Welcome Home

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Welcome Home

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Summary

For the first time in his life, Layle belonged.

Notes

This fic is rated mature for later planned chapters.

Chapter 1: To Belong

For the span of his entire life, Layle has never truly lived somewhere he could call home. From the room he shared with a handful of other children in Rivelgauge Monastery to the bedroll he dragged along during his time chasing Blaze's heels through the thick snow, his earliest memories were cold and full of the constant chase for warmth. Never chosen, never wanted. In his later years, things were warmer and he felt more wanted but he still felt out of place. Even as Cid set up a cot for him in the workshop and taught him how to be a somewhat decent mechanic or when Keiss let him rest on the long flights across the sky in the acoote under the warmth of the sun.

Neither of them could be called home.

"Come on!" Keiss whined, shuffling boxes higher up in his arms, all full of junk he insisted they'd need. Trying to tell him otherwise got him to make this annoyed expression that just got on Layle's nerves so it had been easier to let him have his way. "I'm starving and we've gotta get things settled before we get burgers."

The mattress suspended in the air above Layle's head, blankets strapped to one side, hardly bothered him. The narrow stairs meant they could only go one at a time and Keiss went first. "I can only go as fast as you."

"Shut up, smartass." He mumbled under his breath before finally reaching the top, nearly falling over when he took an extra high step onto flat ground. Layle reached out and grabbed his arm, stabilizing him. Keiss sighed, forgetting that he'd just badmouthed his partner. "Thanks."

Their unit sat on the far side of the raised walkway and Keiss rested his boxes on the railing before swearing, fumbling for the keys without loosing his grip and letting them all fall over the ledge and into the river below. "Just leave it to me."

Layle reached for the lock, planning to turn it with gravity, but Keiss nudged his hand away. "Use the key." The key ring rests on the edge of his fingertip and he bounced them slightly, jingling them gently.

"Does it really matter?" Layle rolled his eyes but grabbed them anyway. The key doesn't slide smoothly in the lock and he had to jiggle it all the way in before it would turn. Even then, twisting it took more force than was ideal.

Then the door opened and he paused, all criticism fading from his mind.

Keiss looked between him and their flat with a rare genuine smile splitting his face and creasing his eyes. "It's exciting, right?"

"Yeah." His heart fluttered and chest tightened at the sight of light streaming into the mostly empty unit. It's swelteringly hot and they'd have to open the windows during the day, but it was theirs. "Welcome home, right?"

His partner laughed under his breath and adjusted his grip on the boxes. "Welcome home, Layle." Keiss crossed the threshold into the flat, oblivious to how wrecked such a simple phrase could have left his partner until he turned around to see him still outside, struggling to keep the mattress above his head with gravity. "Lean it against the wall. We can deal with it later."

Layle nodded, dragging it in without his magic the best he could. It's difficult, catching on every edge along the way, but he managed to get it far enough into their flat that the door could swing shut. He collapsed onto the floor, feeling dramatic, and ends up basking in the sunbeams falling over his heavy chest. It's an incredible feat for someone so out of shape so Layle is proud of himself for such an accomplishment. At the same time, he wonders if Keiss wouldn't mind taking him along for one of his workouts. Even if he could trust his partner to bail him out in tasks that required the touch of a tiny behemoth, it's not as if Keiss would always be by his side. It certainly wouldn't hurt to work on his stamina when it comes to running.

"What are you doing?" Keiss laughed and leaned against the doorframe leading into another narrow hallway lined with three doors.

"Dying." Layle said. "It was heavy."

"Then let me handle the rest." In a show of impressive, terrifying Selkic strength, Keiss moved the entire mattress on his own with startling ease.

From his vantage point on the ground, Layle watched him drag it through one of the three mysterious doors, perhaps more focused on the way his muscles flexed and sweat glistened off his jaw than the fact he should have offered to help. Once he's out of sight and no longer a distraction, Layle dragged himself to his feet to investigate and help. Inside the room was a stunning, pathetic, wonderful, and bare scene that choked him up yet again.

While he laid on the floor, dying and exhausted, Keiss had prepared the room with those random, seemingly useless things he just had to get. Layle's bed sat pushed into the farthest corner with the the tattered blankets tossed across the top. An ugly, tacky rug with a chocobo feather pattern around the edges -deemed absolutely necessary by Keiss the moment he laid eyes on it- sat in the middle of the room. The previous tenants left rods over the windows and Keiss tossed white sheets over them to act as curtains for the time being.

"If you want anything more, like a desk, we're going to have work really hard." Keiss said. "This is a great start, though, and we can-" He wheezed, cut off by the force of a desperate embrace from his quivering, overwhelmed partner. Layle wasn't the type to cry but he could come close, so Keiss just let him have a moment and patted his back.

