feeling of coming so close but only to watch Shiro fly off into space once more in something Adam had never seen before. Allowing himself to imagine the feeling of Shiro in his arms only for him to dissolve in his fingertips like a ghost. Losing Lance and Hunk and Pidge and Keith, as if losing Shiro wasn’t hard enough - he had to lose more of his family too. People that he was responsible for - gone.

Purple light - explosions. Watching with horrified eyes as people he had known for years were obliterated by the Galra, picked off as if they meant *nothing*. Violet had meant *nothing* to them, but she had dreams and hopes and plans and a future that she deserved to see. Moments of Raj with his small smiles and intelligent eyes were plastered into the white space. Henry with his lazy stance, jokes always on the tip of his tongue and a steady gaze that made people feel seen. They were his *brothers* - and now they were gone. It was unfair. It was *so* unfair.

Seeing Shiro again, and Adam’s heart swelling with happiness. But Shiro was broken and beaten and exhausted and Adam hadn’t been there to help him through it. The guilt weighed him down every day, another shadow that Adam wouldn’t be able to shake. Shiro had *died* - and Adam had slept through it. He slept through an entire war, a war full of death and broken families and destroyed homes. He should have been there. He should’ve done more than try to pick up the broken pieces.

Adam may not have lived multiple lifetimes, but that did not mean that he didn’t know what it felt like to *lose* time and time again. But he kept going, because there was no excuse to let his pain turn him into something horrible and cruel and selfish. Pain did not give him the freedom to let others suffer. The world didn’t work like that. If Adam never knew true happiness again, that didn’t mean that no one else was allowed to experience it. He *wanted* people to experience it.

The memories and moments began to shift around them. Lance and Hunk’s laughter as they baked something in the kitchen. Keith’s small smile as he brushed his fingertips across the smooth leaves of one of his jade trees, bringing life to his home that was once empty and cold and broken. Pidge looking up at the stars from the roof of the Garrison, so much hope and wonder and determination in her eyes.
Hannah eating out of a pudding cup, giving Adam playful nudges and hiding her grin behind her spoon. April looking at him with kind eyes, brushing a lock of dark hair behind her ears as she talked about movies and space. Their wedding - simple and sweet and so full of love that Adam had felt that his heart would burst.

And Shiro. God, images began to fill the white space, there were that many moments that Adam held close to his heart. Him and Shiro flying through the desert, Adam smiling to himself as he heard Shiro’s laughter bubble up and into the air. Shiro spraying Adam with water from the kitchen sink, Adam gasping and then chasing after him and around the counter. The feeling of victory when the two of them made it through their first partner simulation successfully. Running on the treadmills and shooting each other smug looks as they increased the speed. Going to the Red Lion and watching the sun set and the stars appear, blanketing them in darkness and yet so much light. Feeling Shiro’s side pressed against his own as they watched that sci-fi movie together.

Seeing space for the first time, being completely surrounded by it and Adam feeling so grateful that he got to share this with Shiro. Stepping onto Titan’s surface, seeing the look in Shiro’s eyes and falling so hard and so fast that Adam wondered if something was wrong with the gravity. The way his hands shook with desire as Shiro kissed him for the first time, slow and then fast and then everything that Adam had ever needed, ever wanted. The playful nudges and grins and teasing remarks that brought them closer as friends as Adam continued to fall more and more in love.

The pleasant buzz of alcohol making everything softer - the stars out the window, the desert mountains in the distance, Shiro’s lips. The heat in Adam’s chest as he got back what he thought would be lost to him forever, the moment when they accepted that loving each other was inevitable.

Making tea in the kitchen, cuddling on the couch, Adam reading his book to Shiro until he fell asleep, long eyelashes fluttered shut and his heart beating in a steady rhythm in time with Adam’s. Shiro playing with his niece in his family kitchen, Casey tugging at his hair and causing him to laugh. Adam remembered how much he wanted to bottle that laughter, to frame Shiro’s smile in his memories and hang it up somewhere in his mind so that he could look at it forever.

Shiro getting down on one knee and the world feeling so right and perfect that Adam couldn’t help but cry as he looked at Shiro smiling up at him, his eyes kind and certain and full of love. Shiro choosing him, not space, but him. Shiro coming back to him, just like he promised he would. Seeing Shiro in the med bay, his eyes wide with surprise and looking so beautiful and soft that Adam knew that he was going to fall in love with Shiro time after time for the rest of his life, and he couldn’t imagine a better way to live.

Adam had memorized the curve of Shiro’s back as he left, but he had also memorized the curve of his smile - and that smile so bright and so lovely that it burned everything else away.

That was the funny thing about Adam’s life, it was because of the pain and loss that he experienced that he valued the good moments with more intensity, that he held them with a stubborn ferocity. Even in all that darkness, a light would always always shine through. Shiro’s smile would always shine through. And that made all of the bad things worth it. Adam turned his gaze back on Honerva, his eyes still burning.

‘For all of the years that you have lived, you truly know nothing,’ Adam spat out in his mind. Honerva’s eyes were wide as she looked around at all of the memories that surrounded her - some devastatingly painful, others devastatingly soft.

“No, I - I, what is this -?” Honerva asked, shaking her head and pressing the heels of her palms against her eyes, only to tear them away in frustration.
“This is life,” Allura said, and Adam turned to see the promise of tears in her eyes as she straightened her back, staring down Honerva. “This is what we have pledged our lives to protect. This is what you will never take away.” Adam watched as Shiro fell to his knees, tears shining in his eyes as he looked at all of the snippets of Adam’s life, entirely overwhelmed. The rest of the paladins looked at them with wide eyes as well. Lance smiled as he wiped away a tear with the back of his wrist. A sad smile tugged at the corner of Keith’s lips. Pidge held on to Hunk’s arm for support, and he leaned into her as well. Adam watched them all in surprise, finally realizing what he had done. This was his heart, poured out for all of them to see. He couldn’t help but feel panic claw up his throat as his life was so completely exposed.

