Catch as Catch Can

by justheretobreakthings

Summary

Emotions run high after Keith's first battle as the new pilot of the Black Lion, and he and Lance get some thoughts and feelings out into the open.

Notes

Written as a gift for kuumai, but I realized as I approached the end that I haven't posted a Genuary fic in a while, and this would be perfect for Lance day. Hope that's all right! Also came out much longer than I expected it to be, but that's seldom a bad thing.

See the end of the work for more notes.

It was quiet as Lance began padding his way back to his sleeping quarters in the dead of night after sitting awake in the Red Lion’s hangar for hours. His footsteps echoed off the castle’s white walls, a dull rhythm that was soothing and lulling to his exhausted mind.

Because damn if he wasn’t exhausted. Really, he should have been asleep right now, flopped into bed like all the others had once they had returned from their battle. And it had been a tiring one to be sure. Their first time with Keith leading them into battle, his own first time flying the breakneck fireball that was the Red Lion. It had taken a lot of energy out of everyone.
That lion, however, was also the thing that had prevented him from sleeping in the first place. He had changed into his pajamas, done his nightly beauty routine, put on his sleep mask and headphones and lay down, ready to drift off to sleep, but was stymied by an energy inside him. A strange fire in his gut, a restlessness racing through his mind, pent-up vibrancy that needed an outlet. It didn’t take him long to realize where these feelings were coming from. Absent were the soothing and cooling touches from the Blue Lion on his subconscious, and Lance wondered if this was why Keith had always gotten so little sleep and spent so many early mornings on the training deck.

Burning all that energy off with a gladiator, however, did not seem like an appealing solution to Lance, so he had gone down to the hangar to try to stop the problem at the source. When he’d only received growls in response to his demand that Red go play around in someone else’s head while he got his beauty rest, he switched to trying to soothe her instead, quiet her down and cool her off. By the end of it he had wound up stroking her paw and singing lullabies.

When the fire in their bond had finally become cozy warmth rather than searing heat, Lance made his leave, intending to head straight to his bed and go comatose for at least a quintant straight. The only thing stopping him was noticing that Red wasn’t the only lion online.

He paused to peer through the window to Black’s hangar, where the lion’s eyes were lit up brightly and her head was tilted downward to the tiny figure sitting cross-legged in front of her. Keith, still fully dressed save for his usual red jacket, and as far as Lance could tell from the movement of the back of his head, he was talking.

Curious, Lance found himself almost unthinkingly sliding open the door and slipping inside the hangar. He could faintly hear Keith’s voice, but not enough to make out the words, even with those hangar acoustics that amplified and reverberated the sound. So he crept closer, slowly, regretting the fact that he had neglected to put on his slippers before coming to visit Red.

He stopped his approach once he was able to make out the words. “I just… don’t think you thought this through very well,” Keith was saying to the Black Lion. “I don’t know if maybe you made some sort of promise to Shiro about letting me take over or something, but - look, I mean, normally I trust Shiro’s judgment in, well, just about everything, but not - not this. He was wrong this time. And - and if you go along with it, it’s just gonna - people are gonna end up hurt. It’s - god, it’s only a matter of time. Please, Black, just think about - just think - ”

Keith let out a choked, coughing sound and continued, his voice softer this time, enough so that he was once again unintelligible. Lance grimaced in frustration and started forward, realizing too late after his first few steps that he had forgotten to be as sneaky as he was before.

Keith leapt to his feet at the sound of Lance’s footfall, whipping around, his hand flying to his hip where even in the peaceful dead of night his knife was sheathed. His posture relaxed when he realized who the intruder was, but his suspicious glare didn’t leave his face. “What are you doing in here?” he snapped.

“Spying on you,” Lance answered. Keith’s glare darkened, and Lance lifted his hands in innocence. “I’m joking, dude. I was visiting the Red Lion, and I noticed that Black was up too. Just wanted to pop in and see what was going on.”

Keith harrumphed and crossed his arms. “It’s the middle of the night,” he said. “You should be in bed.”

Lance raised a brow. “And you shouldn’t?”

“I’m busy.”
“Aren’t we all.” He cleared his throat. “Uh, so, what exactly are you busy with?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“I’m visiting my lion, same as you. What the hell is with the third degree?”

“Fine, fine, only asking,” Lance said. “No need to get touchy.”

Keith let out a sound halfway between a grunt and a snort before plopping back down to the floor and swiveling back around to face Black. “Could you just go?” he said over his shoulder to Lance.

Lance hesitated. “Well, uh…”

Keith’s scowl returned as he turned back toward Lance. “Well what? What’s stopping you?”

