On Darkling Wings
by hunters_retreat

Summary

Eons ago, a legend was born about the Darkling; a Demi-God who stole the God Caltek's most prized possession. The reality was far more tragic, for eons ago, the Gods created a perfect creature. Shiro was beautiful and they fought amongst themselves to keep him. Caltek, God of War, won the right and he pampered and cared for this perfect being. His creature was human though, and humans, no matter how perfectly they had been formed, were fiercely independent. When the Darkling fell to Shiro's world, he taught Shiro the nature of love, and of the prison his life was.

Caught in a tryst and on the eve of their escape, the God Caltek cursed the two lovers. Their souls would be forever bound, life after life, death after death, but only one would remember.

Notes

This is my second story for the Sheith Prompt AU Big Bang! This was such fun to write, getting to play in so many different timelines, but also a bit draining because... well... you'll see :P Thank you to Mila who did an amazing job stepping in to beta this one for me!!! Any
His life was perfect. How could it be anything else when he had been created by the Gods themselves? He was given a flawless world to live in and doted on by beings who nearly worshiped him.

They talked about his beauty and how the Gods had graced him with skin the color of sand, and cognac eyes. They said his hair was like the morning frost and his lips the pale blush of a young rose. Shiro pretended not to hear and simply moved past the servants when they spoke thus. Their purpose in this world was to revere him, to cherish him, and to attend him. The great War God, Caltek, had chosen them specifically for that purpose when he’d made this world for Shiro to inhabit.

He heard them talk sometimes, about how kind he was, how they would follow Shiro’s every order no matter what.

Shiro was eternally grateful for his beautiful home and his steadfast servants. Caltek was a fierce warrior and a wonderful lover and he never failed to do everything in his power to make Shiro happy. And yet, Shiro stood looking over the beautiful mountains to the east of his wondrous home and wondered what was left for him.

Perhaps it was his creation that was the problem. He knew from their tales that the Gods had created him just to see if they could reach perfection. Perfection in the physical form wasn’t a lifelong pursuit though. There was no purpose in his design, and therefore no purpose in his life.

As much as the Gods had perfected his skin and muscle, from his hair to the last eyelash, they had not realized that while they made something, they could not always control what they had fashioned. Like the rest of his kind, Shiro was a creature of deep emotion and the Gods had never known how to handle the humans once they’d been created and set free.

Even now, in the depths of the universe, Shiro heard the stirring of unease as the humans fought against their creators, refusing their divine right simply because they desired freedom. Shiro was in no cell, but sometimes, he closed his eyes and he could imagine what it would be like, to meet another of his kind. To find a kindred spirit.

Shiro turned away from the balcony and saw the servants waiting. "Go see to dinner," he said with a smile. "Something light under the stars tonight, I think."
They left him then, his strange companions. It was they who gave him news of the other worlds; of the God’s deeds and the human rebellions. Caltek would be upset if he knew, but they had been chosen to serve Shiro and they loved him too much to keep what little they could find from him.

"Will the Master be joining you tonight?"

Shiro shook his head. "No, Lance, he won't. I'm afraid he's off to another war council. Hopefully, he'd be back tomorrow evening."

It had been like that for too long. Shiro had been left to suffer his loneliness as best he could. Caltek claimed he loved Shiro, that he had built all of this because of that love. Shiro knew though, that if he truly felt love then he'd find a way to come home more often.

Even before the war had started, Shiro had often been left to his own devices. The servants had more of Shiro's time than his lover ever had.

His three servants left to see to the dinner preparations and Shiro walked through the house to go out onto the back patio. A long, low couch waited and he threw himself down on it, trying to remember when Caltek had last been there to make love to him under the stars.

When he had been recently created and newly won, he had come to Shiro every night. Caltek was no gentle creature but he was passionate and caring. Even if Shiro didn't love, he had felt safe there, in his arms.

Now, Shiro felt a distance growing that he could not name. That he would not. To name a thing was to give it power and Shiro wanted nothing to do with the stirrings of his heart. Of the doubt that Caltek had brought him so far from everything so that Shiro would never learn the wickedness of humanity and let it grow in his own soul.

Caltek, creator and God, saw human curiosity as a bane. The quest for knowledge was a curse. Their passion for freedom was a blight.

Shiro craved them all now.

As the evening sky fell to darkness, a falling light caught his attention. It wasn't a shooting star, and no God traveled in such circles. As he watched, the light came closer and closer. It wasn't until its journey was almost over that Shiro realized the destination.

It was going to land on the other side of the mountain.

Shiro didn't hesitate. He'd always been too curious. He wanted to know more than what was on the planet that had been created for his leisure. Something had come from outside his world and he needed to see it with his own two eyes.

His servants, in their ever-growing need to keep him happy, had developed a skimmer that he could attach to his back and he did so now. It allowed him to fly into the air at great speed and distances.

The landing impact shook the area, and the blast of wind nearly knocked him from the sky, but Shiro straightened his trajectory and continued forward. It would have been hours to walk the distance, but Shiro was able to find the landing area in just a few minutes.

When he got to the sight of the impact, Shiro stared in wonder. Where the outer layer of soil and rock and greenery had been ripped away, beautiful glowing crystals now littered the surface. Shiro moved closer and slowly stretched out a hand to touch one. It began to glow a soft violet and Shiro stepped further into the field of crystals.
At the end of the funnel was the resting place of the fallen object. Shiro carefully picked his way among the crystals until he stopped a few feet away from it.

Only it was no meteor or comet that had fallen from the heavens.

It was a human.

Shiro moved quickly then to check and see if the human was still alive. Raven wings sheltered the human's body where it had fallen and Shiro carefully stroked one back, amazed at the soft down-covered appendage. When he knelt, he realized it was a man. Amethyst eyes stared up at Shiro and he smiled down, trying to make himself seem friendly.

"My name is Shiro. Are you alright?" he asked.

The man nodded, though Shiro could see a cut across his face that bled slowly.

Shiro offered him his hand and they both stood. He wasn't as tall as Shiro, but he had the sudden urge to pull the man close and wrap him up warmly into his arms. To hold him close and let his head rest on Shiro's chest.

He let out a deep breath. "Let me take you-," he stopped then because they couldn't go home. Caltek would kill any human who came to Shiro's world, let alone his home.

"I'm sorry. I can't take you to my home. It wouldn't be safe there. There are some caverns close by though. I could take you there for shelter. Night will come soon."

The man looked at him and tilted his head slightly. "You don't have any wings. I thought all the Gods had wings."

Shiro laughed. "I'm not a God. I was created by them and have lived here for ... well ... I couldn't say how many years have passed here. I have this," he turned to proudly show off the skimmer. "My servants made it when I began to explore the world more."

"I can fly," the human said softly. "If you show me where to go. I need to rest before I can make it far though."

"Follow me then," Shiro said as he turned the skimmer back on.

The man followed closely behind and Shiro wanted so much to touch his magnificent wings. When they landed at the mouth of the cave, he frowned. "I had not heard that humans had wings."

The other man snorted. "They don't. I'm a half-breed. A Demi-God. My mother is a Goddess and my father was a human."

"Do you have a name?"

"Keith."

"It's nice to meet you, Keith. Now, please, let's find a place to settle inside the cave. It is warm and dry. I can bring some comforts to you tonight, but I want to see to your wounds first. Where do you hurt?"

"Hurt? I crash landed into a planet. I hurt everywhere. But I don't require medical attention for most of it."

"How?" Shiro wondered.
"I'm a Demi-God. I may get hurt easier than a God, but I heal quickly and I'm still stronger than a human. I don't need medical attention."

Shiro nodded as they walked further into the cavern. Shiro had explored the area before. In fact, there was not an inch of the planet he had not walked in his many years with Caltek. The caverns were close enough to home that he was within easy reach, should the God come home early and want Shiro's company. There were enough adventures in these caves though to keep Shiro happily exploring while he waited.

"There are hot springs, further in, that keep the cavern warm. The waters are said to be healing, though I have never had a need to find out."

"A human, in a God's world, and you have never been harmed?" Keith's skepticism was clear in his voice.

"The Gods made me and Caltek won me from all the others. Why would he harm me?"

"You know you aren't some sort of trophy?"

"No, of course not," Shiro was affronted. "Caltek made this world for me. He cares for me here. He is a good and just Master and a caring lover. Do not disparage what you do not know."

He led Keith into the cavern but the walk was silent.

In Shiro's head, he counted all the ways he was no trophy, but in his heart, the word sunk in and seemed to sear itself into his flesh. Petted and put on a pedestal, praised and pranced around whenever Caltek wanted to see something pretty. Wasn't that the definition of a trophy?

"Forgive me," Keith said from beside him. "I don't know you and I don't know how you came to live so far away from the rest of the universe, or why you would remain in isolation. I only know the five worlds that have lived under the rule of the Gods. The Gods are not, for those of us on Earth, benevolent rulers. They are tyrants who see us as nothing more than slaves."

"Slaves?"

"Yes. They've been up to-"

"No, Keith, wait. I meant, what is a slave?"

Keith stared at him for a long moment and Shiro felt shame at his own ignorance, but he held his head up high. The ignorance wasn't his fault. If there were books, beyond Caltek's library that he had access to, he would read them. If there was a way to get more than whispered rumors from the servants he would listen.

"Someone who is forced into servitude against their wishes. The Gods treat them as objects to own, items to be bartered, not people."

"That's horrible," Shiro said. He didn't doubt it though. Even the few rumors that reached his ears were filled with bloodshed.

Beyond the rumors, Caltek spoke with him about his campaigns on other worlds. Shiro offered suggestions when the God seemed amendable to his opinion. He had felt the movements of troops drawn across his back many times as he lay in bed with Caltek, sated and spent, when the God reveled in his tales of conquest.
"Being treated like slaves is why we're fighting."

"You are?"

"We all deserve our freedom."

"The Gods created us. Shouldn't we give thanks for that?"

Keith stared at him for a moment and, again, Shiro felt like a naïve child.

"The Gods created us but that doesn't mean they have a right to demand anything they want. We are allowed our dignity. They would take that from us, keep it, as they keep our freedom."

"I don't know anything about the world you're speaking of, Keith," Shiro said. "I'm sorry that's the world you know. All I can give you here is a place to rest and some small comforts."

"You've been kind enough," Keith said. "You have no reason to help a stranger. I don't mean to get you in trouble."

Shiro smiled. "To be honest, it's been kind of boring around here lately. At least your arrival will give me something to think about, after you've gone."

As he finished, he found the inner cavern with the hot springs. He'd left some things here on previous visits. It was one of his favorite places to go, away from his home, so there were mats for napping and towels for drying off after using the springs. Some jugs of water and snacks.

"Wow, this is pretty amazing," Keith said in wonder.

Shiro remembered his first time there as well. The ceiling was high but it was formed of the same crystals that Shiro had seen at Keith's landing site.

"It really is. Caltek made a beautiful world for me to live in," Shiro said softly.

Keith looked up at him and frowned. He didn't say anything but Shiro could see that he wanted to from the thin line he made of his lips and the furrow that crossed his brow.

"I need to go back to my home. My servants will be waiting and if I'm gone too long they might come to investigate. I'll be back at nightfall with some things for you, including some real food," he said. "Please relax until then. Everything here is yours to use as you need."

Shiro turned to leave but Keith grabbed his wrist. "Shiro, thank you. It's been a long time since anyone has shown me this sort of kindness."

Shiro gave Keith a small smile. "Your world must be a harsh one, Keith, for something as small as hospitality to mean so much."

Shiro walked out of the cavern and towards the open air. He was already making plans in his mind. The servants wouldn't think anything of him wanting to camp out tonight. He hated to break trust with them, but it was safer if they didn't know where he was or what he was doing. If Caltek discovered what Shiro had done, he'd be angry.

He couldn't think about turning Keith away though, about contacting Caltek and telling him a human had found his inner sanctuary. It would mean Keith's death and more isolation for Shiro. The last thing he wanted was to be separated from the human when he'd just found him.

He took off into the air, heading home, knowing he'd be back in a few hours. He didn't notice the
way his hand clutched at the place Keith had touched him, or how frequently his thoughts returned to that small moment of contact and the look of gratitude in Keith's eyes.

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"Will you tell me now, what really happened to you?" Shiro asked.

Keith turned to look at him and Shiro could see the way the walls built up behind Keith's eyes. He hated those moments more than anything, except perhaps the moments when he had to say goodbye. He'd been visiting Keith for a month now, every day, spending more and more time with him.

Caltek was still away, always promising to return home soon when he took the time to send messages, but the war wasn't going well for him and Shiro was almost glad for it. At least he had more time with Keith.

"You don't have to," Shiro said quickly. "I just want to understand. Sometimes, you look at me like I'm a child, too young to be burdened with the realities of the world, but other times ... I think you want to talk to me."

"Shiro," Keith's voice was heavy with something that Shiro didn't understand. It happened often. Keith's life, his world, was nothing that Shiro understood. Keith shared a little more each day but it was still outside his realm of reality.

"It's just that you've been here a month and you keep saying you'll tell me in time, but how much longer do we have?"

"What?"

"You said you were only staying until you'd regained your strength. I would keep you here, forever, if I could, but I know it would only hurt you. You have a people to return to, a cause, and I'm only a single man. I know that what I want doesn't amount to much--"

"What do you want, Shiro?"

There was an intensity to his gaze that Shiro was taken aback by. "Keith?"

"He gave you this world, this life. Everything on this planet was made for you. But what do you want? Do you want to stay here, spoiled by a God? Or do you want to leave this place and explore the stars? Not my worlds or his, but explore for yourself?"

"Yes," Shiro said, the desire to reach the stars so much a part of his own thoughts since Keith had come to him. "I want to see what else is out there. I want ... I'm not a soldier like you Keith, but I want to do some good in this universe."

"Then find a way, Shiro. You don't have to stay here, just because he wants you to. Do what you want."

Shiro lowered his eyes as he stepped closer to Keith. "And what if there are things that I want that
are selfish and greedy?"

"Shiro, you're the least selfish person I've ever met. In all the five realms."

Shiro looked up and his eyes met Keith's and he saw then the moment of understanding; the slight widening of Keith's eyes, the way they looked to Shiro's mouth as he licked his own lips.

"Shiro?"

"I thought I was happy. I thought I had everything but I never realized there were things I wanted, because he always gave me everything. You made me realize that happiness and complacency aren't the same thing."

"Shiro."

"You made me see that I want the choice. I ... I deserve the choice, Keith."

Keith nodded. "We all do. That's what we're fighting for."

"When you leave, I want to leave with you. I don't know what I'll find out there or where I'll end up, but I have to try."

"Of course, I'll take you."

Shiro stepped closer again and brought his hand up to touch Keith's cheek. He and Caltek didn't touch like this. He'd never, in all his life, touched another this way. "For now, I want this, Keith. I want you. I choose you."

He had thought about it, had words planned out to convince Keith that his feelings were earnest and that he had never loved Caltek, only thought he understood love because he'd been expected to love the God and give him everything he asked.

Keith didn't let him though. Keith pulled Shiro close and their lips met.

It was different from the way Caltek touched him, and the tenderness of it was nearly his undoing. He wrapped an arm around Keith's waist and pulled him closer. Keith was so much smaller than Caltek that he was almost afraid to hurt him, but he'd seen Keith's fall and he knew that he was stronger than he seemed.

Keith's arms wound their way around Shiro's neck and his fingers twined through his hair. Shiro thought he could stay like that forever, just holding Keith and being held.

"Shiro," Keith's voice was breathless and Shiro wanted to savor the fact that he caused that; the man with so much power and conviction was brought short by a single kiss.

"Keith," Shiro answered, but he didn't know what Keith was asking. Whatever it was, Shiro would give it, if it was within his power.

Keith smiled up at Shiro and took a few steps back. Keith slowly stripped out of his clothes and after a moment of watching, Shiro did the same.

"Join me, in the hot spring?"

Shiro followed Keith, unable to look away from the pale skin of his back and the dark wings that rested so beautifully between his shoulder blades. Keith stepped into the pool of water and Shiro watched him disappear, little by little. He walked with purpose towards a seat that Shiro had carved
into the side, years before. Keith sat there and Shiro realized it was perfect for Keith. His wings still dipped into the water, but he could rest back on his elbows on the rock face and relax his shoulders so that his wing joints weren't pressed against anything.

Keith smiled and held a hand out towards him.

Shiro answered with another smile and he dropped quickly into the warm water. He felt lighter in the hot springs, the warmth seeping the worry that clouded his mind. When he reached Keith, he took the other man's hand and allowed himself to be pulled closer. Keith brushed his lips against Shiro's and it was more than Shiro could take.

"You keep asking me, but what do you want, Keith?" he asked.


Keith looked like he was about to say more, but Shiro stole his words with his mouth and spent the night buried in his arms.

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Shiro felt Keith roll his hips up underneath him, trying to speed him up as his heels dug into Shiro's back. He leaned forward and nipped at Keith's ear and whispered, "You know what they say, Keith," he teased, as he pulled his fingers from Keith's body. "Patience yields-"

"Don't you dare say it!" Keith groaned.

