in sickness and in stealth

by akaiiko

Summary

Keith wants to be doted on. Shiro wants to dote. Everyone else has to suffer until they finally get their act together.

Notes

apologies to my sheithlentine, who probably sat there for three weeks wondering when i would return from the war. i made this for you.

also many thanks to zan & ils who listened to me whine and eventually helped me fix the ending. they're the best.

See the end of the work for more notes.

adam

Takashi texts him—in the middle of class no less—with a brief message. Please pick up soup and orange juice on the way back. Another boyfriend might be annoyed at the interruption. For Adam, it feels like a breakthrough. Finally, after three years of silent warfare, Takashi is admitting that he
needs help.

As Adam browses the soup selection in the Garrison officer’s commissary, he grants himself the small pleasure of imagining what might come next. Takashi is scheduled for another off world mission next month—just a brief jaunt to Phobos—but perhaps he’ll turn down future off world missions. Maybe he’ll even start to consider joining the training and recruitment track full time. It would be unusual for someone his age, but Adam thinks he would be good at it and most of the Garrison agrees. They could get married in a small ceremony on the coast and buy a house in a nice suburb outside Plant City. They could get a cat.

Buried in this small request for soup and orange juice is the promise of a glorious lifetime where Adam doesn’t have to fret about his boyfriend dying in space. Adam practically floats home on the buoyant currents of his dreams. Unfortunately, all of that comes crumbling down the moment he walks into their shared quarters.

Takashi doesn’t look tired or ill. The smile he gives Adam is full and easy. No lilac shadows crease the space under his bright eyes. When he lifts a finger to his lips in the universal shh motion, his medical bracelet is glowing the cheerful green that means all is well with his nerve and muscular function. Despite the fact that Takashi’s sitting on the couch buried under three blankets he is not, actually, the one in pain.

No, that dubious honor goes to the teenager who’s currently got his entire face mushed into the crook of Takashi’s neck. Every ten or so seconds he shivers visibly and pushes closer. As though he’s trying to merge with Takashi even in his sleep. And Takashi, for his part, seems perfectly fine with playing teddy bear.

It’s Keith. Of course it’s Keith.

“I got soup,” Adam says. “Your favorite.” The words taste the way the desert does right before a sandstorm: arid and sharp. Likely he should feel bad for them. Or at least for the way that Takashi blinks at him before his brows furrow into that look of righteous indignation that Adam once found entirely charming.

Incidentally, Adam does not feel bad or charmed. Mostly he feels resigned. Nothing has changed in the carefully plotted trajectory of his life.

Adam bustles into the kitchenette—the sole feature that distinguishes junior officer quarters from senior cadet quarters—and ignores the fact that Takashi’s clearly gearing up for a whispered argument. Argument, because god forbid they not get at each others throats over something stupid at least once a day. Whispered, because god forbid they interrupt Keith’s rest. In the last two months they have had five such arguments because Keith, and he quotes, ‘sleeps best when he feels safe, and he feels safe here with me’.

Regardless of what people think, Adam doesn’t actually dislike or even particularly resent Keith. Keith isn’t the root of their problems. Keith isn’t even a symptom. Keith is...Keith.

Which is why Adam starts heating the soup up. The microwave sounds obnoxiously loud in the small common area as he punches in the correct time code. Takashi’s eyes are burning a metaphorical hole in the back of his head. Adam ignores that too in favor of asking, “Flu?” To punctuate the question he starts the microwave.

“Yeah,” Takashi says. “They said he’s running a high fever. It was staying in the infirmary or with us.” A hint of challenge bleeds into that last statement.
“So he’s staying with us,” Adam says wryly.

Nothing surprises him about the tableau that he turns around to. There’s another one of Takashi’s expressions that used to charm him—the one that’s equal parts mulish pout and self righteous scowl. One of Takashi’s hands cups the back of Keith’s head while his other arm wraps around Keith’s too slender shoulders. They could easily hold a minutes long staring contest over Keith’s head. Are on their way to it, actually, before Keith lets out a low whine that has Takashi stroking his fingers through sweaty locks as though that’s not entirely gross.