“It’s just, uh… I couldn’t help but overhear what you were saying to Black a moment ago…”

Something flashed in Keith’s eyes before he turned back around, and Lance could practically feel the tension in his back and shoulders emanating in waves. “It’s none of your business,” he growled. “Get out.”

“Yeah, see, it kind of is my business, a little bit?” Lance said, daring to stride up toward Keith. “Because if you’re already trying to resign from the Black Paladin position pretty much on day one, that’s kinda gonna affect the whole team. The last thing we need right now is to have to go through another whole Lion swap meet thing trying to get everyone into new positions.”

“I thought you wanted to fly the Black Lion anyhow,” Keith said. “Wouldn’t another swap be good for you in that case?”

“Course I wanted to fly Black, but in case you’ve forgotten, she already said no to all of us.” He frowned up at Black. “All of us except for you. And don’t get me wrong, I’m over it. Um, mostly, anyway.” He scratched uncertainly at the back of his neck. “Though, I gotta tell you, man, it’s a lot easier to be a good sport about things when the one who beat me actually wanted to win. But, hey, whatever, what’s done is done.” After a pause of contemplation, he sat down onto the floor next to Keith. “Wouldn’t kill you to be a little more grateful, though.”

Keith bristled. “Grateful?” he repeated.

“Yeah. To Black. And to Shiro. You’re the Black Paladin. That’s, like, a huge honor.” He hadn’t intended for any bitterness to slip into his voice, but he could taste a hint of it on his tongue as the words came out. Oh well, too late now.

Keith let out a long breath. “Lance, seriously, could you just go away?”

“No, not if I know you’re gonna be in here trying to sabotage your lion bond.”

“I’m not sabotaging anything.”

“Trying to convince your Lion to go pick someone else to be her paladin? Uh, yeah, Keith, that’s sabotaging the bond. I get it, it’s tricky to get used to a new one, but in case you haven’t noticed, I did it, and Allura did it. I don’t see why you can’t just - ”

“Lance,” Keith snapped. “For fuck’s sake, could you just shut up, and go away?”
“Unh-uh. You’re being all grumpy and weird about everything, and that’s just gonna mess things up. You’re Black Paladin now, you have to start thinking about - ”

“I never wanted to be the Black Paladin,” Keith growled.

“Yeah, I know,” Lance huffed. “You’ve only told us a thousand times.”

“So why are you so insistent on - ”

“Because we need a Black Paladin, why the hell else?! And Black picked you!”

“Black picked Shiro first.”

“I’m aware,” Lance said, rolling his eyes. “And now she’s picked someone else.”

Keith went oddly quiet at that, and Lance turned to him to see his brow tightly furrowed, him staring fiercely downward as if he were intensely focused on some spot on the floor. After a long moment, his expression slowly relaxed and he gave a curt nod. “That’s right,” he said softly. “I hadn’t thought of that…”

Lance tilted his head. “Uh, what are you - ?”

Suddenly Keith was up on his feet, twisting around to stride purposefully toward the hangar’s exit. Lance scrambled up to follow, half-jogging into place next to him. “Hey, where are you going?” he asked.

“Away,” Keith answered brusquely, not breaking his stride.

“Yeah, I can see that, but, like, where away?”

“I don’t know. Just… far enough for Black to forget…”

That stopped Lance in his tracks, and after a dumbfounded pause, he had to run to catch up to Keith and cut in front of his path. “Wait a minute!” he said. “When you said ‘away’, did you mean, away from the castle? Far away?”

“Yeah.” Keith ducked around him and kept going. “I can pack up quick, take one of the pods…”

“Why?!?” Lance demanded.

“Shiro is gone, so Black moved on. She picked someone else. So if I’m gone, she’ll move on again. It’s simple. Can’t believe it took me so long to realize.”

“Are you nuts?!” Keith had kept increasing his pace, so Lance, sick of matching it, threw out a hand to grab Keith by the back of the shirt and yank him to a halt. “You’re actually thinking of leaving?!”

“Let go of my shirt,” Keith snarled, shoving Lance’s hand away.

“You’ve been saying since the beginning that we’ve all got to stick together, for Voltron! What about the team?”

“Lance, I’m thinking about what’s best for the team!”

“What’s best for the team is actually having all five paladins!”

“No, it’s - ” Keith shook his head and turned to walk away. “I can’t do this.”
“Hey, no, I’m talking to you!” Lance said. “If you would just - ”

He reached out to grab Keith again, and Keith whipped around, knocking his arm away with one hand and shoving him back with the other. “Lance! Stop it!”

Lance stumbled back, throwing his arms out at his sides to keep from tumbling to the floor or into a wall. “Did - did you just push me?!” he said incredulously. “What the fuck is wrong with… you…”

His voice trailed off, his glare thawing, as he looked at Keith’s snarling face. Because when the hell had those tears shown up? “Uh… dude?” he said. “Are, uh, are you okay?”