“Adam, it’s going to be alright,” Allura said, and Adam turned to see her looking right back at him, a small smile on her lips as her multi-colored eyes shined.

“I’m sorry,” Honerva said with a shudder, holding herself up by her arms as she bent over, looking at the ground with wide eyes. “I forgot - I didn’t understand - but now I remember.” She looked up at the infinite expanse of white above her, Adam’s memories dissolving into light. “I’m sorry,” she said again, her voice quiet, and then she smiled. Adam held a hand in front of his eyes as a bright light surrounded Honerva, and then he pulled it away to see a collection of condensed yellow balls of light rising up into the air from where she had just been kneeling.

“Her dreams and desires,” Allura said quietly, reaching out a hand as one of the balls of light floated towards her. Adam could see the sadness in her eyes.

“Is she just - gone?” Lance asked, brow furrowed as he looked warily around.

“Yeah,” Hunk breathed. “I think she is.”

“It’s over,” Keith said, his gaze hard to read. Then he turned and helped Shiro to his feet, Shiro looking a lot more steady than he was before now that Adam’s memories were gone. Then Adam felt a warmth rise up in his chest and the light around them grew brighter, covering them all until it filled the space and Adam couldn’t see them anymore. He closed his eyes, muscles tensed as he braced himself against the coming brightness. When he opened them again he was standing in the center of the Atlas control room, his hand still on the panel.

“Adam,” Shiro breathed, and Adam turned to see Shiro looking at him with wide eyes. “Was that -?” Adam gave him a small smile, and then he felt his knees give out. Shiro quickly moved to support him, holding him close. He could feel Shiro shaking slightly.

“I’m sorry,” Adam said. “I didn’t mean for you to see all of that. Kind of embarrassing.” Shiro kept looking at him with those wide eyes, and then he laughed and shook his head.

“You’re unbelievable,” Shiro breathed. Then they both noticed a flash of light and looked out of the window. All of the realities were there, intact and pulsing brightly, even the one that Honerva had destroyed before. Adam hadn’t quite liked that reality, but Keith was right - Adam had a feeling that if that reality didn’t exist, then this one wouldn’t either. Pain and joy needed to be taken together. That was life. That was living.

Then Adam was hit by a wave of exhaustion and felt himself go limp in Shiro’s arms, his vision going black.
Adam and Shiro had told Hunk and Lance that they didn’t need to go to the trouble of planning a wedding, but they insisted.

“Of course we won’t do it if you’re not comfortable,” Hunk had said, Lance nodding his head.

“But we really wanted to cry at your wedding,” Lance finished. “You’re our favorite couple.” That had gotten a laugh out of Shiro, and he and Adam had agreed that it was okay.

“You really did a nice job you two,” Adam said, buttoning up his shirt as he looked out of the cabin window. The empty space in Keith’s garden was filled with rows of white chairs, and an arch made out of vines and flowers was positioned at the front. Iverson was pacing next to the arch, mumbling something to himself. Adam shrugged on his black suit jacket and turned to face Hunk and Lance, who were wearing similar suits, except Hunk’s had a gold interior and bow to match, while Lance had the same accents but in blue. “How do I look?” Adam asked. Hunk wiped a tear from his eye and Lance’s smile widened.

“Shiro’s going to pass out,” Lance said as he pinned a blue flower to his own lapel, and Adam laughed, rolling his eyes as he adjusted his tie.

“Let’s hope not. I don’t think that his best man would know what to do in that situation,” Adam said. “By the way, how did you convince Keith to let us have the wedding here?”

“Keith developed a soft spot for Lance while we were in space,” Hunk said, giving his friend a playful nudge. Lance blushed and moved to fix the yellow flower pinned to Hunk’s lapel.

“Oh come on, of course Keith is going to let you two have your wedding here. You’re family,” Lance said, fretting over the flower a little more than was normal, obviously flustered. “Besides, it’s technically not his place anymore.” Adam smiled. Hannah and April offered to move out once they had returned from space, but Keith had insisted that they stay. The cabin was alive once more - that’s all he’d ever really wanted.

“Five more minutes!” Coran called, poking his head in the doorway. He grinned at Adam. “Are you ready?” Adam pressed his fingertips together, looking nervously down at his hands, and then he looked back at Coran, nodding his head and giving him a grin. Coran gave him a wink in return and left the room, closing to door behind him. Adam looked out of the window once more and saw Allura talking with the Holts and Adam’s family. She was wearing a beautiful pink dress, a strange flower in her hair. A juniberry, that’s what Colleen had called it back on the ship. Pidge was wearing a smart dark green pantsuit, a woven band of vines placed on her head. She seemed to be talking excitedly to Matt and June about something. Curtis was swinging Casey around, Casey shrieking with laughter. Everyone was home and safe and happy. Even the people who weren’t there were in their hearts, never to be forgotten.

“Four more minutes!” Hannah called, giving the door a knock.

“Coran already told them that,” April whispered.

“I’m excited! Can you blame me?” Hannah argued, and April laughed as they moved away from the door. Adam rolled his eyes and smiled, shaking his head as he pinned his orange flower to his lapel.

‘Oh! I need to check on the food,” Hunk said. He walked over and put a hand on Adam’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I’ll see you out there.”

“Thank you, Hunk,” Adam said, and Hunk’s gaze softened. Then he left the room. Lance stretched
his arms towards the ceiling, a pleased smile on his face.