The microwave beeps frantically. Adam flinches at the unexpected burst of noise, but manages to keep an admirably straight face as the equation of Takashi’s expression shifts away from pouting and toward scowling.

“Sh-Shiro?” Keith says. Quite frankly he sounds like roadkill. Or roadkill before it’s entirely finished dying. “Shiro, I don’t feel so good.”

“I know. It’ll be okay. I’ve got you.” The words are so soft that Adam almost doesn’t hear them. But even if he didn’t, there’s no missing what comes next. How Takashi leans in and presses a kiss to Keith’s hairline and doesn’t even grimace at the sweat or the sick smell. It all seems so tender, so intimate, that Adam feels like an intruder in his own home. His own relationship.

Few things would bring Hunk to challenge their fearless leader. Shiro is smart and brave and noble, and a really good pilot, and also legitimately terrifying. The last thing is kind of surprising. Like, it makes sense, because apparently he spent a year doing time in a gladiatorial arena. (What the fuck.) But it also kind of doesn’t, because for a solid two years the only thing Hunk knew about Shiro was that weird hero worship thing Lance had going on that let him rattle off all of Shiro’s flight statistics to the tune of The Itsy Bitsy Spider.

(Wait, shit, he promised Lance he would never bring that up again.)

Not challenging Shiro is like, 84% because he respects that Shiro really is their fearless leader who’s somehow kept them alive and in mostly one piece through the last six months of warfare, and like...16% because he still feels like a jackrabbit spotted by a cougar whenever Shiro pins him with one of those looks. Pidge gave him those estimations. Actually, Pidge gave color coded estimations to Hunk about all of their team dynamics. It was the moment that really solidified their friendship.

It would be nice if he could have Pidge with him now. Or Allura. Or even Lance. (Hunk says that last bit with a lot of love, okay? It’s just that Lance still isn’t super great with Shiro. They have this weird dynamic of hero worship and long suffering patience that is, like, really painful to watch.)

Keith would also be good. (Hunk will never say this. Ever. Not with his out loud voice. Lance would sense it from clear across the universe and resent him for it.) Out of every single person on this ship, Keith gets Shiro the best. Whenever Shiro starts getting that look, Keith is there to grab Shiro’s shoulder and anchor him back into Fearless Leader Mode which is great. Really great. Top notch work.

But Keith is also why Hunk has to challenge Shiro. Hunk does not hold many things sacred. Family and food and fairness, mostly, but keeping Shiro out of the kitchen is a sacred calling. And the only reason Shiro wants into the kitchen is Keith.

“Keith is injured—” Hunk dodges in front of Shiro, hands held up in a stay right there kind of
gesture, and tries not to feel his life draining through his body. “—and you’re going to try to feed him something you cooked?”

“Yes.”

Here’s a problem: Hunk can dodge, dip, and dive in front of Shiro all he wants. It won’t mean a thing if he also steps back every time Shiro steps forward. Yeah, Hunk is still technically blocking Shiro from getting to the Altean equivalent of an oven. But they’re already in the kitchen and he’s losing ground fast.

“But why?” Hunk asks. Even to his own ears, it sounds like the last desperate gasps of someone trying to reason with a madman. Which. Yeah. Totally accurate.

In an unexpected victory, Shiro stops advancing on the poor kitchen for the first time since this whole mess started. His eyebrows crinkle up. Their fearless leader suddenly looks like a sad beagle puppy. It’s tragic. “Keith’s still achy.” What.

Keith spent the last three hours in a healing pod since he decided to fight a grydwrym on that last planet. (Which, seriously, why. It’s not like they hadn’t already done battle with the local garrison of Galra. Who needs to go fight a giant reptilian monster after that? Keith. Apparently.) Coran said not to worry. Grydwrym poisoning was something that the pods were fully equipped to deal with, and the massive puncture wounds in Keith’s shoulder would be right as acid hail in a tic. After all of that, the problem is that Keith is achy?


The tragic beagle look intensifies. “Keith loves my grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“What.”