“Oh of course I’m not fucking okay! Do I seem okay?!”

Lance took a step back. “Okay, um… maybe we should just, like, take a breather, take some time to cool off? Because, you know, tempers are high, and I don’t think you’re thinking all that rationally. So, why don’t we, uh, just get a good night’s sleep or something, and we can - ”

“No, Lance. The sooner I get out of here, the more time Black will have to find a new paladin.”

“See, there’s that irrational thinking again, you don’t have to - ”

“Yes, I do!” Keith said. “I have to go, because I! Can’t! Do this!” He voice cracked on the last word, and he squeezed his eyes shut. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t pilot Black! I tried, and it nearly got the rest of you killed! I’m not a leader, I - I was never supposed to be! And now the whole team is just a wreck with me as the Black Paladin. I can’t do it. I can’t.”

He took a shuddering breath and wrapped his arms around himself. “You were right. No one can replace Shiro. He thought I could, someday, but…” He shook his head rapidly and let out a hitched sob. “He always thought he could do it. Make me more like him. And I wanted to be like him, too! And I tried! Back at the Garrison, and here at Voltron. Of course I wanted to be like Shiro, Shiro is amazing, Shiro can do anything!”

His arms shook as he reached up his hands to clutch his hair between his fingers. “Well, anything except fix me,” he said quietly. “I tried, and he tried, but I’m no Shiro. Never will be.” He looked back up at Lance, eyes shining with unshed tears. “I’m sorry,” he said. “For today. For almost getting all of you hurt. Or worse.” He sniffed. “I can still make it right, though. I can go, and - and, maybe Black will pick you this time, or Allura. Or, hell, maybe even Coran. Someone who won’t fuck it up…”

For a moment, Lance was lost for words. He stood frozen, staring at Keith’s trembling form, at his face, still shaped into his signature scowl even as the tears that had started flowing belied the fact that the anger was just a mask.

Then, in two quick strides, Lance had reached him, was wrapping his arms around him.

“What are you - ?” Keith started.

“I’m hugging you, you fucking idiot,” Lance answered. “What’s it look like I’m doing?”

“Well, yeah, but, um, why…”

“Because, dude, you are falling apart at the seams. Someone’s gotta hold you together.” Lance pulled out of the hug but planted his hands on Keith’s shoulders, scanning his face with a frown. “Have you slept at all in the past, like, month? You look like shit. Hadn’t noticed that before.”
Keith let out a hiccough and started scrubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “Thanks, Lance,” he muttered. “You really know how to make a guy feel better.”

“No, I hadn’t meant - I only - ” Lance huffed. “Look, I, uh… I’m sorry.”

“*You’re* sorry?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” Lance snapped.

“Kinda…”

Lance sighed. “Okay, fine, whatever. Guess that’s, uh, fair, all things considered. But, um…” He cleared his throat. “I hadn’t realized that this was, like, taking its toll on you so much.”

Keith shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. “It’s been taking its toll on all of us,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, but, we should have been - we should have noticed that - I’m sorry, okay? I, uh - I guess I’ve always had this picture of you as this, like, confident, take-no-shit, tough as steel guy who could - who could just get through anything no problem. I never really pictured you being, you know, stressed. At least, not like this. Certainly not to the point where you were breaking down and wanting to leave. I guess I’ve just been expecting you to be - um, well, *wanting* you to be, like…”

“… Strong?” Keith finished.

“Well, no, not exactly, more… unbeatable.”

“You wanted me to be like Shiro.”

“...Yeah,” Lance admitted quietly. “Yeah, I suppose we did.”

Keith nodded, his expression flat save for the red rims around his eyes. “I get it. Not your fault. You guys deserve a good leader, so that’s what you were expecting.”

“Keith, it - it *is* kinda our fault, to be honest,” Lance said. He ducked away, suddenly feeling uncomfortable meeting Keith’s eyes. “My fault, really.”

“It isn’t - ”

“Yeah, it is. Because - because I wanted a Shiro, but got mad when you were a Keith instead. And, I mean, we gave Shiro a chance to grow into the role and have us still respect him while he was finding his footing. And I guess we, um, we forgot to do the same for you.”

The two of them were quiet for a moment, then Lance looked up, a sudden determination in his gut. “Hey. Go into your room, change into your paladin pajamas.”

Keith blinked dazedly at him. “Um… what?”

“Just go. I’ll meet you there in three minutes. And you’d better be ready for me by then, because if I walk in on you changing, I’m gonna have to stab my eyes out with a spork and the team will lose their best sharpshooter. Go.”

“But why - ?”