“Gosh, I can’t remember the last time that I’d been able to just party,” Lance said, and Adam laughed.

“I’m not sure if I’ve been to a party since I was fifteen,” Adam admitted, and Lance’s eyes widened at that.

“We are getting you so drunk,” Lance said, and Adam laughed once more. Then there was a knock at the door, and Adam and Lance turned to see Keith standing in the doorway. He was wearing a black suit with a red satin interior, much like Hunk and Lance.

“Can I talk to Adam for a minute?” Keith asked, the question directed at Lance. Lance narrowed his eyes, looking between the two of them, and then he grabbed something off the side table and walked up to Keith.

“As long as you don’t keep him too long. If you didn’t know he has a wedding to get to.” Keith smirked as he looked up at Lance, his dark hair falling in his eyes. Adam could’ve sworn that Lance was fighting back a blush. Then Lance grabbed Keith’s lapel, and Keith looked at him in surprised. “You forgot your flower,” Lance chided, pinning the red flower to Keith’s suit. Now it looked like it was Keith’s cheeks that were turning red. Then Lance gave Keith a lazy smile and left the room. “Two minutes!” Lance yelled over his shoulder before closing the door, and Keith smirked and shook his head. Then he walked up to Adam.

“How’s Takashi?” Adam asked, and Keith scoffed.

“He’s a disaster,” Keith said, and Adam furrowed his brow in concern. Keith noticed his look and gave him a reassuring smile. “Let’s just say that he’s very excited to get married.” Adam felt his cheeks heat up and he looked away, adjusting his glasses. Then he noticed Keith furrow his brow, looking like there was something that he wanted to say but he was finding it hard to say it.

“What’s up?” Adam asked, giving him a questioning look, and Keith met his gaze. He crossed his arms, and then he seemed to realize what he was doing and quickly uncrossed them, shifting his stance.

“In the white space,” Keith began slowly, something simmering in his dark eyes. He let out a frustrated sigh, starting again. “I was very - difficult - to deal with when I was at the Garrison, and the time after it, before going into space.” Then the corner of his mouth twitched up in amusement. “Honestly, I was still difficult in space, Lance could tell you that -” he stopped, becoming serious once more as he looked at Adam. “You did so much for me, Adam. You helped me fix this place up, you tried to get me to open up to people, something that I had to learn the hard way, I mean, you were right about Hunk and Lance, I should’ve -” Keith paused again, growing increasingly agitated. “And when Shiro was missing you were willing to help me find him, even when it seemed hopeless, and after I got expelled you checked in on me when all I did was get angry and more closed-off.” Adam opened his mouth to say something, but Keith’s gaze stopped him. “In the white space, seeing everything that you went through, and yet how you still managed to help and care about others - I realized that I never properly thanked you for everything that you did for me.” He took a deep breath, one that shuddered slightly. “Thank you, Adam, for being there when I was too young and stubborn to appreciate it.”

“Keith, I always knew that you would find your way,” Adam said easily. “The leader that I see in front of me, that was in you all along. I’m just happy that I had a part in seeing you get there. It’s so good to see you happy.” Keith nodded his head, a small smile on his face.
“It’s good to see you happy too,” Keith said. Then there was a sharp knock on the door.

“Okay Keith! Give me my groom back!” Lance called from the other side of the door. “And you need to get back to your groom as well!” Keith huffed and rolled his eyes, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Yeah, I got it Lance,” Keith said dryly, moving to open the door. He turned to give Adam one last nod before leaving the room, his shoulder brushing against Lance’s as he left, his gaze lingering a little longer on the boy than necessary.

“Iverson is all set,” Lance said, clearing his throat as he watched Keith leave before turning back to face Adam, “and Hunk says that the reception is all prepared once the ceremony is over so we’re good to go.” Adam gave himself one last look in the mirror, taking a deep breath. Then he turned and smiled at Lance.

“Let’s go, then.”

Iverson had never mentioned being an ordained minister during his time at the Garrison, or even during their time on the Atlas. In fact, Iverson only mentioned it casually in conversation when he overheard Lance and Hunk arguing over who to contact for the wedding. Adam realized that there was a lot that he still didn’t know about his mentor, even after all these years, and it seemed like Iverson liked a degree of mystery.

“When I accepted these two into the program and decided to make them flight partners, I had no idea that they would age me fifty years,” Iverson said, the corners of his mouth twitching up into a small smile. Adam heard Hannah laugh, and Iverson’s eye narrowed when he found her in the seated crowd. “You and Park caused me a lot of grief too, Wilson. I know you two swiped a jet that one night,” he said, looking at Adam as well. Adam had the sense to at least look guilty. “But even so, these two men taught me many things, things that I assumed I already understood. I saw the fire in their eyes. I saw the way they pushed themselves and each other to be better. I saw how they hated to let the people they cared about down. I saw them help save the universe.” Iverson paused, and Adam spotted his mother sitting in the front row, dabbing her eyes with a cloth as she smiled. “If any two people deserve love and happiness, it’s these two. They may have been a thorn in my side over the years, but they have also been a reminder that there is strength in love.” He cleared his throat and looked at Adam and Shiro, a subtle fondness in his gaze. “Adam Wadley, do you take Takashi Shirogane to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold forever?” Adam looked at Shiro, whose eyes were already on him. He was wearing a black suit as well, with a purple flower on his lapel. He looked beautiful surrounded by flowers and with the desert horizon at his back. Adam nodded his head.

“I do.”

“And do you, Takashi Shirogane, take Adam Wadley to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold forever?” Shiro reached out to hold Adam’s hands, giving them a squeeze. Adam noticed Lance bump Keith’s shoulder from where they were standing off to the side, and Keith let a small smirk grace his lips.