Hunk didn’t mean to say that out loud but he’s not going to take it back. Like. Okay, everyone kind of knows that Keith is really into Shiro. (It’s fair and would definitely be a bonding point because everyone is into Shiro, to some degree, but it’s not a bonding point because Keith is well armed and possessive.) But there’s being into someone and being willing to die a slow, painful, heinous death by grilled cheese at the hands of that someone. So Keith kind of blew past that whenever he ate enough of Shiro’s cooking to declare he loved Shiro’s grilled cheese sandwiches.

Mom told him his whole life that he’s too expressive for his own good and she’s probably right. Shiro caught at least 33.33% of what Hunk spent the last ten seconds ruminating over and he’s kind of...deflated. While still looking like a beagle. For the first time in his life Hunk understands the old phrase ‘like you kicked a puppy.’

It takes close to a varga to figure out how to approximate grilled cheese with the Altean tech and cobbled together ingredients they have available. Shiro’s weirdly determined to do it all himself. Even when his first attempt catches on literal fire. It takes eight attempts but he does, eventually, make something identifiable if not edible. Hunk supervises. By that eighth attempt he understand on a visceral level how this man managed to yeet himself into space and survive a gladiatorial arena for a year.

(Shiro fears neither man nor God and that’s fine. It’s. Fine.)

They ping Keith through his comms when Shiro started trying to plate the grilled cheese. Several minutes later, Keith comes trailing in looking pale and woozy and miserable. Bulky bandages show
through his tee shirt. Shiro immediately rushes to his side and coaxes him over to the Altean equivalent of a breakfast bar. All of this is vaguely sweet. Like. Hunk can appreciate it, okay?

Until Shiro puts the grilled cheese—reminder, the one that’s identifiable but only dubiously edible—in front of Keith. That’s when it all goes to hell. Keith lights up, reaching over to snag his fingers on Shiro’s belt. “You made me a grilled cheese?” he asks. Breathy with delight or maybe bruised ribs.

“Yeah, of course,” Shiro says. He cups his prosthetic over the back of Keith’s skull. Doesn’t seem to notice how Keith melts into the touch.

Hunk’s honestly pretty sure he’s fulfilled his sacred calling. The kitchen is mostly intact, the dishes are someone else’s problem, and he’s got a feeling that both of them have forgotten he’s in the room. Which could become really uncomfortable. Really fast. “I hope you feel better soon, Keith, but I’m just gonna go, okay, thanks, bye.”

Miscalculations were made. Kolivan does not have to justify himself to anyone. And yet, he thinks to himself as he contemplates trying to encode the last two quintants into a message for Krolia, miscalculations were made.

The Champion they had all heard of from Ulaz’s reports and the constant Imperial holofeeds had turned out to be short and temperamental and oddly possessive over his companion. Kolivan feels no particular shame for his assessment of the Champion. It is his assessment over the companion that causes discomfort now. Krolia had always been reticent about her time on Earth. How could any of them have been expected to recognize the even shorter and more temperamental human was her child, rather than a petty thief?

However, now that he knows, Kolivan cannot unsee Krolia in the way that the child sets his jaw against pain. In the high arches of his cheekbones. In the sinuous way he moves to keep everyone an arms length or more away. Of course he is Krolia’s child. Of course.

“Will he not allow a medic to tend him?” Kolivan asks.

Antok crosses his arms and shrugs. “I do not know that the Champion will allow a medic to tend him.”

This is a fair assessment from his second. The Champion has situated Keith on the claws of the Red Lion to deal with his wounds from the Trials. Keith sits quietly, blade in his lap, as the Champion methodically works over scrapes, bruises, and strains. If he recognizes that he has been placed squarely between two weapons of mass destruction, he does not let on. Only leans into the Champion’s metal hand—the second most dangerous part of the man—as the Champion cups his cheek.

Keith is very young. It’s clear that he knows little, if anything, of his heritage. This is the only possible explanation for why he asks, “How much...how much did you see?”