"Focus," Shiro finished as he pressed his hips forward and entered Keith's body. He felt the sharp bite of teeth against his neck and moaned at the way Keith felt around him, under him.

This, with Keith, was nothing like sex with Caltek. The God was an ardent lover but there was a give and take that was absent between them. Shiro was always satisfied, but Caltek took what he wanted and he never asked what Shiro wanted. It was unlike the lovemaking with Keith. There was a passion between them that Shiro found unmatched elsewhere in his life.

Keith cared for him, like what Shiro wanted mattered more than his own desires. Keith's touch incited fire under his skin, and his heart beat faster just at the sight of him. Shiro had heard of love, had even imagined he knew it, but what he had before was nothing compared to the all-encompassing love he felt for Keith.

He made love to Keith in their cave, by the warm water of the hot springs, and Shiro had never felt more fulfilled or more sated as he fell back against the pillows and blankets with Keith in his arms.

They lay there together for a few minutes before Shiro felt Keith begin to move restlessly. At first, it was small, just the brush of his fingers over Shiro's stomach. Then Keith began to reposition his head - always settling back against Shiro's heart but never for long.

"Keith?"
Keith looked up at him and there was the intensity that Shiro felt so drawn towards.

"What are you thinking about?" Shiro asked.

Keith looked away, but Shiro cupped his face gently and pulled his eyes back up. "Tell me, please?"

Keith let out a deep sigh. "I have the strength to return home now," he confessed.

Shiro had been waiting for the day, dreading it but excited at the same time. Keith had promised to take him and Shiro knew he'd keep that promise, but what happened after that was unknown. Until Keith had come into his life, Shiro's days had been nothing but routine. There were no surprises to be had and no unexpected adventures to waylay him.

Now, he was thrilled at the prospect, but he knew he needed to talk to Keith because there was a reality he had never spoken of.

"You want to leave," Shiro said softly.

"I'm a soldier, Shiro. I have to return to the battle," his voice was sad but it conveyed the depth of both his convictions to rejoin his people and his love for Shiro.

"I know," Shiro said. "I would never try to keep you from it. And I want to go with you, but I'm afraid Keith," he admitted.

"I'll take care of you, Shiro," Keith sat up on one elbow and looked down at Shiro. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"I know, but as much as I want to leave, I'll put you in danger."

"What are you talking about?"

"Caltek. He will come and find me missing eventually. He won't just let me go. He'll turn over the galaxies to find me."

"I don't care," Keith said. "You said he fought with the Gods for you, that he built this world for you. When I said I would take you away from this place, I knew what that meant. Maybe we will be hunted in this life, but I would rather take the chance with you and see where it leads us than live my life regretting, and knowing that you were left behind to regret it as much as I did."

"Keith... he ... he tells me of what he does. Knowing what I do now if he ever caught us, he would be cruel."

"The Gods are cruel, Shiro, but I have fought them all my life and will continue to do so until I die. Freeing you from this place will not make me any more a target for them," Keith reassured him.

Shiro let out a deep breath and Keith leaned over to press a kiss to his lips, something sweet and gentle and unlike the words that they had been speaking. "I love you," Keith said softly against his lips.

"How many times will you tell me that, Keith?" he asked as he cupped his lover's cheek.

"As many times as it takes, for you to remember it forever," Keith confessed. He kissed him and whispered the words again, "I love you."

"I love you, too."
"Master!" Lance shouted from the cavern doorway.

Shiro sat up and looked across the cavern to the servants – Caltek's slaves, Shiro had come to realize – as they tried to enter the cavern. He watched as Lance, then Pidge and Hunk fell to his knees by some unseen force, but Shiro understood.

They had come to warn him that the God had returned. As Shiro looked past them in the doorway, he knew they had been too late. Caltek stood behind them, larger than life.

"I made this world for you, and this is how you would repay me?" The God asked.

He didn't know where the courage came from but Shiro stood, naked, between Keith and the God and didn't waiver. "You created a cage to keep a favored pet, but I am no kept thing any longer. I will be free of this place."

"You think this scrawny Demi-God can take you from me? That I, Caltek, God of War, Warfare and Retribution would allow such a creature to take what is mine?"

"I am not yours!" Shiro shouted.

"We made you and I won you with steel and blood from the others who coveted your perfection! I made this place for you to live, this perfect beast to carry you through the universe, always within call so you could be brought to me. You are mine!"

"I was never yours," Shiro's voice was quiet against the rage of the God, but he felt Keith behind him and it gave him strength. "Caltek, you are a God and I could never be anything but a plaything to you. Please," he tried to reason with him. "Let me go. Let me find happiness."

"There is nothing I cannot give you," Caltek said. "There is no reason to let you go."

"You cannot give me love. I don't even know if you are capable of it."

"And that dark-winged abomination is?"

"Yes," Keith said as he stood by Shiro's side. "I love him, and I will love him for all eternity. I won his love and because of that, he will be mine, for all time, no matter what you do to me."

Caltek's eyes grew wide and they began to take on the feral yellow glow that Shiro rarely saw. He grew larger in size and his skin turned a dark shade of purple.

"You should have heeded my creation's warning, son of Krotivania. The Goddess of the hunt was never as wise as she claimed to be. She never taught you to fear me, but she should have at least taught you never to steal from me."

"She was wise enough to see love for what it was," Keith said. "To know it, to accept it, and to pass that love to me."

Caltek laughed then and it scared Shiro more than the anger.

"Is that what she taught you, Demi-God?" he laughed again. "I have been chasing you for years, Darkling child, and here I find you, in my own home, with my perfect creation. Do you really believe that love will save you?"

"I believe that loving Shiro is worth anything."

Caltek moved quicker than Shiro could see. He saw a flash of black, as Keith was thrown against
the wall, and then he was caught tight in Caltek's grasp. The God dangled Shiro in the air, his hand grasping Shiro's wrist.

"Is forever what you want, my pet?" he asked, his grip tightening on his wrist.

"Caltek, please," he tried to push away from the God but the more he struggled the more the pain radiated down his arm. He used his knees to brace against the God's chest and he pulled his other arm back. He had never been violent but he refused to give up his freedom without a fight. He brought his full strength to bear on the God and punched Caltek in the face.

The God roared and Shiro was thrown into the wall. He struggled to his feet and he saw Keith on the other side of the room, trying to stand.

"If you want forever, Shiro, I will give it to you. You want forever with the Darkling, then I will give that to you too. I will give you another gift as well, something to remember me by, for all eternity."

Shiro felt pain radiating in his arm again and he screamed in agony. He clutched at his arm as purple light began surrounded it.

"Leave him alone, Caltek!"

Shiro looked up through his throbbing pain to see Keith as he attacked Caltek. He moved quicker than any human could and he dodged the blow Caltek threw at him. Keith countered with a strike to the face, a knife in his hand that Shiro had never seen before.

"You dare to attack me!" Caltek bellowed. Blood poured down his face from an open wound across the bridge of his nose. He countered Keith's next strike and sent him back towards the wall. Keith snapped his wings open and only that stopped him from hitting the wall.

"Know this, Darkling. Any mark you leave on me, I will give to him."

Shiro screamed again as he felt a blow across the face. He understood what Caltek meant then when he felt the blood dripping down his face.

"Stop!" Keith yelled.

"Any strike you give me, I will give to him. It's your hands that betray him now." Caltek said, his voice laced with dark humor. He looked back at Shiro then. "As for you, wear my mark, forever Shiro, and know that you could have lived happily with me. I would have kept you safe and sheltered, pampered in my sanctuary for all eternity. Now, you will always be hungry. You will never be satisfied with the world you find yourself in."

"Caltek, what are you doing?" Keith demanded.

Shiro felt the flesh of his arm begin to harden and grow cold as the purple light pulsed. The pain became too great and he could barely breathe through it as he doubled over. He could hear Keith shout but he couldn't make out the words or see his lover.

Blood dripped on the floor from the wound on his nose and when Shiro was finally able to breathe in gulps of air, he tasted blood in his mouth as well. The pain began to recede and when Shiro looked, his eyes fell upon cold metal where his right arm had once been.

"Caltek," he sobbed the name, but he knew then that there was no mercy in the God.
"The symbol of my followers, the metal arm, unstoppable and inescapable, and yours for all time."

Caltek walked over to Keith and Shiro could see how much his lover wanted to lash out, but his eyes fell on Shiro and all fight died there. Keith would never bow to Caltek, but he held his attack for fear of what it would do to Shiro.

"You want him forever, Demi-God? You can have him. He was not like the others we created. We gave him long life and a soul able to withstand a life in servitude to the Gods. Do you understand what I can do to him, with that?"

"Leave Shiro alone," Keith demanded.

Caltek picked Keith up by the neck and Shiro staggered up to his feet. "There is no hope for you in this life. I will take it, as is my due. The arm I give him in remembrance, so that you will always know he was mine before you stole him."

Keith clutched at his neck, trying to break free. "You will both die this day for this betrayal, but I am not a creature, as you think, who is unmoved by love. Even now as you struggle for him, I see how he yearns for you. You will both wake after this death, after each death, life after life, for all eternity. But for your betrayal, only one of you will remember. One of you will know the love you have shared and the other will forever be ignorant of this crime."

"Please, don't do this," Shiro begged. "If you can see that we love each other, just let us live out this life together."

"Which will it be?" Caltek ignored his pleas and asked Keith. He dropped the Demi-God to the floor and Shiro watched the two, unable to move from his spot. "Will you keep the memory of your beloved, or will you pass that right along to him?"

"I will keep it."

Caltek shook his head as he looked over at Shiro. "Your Darkling is a selfish one, Shiro. You have given up an eternity of leisure to live life after life of torment for such a creature."

"You misunderstand," Keith said softly. "Shiro will never remember me. He will never look across a crowded room and see me with another person and know what he's lost. He'll never come to the end of a bitter life, having never found me. He will never know the loss. I will find him. Until we find a life where we can be happy, I will always find him." He looked over at Shiro then. "As many times as it takes."

Shiro stood then, hand still clasping his metal arm and faced Keith; the Demi-God, his Darkling lover. Caltek turned on Shiro and he saw the blade coming as Caltek drew near. "Keith, I love you." They were his last words in this life. The last thing he heard, was more a sob than his name, but Keith was at his side as Caltek pierced him with the blade as well.

"Shiro, I love you, too. I will find you. Always."

They died together, in the cavern, unaware of the fate of the world around them. Unaware of the servants that Caltek sent to their graves, cursed by the blood on the blade to follow their Master into the other lives.

Eons later, only one legend spoke of them. The story of a Darkling God who fell in love with his uncle's most treasured prize. They died for love and while the God destroyed the surface of the planet where their home had been, in the deepest caverns where they died, life began. Even as their blood soaked the ground, the first Balmera was brought to life as witness to their sacrifice.
The story, as it had been told to Keith, was simple.

The Priest had been one of their order since the day of his birth. Abandoned by his mother and left on the stairs of the God Hephaestus' temple, the boy had grown to show a strength that his misshapen form had belied. They named him Shiro and raised him to be one of the pious. He was intelligent and kind. Virtuous and fair. Though he had been born misshapen – a stump of an arm ending just under his shoulder – he had been clever enough to learn to work the pumps and hammers of the forge and to create beautiful wonders in the name of Hephaestus.

It was not his fault he was so loved.

His superiors worked day and night to create a gift for him and when presented, he declined, saying that it was the will of the Gods that he was misshapen as he was. He was happy enough with the life Hephaestus had given him. They had been insistent and that night, they added a potion to Shiro's drink to make him sleep. When he woke, he had a brilliant arm of metal and a shame for what they had done.

That day when Shiro went to the forges, the fires all died and no one could relight them. The priests prayed to Hephaestus and he answered. At the first glimpse of the sun on the horizon on the fifth day, Talos, the God's giant bronze warrior, would come to the temple and take Shiro's life, as a sacrifice for the Priests vanity and vainglory.

Keith stared at the horizon and the temple in front of him. The Priest had found him and brought him here with only a day to spare. Come morning, Keith had promised to battle Talos. It wasn't for coin or reputation, though Keith could use both. He might be known as a hero in some parts of Greece, but that didn't buy his wine, keep a roof over his head, or feed his horse.

This was something else. Keith knew what it was to be unwanted by his human parents. His mother had been a huntress of Artemis. Shamed by her rape at the hands of a man, she had hidden from the Goddess. When she bore the child, she had left Keith at Artemis's temple, to appease the Goddess and show that home and hearth were not in her heart. Keith didn't know what happened to her, if the Goddess had taken pity on her or not. Instead of dying as a sacrifice, Artemis had seen Keith's likeness to the huntress that Artemis held dear, and she'd sent a deer to carry him to a hunter's cabin. Keith had been raised there, to the hunt, and Keith became known for it.

This man who was to be sacrificed had committed no wrong and Keith felt a connection to him because of that. It didn't hurt that the Priest who sought him out had been so adamant about the goodness of the man in question, about the grace and dignity that he carried.

Lance spoke almost as if the bonds of brotherhood were more, but when carefully questioned it was obvious it was just a strong friendship and a true admiration for the other man. Keith wasn't about to upset the Gods on a lover's word.

Keith learned quickly enough that the Priest was one of the men who had crafted the arm for the Shiro. He was willing to give his own life to the Talos if need be to save Shiro for their crimes, but
so far Hephaestus had refused their pleas.

"The morning meal will be served soon," Lance said as he urged Keith to press on. Keith had wanted to arrive as early as possible so they'd been riding hard to get to the temple. "Shiro will most likely be there."

"Most likely?"

"He is very pious. He may very well be in prayer to make himself a proper sacrifice for the God," Lance answered.

Keith looked over his shoulder at the man riding behind him. "Does he want to be saved?"

Lance looked away. It wasn't something Keith had thought to ask before, but he could see the answer already.

"Shiro believes that if he dies we will all be saved from the God's wrath. He isn't willing to save himself and put us in danger, though we are the cause of all of this. He doesn't want to die, but he is ..."

"Pious," Keith said. It was the one word Lance said over and over again. Pious. Hephaestus's most dedicated disciple. Devout. Steadfast. Loyal. Brave.

Lance just nodded as Keith kicked his horse back into action. The black horse snorted once and pulled at the reins but Keith just patted his neck and settled the animal. Young boys came forward as they reached the temple, dressed in simple tunics of rough cloth and with smiles and gentle teasing for Lance.

Keith's horse was led away and when Lance brought him forward, the Temple Priests were at the doors, waiting for them.

Lance went ahead of him a few steps and Keith took his time to look at them. Lance bowed to the Elders and Keith saw the scars and burn marks on their arms; marks of the forge of their God. He had seen them on Lance as well. Two others stood behind the Elders, a Priest and a Priestess in leather smocks, still sweating from their toils. The Elders faces might as well be carved in the metals they worked, but the younger two had anxious faces.

"So, you believe this human will defeat Talos and somehow appease the God's wrath?" the foremost Elder asked.

"He is Keith, favored of Apollo, and Hephaestus himself made his sword and shield as a gift for his deeds. If there is any other better suited to this, I could not think of one," Lance offered.

Keith was taken by surprise at the words. When they met Lance hadn't shown any knowledge that he knew the connection between Keith and the Gods. Apollo had favored him because of his sister's early interest in keeping him alive. Hephaestus understood the abandonment of a mother's love and had granted many requests to Keith in the past. Something he apparently had in common with Shiro, who seemed to be missing from this meeting.

The Elders watched Keith but didn't seem to be impressed with his appearance. Keith didn't care much about that. His hair was wild and his clothes were far from clean after days on the road before Lance had found him but he wasn't there to win a beauty contest. He was there to save a man from an unfair judgment. Even if Keith normally sought his prayers to Hephaestus, it was unjust to make the man pay for the hubris of others.
"Show him to the baths where he can clean up," one of the Elders said. "We'll send food there."

Keith wanted to roll his eyes, but he just nodded his head in gratitude. In truth, he had yet to find a temple that didn't have wonderful baths and he didn't want to lose the chance to visit one because of his sharp tongue.

As the Elders left, the young Priest and Priestess came forward.

"Where is he?" Lance asked. They didn't answer and Lance sighed. "Pidge, where is Shiro?"

"Preparing." There was a resignation in the face of the Priestess. When Keith looked to the other Priest, it was the same. Shiro was preparing to die for them, and they were devastated by this. Keith learned all he needed to know about the man in that one moment. These three would face a God's wrath for the love of their friend.

"He didn't think I'd make it back in time?" Lance asked.

"He is refusing to even talk about it," the other Priest said.

"Hunk," Lance let out a deep sigh. "He can't stop this. We can't ... we can't let him die because we did this to him. He tried to do the right thing."

"Why are the Elders allowing this?" Keith asked. The others looked at him like they forgot he was there but Hunk ran a hand through sweat-slicked hair.