“I do.” Iverson looked back at the rows of seated people.

“The grooms have vowed in our presence to commit themselves to each other, to be tied forever by
their love. The bond between them has existed much longer than this ceremony, and it will extend on forever, for that I am certain.” Iverson looked at Adam and Shiro once more, and Adam thought that he saw Iverson’s eye shine with coming tears. “You have kissed many times before, but this time it will be like the first, for this may be the end of the ceremony, but it is the beginning of a bright future, a future that I am looking forward to seeing. I now pronounce you married,” Iverson straightened his back, clearing his throat. “Lieutenants, you may now kiss.” Adam laughed and then let out a started noise when Shiro pulled him in for a kiss, dipping him slightly. Adam’s eyes fluttered shut as he kissed back, holding onto Shiro’s shoulders. He could hear Shiro hum in the back of his throat, his hands on the small of Adam’s back. Then they pulled apart, looking into each other’s eyes. They heard applause and the squeaking of chairs as people moved to stand, but in that moment Shiro and Adam only had eyes for each other.

Adam watched as Shiro moaned, titling his head up a little in enjoyment.

“Shouldn’t you be saving the moaning for later, babe?” Adam asked, reaching over to wipe a bit of frosting off of Shiro’s cheek with a napkin. Shiro looked at him and blushed, setting his fork down. Adam noticed Keith look at the two of them warily from where he was sitting at the other side of the round table. Then he put his head down and picked at his cake, choosing not to get involved. Adam looked at him in amusement.

“Hunk is amazing at making cakes, you can’t blame me,” Shiro protested, breaking off a piece with his fork and holding it out to Adam. “Come on, try it.” Adam opened his mouth and pulled the cake off of Shiro’s fork. His eyes grew wide as he tasted the fluffiest chocolate cake that he’d ever eaten.

“Oh my god,” Adam moaned, holding his hand in front of his mouth as he chewed.

“See?” Shiro said. Then Adam spotted Hunk walking past them, checking on the tables and making sure that all of the cake was distributed.

“Hunk!” Adam called, and Hunk came to their table, his eyes warm and friendly. “You are an absolute blessing in my life.” Hunk looked at him in confusion, and then he saw their half-eaten slice of cake and laughed.

“I’m glad that you like it,” Hunk said. “It was a new recipe that I was trying out in the kitchens back on the Atlas. I was hoping that I could make it for your wedding so I’m glad that I got it right.”

“Oh you got it more than right, Hunk,” Shiro said enthusiastically, taking another bite. Hunk blushed, nodding his head appreciatively. Then they heard feedback coming from a microphone and turned their heads to where a small stage was set up in the center of the garden.

“Sorry about that,” Lance said, smiling sheepishly as he held the microphone in his hand. Adam heard Keith scoff, and he turned to see the fondness in his gaze as he looked at Lance. Then Keith caught Adam looking at him and quickly looked at his cake, becoming interested in it once more. Lance cleared his throat and straightened his posture, shooting everyone a charming grin. “Thank you all for coming to celebrate Adam and Shiro. Although they had decided to do a more informal marriage before we left on the Atlas, I’m happy that they gave us this opportunity to celebrate them.” Lance caught Adam’s gaze and his grin softened into a smile. “Watching Adam and Shiro throughout the years taught me a lot about love,” Lance began. “For a while I thought that love
would fall right into my lap. I thought that love would happen exactly how I wanted it to. But love isn’t always that easy, and love isn’t always that simple,” Lance paused. “But it is always worth it. Even when it can be scary, even when things look unclear. Adam and Shiro taught me that love is about a connection that runs deeper than you’ll ever expect. It’s about being vulnerable. It’s about finding your best friend.” Lance looked somewhere past Adam before quickly looking away, tapping his fingers against his microphone. Then Adam watched as Allura walked on stage to join Lance, a microphone in her hand as well and a nervous smile on her face. “With that in mind, Allura and I have a song that we wanted to perform for Adam and Shiro, a song that reminded me of them.” Lance looked at Veronica, who was sitting off to the side, and she began to strum on the guitar in her lap. Curtis stood next to her, triangle in hand and a look of concentration on his face. Lance rolled his shoulders and shot Allura a smile.

“Do you hear me? I’m talking to you,” Lance sang, and Adam’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Across the water, across the deep blue ocean, under the open sky, oh my, baby I’m trying,” he took a step closer to Allura, batting his eyelashes at her and she laughed. Adam could hear some people whoop and cheer behind him.

“Boy I hear you, in my dreams, I feel your whisper, across the sea,” Allura sang, and the cheering grew louder. Coran was dabbing his eyes with a handkerchief. “I keep you with me, in my heart. You make it easier when life gets hard.”

Then two of them beamed at each other and looked at Adam and Shiro, holding out their free arms to gesture towards them as they sang together, “I’m lucky I’m in love with my best friend. I’m lucky to have been where I have been. I’m lucky to be coming home, again.”

Adam felt Shiro’s hand move to hold his, and then he looked to see Shiro smiling at him. “Care to dance?” Shiro asked, and Adam smiled, nodding his head. They both stood and walked to the empty space in between the tables, Shiro putting a hand on Adam’s waist and Adam wrapping an arm around Shiro’s shoulders as he leaned into him, pressing his forehead against Shiro’s as they swayed together.