For a few tics the Champion pauses. When he looks over his shoulder at the two Galra men, there’s a somewhat feral gleam to his eyes that must impress Antok. At least if his amused grunt is anything to go by. The Champion is not so oblivious as Keith. Still he answers, turning back to Keith with a low, “I saw enough.”

“Oh. I—”
“It was just a mind game, Keith. They were trying to break you so that you would give up the blade. But I would never turn my back on you.”

In the last two quintants, Keith has proven himself remarkably hardy and resistant to pain. At this quiet declaration he breaks. “Shiro,” he mewls. Like a kit. Eagerly he presses forward, careless of his wounds, to huddle against the Champion’s armored chest. Suddenly he looks entirely too small and fragile. The image is not helped by the way the Champion tucks Keith’s face into his own neck and smooths a hand down Keith’s spine.

“I’m here,” the Champion promises. “You just need to make it through the next varga and we’ll get you in a healing pod. Don’t worry. I’ll stay with you. It will be alright.”

Humans would surely not hear this exchange from across the hangar. Galra most certainly do. Miscalculations were made. Kolivan cannot even imagine how he is supposed to communicate to Krolia that not only did he encounter her child and unknowingly send him through the Trials, but that her child is also apparently mated to one of the most famous gladiators in the universe. A gladiator who had been entirely willing to take on the entirety of the Blades to get to Keith. Knowing her, she will be pleased. Restraint has always been Kolivan’s way. It still costs him something to resist rubbing behind his ears to relieve his building tension headache.

shiro

Being in a hospital sets his teeth on edge. Even, no especially, if he’s here with Keith. For Keith.

Everyone can tell. Some—Garrison based personnel who’d been high enough up the chain of command before it all—clearly think that it’s because hospitals remind him of his illness. They aren’t wrong. Half the time he’s breathing through every bad memory of being trapped in a hospital bed waiting for another doctor to condescendingly explain to him that he’s dying. Others—sympathetic medical staff and refugees and the other paladins—think it’s because of Keith. They’re aren’t wrong either. The only thing worse than waiting to be told he’s dying is waiting to be told Keith is dying.

No one has said that yet. Instead, they reassure him. Gently they remind him that his Galra physique makes him more resistant to the kind of bodily abuse that comes from falling in a giant robot through the upper atmosphere. Quietly they suggest that he ought to sleep in a real bed and would he like them to bring a cot. Kindly they tell him that Keith’s vitals are getting stronger every day and there’s nothing to fear.

They can tell, but they don’t understand. Guilt gnaws at the base of his spine every time a night nurse gives him a sympathetic smile checking on Keith.

The promotion to Captain of the Earth’s sole flagship means he gets dragged away more than he’d like. People want his opinion on everything from diplomacy to rationing to engineering upgrades. Most everything is outside his actual expertise.

Eventually he makes a deal with Veronica—she gets the official promotion to his Head Communications and Administration officer, and she figures out how to put the majority of his duties on a datapad. It means spending a lot of time tapping his signature onto a datapad. But it also means being close to Keith. That’s where he is when Krolia returns from another off-world mission, two weeks after Keith first wakes up.

“You’re good with him.” The way Krolia says this makes him pause. Ever since they met she’s been kind. Accommodating to his place in Keith’s life and appreciative of the ways he’s been there when she could not be. Now she sounds tired and bittersweet.
It feels like a placation, but it’s the only thing he can offer her: “You’re good with him too.”

Because she is good with Keith. Two years on the space whale—hadn’t that been a hell of a story—taught her most of Keith’s mannerisms. When he needs to talk and when he needs space. Certainly she’s better with Keith than most of the other Paladins are, except maybe Hunk, and that counts for something.

Krolia chuffs in the Galran approximation of a laugh. Against his expectations, she stays in the doorway. Leans against the frame and eyes him with a predator’s indolence. “How long did it take you to get him down?”

A dull flush crawls up the back of Shiro’s neck. Nothing about her manner is unkind, but he’s too used to people’s silent accusations about the way he babies Keith. “Half an hour,” he says.