"We asked the Elders if we could make the arm. If we were able to perform such an act for Shiro, perhaps we could help others as well? We could help humanity in ways that we had never been able to before. At least, that's what we thought. When Shiro refused, the Elders were very upset. The arm was made to Shiro's specifications and it couldn't be used by anyone else. Besides, Shiro is the perfect person to show off the metal arm. He's ... well ... if it wasn't for his arm, he would be perfect."

"The Elders," the Priestess cut in, "decided that it was within their rights to require it. So they drugged his evening drink and placed the arm on him. When Hephaestus saw it, they said they had made something even the God might want. They said they could make him perfect, as they had Shiro, and that the world would know that they had loved Hephaestus the best."

"The Elders tried to perfect their God?" Keith asked. It was more than an act of hubris. It was an act of suicide.

Pidge nodded. "Hephaestus said that Shiro was the only Priest worthy of his title and that he would take him, and remake him, and allow him to serve in his forge in Mount Olympus and that the temple would be cursed, known to all as damned. He saw the truth, Shiro's humility and knew that the Elders had forced the arm on him, as well as how they took credit for our work. I believe they hope to bargain somehow with the God, if Talos cannot steal Shiro away as Hephaestus plans."

"If Shiro is so pious and the God wants him at his side, why are you three trying to stop this?"

"Because we don't want to lose him!" Lance said. "Hephaestus is taking him too early. He has so much good he can still do this world. We only want Hephaestus to return and hear our pleas. We would gladly take his place until Shiro's natural time in this world is done. That is all we want."

Keith sighed. "I suppose you had best see me to get cleaned up. I'll eat and then go meet with this Shiro."
"Of course," Lance said.  "I'll show you the way.  Hunk, can you stop by the kitchen to have food sent to him?"  The Priest agreed and Keith was led into the temple.

Lance didn't try to show him around.  If Keith was able to save Shiro, there would be plenty of time to explore the temple and get to know its nuances and what made this one special.  He was led to a spacious guest room in the temple.  They only stopped long enough for Keith to drop off his bag and pull out clean clothes before Lance showed him to the baths that were housed in the lower levels.  The baths were fed by a hot spring close to the temple and Lance assured him that at that time of day, he would have the baths to himself.

"Thank you," Keith told Lance, as the Priest seemed to be at a loss for words.  "I can find my way back to my room when I'm done."

"Of course," Lance said.  He sighed and smiled weakly.  "I know it seems foolish, what we did, but if you knew him as we do, you'd do anything just to make him smile.  When Pidge though of a way to give him a replacement for his missing arm, it seemed like divine inspiration."

"Maybe it was, Lance," Keith said softly.  "Maybe Hephaestus is punishing the Elders for their abuse of their position, and not you for your invention."

"We would lose him, either way."

Lance walked away, head down and defeated and Keith let out a deep breath.  He didn't know when he would meet this Shiro, but he had a feeling it would be interesting at least.  Keith wasn't known as a pious man and it irked some people that he didn't bow often to the Gods.  Keith was like everyone though, he had his favorites and he gave his offerings of food, drink, oils, and incense to them in times of need and in times of plenty.

Keith dropped his clean clothes onto a stool close to a pool in the back of the room.  There was a low wall built around it and Keith felt a modicum of privacy for it.  He was more used to traveling on his own than in the company of others so the respite from company was a blessing.  He stripped out of his dirty clothes and stepped into the warm water.

He didn't try to stop the low moan that came from his lips.  It had been too long since he'd been able to properly feel clean.  He didn't indulge himself often, but access to the hot baths wasn't something he would pass up.  He dunked himself under the water and scrubbed at the mess of twigs and dirt that always seemed to settle into his dark hair.

He took a pumice stone and began to scrub his skin clean, working weeks of dirt and travel away until his skin was left with a slight red tinge to his natural sun-bronzed hues.  He ducked under the water again and rinsed his hair one more time.

"I think you may drown before you manage that tangle," Keith heard as his head broke the water's surface.  He turned to find that the source of the amused voice was the most beautiful man he'd ever seen.  He wore the simple tunic of the other Priests, but his undergarment had long sleeves and gloves covered his hands.

The man smiled as he held the tray he carried up a little higher.  "I was asked to bring you food."  He sat the tray on the edge of the pool but seemed in no hurry to leave.

"Thank you," Keith said as he moved closer to the food.  The tray held teganites topped with honey, as well as some cheese and figs.  Lance must have told them how they had pressed on to arrive in time, eating in the saddle when they could.
"You have come to help us. We can at least give you the hospitality you deserve."

Keith took a bite before he sipped at the water poured for him. The other man sat at the edge of the pool and watched with a calm that Keith had rarely seen in another. A small smile seemed to tug at the corner of his lips as if there was some source of amusement Keith knew nothing about. Grey eyes held a kindness that seemed to regard them as friends even if they'd just met. His dark hair was cut short except near the crown where his hair had turned white. In whole, he seemed warmly exotic, almost intoxicating to look at. He had no doubt, paired with the fact that he wore gloves, that this was the man he had come to save.

"I was asked to deliver your food because I was coming to the baths myself. May I join you? Or would you prefer your privacy?"

"Please, feel free," Keith said without hesitation. The other baths were empty so it wouldn't have been a hardship for the other man to settle in another bath and leave Keith to his thoughts, but Keith saw the curious light in his eyes and he had his own questions.

"I ... I should warn you about-"

"I would like to see this metal arm that seems to be the source of so much pride and pain," Keith said before the man could finish. He was right. The man smiled and it was obvious that this was Shiro.

Without another word, he stripped off his clothes. He stood in a way that Keith couldn't see his right arm, but there was certainly nothing wrong with the strength of his other arm or the width of his shoulders. His waist was nicely tapered and led to a perfect ass and strong, supple thighs. When he moved to step into the pool, he held his arm behind his back and there was only the flash of silver as he dropped into the water.

When he surfaced again, Keith moved closer. "May I?" he asked.

Shiro lowered his eyes and a slight blush covered his cheeks and nose. A scar trailed over the bridge of his nose and something about it seemed to unsettle Keith. He wanted to ask who had given him such a mark but be refrained. Instead, he took the hand that Shiro set in front of him. He ran his fingers over the silver. He could see no seam in the metalwork and the fingers moved in his grasp as if they were flesh and not man-made.

"It is extraordinary," Keith said softly.

"It was a creation unparalleled by any other smith," Shiro agreed.

"Why would you refuse it then?" Keith asked out of curiosity. "I was told you make beautiful metal sculptures for Hephaestus. Would it not be easier to do with two hands?"

"Perhaps," Shiro said. "But I have been this way since birth. If the gods intended me this way, who am I to change that? Perhaps my arm was the price I paid for the visions I make out of metal. It was a price I was more than willing to pay. If Hephaestus had wanted to gift me with an arm to create more works, he would have given it to me himself. I am just a humble man. I do not claim the right to alter what the gods have given us."

Keith ran his fingers over the metal and he watched Shiro close his eyes, as if he could feel the sensation. It was truly a marvel. It was no wonder the Elders wanted the world to see it on Shiro. Such a piece of work, and on the most modest and unassuming of Priests. He would truly stun the world, as he had stunned Keith so simply.

Lance had been right. Even a few moments with Shiro and Keith could see why the three Priests
had loved him so much they had created this for him, and why they were so devastated at the thought of their loss.

"Do you want to be saved?" Keith asked.

"I don't want to die," Shiro said as he backed away, taking his hand from Keith's. "But there is no stopping Hephaestus's wrath. I know my friends would plea for my release from this sacrifice, but I have made my peace with it."

Shiro stepped out of the water then and dried quickly. Keith watched in silence as Shiro applied oils to his skin and then stole a piece of cheese from Keith's tray and winked at him. Keith let out a sharp laugh but, in that moment, he felt his heart lurch. There was something here, something far too miraculous to let go.

"Is there anything you want for yourself?" Keith asked as Shiro dressed and began to leave the bathing area.

Shiro dropped his eyes. "Perhaps," he said softly before he looked up at Keith. Heat filled his eyes and there was no mistake in it. "Perhaps I would like a kiss from my hero, before my tragic end."

He left then and Keith was at a loss for what to say.

He finished his bath and his tray before he returned to his rooms. He began to scout out the temple then, to understand the task at hand. He spoke with Lance, Pidge, and Hunk about Talos and what they knew of their God's creation.

In the end, Talos was not as hard to defeat as he had thought he would be. The creation was large and cumbersome and Keith was able to move around it easily. Shiro had been standing on the temple steps when the metal man had arrived, but he moved when Keith told him to and he was pushed behind his friends, no matter how he shouted to Keith that he was not worth the danger.

It was Hunk who saw the anomaly in Talos's anatomy and Pidge who realized how it could work to Keith's advantage. Lance came to Keith's aid and distracted Talos while Keith snuck up behind him. He shoved his sword into the nail on his ankle and used it to pop the nail loose. He scrambled away quickly as liquid metal began to pour out over the land. It was only a matter of moments before Talos fell to the ground and died, his life's blood spilled over the land.

As Talos gave his last thrash of life, there was a great roar within the sky and Keith was called back to the others when Hunk screamed, "No!"

He ran back to where they sat with Shiro, the man on the ground between them. Keith fell to the floor by his side and saw the way his metal arm buzzed with energy and a faint purple color radiated from it.

Shiro looked pained and blood coated his lips but he smiled at Keith anyway. "It isn't your fault, Keith," he said faintly. "Hephaestus will have me, no matter what you do."

"The God doesn't deserve you if the only way he can keep you is death," Keith answered as he cupped Shiro's cheek softly with his hand. "What can we do? I know nothing of this poison that is killing you."

Shiro let out a deep breath. "Give me my wish, Hero," he answered. "It is all I want, before I die."

Keith felt a sob rising from his throat but he swallowed it down, even as he leaned closer. He brushed his lips over Shiro's softly, then licked across the seam, asking for permission. Shiro opened
to him and Keith pressed in closer, deepening the kiss.

And he remembered. Images filled his head, memories of being pressed against Shiro in a cave, memories of hot springs and whispered secrets. Memories of lovelmaking and exploring. Memories of Caltek and Shiro's death. Memories of their curse and the weight of it as Keith pulled back to look at Shiro, dying again in his arms, because of a God who wanted to steal him from Keith.

Again, he was powerless.

"Shiro," tears blurred his eyes but he could still see Shiro's smile. When the tears fell, he could see the one thing that pained him more than any other. Shiro didn't remember. It was Keith's memory alone that held their love for one another. They were not just two men who had met in this temple 24 hours before. They were lovers who had crossed time and lives to meet again.

"Shiro," he said again as he pressed another kiss to his lover's lips. Arms held him tight and Keith continued until he felt the arms fall from him and the lips grow slack against his touch. He dropped his head to Shiro's chest and sobbed.

He ignored the others as he turned and looked up to see the God Hephaestus above him. "He will always be mine," the God said.

"No, he won't," Keith said without hesitation. "His eternity has already been claimed. Life after life, death after death, he will be mine even if he never knows it."

Hephaestus paused and he must have found some truth in the words. "So be it."

Keith let out a bitter laugh at the God's resignation, but he didn't bother to fight when Hephaestus swung a forge hammer to end his life.

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He was finally here. This life, he knew everything. He remembered everything. He thought that meant something. He thought remembering meant something.

Keith had seen him five years ago. He'd been a nobody, just one in a nameless crowd of people, but the games were the games. As much as Keith hated the spectacle, he was a good Roman and went like everyone else. He pretended to enjoy the matches, but it had never set well with him. He had been at the mercy of other's hands far too often to find joy in watching these men fight for other's entertainment.

In this life, however, he was a citizen of modest means. At least he had been, until he'd seen the man that was considered the greatest gladiator in their lifetime. The Champion, they all called him. Undefeated against all opponents, even when he'd been set to fight multiple men at the same time. Even when he was forced to fight with a rag-tag group of men with no warning against groups much larger and more well-formed.

Shiro, Keith knew the name even if the crowds didn't chant it. And the ragtag group of warriors at
his side, he knew them as well. Lance and Hunk. Pidge, hidden in men's clothing, but Keith knew the truth. They had found their way to his side once again.

Today, Keith would meet them in the ring as an ally. He had played his opponents well and landed himself in the gladiator ring himself. He would never have had the wealth to buy Shiro and escaping with him would have been a ridiculous attempt. The only way to be with Shiro in this life was to fight by his side.

Today was his first chance and he had worked and buzzed in his master's ear until the man decided that his best use for Keith was to sell him after today's fight. Unless something unforeseen happened, Keith would be bought by Shiro's master tonight.

When Keith entered the arena, a small contingent of men with him, he made his way to the other four that waited. He smiled at them as they met. "Champion, we are yours to command," Keith said.

The man stared at him and there was a hardness to this Shiro that he had never seen before. A gladiator's life was tough and there were rumors about how hard his master had pressed to break him in the first place. Now, Keith wondered about those rumors. About how true they were. Shiro just nodded though and began to set them into motion.

They won the battle and Keith was sold that night. He came to the ludus and was properly cleaned by the slaves of the house so that their owner could see him properly; arena dust scraped from his body and oils freshly applied. They had cut his hair, which bothered him, but not enough to speak out. He would be with Shiro soon so he could put up with any of it.

Five years and he'd finally be able to speak to Shiro for more than a moment or two. He would find a way to win back his love and they could find a way to escape this hell.

Keith sat at dinner but Shiro never came. After, he went to Lance and Hunk who sat together talking quietly. "Where is he?" Keith asked without preamble. It was probably too rude, but he was done waiting. He needed to see Shiro. He needed to speak to him. Tonight. Now.

"What?"

"Where is Shiro?"

They looked at each other and annoyance passed between them. "None of your business, buddy," Lance said quickly. "Where Shiro is, that's his own business."

"Lance, he's back," Pidge came running over, voice lowered but she didn't care that Keith stood before them, listening to her words. "It's bad."

"Shit. How do we get him out of this?" Hunk asked.

"What's going on?" Keith demanded.

Lance looked at him and he shook his head. "I don't have time for this," he said. He continued though and there was a desperation in his voice that made Keith realize just how bad this was. "The Champion is very highly sought after, once the arena is done. Most of the time it's a pleasant enough experience. He lets some noble's wife or daughter paw all over him, occasionally he has to perform for them, but mostly they just want a few gropes and the chance to tell their friends that they were with the Champion. However, there is a guy. He isn't the only one, but he doesn't just want to touch. He wants to hurt Shiro. Our master doesn't have enough power to tell him to stop and he'd be a fool to turn down the money he's offering for Shiro. But Shiro fights him, every single time. It gets bad. Last time, Shiro couldn't fight for a month."
"How does he best the Champion?" Keith asked. He knew what was required of gladiators. He'd been in the same position himself.

"With a lot of extra men to hold him down," Pidge said. Her hands were fisted and her voice was an angry whisper. "I heard him yelling, Lance. They mean to hurt him for real this time."

"No. No, not now," Keith said without thought. "Not when I'm this close. Where is he?"

"We can't get to him."

"Watch me."

It was simple enough. If you didn't care what happened to you afterward, escaping their chambers was easy. He made his way through the halls, blood on his thighs from where he'd wiped his hands clean enough to grip the sword he'd taken from the dead guard’s fingers.

He crept down the hall when he saw the men standing around the room. He closed his eyes and tried to still his anger at what he heard, but nothing could take away the muted screams, nor the cruel laughter.

Rage burned through him and Keith struck without thought. Before anyone knew he was there, he sliced the first throat. He didn't know what they saw, but when they looked at him, they fell back in fear. He bit his lip on a sharp tooth and when he gripped one man by the throat, claws had tipped his fingers instead of his usual fingernails. His rage turned him into a half-formed demon and he smiled as he ran the tip of his tongue over two fangs.

"Do you still think you can have what is mine?" he asked the men.

They tried to escape, but they all died to his sword, or his claws and teeth. The room was a mass of blood and guts and Keith dropped the sword to crouch in front of the man beneath him. "Shiro?" he called softly.

The Champion looked up at him, eyes dulled from pain. His hands were tied behind his back and Keith could see that he had been whipped. Blood streamed down his back and thighs and Keith wanted to kill them all again but he needed to care for Shiro instead.

"Shiro, please, answer me."

"Have you come to take me to hell?" Shiro asked.

Keith shook his head. "No. I've come to free you."

Shiro laughed as Keith untied his arms. There, on Shiro's stomach, was a wound he would not recover from. "What will you free me from, demon?"

Shiro's morbid humor struck Keith like a slap in the face and he wanted to howl from the grief. Shiro was already dead. It was only a matter of time. Tears fell down his cheeks and he didn't try to hide it. Shiro watched him, but Keith could see not only was he pain-lulled, but he had been drugged as well. Possibly poisoned. The men who came here tonight meant to make sure that Shiro never fought again.

"Anything. I will give you anything, Shiro. Tell me what you want."

"Free me from this," Shiro answered softly. "Free me from this slow death. I am a gladiator of the arena. I would have died in battle, quick and fierce. I do not fear that. I do not want a slow death."
"You can't ask that of me," Keith pleaded.