“They don’t know how long it takes,” Allura sang, Lance singing the same words after her. “Waiting for a love like this.” Lance nudged Allura and she smiled, the two of them still looking at Adam and Shiro as they sang. “Every time we say goodbye, I wish we had one more kiss. I’ll wait for you, I promise you, I will.” Adam held tightly to Shiro’s lapels, squeezing his eyes shut. Shiro tilted Adam’s chin up and pressed a kiss to his lips, Adam feeling a tear fall down his cheek as he smiled. “I’m lucky I’m in love with my best friend,” Lance and Allura repeated. “Lucky to have been where I have been. Lucky to be coming home, again.” Adam opened his eyes and saw Shiro looking at him, a soft smile on his lips and they held onto each other. “Lucky we’re in love in every way. Lucky to have stayed where we have stayed. Lucky to be coming home someday.”

“And so I’m sailing, through the sea,” Lance sang, a serious expression on his face as he reached his hand out to the crowd, moving into a dramatic lunge. Adam laughed as he watched him. “To an island, where we’ll meet. You’ll feel the music, fill the air.” Lance straightened up and walked towards Allura, pulling her juniberry flower from behind his back. “I’ll put a flower, in your hair.” He placed the flower behind Allura’s ear as he sang that line, Allura giggling behind her hand.

“Though the breezes,” Allura sang, stepping away from him and downstage, “through the trees, move so pretty, you’re all I see. As the world keeps spinning round.” Lance brought her into a spin, holding on to her waist. Allura looked up at him. “You hold me, right here, right now.” Lance let go and together they looked at Adam and Shiro once more.

“All the way home”
home again. Lucky we’re in love in every way. Lucky to have stayed where we have stayed. Lucky to be coming home someday.” Veronica’s strumming got quieter and Adam looked at Shiro, the music seeming to fall away.

“It’s hard to think that this is real, that we finally got our happy ending,” Adam confessed.

“I know what you mean,” Shiro agreed. “But it is real. And we deserve to be happy, everyone here does.” Adam smiled and pulled Shiro towards him by his lapels, pulling him in for another kiss. They heard applause and Adam realized that the song had finished. Adam and Shiro pulled apart so they could clap, Lance and Allura beaming at the audience. Lance found Adam’s gaze once more, his eyes soft.

‘Thank you,’ Adam mouthed, and Lance nodded his head once before taking a quick bow with Allura and heading off the stage, giving Veronica a hug as she set down her guitar.

“I didn’t know that Lance could sing,” Adam mused, and then Shiro laughed.

“I did. He loved to sing in the showers at the castle.” Adam laughed as well, wrapping an arm around Shiro’s waist as they headed back towards their table. Veronica started to play something else on the guitar, and people got up to dance. Adam watched as April led Hannah to the middle while Hannah groaned in protest, but Adam could see the smile tugging at her lips. June and Noah were dancing as well, Casey in between them. Adam couldn’t believe that she was almost nine. Then Adam furrowed his brow as he looked at their empty table before glancing back at the forming crowd of dancing people.

“Where’s Keith?” Adam asked, and Shiro furrowed his brow as well. Then Adam heard a laugh and turned to see Allura laughing at something that Lance said, Lance grinning. Oh. Adam had a feeling he knew what was going on. “I’m going to go into the cabin for a few minutes,” Adam said. Shiro looked at him in confusion, but then he smiled and squeezed his hand before letting go.

“I’ll be sitting here eating cake.” Adam grinned and then made his way into the cabin. He walked through the kitchen and into the main room, finding Keith sitting the couch, his tie loosened and his hands clasped together between his knees as he looked down at the floor.

“And here I’d thought you’d be in the middle of the dance floor,” Adam teased, and Keith looked up at him in surprise. Keith had grown up so much, and yet he still had those young eyes. Keith furrowed his brow and looked away.

“Sorry, I just needed a breather,” Keith said, and Adam nodded his head in understanding, moving to sit next to him. Adam let the silence settle around them as he thought about the first time he came to the cabin, so many years ago. Then he sighed.

“You know, I used to get kind of jealous when I was a cadet at the Garrison,” Adam confessed, and Keith turned his confused eyes on him. Adam looked forward. “Whenever Henry would throw an arm around Shiro’s shoulders or April would smile at him I felt this wrongness in my gut. For the longest time I thought that I was just worried that Takashi would find a new best friend, that I wasn’t going to be good enough to hang out with him, but then I realized that I wanted way more than a friendship, and you want to know what the funny part was?” Adam glanced at Keith to see that he was still looking at him, his brow still furrowed. “Takashi knew that he loved me years before I even realized that I had a crush on him.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Keith asked quietly, his voice gruff and too controlled to be natural. Adam smiled at him.
“I always thought that you were so much like Takashi,” Adam said. “And you two are still very similar, but it took me a while to realize that you’re a lot like me, too.” Adam sighed, moving to stand. “When you think that you are unworthy of good things, that you are unworthy of the happiness that is presented to you in your life, it’s hard to notice when someone loves you. For so long you’ve convinced yourself that you’re alone in the darkness - how could anyone find you? But people do. They do, Keith, and they see the light that was there all along.” Adam looked down at Keith, who was staring up at him with wide eyes. “I have a guess as to why you’re sitting here by yourself, and I’m telling you not to make the same mistakes that I made. Don’t be blind to the love that’s already in your life.” With that Adam gave Keith one last smile and headed back towards the kitchen.

“Wait -” Keith said, and Adam turned to face him. Keith looked at him for a long moment, his eyes big and lost as he opened his mouth to continue, but then his gaze softened and he gave Adam a grateful smile. “Thanks.” Adam nodded his head once before turning.

“I have money on you two!” Adam called as he made his way through the kitchen and out the door, back into the garden. He watched as Lance hurried towards him, worry in his eyes.

“Have you seen Keith?” Lance asked, looking around and fidgeting with his hands.

“He’s in the cabin,” Adam said, nodding behind him. Lance shifted his gaze towards the door, looking eager to go inside. Adam bit back his smile. “Thanks for the song, Lance.” Lance found Adam’s eyes again.