“Move, mullet.” Lance took Keith by the shoulder and steered him around, giving him a nudge in the direction of the latter’s room. “Something I wanna do.”
Keith still appeared bemused, but with visible reluctance he obliged, and once he did, Lance set off down a different hall toward his own room.

Three minutes later on the dot, Lance was at Keith’s door, arms piled high. He knocked at the door with his foot, and Keith slid it open, still looking just as bemused as before, although the tears, thank the stars, seemed to have subsided. He looked bizarre in his silky red pajamas, as if they were a costume on him, but Lance decided not to comment on it. “You ready?” he asked.

“Ready for what?” Keith asked. “What the hell is all that stuff?”

“This,” Lance answered. “Is an apology.” He marched past Keith and dumped his things onto his bed. “So, it’s pretty clear now that you’ve had a rough go of things, and someone should have tried to help with that. And as your new right-hand man, that should have been my job.”

“However - ” He turned around to face Keith, hands on his hips. “You’re a very different leader from Shiro, and I’m gonna have to be a very different right-hand man from you. For instance, no offense, but I’m betting that your stint as Red Paladin was seriously lacking in the pampering department.”

“In the… what department?” said Keith.

Lance gestured to the objects on the bed. “Everything we need to help you actually de-stress for once. I’ve got candles, face masks, nail polish, soft music, handheld massagers, scented lotions.”

“Where the hell did you get all this crap?” Keith asked.

“Coran, mostly, and it’s not crap. All this stuff really does the trick.” He picked up one of the jars on the bed. “Wanna start with a face mask? This thing here, it clears your pores, fixes those dark circles under your eyes, and the scent is guaranteed to help you relax.”

“Guaranteed by who?”

“By me.”

“Lance, I don’t think - ”

“Please?” Lance held the jar up. “Look, I - I know I haven’t been particularly supportive of you this whole time, but let me make it up to you. I know this isn’t really your wheelhouse, but - well, this is how I support. Please, just try it?”

Keith chewed at his lip for a long moment, glancing over the objects scattered on the bed, then he let out a sigh. “Fine. Just this once.”

“Yes!” Lance tugged Keith by the sleeve to sit him down on the floor, uncapping the jar. “You’re gonna enjoy this, I promise. I used to do these pamper nights for Hunk back at the Garrison, and he always loved them to bits. And I don’t know what it is about Altean soaps and lotions and stuff, but all this stuff smells freaking amazing. You’ll just wanna sit around and breathe in and not have a care in the world.” He scooped some of the goop from the jar up onto his fingertips. “Close your eyes.”

Keith eyed Lance’s hand suspiciously. “Um…”

It took Lance a couple of ticks to realize why Keith would be so uncertain about this, and he felt a pang in his stomach. “Ah, geez, mullet, I’m not trying to prank you or anything here. I’m - I’m sorry. I was kind of a jerk to you earlier, but I just wanna - I’m just…” He sighed and passed the jar to Keith. “Here. You can apply it yourself if you want.” He brought the hand that was already full of
the cream to his own face to rub into his cheeks. “I really am just trying to make it better.”

“Why the change of heart?” Keith asked. “You’re not mad at me anymore for all the stuff with Black?”

“No. No, look, I was never mad at you over it, I was - I was stressed. About the whole situation, and I took it out on you, and I - I shouldn’t have. I still don’t really know, like, how I’m feeling about Black, or Red, or all this new crap going on, or, well, anything, really. But I… I know that that was the first time I’ve ever seen you cry.” He shrugged. “Turns out I, uh, really don’t like it. And if I can help make sure it doesn’t happen again, then, well…” He nodded toward the jar. “I’ll try my best. Honest.”

Keith’s brow pinched as he looked back and forth between the jar and Lance. “Lance?”

“Yeah?” said Lance.

“… Go ahead. You can put the stuff on. I’ll, uh… I’ll give this a shot.”

Lance’s face brightened as he snatched up the jar again. “Awesome! Don’t worry, man, this is gonna be great. And you’re gonna feel great after and - and - and this is great. This is - we can do this. All of it.”

He eyed Keith intently, hoping Keith picked up on his meaning. Keith simply nodded, and whether that was an indication that he had gotten it or just an invitation to go ahead with the face mask, Lance didn’t know. But he took up the jar and started applying the mask cream to Keith’s face. “Be careful,” Keith said, moving his lips as little as possible. “Don’t go jabbing anything important.”

“Just shut up and enjoy the bonding moment, mullet.”

Keith peeked one eye open. “Promise you’ll remember this one?”

“Yeah. I promise.”

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End Notes

Want a mini fic from me to you? I'm writing one-shots for anyone who writes a fic or makes art that features aro/ace Keith, and tags me in it @justheretobreakthings on tumblr!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!