"Give me your teeth, demon. That is what you came for, isn't it? All this blood around you. Your mouth is stained from it. Give it to me as well. The kiss of death, for a man who has given so much to death himself."

Keith picked Shiro up and led him back towards the bed. He laid him gently on it and pressed a kiss to Shiro's lips. Shiro's eyes widened in surprise, but his arms came up to grip Keith's back and pull him closer. "Yes," he whispered softly. "Kill me with your kisses. Take me to hell with the sweetness life never granted."

Blood bubbled up between Shiro's lips and Keith knew what would happen next. The slow, horribly painful death that awaited him. Shiro was calm but Keith felt out of his mind. He leaned forward and kissed him again and again and again until he could feel the pain setting in through the stiffness of Shiro's body.

"I love you," he whispered against Shiro's lips. He kissed him one last time as he put the blade so very precisely into Shiro's body. One sharp thrust and it was over. One last kiss to lament lifetimes.

He'd failed him. He'd been too late to save him. He'd been too slow to rise in the ranks and get the notice he needed to be with Shiro and now he was beyond reach. Until the next life.

He sobbed again and climbed into bed with Shiro. They found him an hour later. He continued to press soft kisses to Shiro's face and lips, his cheek and neck. He clung to his body when they tried to take him away, and when they pierced his body with the sword, his final blood bled onto Shiro's skin, taking them both from this hell.

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Keith had always been a strange child. It was commented on frequently by the villagers who would much rather gossip than try to teach the orphan how to behave. He was smaller than other children his age, and too often ready for a fight. The apothecary was the only one who gave him any pity and he took him into his home sometimes. He made sure Keith was fed, gave him the clothes his son outgrew, and sometimes odd jobs to earn a few coins.

Katie, the apothecary's daughter always laughed at Keith's misadventures and patched him up as best she could. Keith wouldn't let anyone else touch him, but for some reason, the girl seemed to be able to settle something in him.

Then it all changed.

"Keith! Clear the table!"

He barely had time to grab the mortar and pestle he'd been working with when Katie's father was followed into the room by a group of knights, carrying one of their own.

"Hot water," Master Holt called out and Keith ran to get a bowl to fill as he'd been asked. He wasn't
much use with medicines, but he could fetch and carry at least - he did what he could to pay the man back for his kindness.

"Katie, he's got a fever. I'll start a poultice for his wound. Keith, bathe the wound," he said as he added a handful of crushed herbs to the water Keith had fetched.

The other knights left, but one stayed behind. As he removed his helmet, Keith stared in shock.

"Let me loosen his armor," Shiro said as he worked quickly to remove the breastplate that had been hiding the worst of the wound. "We were afraid to take it off until we reached a safe village," he continued as he pulled it away.

When it was clear, he smiled at Keith. "There. His name is Lance. If he says anything idiotic, which he will if he wakes at all, then remind him I told him not to play the hero."

Keith could only nod as Shiro took a step back. He looked down then and saw a familiar face. It took a moment to remember where he had seen it.

Shiro's servant. Like Katie, Lance had been caught in the curse that had thrust Keith and Shiro into separate, innumerable lives. Which meant that the third must be somewhere too. He shook the thought away and began to wring out the cloth in the warm water. He couldn't do much, but he was used to cleaning wounds; his own and others.

Katie and Master Holt worked hard to save the knight and Keith stayed at their side, cleaning utensils and mashing herbs, holding the knight down once when he woke. His hand had briefly touched Shiro's and the other man had jumped at the contact. Keith wondered if there was some recognition, but nothing passed behind Shiro's eyes when he gave Keith a small smile and grabbed Lance's leg and held him in place.

When it was all done, Lance lay asleep on the table and it was just a matter of time to see if their treatment would see him through the injury or not.

"Thank you, Good Master," Shiro spoke. "We are indebted to you for your help."

"You can be in my debt in the morning, if he makes it," Master Holt replied.

"We'll take our leave of you then. If anything happens, send word to the Inn. My men and I will be taking beds there."

Keith let out a deep breath as the knights left, though Shiro stayed a moment to speak with Master Holt. Keith was practically dancing on his feet as he waited. When Shiro finally took his leave of Master Holt, Keith ran after him.

"Excuse me, Sir Shirogane," he called out.

Shiro stopped walking and turned to look at Keith. "What can I do for you, boy?" The words were plain but they weren't harsh the way most people spoke to him. He ached though. He was only a child of 12, but he remembered so much more. He remembered lives. He remembered love.

He remembered Shiro's last words on a planet so long ago. It nearly made him weep anew.

He had no time for that now though. Shiro was in front of him, and maybe this was the life where he would get it right. Maybe, this was the life where he would get to live happily with Shiro.

"Sir, I want to be a knight. To prove my worth on the battlefield. Will you take me? You've seen
that I can take orders. I can care for your armor and your horses and I even have some learning from Master Holt. I would be a good squire. I'm good in a scrape and I'm fast witted."

"What can you do with a sword then?"

Keith shook his head. "I don't have any experience with a sword, Sir. Just my fists."

Shiro looked him over and nodded his head. "We leave in the morning for battle and I don't have time to take a squire on. When this is over we will come back through though. Show me what you can learn then, and I'll see about taking you on," he said with a smile.

Keith smiled at him and as much as he hated the idea of not following Shiro, this gave him the time to be better for him. He would train night and day to make sure Shiro saw his worth.

"I'll be the best squire you ever saw," Keith promised.

Shiro laughed as he walked forward and ruffled Keith's hair. "Do your best. Remember the Knight's Code. When I come back, show me something worth keeping."

Keith watched Shiro walk away. "As many times as it takes," he told himself before he was called back by Master Holt.

The next morning the knights left with Lance looking much better. He was still not travel-ready to Master Holt's opinion, but Lance refused to leave his Liege Lord's side. Keith ran after them through the village and ducked behind the old stone fence on the north road to watch. He stayed long after they were passed.

Keith stayed long after nightfall, drying his eyes and trying not to think of what would happen to Lance, the servant who had tried to warn his Master so long ago. He spent most of the night pondering what to do next before he finally fell asleep under the stars.

Keith spent the next morning finding a good steady branch to practice with since he had no money to buy a wooden sword. He used his small knife and whittled at it to get it nice and smooth and he rubbed the sides against the sharp edge of rocks to get the right shape.

In a few days, he could swing it comfortably and when he slashed and struck, it went where he wanted. He had nothing to train with except the trees in the forest so he did. He splashed around on the rocks in the river to practice being light on his feet.

Though he had memories of past lives, those experiences did nothing to help his muscle memory – which was non-existent. Those memories outside of Shiro were too blurry. Maybe because he was only 12. He couldn't remember if being older made the memories crisper.

Shiro was always clear though. Shiro, the man he would love for all times. The man whose trust he would have to regain over and over again. Keith would do it though.

So he worked with his wooden sword and he practiced until he knew Shiro would see the effort he'd put into it and the skill he'd developed all on his own.

Three months later, they received words that the knights were returning, but it was a retreat. The women and children were told to run and the men in the village should be prepared to fight.

Keith was given a real sword for the first time and as the knights rode into town, he looked for a familiar face. He couldn't find the one he longed for, so he found Lance, shouting orders and preparing the village for the invaders.
"Where is he?" Keith demanded. "Where is Sir Shirogane?"

Lance looked down at him, eyes bloodshot and haunted. "He didn't make it. He ... he paid for our retreat with his life."

Keith felt the tears prickle in his eyes and he couldn't stop their release. Lance placed a hand on his shoulder in a moment of camaraderie. When Keith looked up at him, he hardened his heart and gripped his sword tight.

"Then we'll make them pay," Keith said. "They'll die today. Every last one of them."

Lance's smile told Keith that they had no chance to make those words true. Their enemy's numbers were too great. They would die trying though.

When the invaders came, they crushed the village and the remaining knights, but not before two brave souls made them pay dearly for it. They fought like demons and howled for the blood of their enemies. And when they fell, the spirit of the village fell with them.

Sir Lance took the head of the invading general and died as he screamed, "For Shiro!"

The young boy, possessed by vengeance and hate, died quietly with blood covering his body, both his enemies and his own. His words were a whisper that no person alive could heed.

"As many times as it takes."

***

Keith was just a child, but he knew the face when he saw it. Shiro wasn't much more than a boy himself, but he was stumbling and Keith could see the red flush of fever on his face and the exhaustion of his body. No doctor would help him now. No one that would touch him, anyway. He'd fall in the gutter at some point and they'd scoop him up and put him in the cart, collect him with the others, and not even bother to see if he was still breathing or not.

Keith let out a deep breath and pushed back the sting behind his eyes. He forced himself up and walked over to the other boy even though his own body ached. "Hey, can you hear me?" The boy looked up at him, eyes clouded with the fever. It was by sheer will that he stood at all. "Come on. I'm Keith. I'm going to take you home with me. I'll look after you."

The boy didn't say anything, but when Keith took his arm and pulled it over his shoulder, Shiro leaned against him. When Keith put his arm around his waist and began to walk, Shiro walked with him. It was a long walk, but it wasn't like they had any other place to be. Keith had never seen Shiro in town so he didn't know if he had family looking for him or not, but if he did ... well ... that was too bad because he had Keith now.

Forever.

When he got to the building, Keith pulled Shiro to the back and ducked down to pull aside the
planks that were covering the hole in the side of the building. He shoved Shiro down first and heard him fall hard on the floor as if his legs had given out, but there was nothing to it. He'd been afraid if he left him outside on his own he wouldn't follow.

Keith snuck down and pulled the wood planks back to hide his entrance. Only a few people knew where Keith was holed up these days and none of them would come looking for some time. He would have time with Shiro. A little, anyway.

He found Shiro sitting up, which was a good sign. He looked around the room and Keith gave him a small smile when their eyes met. "Do you want some water?" Keith asked. "Something to eat?"

"Water?" Shiro asked. "I'm not hungry, but I'm really thirsty."

Fever did that. Keith thought about arguing with Shiro, but he didn't think a few bites of old apple and stale bread would matter one way or another. Instead, he got a cup and dunked it in his fresh water barrel. He handed it to Shiro who took it with a smile. "What is this place?" he asked.

"Used to be an Inn. Whole bunch of people got sick and they closed the place up. Burnt it to the ground mostly, but the rains came and it didn't burn down to the basement. It makes a good enough hiding place."

Shiro nodded as Keith found his bag of food. He managed to get Shiro to eat a few bites without having to fight and Keith finished the rest off himself. He needed his strength to see Shiro through this.

"How old are you?" Shiro asked.

Keith led Shiro over to his bed and when Shiro laid down, Keith curled up next to him. "Five. 'Bout you?"

"Eleven," Shiro said as he ran a hand down Keith's back. "I'm sorry," he didn't stop touching Keith's back as he spoke and Keith just hummed. "I'm sick. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"I know," Keith said softly. "I am too. We can be sick together." Shiro chuckled at that and it made something in Keith feel lighter. He closed his eyes and wrapped his fingers in Shiro's free hand. "This is better than the other times," Keith said. He was suddenly so tired and Shiro was right there.

Shiro yawned and Keith looked up with sleepy eyes. He leaned up and pressed a kiss to Shiro's lips.

"Hey, I'm a boy. You're not supposed to kiss me."

"I wanted to though," Keith defended. "When someone is sick you kiss them to make them better."

"That's for scraped knees, silly," Shiro informed him.

"So? I wanted to."

Shiro sighed. "Okay. I guess it's okay since it's just the two of us. But don't go kissing other boys."

"Just you," Keith agreed.

Shiro pulled him closer and Keith swore he could feel the press of lips against his hair. "Thank you, Keith. I didn't want to d... be alone."

Tears prickled in his eyes and this time he didn't try to stop them. "Me either. We found each other
again though, so that's okay. I love you, Shiro."

"I think ... Keith, I think tomorrow I'll love you too."

Keith looked up at Shiro and they were both smiling. Shiro was the one who pressed his lips to Keith's and then he pulled him back into his arms. As Keith began to fall asleep, his last thought was that this was his favorite way to go so far.

Three days later, Keith's gang came looking for him. They found Keith and Shiro still wrapped together as if in slumber, taken by the plague that had ravaged the country.

***

Keith couldn't remember a time when Shiro hadn't been his everything. As a child, he remembered looking up to the young Lord and how great his pleasure was when Shiro would take his hand and walk with him through the fields. Shiro would patiently explain the movements as the warriors trained with sword and bow and body. Keith couldn't imagine a life grander than being a samurai under Lord Shiro's noble watch.

As he grew, he sometimes remembered things that weren't right. He woke screaming from horrible nightmares and his mother was never able to still them. Some said it was the death of his father that had so disturbed him, but after a bad night, it was only the presence of Lord Shiro that calmed him. Keith never spoke of what he saw, on his mother's advice. He had spoken to her of it, but the outlandish worlds he spoke of were child's play and nothing more than a figment of his imagination. She feared what others would say of him if they heard.

"Another bad night?" Shiro asked as Keith looked across the open field, waiting for dawn.

Keith let out a deep breath and the still of the sleeping world filled him with the ease that his own sleep never did. He was not a child any longer, no longer a student of war either, but a warrior in his own right. Many things changed over the years, but this hadn't. Shiro still calmed him. Which was fitting when Keith's nightmares, for years, had been of Shiro's dying.

Keith nodded. Shiro took his silence in good nature as he always did. "One of these days I will get you to share with me what fills your nights with such horrors. No child of our village ever cried out so brokenly, and no man has been so vigilant to guard his own mind as you have."

"My thoughts are yours," Keith said with a small grin. "My life and blood are yours. Am I not allowed to keep something for myself?"

Shiro's eyes tightened and his brow furrowed. "I'm not some old fool. I know what bothers you, Keith. I just wish I understood better. No one in this village has not heard the way you break every night, crying out my name. I don't know what you see happening to me, but if these visions are to come to pass, won't telling me stop them?"

Keith's eyes widened. No one had ever mentioned it in that manner before. He didn't know he called his Lord's name each night, nor that he was so loud they all knew. Keith let out a deep breath. "They are not visions. They are simply nightmares of things that couldn't possibly be. My mother believed they were simply the overactive imagination of a boy without a father."
"I am not your mother."

Keith took a few steps towards the field but stopped. "Give me my horrors," Keith said softly. "There is no rest in the night for me. The least I can do is keep guard of my nightmares so they don't assail others in my stead." Keith turned to the archery fields then and began his morning rituals a bit early.

The feel of the bow in hand.

The pull of the string.

The sound of an arrow released.

These things gave him relief. They eased the dread of night from his eyes and they gave him the peace he needed to embrace this day, and not wonder at the curious worlds and terrifying deaths he witnessed. He didn't believe they were simple nightmares no matter what others had said. Keith wasn't a scholar by any means, but he was as well-read as anyone but the Lord Shiro and his fantastical worlds had a history to them that Keith could feel. His imagination was not so great as to dream up the grit of gladiator arenas or the stench of plagues. He was certainly no hero as some would claim him to be. That was the truth of it all. Beyond the worlds he saw, and the death that lingered behind his eyes, one fact was true in every single one of them. Keith loved Shiro in all of them, and he failed him each time. In this life, he refused to be that man.

He let out a deep breath and pulled back the string again.

Shiro's hand on his shoulder in recognition of a job well done.

Shiro's hand hold his as a young boy, leading him along the path.

Shiro's eyes on him as he watched Keith train in sword and bow.

Shiro's hand on his hip, the other on his wrist, as he had taught Keith the art of the draw.

Shiro's lips, against his temple, in the dark of the night when only Shiro could keep the wolves at bay.

Shiro, his Lord, his secret lover. The man he would protect at all cost.

These gave him strength. Even when the darkness of the world pulled him under, the light that Shiro brought grounded him. He was the truth Keith would always seek. The song he longed to hear. The words that needed to be written and read and preserved.

A hand fell on his shoulder and Keith looked to see Hunk standing beside him. "It's time."

Keith nodded as he went out into the field to pull the arrows from the target and replaced them. They would want for more, before noon. The other clan had arrived the night before and though Lord Shiro was brave and noble, their clan was smaller and alone. Foreign money and promises of titles were more important to the other clans than the old ways and the doing of right. They had become vipers for hire, striking where paid, and denying the old alliances. If he looked, Keith knew that even the sword and bow would be replaced in some places with guns and their powder.

There was no winning. Keith could only hope to defend Shiro with his last breath, to die one more time in his service, and hope that he was faithful to his oath. He could not save Shiro today, but he could die before him, putting his own blood to the blade before him.
The operating theatre was full of students and spectators of local renown, and Dr. Kogane finished the procedure to the claps and cheers of the audience. He gave a slight bow as he dipped his hands in the bowl of water and began to clean the blood from them. A towel was handed to him and he dried them. They shouted his name but he ignored them all. He gave lecture like this, performed for them so they could be bettered in their attempts, but he had no desire for their accolades.

He was a man of medicine but he had other memories, of a time when these things were healed by other means. He had been a soldier though, not a man of medicine. The understanding of how they healed was lost to him. Now, he did his best to help with what modern science could give him.