“I meant it. You really taught me a lot Adam, about a lot of things. I wouldn’t be where I am today without you. I’ll always be grateful.”

“And I’ll always be grateful to you,” Adam said. “Now go find Keith.” Lance blushed and nodded his head, walking past Adam and into the cabin. Adam smiled to himself and went back to his table, where Shiro, Hunk, and Pidge were laughing about something, Shiro eating what looked liked his second slice of cake.

“Oh we have to play Monsters and Mana again,” Pidge said. “Clone Shiro loved that game, I bet you would too,” Pidge continued, looking at Shiro. Shiro gave her an amused smile as he chewed.

“Clone Shiro was really bad at that game,” Hunk said with a laugh, and Pidge laughed as well. Shiro crossed his arms.

“Well I bet I’m amazing at that game,” he protested, and Hunk and Pidge gave each other an unconvinced look. Then Hunk noticed Adam approach. He turned towards him and smiled.

“Hey, I was going to grab more cake, want some?”

“The answer to that question is always yes,” Adam said. Pidge snickered and Hunk got up from his seat, making his way into the cabin. Adam wondered if he should stop him, but Hunk was already gone.

“Have you ever heard of Monsters and Mana?” Shiro asked, and Adam furrowed his brow as he moved to sit down.

“No, what is it?” Pidge’s eyes lit up excitedly.

“It’s this game where you make up your own character and travel and fight bosses and win items and try not to die,” she explained quickly. “It’s really fun. Coran taught us how to play back at the castle.”
“What’s your character?” Adam asked. Pidge put on a smug grin.

“I was an axe-fighter named Meklavar. I was pretty cool.” Then Pidge looked at Shiro. “Clone Shiro was a paladin named Takashi Shirogane.” Adam laughed behind his hand and Shiro pouted.

“That’s not very original,” Adam said.

“Well it was a clone, nothing about a clone is original,” Shiro offered dryly and Adam and Pidge laughed. “I would’ve come up with a better character.”

“Maybe we’ll all play sometime,” Adam said, covering one of Shiro’s hands with his own. Pidge’s eyes lit up again and Shiro smiled. Then Hunk came back to the table, placing a few slices of cake in front of them. He pressed his fingertips nervously together, not sitting down.

“What’s wrong Hunk?” Shiro asked. Hunk furrowed his brow.

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just - when I went to the kitchen to get more cake I heard noises and I turned and -” Hunk laughed and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “I kind of saw Lance and Keith making out on the couch.” Shiro eyes blew wide and Pidge groaned.

“Seriously?” Pidge said, furrowing her brow angrily. Adam smiled at her and held out his hand.

“Pay up, Pidge.” Pidge huffed and reached into her pockets.

“You meddled, didn’t you?” she asked, looking at him suspiciously as she handed over twenty bucks. Adam shrugged his shoulders.

“If I did, there were no rules against it.” Pidge groaned again and leaned back in her chair, looking at the sky in defeat. Hunk sat down and held out his fist, Adam tapping it with his own.

“Nice,” Hunk said, shooting him a grin. Then Adam noticed that Shiro was quiet, his eyebrows knit together as he looked down at his piece of cake.

“Since when did they like each other -?” he asked no one in particular, his voice soft and full of confusion. They looked at him with wide eyes before Adam broke out into laughter, holding his sides and Shiro shot him a glare.

“You’re unbelievable,” Adam said, shaking his head as he continued to laugh. Shiro smiled and grabbed a handful of cake, trying to smush it into Adam’s face. Adam yelped and quickly leaned away, but soon the four of them were engaged in a food fight. When Lance and Keith made their way out of the cabin, their clothes disheveled and dopey grins on their faces, they saw the scene unfolding in front of them and decided to join in. Together they filled the desert with their laughter. That is, until someone managed to hit Allura with a large glob of icing and she fought back with a passion and impeccable aim that led them to quickly surrender.

Adam tightened the apron around his waist, pulling the whining tea kettle off of the stove. Then he grabbed the mug next to him on the counter and added a small handful of tea leaves and honey before pouring in the hot water. Adam watched the steam curl from the mug with a satisfied smile, his hands on his hips.

“Green tea with honey!” Adam called, lifting the mug and carrying it over to the counter. Shiro
walked up to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek before taking it and bringing it to the customer reading a book at the table by the window.

“On your left,” Hunk said. Adam moved out of the way and watched as Hunk carefully placed a tray of freshly baked muffins under the display glass. Hunk straightened up, an easy smile on his face.

“Those look great, Hunk, the Ambassador of Zexalia will be thrilled.”

“I hope so, he is a regular,” Hunk reasoned. Then Adam heard a ding. “Oh! Those are the Balmera Cookies!” He hurried deeper into the kitchen where they kept the ovens. Adam smiled and shook his head, filling his kettle with more water. Then he felt an arm wrap around his torso from behind.

“I’m guessing that this isn’t Hunk,” Adam said, and he heard Shiro’s laugh as he nuzzled his face into Adam’s neck.

“Are you all packed?” Shiro asked, and Adam nodded his head, reaching over to arrange the tea packets that he’d made last night.

“Do you think that letting Hannah and April run this place while we’re gone is really a good idea?” Adam asked.

“Don’t forget Romelle is going to help with the baking!” Hunk called from the ovens. Shiro chuckled and then rested his chin on Adam’s shoulder, humming thoughtfully.

“As long as Hannah doesn’t offend the new Nazrian representative we should be fine.” Adam scoffed and stopped organizing the tea bags. “I’m kidding,” Shiro said, pressing another kiss on Adam’s cheek. The bells on the front door jingled and Shiro and Adam looked towards the entrance from the viewing window cut out of the kitchen. Adam grinned and carefully moved out of Shiro’s embrace and towards the main space.