For the first time in his life, Layle belonged.

His bed, his room, his home.

Chapter 2: You Can Die Later

"I'm going to die." Layle said in a breathy, shrill voice between gasps, resting his hands against his knees.

They're halfway through Bridge Town, on their way back to the flat after Layle joined Keiss on his morning workout, and the promised slow jog was predictably too much. Layle's legs felt heavy from climbing cliffs and jumping on and off giant rocks, his arms shook when he brushed his hair back because he hauled the heaviest rocks he could carry around the wildlands, but all the pain in his limbs combined had nothing on the searing pain of his ribcage as he sucked in deep, short lungfuls of air.

Meanwhile his partner, in shape and a Selkie to boot, looked at him with this frustratingly perplexed expression as if he weren't naturally blessed with natural strengths leagues above those in his tribe let alone some out of shape Clavat like Layle. It's no miracle that he hadn't been left behind, either, and he knows that Keiss barely pushed himself the entire time, spending more time and energy helping Layle out. He'll bite his tongue, appreciative of the support, but his competitive spirit is in full rebellion, telling him to snap and lash out between loud, pained inhales.

"You can die later, crystal bearer." Keiss grinned and rested a hand on his popped out hip. His smile is blinding like the sun and Layle just wanted to tell him to dim his mood a bit. "Come on. We need to get back in time to shower before heading to out new client's location."

Ah, that's right, the client.

They have a potential gig lined up later and he will have to be there for the signed on. Layle groaned out loud, channeling his petty rage into forcing his body forward one exhausted step at a time, building speed until he's at risk of tripping over his clumsy, numb feet. Trailing behind Keiss helped him focus on on a goal, even if it's impossible, as they made their way around the winding paths around Bridge Town that turned what could have been a decent straight shot into a harrowing journey thrice as long. All those winding paths couldn't have prepared him for the final, inevitable trial that appeared before him like a monster freshly formed from miasma: stairs.

Keiss might as well have flown up them, feet thumping against the metal panels as fast as Layle's heart beat in his chest. It made him pause at the bottom, staring on in disbelief when Keiss spun around at the top to watch his partner with an encouraging, annoying smile. 'He is enjoying this way too much.' Layle thought as he dragged himself up one miserable step at a time by the rusty handrail.

Once at the top, Keiss patted his shoulder. "I knew you could do it."

"Are we done?" He wheezed.

"We're done." Keiss took a step forward, still moving far too fast but at least no longer running. Layle mindlessly trails behind him, chest heaving and mind spinning. "I'll shower

first so you can take as much time as you need to."

Keiss walked briskly through the front door with a satisfied smile plastered on his face. Following behind him is his melting, half dead partner. Layle's skin had turned a bright, vibrant pink tinted over the course of their run and the polluted air around Bridge Town left him feeling disgustingly grimy after mingling with his own sweat to create a slurried layer of sweat, ash, and dirt. Two steps through the door, he collapsed to the ground in the same spot as when they first moved in, kicking the door shut and basking in the morning sun. It's the perfect spot because the windows on both sides of the flat are lined up in a way that it's always warm and sunny when he needs it most.

So perfect that Layle starts to doze off.

"Don't just fall asleep there." Keiss nudged him and he groaned. "If you don't stretch now, you're going to be sore later."

"I'm already sore." He croaked, cracking his eyes open to catch Keiss' usual mildly disappointed expression.

"Do you want it to get worse?" He asked as he moved back, stripping off his shirt as he headed towards the bare, open living room. Asking Layle not stare when his head already felt so empty would've been too much. "Layle?"

He managed to pry his eyes away though, removing temptation from his line of sight. "Yeah, sure."

"No! No you don't!" Keiss grabbed his sweaty hand and pulled, trying to drag him to his feet and dragging him further into the room and away from his warm, perfect spot in the sun. A displeased moan leaves Layle when the morning chill rushes in on his damp body to make him shiver without the sunlight to fend it off. "If you cooperate, I'll handle breakfast this time."

Never one to turn down the chance to be fed something more substantial than a sandwich and some fruit, Layle found a glimmer of motivation and allowed himself to be hauled up to his feet. Every muscle ached on the way up and his head started to spin but Keiss' searing hands firmly rested on his shoulders and biceps as he tried to steady himself. Bright red hair dominated Layle's vision, glittering with small lights like sunset against the ocean, and his eyes were full of embers from the light from the window hitting them just right.

Keiss was gorgeous.

His heartrate picked up and his breathing faltered from the strange feeling spreading across his body and sweat beaded across his skin again as-

"Woah, hey!"

Layle, who'd gotten up too fast, fainted right then and there.

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