He left the theatre and headed into the back room as he unrolled his shirt sleeves. He buttoned them up, then pulled his jacket on over his vest and straightened his clothes. He looked a proper gentleman as he stepped away from the hospital, but he always felt it was a false disguise. Some days he woke from dreams so real he felt for wings in his back and fangs in his teeth. He was hardly a gentleman, but it was a necessary front.

He'd scraped his way up from the gutter, an orphan who found a patron who saw his intelligence and had taken him in. Dr. Holt had given him the same education as his children, both talented scientists. His son, Matthew was a fine physician and a dear friend. His daughter, Katie was on the fringe of science; as a Galvanist and a female, she faced skepticism from all sides. Keith loved her dearly as a sister, and she was of immeasurable help to his own personal pursuits.

He walked through the busy streets of the city, ignoring the passing of horses and carriages, ignoring the calls of whores. When he arrived home the maid took his jacket and long coat, though her look reminded him that she thought less of him because he refused to wear a hat and gloves, like a true-born gentleman might.

"Keith! You're home," Katie came into the foyer and he smiled at her. He placed a soft kiss on the side of her head and she smacked him in the chest. "I thought you were going to be at the hospital all day."

"I am a poor teacher. If I had stayed, I wouldn't have been able to stomach the questions."

"You mean the accolades," she countered. It was known that Keith hated the way people tried to hang on him. Rounds in the hospital after one of his lectures were usually punctuated with idiots who wanted to praise his brilliance rather than honest students who wanted to inquire about his methods.

"We should go out to dinner tonight," Katie said.

"Why do you keep such a talented staff of cooks if you refuse to eat at home?" Keith asked.
She rolled her eyes at him. "The others are out for the night as well. We could go out, do some research, and have a late dinner before we head back home."

He sighed but she leaned up and kissed his cheek before she spun off, presumably to get her cloak and hat. The maid hadn't yet left the foyer so she handed his jacket and long coat back. "Would you like a coat and hat for the evening?"

He would deny it, but if Katie were insisting on dinner, he had best dress the part completely. "Yes, thank you." She didn't smile at him, but he could see the desire clearly. There was a fond relationship between the staff of the house and their masters, more so than was proper, but it was a good home. "And have the carriage sent out. We'll be going to the manor."

A few moments later Katie joined him and they spent the rest of the afternoon at the manor laboratory. When they were done, they headed to dinner at the finest restaurant in the city. They should need a reservation but when Katie asked to see the chef and gave her name, they were immediately seated at the finest table.

"Ms. Holt," a booming voice called to them. He smiled as he watched the chef coming closer, arms thrown open wide and Katie stood to return the embrace. "You are as beautiful as you are smart," the chef said with a grin.

Keith stood as well because it would only be a moment before he was held in the same embrace. Katie laughed at the compliment as she took a step back and Keith was enfolded. "And look at the esteemed Dr. Kogane in my humble restaurant."

"Hunk, you seem well," he said to the chef. In another day, another age, they had barely known one another but they had been bound by love of another. Keith knew little of him then, but this man was a close friend in this life.

"What brings you here so late?"

"Just work," Keith said with a smile. "Katie wanted to go out and we thought you might have something special for us."

Hunk pulled him tight one more time, then patted him on the back. "You'll get the best I can make, as always," Hunk said. "Something on the menu?"

"Something special," Katie said. "We trust the chef to bring us something worthwhile."

"Chef's choice it is then," Hunk answered, as if they would ever order from the menu while Hunk was cooking.

They settled into their seats then and left the cooking to their friend. Katie continued to speak quietly about her experiments and Keith listened, as enraptured as always at the excitement of her voice and the sheer scope of her brilliance. She was mocked by modern science because what woman could understand their world? The joke was on them because she was so far beyond their understanding of science.

She loved her work and was often immersed in it, at the detriment of her health if she were left to her own devices. Keith was frequently sent to fetch her from the manor. And any other of the family who forgot to return for mealtimes. Matthew and their father were just as bad.

Keith spent his weeks at the hospital. He spent his weekends at the manor with Katie, his own personal experiments turning in a laboratory beside hers. He had lost too much over the years, been helpless too many times. He meant to change it. He meant to take what he knew and change the
world.

"I need to compliment the chef!" Keith heard from a table on the other side of the room.

There were few people left. Hunk had brought out a delicious meal and he and Katie had eaten slowly, continuing their debate. They knew that when the kitchen was done and the cleanup was through, Hunk would join them for dessert and a drink to toast their friendship.

He looked over because he knew the voice. He had never met the man nor heard him in the here and now, but it wasn't the first life they'd shared. He watched as Hunk came into the room and smiled wide at the other man. "Lance!"

Keith watched as Hunk and Lance shared small talk and he took the chance to look at the other man. Lance was dressed well, like a nobleman in silk finery and bright colors that seemed to suit his personality so well. He smiled as he spoke, hands animated as he shared some adventure with Hunk.

"Did something catch your eye?" Katie teased as she laid a hand on his, bringing his attention back to her.

He realized what she meant and he let out a sharp huff of laughter. "I was just interested in seeing who else knew Hunk," he said. He wasn't sure how else to hide his interest in Lance. Lance was the last of the three servants. He didn't meet them every life. Some lives he didn't remember them at all until his deathbed.

He could never decide which was better, but in this lifetime, he had been blessed with both Katie and Hunk, and the memories of other lives. With the appearance of Lance, he had hopes that the real reason for his reincarnation would arrive soon.

"Keith, Katie, you have got to meet someone!"

Hunk called out and left Lance as he came to them. "Will you join my friend and I for an after-dinner treat?" Hunk asked.

Katie nodded. "Of course. Any friend of yours is a friend of ours."

"I was hoping you'd agree. Give me a few minutes and come to the back booth and I'll have something for you."

He left to go prepare whatever he still needed to and Keith and Katie finished the final bits of their meal. He saw Hunk come out again with a tray and when he caught Keith's eye he gestured them over. Keith pulled Katie away from their table and towards the back of the restaurant.

"Eager?" Katie asked with a grin.

"For Hunk's cooking? Yes," he said as they came up to the table. Fresh fruit was set in a platter in the middle of the table. Five plates were set around the table with an amazing looking dish of cake, fruit, and crème that Keith would have been slobbering over at any other time.

Except as they arrive at the table Lance stood to greet them, his friend with him.

"Keith, Katie, this is my friend Lance. He's a journalist with the Times and tells a great yarn. I used to work for Katie's family. In fact, the Holts were my patrons when I was building this place. They helped me move out of their kitchen and into this one."

"Katie Holt, the scientist," Katie said as she held her hand out. Lance smiled as he took it and kissed the back of it lightly. She looked at Keith and introduced him as well. "Dr. Keith Kogane, surgeon."

"Dr. Kogane, I've heard a lot about your work," Lance said.

"I wouldn't think a newspaper would be the place for a lot of talk about the surgical world," Katie said.

Keith was barely able to keep his concentration on the conversation, but Lance laughed and Keith couldn't help but smile at that. He'd heard Lance in too many perilous circumstances and not enough happy ones.

"It isn't, not often anyway. However, my friend here is a follower of your work. Dr. Kogane, I'd like to introduce you, and Ms. Holt, to Takashi Shirogane."

"Doctor, it is an honor," Shiro said. Keith couldn't help but stare. Shiro stood before him in a dark suit with a purple vest and silver tie. He was beautiful. A quick glance showed two perfectly human arms and there was no scar over his nose.

"Please, call me Keith," he said without thought of how inappropriate it was.

Shiro smiled though and he ignored the small snicker from Katie. She must have thought he'd been watching Shiro the whole time, even if he'd only actually just seen him.

"My friends call me Shiro," Shiro said as he offered Keith his hand. Keith shook it quickly, afraid if he held on too long he'd do something truly unacceptable.

"Shiro is a policeman," Lance said as they all took a seat around the table.

"It's a noble profession," Keith said.

"And a dangerous one," Katie followed with.

Shiro ducked his head and his cheeks colored slightly. "It can be but upholding the law and bringing the guilty to justice is a worthwhile cause."

"I agree," Keith said.

"It's not life-saving like surgery," Shiro said.

Keith smiled. "It has its moments."

"This looks delicious, Hunk," Katie said as she began to reach for her dessert. They all complimented the chef and began to eat. It was as good as it looked, but not near so good as the company.

Lance entertained with anecdotes from the newspaper and Hunk countered with stories of his customers and suppliers. Katie and Keith talked a little about their own work but Keith's wasn't the sort of thing you discussed over a meal. Shiro even told stories of incompetent criminals and cases that had been hilariously solved.

Keith couldn't remember a better evening spent in the company of friends. It had been easy, even though he and Katie had never met Lance or Shiro before. The chemistry between the five of them
had been instant and laughter flowed as freely as ideas between them.

Eventually though, the hours grew late and it was time to find sleep for the last few hours before sunrise. They agreed to meet up at the opera house the next night. Hunk had box seats that he usually shared with the Holts. Shiro and Lance accepted the invitation quickly and Keith was looking forward to the opera in ways he hadn't in quite some time.

When they said goodbye in front of the restaurant, Keith was surprised to be pulled into Shiro's embrace. He returned it as strongly as it was given and when he pulled back, he smiled at the slight blush on Shiro's cheeks.

"I'm sorry. That was, perhaps, too informal. But I feel as if I have known you for quite some time and not just this one night."

Keith smiled. "Maybe in some past life, if you believe in such things."

Shiro laughed. "I thought you were a man of science?"

"Science answers the questions we have about the universe, but there is still so much we don't know. I like to keep an open mind until science has its say in such things."

"So a man of both science and the fancy of fairytales then."

Keith nodded. "There are times in life when I have found it is better to believe in mystery than to claim it false, simply because I can't prove it yet."

"Keith, our carriage is here," Katie called to him.

Keith nodded to Shiro, but it took everything in him to walk away. He gave Hunk a hug and shook hands with Lance before he helped Katie into the carriage.

"Until tomorrow night," Shiro called to him.

Keith smiled as he waved back at Shiro one more time before he stepped into the carriage and sat across from Katie.

"That was ... something," Katie said with a grin. Keith shook his head but he couldn't help but smile softly at the thought of Shiro. "It seemed ... reciprocated."

He looked up at her sharply and his smile dropped. "Katie."

"It was only the five of us. Lance seemed indulgent of Shiro's favor of you. I didn't see a reason to tell you how obvious you were being."

It was ridiculous that he had to hide his attraction to men in this life, but people were superstitious and their beliefs often led to closed minds and hardened hearts to those who thought differently. Keith had a hard enough time some days being a man of science.

"He was interesting," Keith said instead of arguing with her. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes. And quite handsome."

"Are you looking for a husband?"

Her laughter was delightful and he let it fill the carriage, his mind turning with the pleasure of what would come the next evening, and in the times yet to come.
The morning, however, brought a different tale entirely as a tragic mishap had Keith at the hospital all day working to heal the injuries of a massive accident in a factory. As he trudged through the halls of the hospital, still wearing his surgeon's apron and looking for any last patients he might help, he walked by an open door and found them.

Lance sat by a bed, his head down and his hands gripped tightly between his knees.

"Lance?" Keith called his name softly.

"Keith?" he looked up at Keith and before he could answer, Lance had him in a crushing embrace. "Thank God you're here."

"Lance, what happened?"

"Shiro."

Keith gripped Lance's arms and pushed him back to get past him to the bed he'd been sitting beside. "Shiro?" He moved to the bedside but he was afraid to do anything else as he looked down on Shiro's lifeless form.

"The accident. Shiro was called upon to help retrieve the injured from the factory. The factory collapsed further. Shiro was pinned. When they brought him here... his arm..."

Keith was already reaching for his right shoulder before Lance could finish. When he pulled the sheet of his shoulder, Keith saw that his arm had been amputated.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head against the pain in his chest. "Not again," he whispered.

"When they took him in, they said they didn't know if he'd survive the surgery. When they brought him out, they said he was already in God's hands."

"No," Keith said with a deep breath. "Shiro will never be left to a god's hands."

Lance looked at him, eyes wild. "They said-"

"I don't care what they said," he said vehemently. "I'll return. If anyone tries to move him to the morgue, tell them I have forbidden it."

He left the room before his grief could usurp his purpose. He turned it from weakness to strength. His knees that had wanted to buckle under the strain, he willed to steel as he strode from the hospital. His bent head he forced high with his back stiffened so that he could not bend and break.

He found the ambulance carriage and had the driver bring it to the back of the hospital. Then he quickly returned to the room where Shiro waited. He picked him up from the bed and began to carry him down the hallway.

He didn't know what Lance was saying, nor what anyone else spoke as he walked down the hall, still wearing his bloody apron, with Shiro in his arms, nor did he care. He crawled into the back of the vehicle with Shiro and laid him out on the bed. "Take us to the manor house," he instructed the driver.

Lance jumped into the front of the carriage as it was about to speed away. "Keith, what are you doing?"

He ignored him. Katie would already be at the lab. Her work, his theories, it would all come
together tonight. He thought he would have more time but fate had come too soon. He was supposed to have years to perfect it, years to make sure nothing went wrong. Even as the carriage sped them on their way though, he buried his head in his hands and made it work in his mind’s eye.

He would save Shiro. He had to.

"Katie!" The carriage hadn't come to a complete halt when he jumped out the door and ran for the manor. "Katie!" he screamed again as he pushed open the door. He ran towards the back where the laboratory was and met her partway there.

"Keith, what's wrong?"

"Shiro!"

"What happened?"

He grabbed her arms and pulled her close. "We have to save him. There was an accident and they amputated his arm. He didn't survive the trauma." She realized what he wanted then and her eyes widened. "Katie. I need you now. All of this, it was all for him."

"You just met him last night."

"It's hard to explain. I just ... Katie ... please."

"Okay, Keith. You know we're just as likely to kill him as save him."

"He's already gone, Katie," he sobbed the words as if saying them had made the situation real. As if saying it stole his strength and weakened his backbone.

"Go bring him in," Katie pushed him back towards the door and it got this feet moving. Lance was at the back of the ambulance. He and the driver had moved Shiro out of the carriage and Lance waited with him in his arms.

"This way," Keith said as he opened the French doors wide. Lance followed without question. Keith's laboratory was the smallest of the four in the Holt Manor, but he required little space for his work. His only major requirement was access to Katie and her work. As they entered the lab, Katie was throwing open the great doors between their two rooms. She began to move long tubes and wiring through them to reach the table that sat at the center of the room.

"Set Shiro on the operating table," Keith said as he began turning on his equipment.

There was a commotion behind him but Keith ignored it as he moved over to Shiro's body and ripped open his shirt.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lance grabbed Keith's arm but Keith pushed him away.

"I have no time for your questions," Keith said as he reached for scissors and cut off his pants. Lance was yelling and for a moment Keith thought her heard Hunk, but it was Katie's reassuring voice beyond it that filtered in. She was handling Lance and whatever else was coming their way. Shiro was left in his underclothes, a better specimen than Keith could ever have wished for and the one he could never have wanted to see on his table.

"Katie, I need to attach these."

"Keith, what are you doing?"
He looked up at Matthew as he walked into the room and he grit his teeth at the other scientists’ interruption. He was as close to family as Keith had and he just hoped that what he was about to do didn't cause trouble for them all. "Using Katie's experiments with galvanic forces I believe it is possible to reanimate a lifeless corpse. Shiro died a heroic death in the line of duty and I don't intend to let that remain true."

Matthew's eyes were wide as he looked at Keith. They had discussed the uses of Katie's science, but Keith had never explained the full intent behind his own work. Re-energizing lifeless limbs and reversing paralysis were a long walk from bringing back the dead. Matthew took a deep breath though, straightened his back and nodded. "How can I help?"

Keith let out a deep breath. "Strap him to the table. Then I need to introduce the current at these points along the body," Keith said as he pointed to six points. "These need to be attached like this," he demonstrated as he adhered one to the left of the chest. He left Matthew to that as he looked over at Katie who had secured two of the tubes that would feed energy into his lab. He looked up to see her father, Dr. Samuel Holt, coming through the third set of lab doors with the last set of tubing. Keith had never discussed his work with Samuel, too fearful of his patron's disapproval.

"Perhaps you thought me too busy to keep track of my children's work," the doctor said as he began to hook the tubing, correctly and undirected, into the table where Shiro was lying, "but even if you wouldn't speak with me, Katie did and I'm quite capable of stealing into my own Manor House when my children are away and looking into their research. I had expected you to come to me soon, but it looks like I will have to forgo my surprise."

"Thank you, Sir," Keith felt his mouth too dry then, unable to say more through a thick tongue and a broken heart. Samuel finished and Keith turned back to the machine. Katie was inspecting Matthew's placement of the electrodes. Samuel was double checking the tubes, wires, and coils that connect his work with Katie's.

"I'm ready, Katie," he said as he looked over at her. Their eyes met and she nodded before she ran to the other room. Matthew followed her, more familiar with her work than with Keith's.

"If you do this, you will be a hunted man," Samuel said as he came to stand behind Keith. "The church will never let a man bring another to life."