“Hey little bro!” June said, throwing her arms wide. Adam took long strides to meet her, hugging her tightly before pulling away. Then he shifted his gaze towards Casey, who had a book tucked under her arm and was smiling up at him.

“Hey Casey Spacey,” Adam said, and Casey rolled her eyes, a grin still on her lips. “How’s the first year at the Garrison treating you?”

“Grandpa Iverson is still pretending that he doesn’t know me,” Casey said, “but that’s probably because I call him ‘Grandpa Iverson’.” Adam and June laughed. It felt like yesterday when Adam got the news that Casey was accepted into the junior science program at the Garrison. At twelve she was the youngest one there, but she’d already managed to impress her teachers.

“And what do you have there?” Adam asked, looking at her book. Casey gave him a secretive smile and lifted it up for Adam to see. His eyes widened when he saw five colorful lions flying through the air. Then he saw the author’s name, just one word - Coran.

“He decided to write a book about your adventures,” June explained, amusement in her eyes as she looked at Adam. “He may have embellished a little, but it’s mostly accurate.” Adam looked at Casey, a smile tugging at his lips.

“I’m definitely reading that when you’re done,” he said, and Casey giggled, tucking the book back under her arm.

“Little bro-in-law!” June suddenly said, and Adam turned to see Shiro bring a muffin and a cup of
coffee to the customer at a nearby table before pulling June into a hug.

“Good to see you,” Shiro said with a smile, and then the door jingled once more, Noah entering the café holding a package in one hand and the hand of a small child in the other.

“Lucas and I come bearing gifts,” Noah said, shifting the package in his arms as he led the toddler towards them. Lucas looked around the café with wide, curious eyes. “One gift, actually, for your trip.”

“Mom and Dad announce that they’re taking a trip to Europe and then a month later you say that you’re spending time in space,” June said, rolling her eyes as she smiled. “Way to one-up them, Adam.”

Adam laughed and held up his hands in surrender. “This was all Allura’s idea.” Then he smiled, thinking about the pictures that his parents had sent him and June. “I’m happy for Mom and Dad. They’ve earned a vacation.” June nodded her head in agreement. Then she let out a sigh.

“I’m going to miss your tea, and you,” June admitted, a sadness in her smile. Adam punched her shoulder lightly.

“I won’t be gone for too long, I can promise you that,” Adam said. “The Red Lion is like my child,” he added, looking around the small café.

“Your first child, at least,” June corrected, and Adam looked at her in confusion. “Shiro mentioned that your adoption application just got approved when we were talking on the phone a few days ago.” Adam gave Shiro a look and he rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“It slipped out,” Shiro confessed, and Adam scoffed, wrapping an arm around his husband’s waist.

“It will still take over a year until everything is finalized,” Adam explained. “But we’re excited.” Shiro nodded his head, his eyes alight.

“Hear that Lucas? You’re going to have a baby cousin!” Noah said, gently shaking Lucas’ stubby arm. Lucas’ giggled, reaching up toward the package in Noah’s arm. Then Noah seemed to realize that he was still holding it and handed it over to Adam. Adam gave Shiro a glance before tearing it open. It was a leather-bound book, and Adam flipped through the pages to find it full of pictures that he hadn’t realized were ever taken. Pictures of Adam’s family growing up, pictures of Adam and Shiro and the other cadets during their first year at the program, the picture of Adam and Shiro during their third year, Adam holding up that god-awful peace sign. There was even a photo of Shiro’s parents in there, the pictures that Shiro tapped up by his bed on the spaceship to Titan. Adam looked up at Noah and June and saw their smiles.

“When did you have time to make this?” Adam asked. Shiro took the book gently from Adam’s hands and continued to flip through it, fondness and wonder in his eyes. June shrugged.

“I’ve been on kind of a scrapbooking kick lately. I think it’s a mom symptom,” June offered. “I was hoping that you would bring it to space with you, so you don’t forget us while you’re going to new planets and meeting with all kinds of important alien leaders,” she explained, giving a wave of her hand.

“She’s a little jealous,” Noah fake-whispered, and Casey nodded her head in agreement, giving Adam and Shiro a look.

“Betrayed by my own family!” June gasped, outraged. She bent down to tickle Casey, her laughter filling the café. Then Hunk came out of the kitchen, a phone in his hand.
“Lance just told me that him, Pidge and Keith are on their way,” Hunk said. He gave Adam’s family a friendly smile, eyes crinkling with warmth. “Should we start closing?” Adam looked around. There were only two customers, and they both looked like they were finishing up.

“Please, take your time,” Adam told them, giving them a friendly smile. They nodded appreciatively. Then he looked back at June and Noah. “We should clean up the kitchen,” he admitted. June nodded her head in understanding.

“Have so much fun,” June said. Then she was rushing forward to pull him into a bone-crushing hug. Adam felt the wind get knocked out of him and he laughed, hugging June back. He gave Noah a nod of his head as he looked over June’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of him,” Shiro said, and June pulled away, looking Shiro up and down skeptically.

“With your track record I think that Adam is the one that will need to take care of you,” June reasoned, and Shiro blushed.

“They’ll take care of each other,” Noah compromised, and Adam and Shiro looked at each other and smiled, Adam reaching out to hold his hand.

“Oh, Mom, time to go,” Casey said, tugging at her sleeve. “They have a lot of things to take care of.” June looked down at her quizzically.

“Since when did you become such a little adult?” June asked.

“Grandpa Iverson hold me that you are never too young to understand discipline and responsibility,” Casey said, and they all look at her in surprise before bursting into laughter.

“That sounds like him,” Shiro said quietly, and Adam flashed him a grin.