It’d been a long half hour. Keith refused his medications earlier in the day and his pain had gotten ahead of him. By the time Shiro got to him, Keith was rumpled and furious, snarling about how the hospital scent was making him nauseous. Setting him meant tucking Keith’s face into Shiro’s hip to drown out the ‘bad scent.’ Meant petting Keith’s tense spine with easy strokes until he went lax. Meant rattling off summaries of meetings with the brass until his soft murmuring was overtaken by Keith’s purring.

“As I said, you’re good with him.” Krolia tilts her head until her temple touches the doorframe. It’s in that moment that her exhaustion shows. Only visible because he is looking and because she is letting him look. (And because she reminds him so much of Keith, who only shows his exhaustion in these small ways, afraid of the way predators lunge at vulnerability.)

Rolling his shoulder with its new prosthetic port, Shiro puts down the data pad instead of continuing to look at Krolia. “I do my best,” he says. The guilt is back, and it’s not even night, and he wonders when people will stop acting like he’s doing something good.

“I’m glad he has you as a mate.”

Suddenly, he’s glad that he put the datapad down. Otherwise the fragile glass would be cracked beneath his fingers. Glass fragments in Keith’s blankets would mean moving Keith to a new bed, and Keith only just settled down.

As if sensing the new tension, Keith lets out a low whine as he nuzzles his face more firmly into Shiro’s hip. Instinct has Shiro smoothing Keith’s hair back. “Shh, you’re okay,” he murmurs. “You’re okay.” Another whine, still low but pitchy with need. This deep under, Keith responds better to physical contact than words. Shiro settles his prosthetic along the line of Keith’s spine and pushes him a few millimeters closer. He keeps his arm there, warm and solid, anchoring them together. The whining dies to a whimper. One of Keith’s hands is curled into a fist, tucked under his chin, and Shiro encloses it with his own hand. Rubbing his thumb over the fine skin at the back of Keith’s hand, he waits as Keith settles back into a deep sleep.

“I’m not—” Shiro tries to gather up his words. Wishes it was as easy as gathering up Keith in his arms. “We’re not together. Not like that.”

Whatever he expects—and sleep deprived and overworked and guilt ridden as he is, he doesn’t expect much—it is not the easy way Krolia acquiesces. That’s enough to startle him into looking at her full on. Krolia gives him a smile worn in by a lifetime of small disappointments. “You were there,” she says. “In so many of his memories. For a long time Keith didn’t let himself feel his grief. His fear. His pain. You changed that for him.”
It occurs to him that this is the most she’s ever said to him at one time. His throat clicks dryly as he swallows, trying to think of something to say. All that comes to mind is all the memories she must have seen were he wasn’t there. When he was the cause of Keith’s grief and fear and pain. When he couldn’t bear the hurt. He settles for: “But we’re not mates.”

“No, you’re not,” she says. Just as easily as before. As though she knows something he doesn’t. “But I leave him in your hands.”

Three hours later Keith wakes up, already complaining of the cottony feeling in his mouth from too many muscle relaxants and pain medications. “Your mom visited,” Shiro says. “I think she’ll be back later.” Grumbling comes from the general direction of his lap. Keith’s attempting to bury his face in Shiro’s stomach for some reason involving too bright lights. “What was that?”

Keith turns his face just enough for his words to be intelligible. “You won’t leave just ‘cos she’s here, right?”

“You want me to stay?”

Both of Keith’s eyes slit open. It’s an attempt at a glare. The pupils are slightly mismatched in size, proof of how hard he went down. Despite the glare, there’s palpable relief to Keith’s expression when Shiro’s prosthetic flips the lightswitch before drifting back to the bed. The steady blue glow of Altean tech is more forgiving than the buzzing white of hospital lighting. Concussions have always made Keith tetchy about light. And noise. And smell.

“D’you want to leave?” he asks. Petulant. Shiro’s aware that a lot of people think he’s oblivious to how awful Keith is when he’s sick or injured. He’s not. He just knows what it is to be hurting and helpless and hateful.

Gently he pushes back some of Keith’s sweat streaked bangs. The bandages came off a few days ago but they had to replace some of the stitches. Neat as they are, the black lines are stark against the tender skin of Keith’s hairline. “I’ll stay,” he says. “As long as you want me to.”