"So long as Shiro lives, I don't care what they do to me," Keith said. He heard the choked off noise from the other room and realized that not only was Lance there but somehow Hunk had trailed them to the lab as well as half a dozen men of the hospital's medical staff. They must have followed in curiosity at his quick departure with Shiro's body, but as much as Keith wanted them out of the room he had no time to deal with them.

"If this goes wrong?" Samuel asked. "What then?"

Keith closed his eyes. He had one chance to save Shiro. If this didn't work, his body would be lost with no hope of reanimation. He refused to think of it though. If he didn't save Shiro, there was no hope for either of them in this lifetime. As much as he had loved them all, he would follow Shiro to his grave, as he had before, in defiance of a God.

"Keith, we're ready!" Katie called from the other room.

Keith took a deep breath and flipped the last of the switches to prepare it for the electrical current. "Go!"

The lights of the manor house began to dim and glow in pulses and Keith refused to allow the
thought of failure to intrude into his head. He watched the gauge to see that the input was steady and that they had reached the stream necessary for the animation process. They had never tried anything like this. It had to work though. Keith couldn't watch him die again. The thought of life without Shiro, even a life that hadn't known him for more than a few hours, was unbearable.

Keith pressed open the electric gates and allowed the current to flow into the body on the table. The body jerked against the restraints that held him to the table but it was the current and not life. Not yet. Keith continued the flow of energy and ignored the sounds of distress among the medical professionals that had followed them there. In the back of his mind, he heard things like 'monster' and 'hubris' but he wasn't conscious of them now. They were simply the words of smaller men who didn't know that universes waited beyond their stars.

Katie was beside him now, running her fingers over the gauges and reading them as easily as Keith could. "Keith, almost there," she spoke over the hum and buzz of the currents.

"Prepared to hit the switch," Keith said as he waited for her signal.

It was a few tense moments as he waited and he looked across the body to see Lance and Hunk, side by side, eyes wide in both horror and hope with what Keith was doing. He looked back at Katie then.

"Now!"

He flipped the switch and the entire room went dark. It only took a moment for the generators to flip back on but the voices of the small crowd rose quickly. Keith struggled in the dark to move to the table. He knew the lab well enough to make the journey without sight, but the connected wiring made the journey slower. When the lights came on he was almost there.

"Shiro?" he called the man's name, even though there had been no movement from the table. He looked down at the body and saw the red swelling around the restraints. Where the electrodes were attached Lichtenberg figures appeared in tree-like formations across Shiro's skin. Keith wanted so much to touch, but he was afraid. He had never feared death, not for himself, but this was too much. He raised a hand, then drew back.

"Perhaps a physician should take a look," Matthew said beside him. Keith let out a shaky breath. He'd never been so grateful for the man he considered a brother. He had no memories of Matthew from the other life, but he hoped he knew him in future ones.

Matthew took his time, checking the body over and Keith bit his lip bloody as he waited. The room had the hush of expectation and Keith felt the others coming closer. Lance and Hunk had a place here, as well as Katie and Dr. Holt, but as much as he wanted to shoo the others away, he couldn't take his eyes from the questing fingers of Matthew Holt's medical examination.

"Keith," Matthew's voice was a bare whisper. He looked at Keith and there was horror in his eyes. "He has a pulse."

Keith stared at Matthew for a moment and then he looked at Shiro again. He brought his hands up to the electrodes and began to slowly pull them away from his skin. When that was done, he released the restraints.

"Will he wake?" Lance broke the silence. "Keith, you said you could save him. You said... you would not leave him in God's hands. Please..." Hunk took hold of Lance then, pulling his friend into a comforting embrace. Keith couldn't answer anything yet. He heard Dr. Holt pushing the medical members out of the laboratory with promises of further updates and Katie offered an
explanation of her Galvanist science for any who wanted to hear while they waited.

Keith couldn't move from where he was. The body had a pulse. Breath pumped through his lungs and filled his chest. A soft whisper of air passed over his lips and Keith ran a hand over Shiro's brow.

"Any time now, Shiro," he said with a shaky voice. "We're all waiting for you. Hunk, Lance, Pidge, and I. We're all here."

Shiro's eyes held no show of motion behind them until they suddenly flew open and Shiro's hand clutched at his head. He screamed, in pain or madness Keith had no way of knowing.

"Shiro!" Keith called his name but the other man curled into himself and the guttural pain echoed off the walls of the room. "Shiro, please, talk to me."

Shiro opened his eyes then, red-rimmed and far more focused than Keith had expected. "What did you do?" Shiro demanded. "I wasn't ... I wasn't supposed to know."

He stumbled off the bed and Keith watched him trip on coltish legs. He slammed into the edge of the machine and Keith watched as a neat line of blood spilled from a thin cut across his nose. A cut deep enough to scar.

"Shiro, no, please." The scar. The arm. "Please, no," he begged.

"I'm not... I'm not supposed to remember."

He pushed off the ground but his screams had brought the others back and they stood staring at Shiro like he was some sort of monster. Shiro stumbled past but someone tried to stop him and Shiro reacted on the instinct of a man who had lived too many lives that led to death; one armed, but moving with a grace of fighter. Keith watched Shiro take each step with a new memory, not just of a cold God and the love he'd ruined, but of other lives as well. Egypt, Greece, Rome, Persia. Babylon, Europe, France, Germany. How many lives had they lived together? How many times had Keith watched him die?

Now though, Keith could see every life, every bit of fighting instinct was primed in Shiro and the moment someone tried to stop him he reacted. Shiro screamed in rage, in confusion and panic, and lashed out at the man between him and the door. The hit was precise and the man was felled bloody and motionless on the floor. Someone screamed and Shiro continued his mad rant about not knowing and chaos filled the lab. Lance tried to protect his friend and Hunk went with him, but they were outnumbered by the others. Keith watched in desperation as they fell to the hands of his colleagues and neighbors.

"No!" Shiro shouted and he took the cane from a man's hands and beat him with it. Shiro didn't aim to maim though or to delay. He aimed with terrible accuracy for death, honed in lifetimes of combat and study.

Keith ran to protect Shiro, his own hands became bloodied then because no one could walk out to tell the tale. No one could know the truth. They had to kill every witness or Shiro would be executed before Keith got the chance to show him just how much he was loved.

The gunshot rang loud in the lab and Keith stared at Shiro, looking for the bullet wound, before he realized the shot hadn't been aimed at Shiro at all. He looked over at Samuel Holt, the man who had been like a father to him, his patron. A man who had given so much in so many different lives. There were tears in his eyes but Samuel held the gun resolutely. "Keith, what have you done?"
"KEITH!" Shiro screamed and ran to Keith's side.

Tears fell from Keith's eyes. He wanted to protect Shiro, with his very life, but not like this. Not knowing what was to come. "No, please," he begged Samuel.

Shiro fell to his knees beside Keith and pulled him into his arms. "Keith?"

A shot rang out a second time and Keith felt the weight of Shiro over him and knew it was over. He struggled under Shiro's weight and knew it was only a matter of time before he bled to death over Shiro's already dead body. He sobbed as he cupped Shiro's face and kissed his lips softly. "Next time," he cried. "Next time, I'll find you quicker."

He pressed a last kiss to Shiro's lips and didn't hear the third and final gunshot.

***

The stagecoach pulled away from the town and Keith let out a deep sigh as he tried to adjust to the steady rocking. He'd been traveling for weeks now and while he enjoyed the soft bed he'd been afforded in the small town he was ready to start the last leg of their journey. At least once they arrived in San Francisco he would be able to stay for a while. Keith loved traveling to new places but stagecoach wasn't his favorite mode of transport. He'd have preferred the train or even riding horseback himself but he had been given very strict orders.

The family that had been traveling in the coach with him for most of the journey opted to stay in the small town when news of bandits drifted back to them but Keith has no such fears. It was the West. Rumors or no, bandits were always a danger.

"I'm surprised there are only the two of us," the man sitting across from him said. "The thrill of the big city usually makes this end of the trip full."

Keith turned his attention to the new face. He hadn't been a part of the journey; someone new in the last town who bought a ticket to the city. He was a man of money, Keith could tell from his silk vest and fine watch but his boots told the story of a working man and the scar across his nose gave hints of a more dangerous occupation.

"There was a family of six that decided to try their fortune here instead of San Francisco. I'm sure the coachmen tried to fill the carriage on short notice," Keith answered.

The man nodded. "I suppose that means we'll be getting to know one another in the next couple of days," the man said. "My name is Takashi Shirogane."

"Keith Kogane."
They shook and Keith noticed the firm handshake and the way calloused fingers traced along Keith's fingers as they released. It was a simple enough introduction, and Keith was reassured by the fact that the man knew the way of a gun from the feel of those hands.

"What business do you have in San Francisco?" Mr. Shirogane asked.

"I'm just here, making sure a package gets delivered on time," he said. "And yourself?"

"Something along the same lines," he said with a smile.

"Hopefully it will be an uneventful trip."

The other man smiled and when he tipped his hat forward over his eyes and stretched ridiculously long legs across the space between them, Keith allowed himself to watch as the man fell into a light sleep. They said you could tell a real cowboy by his ability to sleep anywhere and his ability to eat anything. Keith couldn't help but smile and wonder what stories he would get out of one Takashi Shirogane.

The journey took them two weeks and in that time Keith got to know the man better, as well as their driver, Hunk and the coachmen who road along with him, Lance. During the evenings, when it got too dark for the horses to carry along safely, they stopped and made camp, and the two carriage-men shared stories of the road and of the world they'd seen. Hunk made their campfire cooking into a meal worthy of a fancy restaurant while Lance confessed he'd once wanted to be a musician and he pulled a dusty old guitar from the coach and entertained them with songs.

During the day, the coach sped on towards their destination and it was Keith and Shiro, alone, to fill the time. At first, it was infrequent interruptions as something random was said, then it became more conversational as they got to know one another. They both had a love of adventure and, of their own accord, would have preferred to have ridden the journey on horseback instead of in a carriage. Shiro, it turned out, was a Marshall and a good one at that, being called all the way from New York to San Francisco.

As the hours passed, sitting across from one another became sitting next to one another. Sometimes silences fell between them and they slept the hours away. Sometimes, Keith woke to find his head on Shiro's shoulder. He'd be embarrassed by that, except that Shiro would fall asleep as well leaning just as heavily on Keith.
One day, a careless brush of hands turned into a magnificent blush on Shiro's face. The next brush of hands wasn't quite so careless.

It was a dangerous flirtation but Keith couldn't stop himself. Nothing would come of it. Nothing could come of it. They'd separate in San Francisco, and no matter how much Keith wanted, this wasn't his to have. One night changed everything though.

Rain came upon them while they were camped under a canopy of great fir trees. They could try to cramp together in the coach and keep dry, but after days of riding inside, neither Keith nor Shiro were interested. Hunk and Lance took the chance to sleep in the dry compartment and Keith and Shiro were left to fend for themselves.

The fir trees themselves did an excellent job of holding back the rain and Keith found one large enough that he and Shiro could sleep in the center beneath the great boughs, dry and isolated from any watchful eyes by the stream of rain pouring outside their bed for the night.

Keith hadn't planned for this, but when Keith laid on his back next to Shiro, the other man sat up on one elbow and smiled down at him. "This would be completely improper if you were a young maiden."

Keith laughed. "Good thing I am not a young maiden."

Shiro spoke the words Keith would never have had the courage to. "If you were a young maiden, your virtue would be safe in my hands." When he leaned closer, Keith let out a deep breath. He'd never had an intimate relationship with anyone, no girl had ever held his attention this way and Keith had been far too careful of his shortcomings to allow himself to be caught up in his affection for men. This was something entirely different though and when Shiro's lips stopped a breath away, Keith closed the distance.

Shiro's lips were dry against his and as he leaned over Keith, his hand gripped Keith's hip. It was warm in ways no other person's touch had ever felt.

"Keith," Shiro whispered as Keith wrapped his arm around Shiro's back and pulled him closer. "What do you want, Keith?"

"Everything I can have of you tonight."

Shiro's knee came up between Keith's legs and Keith spread them in invitation. Shiro shifted to rest his weight over Keith. Keith tightened his grip on the back of Shiro's jacket and moaned into the kiss. Their kisses left Keith light headed but the feel of Shiro over him was grounding.
Shiro presses his hips against Keith's and they moaned in unison at the friction it caused between them. "Keith, I want you."

"Yes," Keith said against his lips. "Anything you want."

"Have you been with a man before?" Shiro asked. Keith just shook his head. "Have you ever lain with anyone before?"

"You stole my first kiss," Keith admitted. "What else will you steal from me tonight?"

Shiro smiled. "Everything."

The next morning they boarded the stagecoach and spent the days as they had before, speaking of the world and enjoying the scenery. If the coachmen thought it odd that they sat on the bench beside one another instead of across from each other from the start they never said anything. And if their conversations were interrupted with the sweet press of lips and a mutual attempt to learn as much as they could with all their clothing in the way, no one was the wiser.

At night, they stole away from the coachmen who were happy enough to take advantage of the coach benches and sleep inside the warm coach. Keith and Shiro never wanted for heat on their nights together anyway.

San Francisco came into view and while they both had obligations, they also had a plan. It wasn't immediate, but Keith had learned patience in his life and Shiro had pressed promises into his skin each night, with lips and fingers and echoed them with words as they parted ways.

It took five years before they met again. Letters had passed between them since their departure, promises again, that they were still working towards the same goal. They were a cold comfort, but Shiro's words allowed Keith to remember those few passionate nights with a clarity that kept him sane.

Five years of saving his money, of working his hardest to do what he needed to do. He wrangling cattle and sheep and goats and raising pigs and crops. He took whatever jobs could take him a step closer to Shiro. Shiro built a reputation that even Keith had heard of as a Marshall of renown and of good faith. Their lives weren't safe and there had been some close calls over the years, for the both of them, but Keith held each letter close to his heart, a bundle strung together by twine in his saddle pack. It was the only precious item he carried, other than a knife left to him when his mother passed away.

The farmstead was small but well placed in the small valley. The town was an hour's ride away. The nearest neighbor was half that. As Keith rode up to the house, he could see a few animals out in the back, a small start but a good one. There was a field beyond that, well tilled and teeming with
life already. As Keith dismounted, he brought his horse to the small barn to the left of the house and found a stall prepared. Keith took care of the saddle and gear, then saw to the horse before he took his saddlebags and headed towards the front porch.

When he reached the bottom step, the front door creaked open and Keith looked up to find Shiro standing before him. "Looks like you've had a long road, cowboy," Shiro said with a smile.

Keith couldn't help but smile back. "I suppose it was. I'm just glad it's over."

Shiro reached for his hand and Keith let him drag him up the stairs. "Welcome home, Keith."

Home. A word that hadn't meant anything to him since he was a child. A word that he had been building in his heart for the last five years. Home was Shiro. Home was the life they were working for. Home was a small farmhouse far enough away from the world so no one would mind two old hands settling in and retiring there. A town close enough to get supplies but that allowed them to stay out of everyone's business.

"You gonna give me the tour?"

Shiro took his saddlebags and dropped them just inside the front door, then pulled Keith away from the front. "Unimportant room, unimportant room, unimportant room," he said as he walked through the farmhouse. He pushed Keith through the last door on the left and he barely had the time to see a bed before he was pressed up against a wall with Shiro's arms bracketing him. "Bedroom."

"I like this tour," Keith admitted as he wet his lips.

Shiro smiled as he leaned closer. "It's about to get much more thorough."

"God, Shiro, stop talking." Keith grabbed Shiro by the back of the neck and pulled him down for a kiss. It was everything he remembered and some he didn't. Because he remembered the way Shiro's dry lips felt pressed to his, but he had never made that sound before. Because he remembered the feel of Shiro's hand's unbuttoning his vest and shirt, but he'd never had the time to notice the way Shiro's hand shook as he took his time and divested Keith of each item. Because he remembered the press of Shiro in his body, but he'd never felt the softness of a mattress under his back or felt the press of Shiro's body behind him as he was held in his arms long after their lovemaking was complete.
When they grew hungry, Shiro gave him a real tour of their home and Keith nodded with each thought of what they needed to do next to improve it and leave their mark. When the stars came out, Shiro took Keith back to bed and after another round of lovemaking, they fell asleep in each other's arms. They woke in each other's arms. It was the way Keith wanted to live every day of his life.

And for three years, he did. They worked the land and raised their small pens of animals. They grew what they needed and traded labor or goods for what they had to buy at the general store. They were well respected in town, two men that were willing to help out when it was rough going, who smiled when they came to social gatherings, and who returned quietly to their own home.

When the fire broke out and smoke reached the neighbor, word spread quickly and the whole town ran as fast as they could to try to help, but it was too late.

There was no great irony to it, no tragic story of younger deeds come back to haunt them. It was just a random bandit, needing a place to hide and getting a jump on them when they were too caught up in each other to notice the horses spook. The fire started when the outlaw fell into the lantern, shot dead by Keith even as he staggered to get to Shiro's body, his own already growing weak from the wounds he'd suffered in the fight.