“Okay, sweetheart, you’re right,” June said, smoothing Casey’s hair lovingly. She gave Adam one last glance, warmth in her eyes. “Take care you two. We’ll see you soon.” Adam nodded his head.

“Safe travels,” she said, leaving a tip on the table as well. “I’m going to miss your coffee.”

“We have friends taking care of this place while we’re gone, and it’ll taste even better once we get back,” Shiro said, and her lips twitched up in amusement before she left, the bells jingling as she closed the door. Then the café became quiet.

“I wash, you dry?” Adam offered, heading for the kitchen. He could feel Shiro’s smile as he followed him. The three of them made quick work of cleaning the place up and getting it ready for closing, and by the time they were finished Keith, Lance, and Pidge came in through the front door.

“Who’s ready for a va-cay?” Lance asked, his voice practically echoing throughout the cozy space as he dragged out that last word. Adam, Hunk, and Shiro came out of the kitchen to greet them, aprons off and bags in hand. Keith’s arms were already crossed as he gave Lance a dry look.

“This isn’t a vacation, Lance, this is a diplomatic mission where we check in on all of the planets in
the Voltron alliance and make sure that -” Lance rummaged through his pocket for something, Keith’s words dying at the back of his throat as they all watched Lance unfold a very long and very detailed document.

“Yeah, yeah I know all of that, but, we’re also going to make the most of each visit,” Lance declared, a smug grin on his face as he held out his paper for everyone to see. “I’m talking about the beaches on Iotax with translucent sand, the forests on Olkarion that are just starting to grow back.” Pidge seemed to be particularly excited about that one, her eyes flashing with interest. “There’s even this one tunnel on Balmera that goes through the entire planet. The rest of us are going to check that out while Hunk spends time with his lady love,” Lance declared, waggling his eyebrows. Hunk blushed and adjusted the strap of his bag on his shoulder.

“Don’t forget that we’re supposed to stop by the Altean colony,” Pidge said. “That’s what Allura’s excited about the most.”

“I just want to fly again,” Keith admitted with a roll of his shoulders, a gleam in his eye. Lance looped his arm through his boyfriend’s and gave him a playful nudge.

“Let’s see if you’ve gotten rusty,” Lance said. “While you were stuck in all of those boring Galra summits in between our relief missions I was practicing my pilot skills. I bet that I could beat you in a race.” Keith huffed and gave him an unconvinced look from under his hair.

“We’ll see about that.” Lance grinned at him, and a smile tugged at the corner of Keith’s lips. Then something on Pidge’s wrist beeped.

“That’s Allura, she says that the ship is ready,” Pidge said, pulling absentmindedly on a strand of copper hair. Pidge had decided to keep it short, framing her face. It suited her.

“Time to go then, pala -” Shiro stopped, furrowing his brow. “Should I still call you paladins?”

“Defenders of the universe maybe?” Lance offered, stretching his arms and picking up his bag from where he had dropped it on the floor.

“Technically we’re the defenders of all universes,” Pidge pointed out, typing out a message on her watch.

“I think ‘family’ works just fine,” Hunk said.

“Aww Hunk, you big cheeseball,” Lance said, moving to wrap an arm around his shoulders. Then Lance noticed Keith pout at the loss of contact and he held his other arm out, giving Keith an inviting look. Keith gaze softened and he moved to stand on his other side, settling into Lance’s embrace.

“Where’s the ship, Pidge?” Adam asked, and Pidge looked up at him.

“Allura said that it would be -" They heard something coming from outside and the six of them quickly made their way out of the café. Adam’s hair whipped around him as he looked up at the sky to see the Atlas flying above them, hovering as close as possible to the ground without hitting any buildings.

“So how are we supposed to get up there?” Hunk asked, shielding his eyes from the sun as he looked up.

“Allura says that she’s going to -” Pidge began, looking at her watch once more. Her eyes widened, and then Adam couldn’t feel the pavement under his feet anymore. Lance yelped in surprise and
Adam watched as they, himself included, began to float in the air and upwards, a soft glow surrounding them. Hunk flailed his arms to keep his balance, looking warily at the ground. Lance began to turn upside down, Keith hiding his grin behind his hand as he watched him. Then Adam looked up to see a hatch in the Atlas open, and they all floated into the ship.

“Welcome everyone!” Coran yelled. The hatch closed and they all dropped to their feet, their bags as well. Adam saw Allura standing next to Coran, her arms outstretched and light dissolving at her fingertips as the glow around them went away. She was wearing her flight suit, her hair pulled back in a perfect bun and a victorious gleam in her eyes.

“Did you just #abduct us?” Lance asked, eyes wide as he looked at Allura. Allura waved her hand in a careless gesture.

“I’ve been practicing,” Allura explained. “Ever since our fight with Honerva I’ve been curious to see my limitations with regards to ancient Altean alchemy.” She looked at Adam, and Adam could guess that she was thinking about the blue light. Then she looked back at the rest of the group, excitement in her eyes as she clasped her hands together. “Now who’s ready for the next adventure?” she asked. Adam looked over at Shiro and found that he was already reaching out his hand. Adam smiled and took it.

“Oh I am so ready,” Lance said. “You have to check out this itinerary -” Allura’s eyes widened as she saw the long list that Lance had compiled, and then Keith let out one of his rare laughs. Soon the rest of them were joining in. This didn’t feel like an ending, not at all. With Shiro at his side Adam felt like this was finally their beginning. A beginning that they earned - that they all earned.

"Let's go to space," Adam said, and he looked around to see the expressions on his friends faces. Their eyes were full of promise and hope -

And so much starlight.

Chapter End Notes

My tumblr: @nobodys-pearls

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