Shiro knows it’s a cop out, but he also knows that Keith’s too tired to keep arguing the point. He’s proven right as Keith shifts the topic to his desire for mozzarella sticks and wondering when his mom is going to get back. They stay on those kinds of safe topics up until Keith drifts into another fitful sleep thirty minutes later, and Shiro gets back to adding his signature to things that probably don’t need his signature.

Other people start visiting over the next week. Hunk’s graduated from bed bound to wheelchair bound. People who haven’t spent time hospitalized tend not to realize how big of an upgrade that is. It means that Hunk comes around once a day, usually right after visiting hours are officially over, and gets Keith to laugh wheezily about the shitty hospital food.

Shiro comes in late on a Wednesday, right in the middle of when Hunk usually visits, and his tongue bound up with a dozen questions he can’t decide on an order for. “He’s asleep,” Hunk announces. He waits for Shiro to collapse into one of the hospital chairs before going on. “I got him to take the muscle relaxants. You’ll have to fight him for the pain meds. Also, he ate some contraband.” Shiro opens his mouth. “Ramen.” Shiro closes his mouth. “Yeah.”

Laughing, because what else is he supposed to do, Shiro reaches up to rub at the back of his neck. “The meeting ran long,” he says.

“It happens,” Hunk says magnanimously.
Once, Keith drank too much nunvil and looked deeply into Shiro’s eyes before announcing that Hunk forgives all things. It’d been a moment. Shiro remembers wanting to laugh, and also knowing what it meant to have Keith say something like that. For so long he’d been the only person Keith needed. The only person Keith wanted. But now Keith had a lot of people, a family, and he deserves them.

“Thank you for being here. Helping him.” The words stick in Shiro’s throat and he hates himself a little for that.

Hunk hears it. Hears and misinterprets. “I get it, man,” he says. Wheels closer and pats Shiro’s forearm in a way that’s too kind for what Shiro actually deserves. “Keith’s always taking the hardest hits for us. But he’s going to be okay.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

Hospitals mean it’s never silent. Keith’s heart monitor beeps steadily. The IV drip clicks at regular intervals. People chatter out in the hallway about medicine reserves and lunch breaks. But that doesn’t mean a silence can’t drag on too long.

“Keith’s going to be okay,” Hunk says. Somewhere along the way, Hunk learned to give his words a certain weight. Arguing against him seems impossible. Shiro’s proud of him for that, even as he opens his mouth to argue anyway. Hunk doesn’t give him a chance. “Not because he’s Galra, or whatever. Because he has you.”

That gets Shiro’s mouth to shut with an audible ‘click.’

“You weren’t there when you—” Died. “And I don’t know how much you remember from—” The clone. “The point is, all Keith ever wanted when he got hurt back then was you. And now he’s hurt, and you’re here, and it’s gonna be okay.”

Keith’s asleep, the arm unburdened by wires and needles curled into toward his chest. Sleep doesn’t usually come to him easy. As long as Shiro’s known him, he sleeps light, fingers always curled loosely around his knife. Now he’s in an artificial sleep and it makes him look younger. It’s impossible to resist taking his hand, and Shiro feels something settle in his ribcage as he rubs his thumb against the center of Keith’s open palm. Reflexively, Keith’s fingers curl around his. The trust makes his heart ache. “I’ll take care of him.”

“I know you will,” Hunk says. A nurse comes to chase him out a few minutes later and he goes without protest, promising to be back the next day.

Shiro laces his fingers with Keith’s. Years of fighting with a sword have callused Keith’s palms in unexpected ways. When he’s awake it’s so easy to only see the warrior he’s become. But despite the calluses, his hand is still small in Shiro’s, and he’s still so young and so breakable and so worth protecting. Lifting Keith’s hand, Shiro presses a kiss to his scarred knuckles. Quieter, more a promise than a declaration, Shiro says, “I’m always going to take care of you.”

End Notes
to question me about how many cut povs there were from this fic of The Universe Suffering, come find me on twitter or tumblr.

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