They died of their wounds, but burned together, as if they refused to be separated even in death.

***

They were sitting on the side of the road, nothing but sun and grassy fields and a bottle of booze between them. The car was hidden back among the trees, a trunk full of liquor to distribute. The cops had been on their tails lately and the off the road path was supposed to be the new meeting place. Keith smiled at Shiro as the other man took a long pull from the bottle before he handed it over. Their hands brushed and Shiro took a little too long to pull away. Keith never mentioned it. Neither did Shiro. It was good though and Keith thought if he never had anything else in this world, he had these moments with Shiro and that was enough.

Running booze wasn't the safest profession but Keith was good in a fight and he'd seen Shiro take on
half a dozen guys and still come out on top. The scar that ran across the bridge of his nose wasn’t for decoration after all. That small imperfection made Shiro more real, less a greek model of perfection than he was otherwise.

Keith took his turn with the bottle to stop that train of thought. His stupid dreams put the worst things in his head. He dreamed of different lives, different times, Shiro ever present and always so perfectly himself. Some dreams he knew Shiro and others he didn’t. Some dreams, he touched Shiro and was welcomed. In others, they weren’t lovers but love was between them all the same.

Like this life.

Keith would do anything for Shiro though and he knew the older man felt the same. If they sometimes stared a little too long at the other, if Keith sometimes had the urge to lean closer and lick the taste of whiskey off his lips, no one had to know. It was just something between them. And screw the guys that said there was something wrong with it because no one in their right mind could look at Shiro and not want to touch him.

"What do you think about past lives?" Keith asked as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Shiro smirked at him as he took the bottle back. "You been hittin' this when I ain't lookin'?"

Keith laughed. "Nah. Just this girl at the speakeasy."

"You reckon I done something wrong, to end up a bootlegger with the likes of you?" Shiro teased.

"I figure you done something right somewhere," Keith laughed. "Sure as hell wasn't here in this lifetime."

"Suppose not," Shiro said. "Maybe. It's a nice thought though, ain't it? Screw up in this life, but we get another chance to make it better in the next?"

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Maybe find somethin' not so complicated. Just get myself a business of my own. Be my
"No guns. No fights. Just a clean life? Can't see you doin' that," Keith answered.

"Maybe not," Shiro took another drink before he passed it to Keith. "It sounds good though, right?"

"Guess if you found the right person to settle down with."

Shiro smiled. "Until then, guess I'm stuck here, making a whole mess of trouble with you."

A car pulled onto the long path up the way and Keith and Shiro stood. It was a minute or two before their guy was supposed to arrive but Matt and Pidge had said it was a new guy and he seemed the nervous type. The car slowed but the window came down and both Shiro and Keith were running back towards the car. Keith heard the gun before he saw Shiro go down. Keith was just a minute behind him.

Keith crawled slowly towards Shiro but he could see dead eyes from where he was. When he was close enough to reach his hand, Keith took it in his own. "Next life, Shiro," he said as he coughed up blood. "I'll find you in the next one."

A bullet made the promise his last words.

***

"What the hell are you doing?"

Keith threw himself into the fight but he already knew it was a losing battle. It had been a losing
battle since the moment he'd met Shirogane Takashi. An internment camp was no place for love, and this was no time for an American soldier to fall for someone of Japanese descent, let alone two men.

It had happened though, and Keith had never felt more alive than he had with his time with Takashi. He didn't know how they'd found out, but the jeers and insults they threw showed that they knew. It didn't matter how. No one would stop the assault and no one would question it either.

Keith punched the first soldier in the face but he was up against five and Takashi was already on the ground. "Leave him alone!" Keith yelled at his attackers.

They didn't go easy on him because he was American. No, they saw him as a traitor, to fall in love with someone like Takashi. A deviant traitor at that. Keith was no longer one of them and they decided that he deserved everything they could aim at him.

When he fell, he threw his body on Takashi’s, wrapping himself over his back and head to try to protect him as best he could. It wouldn't last. It couldn't.

The last thing Shirogane Takashi felt before he died was Keith's body wrapped around his own, a warmth in a life that had always been too cold.

Keith died protecting the man he loved. And in his death, he remembered just how many times he had died, protecting the man he loved.

***

He was just a boy. It was tragic, but this was what Keith did and that this boy stung his heart so much just made it all harder. Keith had dealt with it too many times to count. Sometimes his patients won the battle. Other times the bastard won. No matter how his young charge fought though, this was a losing battle.

One that Takashi Shirogane had lost.

There was no telling the boy that though. He smiled as if his body wasn't wasting away and pain didn't eat up at him. He smiled as if Dr. Keith Kogane wasn't the only regular visitor in his room and he wasn't an orphan with no one but social workers and hospital caretakers to see him every day.

"What would you like to do today?" Keith asked Shiro as he sat on the edge of the bed. It was his day off, but he never missed a day visiting Shiro.

Shiro coughed, too sick to do more than sit with assistance, but he smiled anyway. "Today I'm
going to swim the English Channel."

"Really?" Keith asked. "That's a lot of swimming."

Shiro closed his eyes. "Yeah, but imagine it," the ten-year-old said. "Swimming out so far that there was no one else around. No one to come in and check on you all the time to make sure you were doing what you were supposed to. Just you and all that space. Nothing tying you to the ground. I bet if you laid on your back in the water at night, it would feel like you were in space, floating with the stars."

Keith nodded. "I bet it would."

"Dream with me?" Shiro asked.

Keith nodded. "One minute. Let me fix some of this."

It was simple enough. He turned off the monitors. He pulled the wires from Shiro's body and the boy smiled too widely for Keith's already breaking heart. Like he knew what Keith was doing. Like he approved. And then Keith took the needle he'd held in his hand since he walked in and he injected Shiro with a dose before he turned away from the boy's watchful eyes and injected himself with the rest of the medication.

When he laid down on the bed beside the boy, Shiro let out a deep breath. "Close your eyes," the boy said softly. Keith did and Shiro kept talking. "I bet if we were in space right now it would be cold. I wouldn't even notice it though because I would act like I was swimming."

"The English Channel?"

"Just like that," Shiro said happily. "What should we name our space ship?"

"The Shirogane?"

"Ewee! No. The Ogane!" Shiro exclaimed. "Cause it's your name and my name, both. Kinda." Keith laughed with Shiro but he could already hear the yawn in Shiro's voice as he kept talking.
"My ship is going to look like a lion!"

Keith smiled. "A lion? In space? I don't know about that. Mine is going to look like a big man."

"With a big butt!"

"What?"

"The nurses always say you like big butts."

Keith shook his head. "I'm going to have to talk to your nurses."

Shiro giggled. "They always think I'm sleeping. They never know when I'm faking it. Not like you."

"Alright, so I have a big butted robot and you have a lion ship. What are we gonna do with those?"

"Save the universe, of course." Shiro yawned again and he curled into Keith's side. "After we take a nap."

Keith wrapped an arm around Shiro and held him close. He closed his eyes against the tears but his throat was thick with them. "Yeah, after we take a nap."

"Thank you, Dr. Keith. You always share the best stories with me."

"Your welcome. Sleep tight now. You know I love you, right buddy?"

Shiro sighed. "Love you too, Dr. Keith."

Shiro fell asleep a few minutes later. As Keith felt his eyes droop closed, memories pressed into him, lives he had already lived with Shiro. Lives where the boy was older than him, loved by him in
ways this Shiro would never grow up to experience. Keith let out the sob he'd been holding and he pulled Shiro closer, heartbroken over the latest in a long line of tragic lives they had led.

When the nursing staff came to check on Shiro, they found him asleep curled up with Dr. Kogane. It wasn't something you saw often, but there were rumors that Dr. Kogane had tried to adopt the orphan. Perhaps if he hadn't been terminal he would have had time to fight the courts.

When Hunk went to check the boy's vitals, he found no pulse, no heartbeat. When he tried to wake the doctor, he was surprised to find the same. The press would come to call it a murder-suicide. That night, Hunk, Pidge, and Lance went out to have drinks and toasted the two lost souls. Keith had always been one to keep to himself. He'd suffered depression off and on most of his life, but in the last few months, there had been a light to his eyes that made them all think he'd found a way to battle those demons. They realized now, he'd just seen an end to them.

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Keith would have skipped school if he'd known he'd be there. He was only twelve but he was already done with this life. He remembered so many others and he was too tired to do it this time. So unlike every other life, when the man he loved beyond death and reason walked into the room, Keith stared away, out into the galaxy and wondered how many more times he'd have to live this moment. How many more times would Keith have to meet Shiro, and remember how much they had loved one another, and lose him all over again?

At least when he'd had the plague they had met and died within the same day together. He looked out across the blue sky but it gave no reprieve. He remembered the skies above a temple as clearly as the wide open range beyond a farmhouse. He remembered wild card rides and nights under the stars running booze from state to state, the open seas, and the false hope of a future under the same sky from an internment camp. Blue skies meant nothing. Keith closed his eyes and let out a deep breath to pull himself together.

Blue skies had meant everything.

Keith's thoughts were pulled away from his contemplation as the class shuffled out of the room. He followed though he hadn't paid enough attention to know why they were leaving or where they were going. When they arrived outside he saw the simulator the Garrison had sent and while that usually would have piqued his attention, today it was just another lie, wasn't it? A promise of more skies that would fall from under him.

He didn't plan to try the simulator himself. He wasn't Garrison material and they all knew it. When Shiro called to him though, Keith felt the pull of him too strongly to leave it be. He'd just play for a moment, crash like the others, and Shiro would walk out of his life. Keith would ache - God would
he ache for the man he loved far more than his 12-year-old self should understand - but when his death came, he would have no idea of Shiro's fate. Considering the beginning of Keith's life in this century, there was nothing good to come of keeping Shiro in this lifetime.

He sat at the simulator then and as he began to fly, it reminded him of other things he had long forgotten. Every life had been tied to Shiro, but once, Keith had been a Demi-God. He had wings and he had flown over sea and land, through sky and space. He had swum among the stars and danced with comets. He found a joy in the simulator he had forgotten, except maybe to some extent in his short life as a pirate on the open seas.

Freedom was wings to fly but without that, he could still have the open skies. He couldn't love Shiro in this life, refused to try to get closer to him, but becoming a pilot might just make this life worth experiencing. At least he could give his next life this memory to keep.

He heard them talking about him though, heard Shiro take a personal interest in him and Keith knew he couldn't do it. He couldn't disconnect from Shiro. Their souls had been twined together by a cruel God, lifetimes ago.

So before Shiro could get it in his head that Keith could be a cadet, he stole his car and took off; no looking back and no regrets. Shiro would see quick enough that while Keith might show some potential as a pilot, he was far too much trouble to be Garrison material.

He'd forgotten about Shiro's indomitable patience and his desire to help others though. Always, Shiro gave more of himself than he got in return and it was one of the things that Keith loved most about him. It was one of the things that made Keith fall into line with Shiro's plans again. So instead of keeping his distance, Keith ended up at the Garrison. He didn't pester Shiro though or try to get closer. He just ... was there. Always on the outside of everything. The pilot training had reminded him of how much he loved to fly and he began to wake from dreams of lost wings as well as lost love. He excelled as a pilot so the Garrison ignored his less than admirable traits, like his anti-social behaviors and his dislike of authority. It was hard to fear any of them as an authority figure when he had already taken on two Gods and lost. There was no consequence greater than the one he lived now.

He was fine like that, keeping everyone at bay and leaving Shiro out of his existence entirely, but then Adam happened. Not that Keith blamed Shiro, who didn't remember him, or Adam, for loving a man Keith knew was more worthy of love than any other. Not that Keith could do anything about it either; he was just a troublesome cadet far too young and inexperienced to catch Shiro's eye in that way. Keith was happy for Shiro.

It didn't mean seeing Shiro happy with someone else didn't affect him though. He started to act out, to lose his focus. They tried to remind Keith of his potential and of the great things he could do, but none of it meant anything. Finally, they called on Shiro to mentor his young find through his troubles. While it was probably the best choice they could make, Keith would never quite forgive them for it.

Because he couldn't get around Shiro now. There was no waving across a crowded room if Shiro happened to see him. Now, Shiro looked for him. Shiro sat with him. Shiro came to take him on weekend riding trips and spent extra time in the simulator with just the two of them. He treated Keith like an equal, even though he was younger, and he always listened to Keith when he talked about his trouble with the other cadets.

People whispered behind Keith's back about his past and how he was abandoned, how he'd seen too much. They didn't know the half of it and as he began to train his body for fighting, as well as for piloting, nightmares took their toll on him from that too. Not just the death of Shiro, but the battles
he'd fought over the years. The gladiator arenas, the pagans, clans, and tribes. He'd fought sea battles and air battles; fought with sword and bow and gun and body on the land. Blood had filled his soul until his entire existence was drenched in it.

Keith endured though because even if it wasn't with him, Shiro was happy here. He had the love of a good man and a passion for adventure. When he was selected as the pilot for a mission that would take him farther in space than any other human had been, Keith was thrilled for him, even if he learned almost as soon, that Shiro had a disease that would take away his adventures.

He had this now though, and Keith could see Shiro of the future as a teacher to the young, a man who excelled at inspiring others to greatness, as he had with Keith. Keith would be there for him, support him, be the friend he'd never had the chance to be in all his other lives.

If that was all he could have in this life, he thought it would still be worth living. Only one other life had given him more of Shiro than this life had, and it had been short-lived. He planned to make the best of it. To be the man Shiro could be proud to know. So when Launch Day came, Keith smiled proudly at Shiro and waved good-bye, his heart breaking a little at their separation, but knowing that soon they'd been back together again.

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Keith never believed the reports the Garrison put out. He never once believed that Shiro was dead. Perhaps if he was younger he would have believed the lies. Perhaps if he had experienced his death less often, he wouldn't have to know the pull of his soul as Shiro fled the mortal world again. In this life, with these memories, Keith knew though.

There were other hints as well. Never in all their lives had Hunk, Pidge, and Lance showed up after Shiro's death. Keith never lived long after Shiro - too upset about each death to outlive him to long-life - but if they arrived in Keith's life it was always before. They had been caught in Shiro's curse after all; there was no point to their lives if they showed up after his death.

And there was the never-ending need to look, the need to search for something more tangible than pilot error and Garrison rules. Keith found it in the desert. The old shack he'd lived in with his father became his refuge and the knowledge that something was calling to him pulled him further and further into the desert. His dreams took wing, once again, and as he slept he soared over mountains and unfamiliar terrain, worlds that he had never known. He felt the call of it though, the call of the others. He might be human in this life, but he had been a Demi-God and other creatures, older and
wiser than him in the universe, felt it in him as well.

It led him to the desert when the ship exploded into the sky and crash-landed on the Earth. It led him, when he helped Shiro escape and when he allowed the others to climb aboard the speeder and race them away from their pursuers. It led him into space, to a castle and guardianship of a universe that had never been kind to him.

He had Shiro again though and that was all that mattered. They grew. They learned. Keith dropped his guard around the young servants that had once been slaves, who had come time and time again to call Keith or Shiro friend. Family. Who now called themselves Paladins of Voltron and defended those that could not defend themselves.

It was almost laughable, at times, to remember the meek creatures he had first met, fearful of Caltek but so enamored of their Lord that they defied the God anyway. They held him together when Shiro disappeared in the Black Lion, when the link between them became so weak and transient that he almost thought he had lost Shiro for good.

Shiro returned twice more to him in this life and Keith was nearly deadened by the pain of it all. He isolated himself with the Blade of Marmora, tried to learn about his Galra heritage, only to be faced with the most laughable and ironic twists in his lost, sorted history of lives.

The Galra Gods, the ones his mother believed in and who the Emperors tried to emulate, were none other than the Gods that had created Shiro. The Blademaster, the God that the Galra prayed to in their moment of need, was none other than Caltek. The Blade of Marmora did not pray to the beast Caltek, but Keith found another treasure of amusement to know that his mother, the woman who had borne him into this life, prayed to his eternal mother, the Goddess of the Hunt, Krotivania.

He refused to pray to either and pretended not to notice the similarities in the legends of the Darkling God who stole Caltek’s most precious possession or the stories of the mother’s precious Darkling God who ran with mischief in his wake and was a God of thieves, forbidden trysts, and the downtrodden.

The Shiro that had been returned to them turned out to be nothing more than a clone, though even as he fought against him, Keith struggled because he knew there was still a connection, somewhere. As tenuous as it was, Keith could still feel Shiro in this world. As the stage of their fight fell around them, Keith held on to Shiro. There was nothing he could do, nothing he could ever do but die with Shiro in the end.

But this life had greater twists than the others and they were once against saved by the Black Lion. Keith held his breath and stamped on his own heart repeatedly for the hope it tried to spew as they raced to get back to Allura and find a way to bring Shiro back to consciousness.

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When Shiro woke, Keith pulled him into his arms and he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to let him go. They'd had too little time in this lifetime. And even though Keith had confessed his love to Shiro in their fight, it hadn't been what he'd really wanted to admit. What he'd really needed to say.

There was still a war going on though and there was still a universe to save, even if Keith would have let it all burn, now that he had Shiro safe again. Which wasn't great for their current relationship and mission.

"We can't just sit around and wait for something to happen!" Lance said as they sat around the table and discussed their next move. Shiro had barely been awake a day before he'd demanded to be updated on everything. His memory was splotchy from two different sets of memories and Keith would have laughed at the idea of it, if Shiro weren't so obviously distressed over it.

"No one is suggesting that we do nothing." Shiro tried to stop the fight before it began, but Keith was suggesting exactly that, actually. As much as he wanted to go to Earth and help the people there, it wasn't worth risking Shiro again.

"Really? Because maybe Keith doesn't care that there are people on Earth that might suffer for what we've done, but I do. I have family there still!"

"Most of us do," Shiro reminded Lance. Shiro wasn't one of those, but no one ever mentioned it. "What Keith wants is for us to get more information so we don't walk in blind."

"No," Lance countered. "What Keith wants is to do nothing, he's just dressing it up as intel gathering so he can talk you out of this fight."

"That's not," Shiro hesitated and Keith knew the other man was remembering Keith's confession. "Keith's not..."
"Yes, I am."

"What?" Shiro's eyes were comically big as he looked at Keith, trying to comprehend what he'd just heard.

"Lance is right." He hadn't meant to say it, but it came out anyway, a betrayal from his heart to his lips but he couldn't take it back. "I can't... I can't watch you die again," Keith said softly. "I can barely handle this life as it is. I can't live it without you." He saw the way the others gaped but he ignored them all as he walked out. He needed to breathe, needed the space that the castle didn't seem to give him.

Instead of the training rooms or his quarters, or even the Black Lion, he went to the observatory. The view of the stars around them gave him a moment's peace and when he pressed his face against the clear wall, he could feel the cool of it against his skin. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He didn't do it often, not on purpose, but he did now.

He remembered the first time he saw Shiro, waking from his treacherous fall onto the strange planet and finding kindness where he'd expected death. Finding beauty where he'd expected pain. Finding the one thing in the entire universe that could possibly be worth all the suffering he'd endured.

"Keith?" His name was softly spoken and he refused to look back at Shiro. He felt Shiro come to stand behind him though, his body warm against his back where the wall was cool against his face.

"Keith, please talk to me?"

He let out a deep breath. "What is there to say, Shiro?"

"Tell me what this is all about?"

"How many times have I had to lose you in this life, alone?" Keith asked. "How am I supposed to survive this? I... I'm not that man. I can't pretend that losing you won't destroy me this time." He turned to look up at Shiro, close enough that he could reach out and touch if he wanted. "I have loved you, Shiro, for ages. Ages. I can't watch you die again."

"I'm right here," Shiro said. He leaned closer until his forehead rested against Keith's. Keith stayed like that for a moment, breathing in Shiro's breath, feeling centered around this man once again. When Shiro pulled back slightly, it was to bring his hand up and tip Keith's chin. When Keith
looked up, Shiro pressed their lips together.

Keith jerked back with a sob. "Don't."

"Keith?"

"I can't." There were tears in his eyes and in his throat but he didn't give a damn. "I can't because you'll die and I'll die and ... how many times can I lose you?"

"Keith, you won't lose me. I wanted to tell you. I came to tell you," he said as he pulled Keith back into his arms. "I love you, Keith. All that time in that place, I thought about you constantly. About what you mean to me. I love you. You won't ever lose me again."

"Yes. He will."

The world seemed to spasm around them and reality with it. One moment they were on the Castle of Lions and the next they were on an ancient precipice, faced with the nine Gods of Galra. Allura was with them as well, but none of the others. Keith felt some relief that they hadn't been dragged into this, but he had no idea why Allura was here.

"You play with things that are not your own, Altean."

Shiro shifted to stand beside Allura while Katspal, God of Chaos spoke. He was also known as the god of magic and mirrors, or transitions and transience.

And alchemy.

"Who are you and what do you want of us?" Allura asked. Allura watched them all, but Keith put his back to Shiro's, between the man he loved and the God that had once lost and coveted him.

"Did you think you could wretch him back from a spiritual realm like that and place him into a body not his own, and there would be no consequence? No price for passage? No reprimand for stealing the power that is rightfully the gods?"
"I have stolen nothing. Altean alchemy is my birthright."

"Everything about your culture was stolen from us, child," Krotivania said softly. "The Alteans and the Galra were once a single people. You grew apart and while the Galra continued to celebrate us, you made gods of science and technology and left behind the old Gods, except for the alchemy you stole from us. The same alchemy we used to forge the creation we made, so long ago."

"What did you make?" Allura asked.

The world suddenly shook with vibration and the roar of lions made them cover their ears. All five lions flew down to the precipice and Keith barely had time to register the lions before the Paladins were whisked from their lions and stood beside Keith.

Caltek let out a snort of amusement but none of the other Gods answered the interruption.

"We made a perfect being," Krotivania said softly. "And Caltek took him, as was his right by trial in arms. How could I know that my blood would turn aside from his own kind and steal Caltek's prize from him?"

"What exactly is going on here?" Hunk asked.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," Shiro answered honestly.

"Would you explain, or should I, Darkling?" Caltek broke his silence.

Keith glared at Caltek but the hate that had been there in their previous life seemed to have disappeared from the God. Keith didn't trust it, but the others had no idea what they were up against.

"The Galran Gods created a perfect being, but Caltek couldn't keep him. He fell in love with a half-bred Demi-God, who loved him so much he defied the Gods and tried to steal him away. Caltek caught them and cursed them to live forever, reincarnated, but never to live life together for long. When you used Altean Alchemy to restore Shiro's soul, it must have allowed them to find him again."

"Find who?" Lance asked.

"Shiro. Their perfect creation."

"What? Keith, that's crazy. I'm not perfect."

Krotivania laughed as she raised a hand. "Then I suppose he is not my Darkling son." Dark beams of light left her hand and as it struck Keith, he felt the change happen. His nails grew and his fangs dropped. His skin turned purple and his eyes took on the yellow of his eternal mother's. Pain ripped through his shoulders and his wings returned to him. He dropped on one knee in pain, but he held his knife before him and stared at the Gods around them.

"Um, guys, did Keith just sprout black wings?" Hunk asked.

"What the hell, Keith?" Lance demanded.

"Keith?" Shiro's voice was shaken but Keith didn't have the time to reassure him. As much as
Caltek was the enemy Keith had always feared, it was his own eternal mother that seemed the most likely to attack here. The other Gods seemed happy to watch the drama as it unfolded; a truth Keith had always exploited in his first life.

"He has no right to this life," the Goddess said softly. "How many times has he died? How many times should one creation get to experience rebirth again? How many times should you, Darkling child of mine? I think you have reached the end of your story."

"Enough!"

The air around them shivered and they covered their hands against the voice of Caltek. He was a warrior, a true God of Retribution and he had never bent knee or cowered to another. The silence of the other eight Gods showed his power and his true position among them.

"There is only one among us who has the right to judge them. I care not for the Altean alchemist. Her little magics are nothing compared to the glory of Katspal and there is no need to defend his honor for such offenses. The Darkling and his lover have always been mine though."

"He was never yours," Keith reminded Caltek.

Caltek watched him for a moment before he looked at Shiro. "You still bear the scar he gave me," Caltek said softly, "and my metal arm. Even marked like this, you are still beautiful, Shiro."

Shiro's fist clenched and Keith watched as it flared purple. Shiro didn't move though, simply glared at Caltek as if he could remember why he was so feared and hated.

Caltek looked back to Keith then. "Does it bother you, to see my emblem upon him? To see the scar you left us, upon his face? How many lives has he wore one of them or both?"

"All I ever cared about was keeping him safe. That arm, the Galra arm he wears, in this life it was a weapon to keep him alive in the arena and it has seen him through battle after battle. Even if you had made the arm, I would thank you for it, because it saved him. It brought him back to me."

Caltek looked at Shiro, then at the others beside him. "I had not intended to send the slaves with him, but their love of him bound them to him as well. Have they ever remembered?" Keith shook his head and Caltek nodded in understanding. "Only you have remembered, and I understand now what you said back then. The cruelty of loving what you can never have, of knowing love and losing it over and over again. I have watched you often, and from afar, but never without waiting for you to break. This life, it has done the most to damage the Darkling spirit inside you, that part of you that allowed you to be revived over and over again. But still, you persisted. Why?"

Keith had never been so angry in his life... in any of his lives. "Don't you get it?" he demanded. "I love him. I have and always will love him. It has ripped me to shreds, it has given me moments of incredible lows and the highest of highs, but even when I denied myself the attempt, I could never deny him. I could never leave him and let him die alone. I would rather suffer a thousand more deaths with him than let him live one life where he died alone. If you knew love, if you were capable of it, you would understand."

He expected an angry reply or an act of violence. He was stunned, once again, by Caltek's carefully considered look. "You have not lied, Darkling. You have shown more devotion to Shiro than I ever could have. This... love... you have is not something we are capable of, not the way mortals are. The two of you were destined to be happy in this life. I did not think it possible but the curse I laid upon you was undone when he returned home with you, to the caverns of the beast he once called home. I will not let them interfere with that. What happens to your life now is your own. How you
live, and how you die, are no longer my doing."

Keith didn't trust the God, had never trusted them, but he believed in the sincerity of his voice. Caltek was a God of War, but he was no liar. "Thank you."

"Shiro, step forward."

Shiro seemed to move without thought and Keith jumped to stop him but it was too late. Caltek pressed a kiss to his forehead and Shiro's body immediately began to spasm. Seizures took his body and he fell to the ground even as the others tried to stop his fall. The lions roared around them and Keith pulled his blade to the ready but Caltek smiled.

"You have waited eons for him to know you. You have suffered for him. He has a right to know the truth."

"No! What did you do?"

The world spasmed around them for the second time and when Keith opened his eyes he was back in the observatory in the Castle of Lions. Shiro's seizure had passed but he wasn't conscious. Keith pulled him into his arms and began to walk out of the observatory but his wings hit the side of the doors and he bit off a curse. It had been so long since he'd had them he almost forgot how to maneuver them. He pulled them tighter to his body and managed the doorway.

"Keith?"

He heard footsteps pounding around him and he knew the team was behind him even if he couldn't turn to look.

"He hasn't regained consciousness. Get one of the beds ready." When he stepped into the medical bay, they had a bed ready but they all stepped back from him in surprise.

Coran was the only one who seemed unfazed by Keith's wings. "Well, I'm sure that's an interesting story," he said as he looked at Keith's wings. He pushed around the others though and open the bed. "Set him here."

Keith let out a deep breath as he set Shiro on the bed. As soon as the monitor began to show that Shiro's life functions were all steady, Keith relaxed a little. Enough to force his skin back to its usual color. His yellow sclera faded back to white and his fangs disappeared. There was nothing to do about the wings though. He had never been able to make them come and go, unlike his Galra heritage.

"Perhaps, while we wait, someone could tell me what happened?" Coran asked Keith.

"I'm sure we could all use a little clarification," Pidge said, but there was a slight smile on her face to take away the sting of her earlier reaction to him. Keith sighed but at least it would help pass some of the time.

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No one left the room. No one wanted to miss the ending of this story. Coran gave Keith some privacy, but the others waited at Shiro's side to see what would happen when he woke. Hunk left at one point to get food for them all. Lance regaled them with tales of his family and, in a roundabout way, all the happy couples that had managed against the odds. If Keith weren't drowning in his panic, he'd be grateful.

"How many lives do you remember?" Pidge asked when they were all back to their silent vigil. Keith loved them all dearly but silence could only hold so long among them.

"I don't know," he answered honestly. "There were Galran lives. Altean lives. Mer. Olkari. Tashian. Fusian. Human. I don't know if it's because of my human body now, or if it's because they were the most recent, but the human lives are the ones that have the greatest detail for me. I can't even remember how many humans lives we lived."

"Did you know about the curse, every time?" Allura asked.

Keith nodded. "Not the whole time, but I remembered before I died, every time." He looked down at his hands and tried not to think of Shiro, too still on the bed right now. It reminded him of the Holt Manor House. He stood up and began to pace the room.

"Did you ever get to be happy?" Coran asked.

"I don't know. I mean, there were always moments. Even if I didn't know until I died, there were moments where Shiro and I connected. In every life."

"What was your favorite life?" Hunk asked.

Keith huffed at that because he knew Hunk expected some great romance or some epic tale, but sometimes, the smallest things were the best.

"I was five when I met Shiro and I knew everything."
"What happened?" Pidge asked softly.

"He had the plague," Shiro answered. None of them had noticed the medical pod opening or Shiro sitting up but they were all stunned to silence by his words. "I was twelve. My family had already died to the disease and I was wandering the streets, trying to find help. I was lost. Keith found me and took me to his home. He gave me water to drink, bread and apples to eat. He even tried to kiss me better."

Keith smiled. "You said I wasn't allowed to kiss you because you were a boy."

"And we fell asleep," Shiro said. "And we died together."

"That was your happiest life?" Lance sounded gutted.

Keith looked down, but he let out a contented sigh at the memory. "I had a five-year-olds concept of the world. We met and all I knew was I loved him and he was going to stay with me until the end. And he did. We fell asleep together and it was the most content feeling I'd ever had. It still is."

Shiro got up and knelt before Keith. He took his hands in his own and he waited until Keith looked at him.

"I was rather fond of our meeting on the stagecoach."

"You were rather fond of sleeping under the stars, while we were traveling by stagecoach," Keith corrected.

Shiro laughed and Keith let out a shaky breath. "Keith," Shiro said as he cupped Keith's cheek with one hand. "I don't know how you survived it all. I ... it's not all clear yet, but there were so many lives. So many deaths and too little love between."

"Never," Keith refuted. "I always loved you."
"I know," Shiro's voice was shaky as he spoke. "I didn't know at the time though. He didn't let me remember you. I am so sorry, Keith. I promised... I ..."

"Your dying words, in the cave," Keith said softly. "I never doubted them. That gave me strength when I was weak. Even when I doubted my sanity, I never wondered if you could come to love me in any life."

"Even this one?" Shiro asked.

Keith shrugged. "This was harder. I was born knowing. I wasn't always. I was hurt too young, abandoned by my mother and I lost my father and I had memories of loving someone and dying for them too many times. When I met you, I just wanted a life to recover from it all."

"Shiro," Coran interrupted them and Keith suddenly remembered the others were still there. "You should return to your quarters and get some rest. Even if this Caltek simply gave you these memories, your mind will surely need time to process it all. Go get some sleep."

He ushered the others out of the room and Keith stood. He offered Shiro a hand. "Come on. He's right. Let's get you back to your bed."

Shiro didn't fight him on that, so Keith led him back to his quarters, though Shiro hadn't let go of his hand either. When Keith tried to pull his hand free once they were in his room, Shiro refused still.

"I agreed to go back to bed Keith. I never said I would go alone."

"Shiro."

"Lay with me, Keith," Shiro said softly. "I haven't had a truly good night's sleep since the farmhouse."

Keith let out a huff. "That was a horrible mattress."

"Now it was a horrible mattress. Back then, it was the most comfortable bed money could buy."
When Shiro set his hands on Keith's chest and began to strip him of his clothes, he didn't argue. Keith returned the favor until they were both naked and they went to bed, Keith settling with his head on Shiro's chest. He was restless though and Shiro seemed to know it. "What?"

Keith sighed. "It doesn't matter."

"What, Keith?"

"I just ... you know mine. What ... what was your favorite life?"

Shiro let out a deep breath as he pulled Keith closer to him and pressed a kiss to his temple. "Once upon a time, there was a young man who knew nothing of love. He was treasured and cared for, but it was not love, even if he was too young to know that. And then one day, a Darkling fell from the sky and changed everything."

Shiro pulled Keith's chin up and he kissed him softly on the lips. Keith barely moved, almost afraid of getting what he'd wanted for so very long.

"Every life he lived, every death he woke again from, the young man learned what love was. Be it from child or companion, hero or soldier. Every life. Every death. They were part of the same story. So this, this right here is my favorite because it's all the same. We're together, just like we said we would be. Forever. I love you Keith, and there is nothing that will ever take me from you again."

Keith didn't stop him when he started speaking again because as much as he wanted to lose himself in Shiro right now, he needed this confession. He needed Shiro's words of love. After lives of being separated too soon, of not having enough time to love, he needed this.

"My life isn't perfect. The Gods created me to be, but how can they create perfection when they don't understand freedom? That's what you gave me. No slavery. No life as a pampered pet. Just a life of love, over and over, until the end." Shiro looked up and smiled. "Though I have to admit, I never thought to see your wings again. I'm glad you have them back."

"Yeah?"
"They were the first thing I saw of you. I never looked at you once in that life without thinking of them."

"And now?"

"I think the same thing."

"And what's that?" Keith pressed.

"Love," Shiro said against his lips. "Love rises and sets on Darkling wings."

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