Surface Tension

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Surface Tension

by APendingThought

Summary

Keith has his shortcomings. Fortunately, Shiro knows them all. Shiro and the Paladins must find Keith lost on a frozen ice wasteland before time runs out!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“I’m telling you, Shiro. We’ve BEEN here already!”

“Just do it.”

“If you insist! I just think it’s pointless going in circles in the middle of white porcelain nothing!”

Shiro was relying more on instinct now than hardcore intel, something he disliked. The parameters were wide and Keith could cover more ground on his own in a shorter amount of time than all four of them put together. When no energy signature at all turned up within the realm of possibility, Shiro began probing the impossible. He was no longer looking for Keith, no longer desperately scanning the sensors for any faint blip of a bio sign. He was looking for Red.

The lion would not abandon its Paladin.

“Fine. We’ll just double back.” Pidge sulked over the intercom. “It would help if there were actually something to SEE around here except glaciers.”

“Keep looking.” Shiro urged them.

“Anyway, Keith is fine,” Hunk grumbled. “I’m sure he probably lost track o’ time, dug himself a shelter somewhere and is planning to Keith his way back to the castle in the middle of the night just to mess with us—“

“No.” Shiro cut him off. “Keith had no clearance and it’s taken too long for him to respond. He's out there. Fly your lions to three two mark one and wait for my signal. Watch those hills, my instruments aren't readin' right.” He veered strong to the right over a vast ocean frozen solid.

The first comb had turned up nothing. The distress signal emitted from the planet wasn't a false alarm. Any presence of the Galra would not be easy to find in this snow cover which actually made it a perfect location for a hovel of covert activity beneath its blinding surface. Allura had ordered this reconnaissance to clear the planet of any trace of the malevolent empire.

That had been nearly 17 hours ago.

Keith had long ago switched his com off. His link to the others cut on purpose was the most likely possibility. Shiro knew he worked best alone and the chances of him cutting them off to focus better in this haze of scant visibility were good. But too much time had passed with no echo from him or Red. So far. The collective sigh from Lance, Pidge and Hunk echoed what they were all thinking. This fly and rescue mission now was warranting an ass-kicking much later. Shiro's grip on the throttles tightened as he did a solid 90 degree turn over a mountain and roared over and through the desolate valley below. They would know if any of the five were dead. Shiro didn’t need to remind them.

"Anything?" he asked into the com, "...at all?"

Most surprising to Shiro was the silence from Lance’s end. The blue paladin had not uttered so much as a word since they’d re-launched back into the blinding whirl of snowstorm to hunt for Keith. He knew what Shiro knew—every second wasted talking was another second Keith spent out there.

Shiro’s own flare of worry burned in his chest, above the blaring urgency of their mission. If Keith was anything, he was tough and more than an experienced pilot. He didn’t flinch when the lethal
charged straight at him, sword drawn and posed. He’d been ready to take on the most powerful evil in the universe solo and walked away from it.

Shiro flexed his cybernetic arm.

“It’s not getting any warmer out here, guys.” Pidge’s voice crackled over the interference from the shifting winds. “I don’t think the Lions were designed to take prolonged exposure in these conditions.”

“Yeah well, neither is Keith.” Hunk shot back.

“I know that! My point is, if we don’t turn something up soon, we’ll be in the same situation he is!”

Shiro knew, without seeing the expression on Lance’s face, the lightning fast clarity that breached no argument.

“Pidge is right. We’re running out of time. Hunk, I need you on the outfield. Go ten and five, mark three. Get there at three hundred, watch your altitude. Lance, trail me and put out feelers for any of Red’s energy signatures. Pidge, if anything on this ice block has a pulse, I want a report whether it’s Keith or not.”

“Roger that.”

The barren whiteness of this landscape had discouraged them. It was as if they had entered a new dimension where nothing they knew existed. An entire planet and the only things breathing on it were four frustrated explorers. The more he stared out into the wide stretch of nothing, the more his focus grew to a burning bright panic. Keith was out there and he’d lost himself in it.

“C’mon kid…” He murmured, tamping down his frustration. “Where the hell are you?”

The conditions on the outside were dangerous, similar to what he’d read about the summit of Mount Everest. The atmosphere was thin, the oxygen levels unfit for unsupported human physiology. He shifted Black’s sensors slightly, honing in closer on the landscape beneath him. They had scanned this entire perimeter before. Save for the topographic features of snow-capped mountain range and glacier fields, the landscape yielded very little. He swung Black lower, soaring fluidly past the outcrop of cavernous rock formations standing against the storm’s fury like soldiers. Still no heat emissions. No life signs. He slammed his human hand against his dash. "Dammit--"

The engines slowed.

Black stuttered to a halt without his command, landing to rest on top of a thick ledge of ice. An ear-splitting roar made his heart pound.

Black always knew more than he did. As far as he was concerned, he was done with this location. No sign of Keith, no point in staying. But Black would not budge. Her eyes had dimmed, her generators still thrumming in wait, unmoving on her perch. With a sigh, he clicked on his com.

“Lance? You there?”

“Copy.” Lance responded instantly.

“Meet me at my signal point. I think the trail just got warmer.”

“At least something did!” Lance muttered. “Be right down.”

Black thrummed with roiling energy, urging him out of his pilot seat. Their suits were meant to
withstand extremes but even with their protection, he calculated his window of consciousness to be not very wide. But he was getting nowhere sitting on his ass. With a click, he released the lower hatch and ventured into the fray of harsh wind.

This planet made Kerberos look like Santaland. The wind was whipping past his face at a hundred miles an hour, fast and cruel enough to freeze the skin of his cheek had he not had the sense to lower his helmet visor before exiting the craft. Bits of ice sparkled like deadly glass shards, trying to take away at the protective layer of his under armor around his exposed limbs.

“You better be wrong about this, Black.” He growled, sliding down the solid ice formation beside his lion’s massive robotic paw. An inward shudder from the ice made him pause. A trace of something concealed, not natural to these surroundings.

“Huh?”

He placed his hand against the snow-covered ledge, expecting to find it yielding to the heat emanating from his cyber hand, rapidly melting away the hardness to reveal more ice. His breath caught in his chest when he realized what Black had actually landed on.

“No...”

He immediately sent out an open feed. “Guys, need you here now. I think I found something.”

His uniform did well against the cold, but not like this. Shiro groaned when another gust of ice filled wind slammed him into the side of a snow dune. He shook his hand free, wiping off the emitter that had been tracking Red. It was still steady even though Red was wrecked and half buried in snow about a mile behind him. He righted himself as best as he could with the wind and shook the device like it would help.

To his surprise, it did.

A small alarm went off and started to triangulate a location. Eyes burning with the frigid air, he waited until the allocations stopped. Shiro blinked. He was right on top of it. He was--

Shiro’s arm flared bright melting snow a few feet deep, just short of the body that lay under it all. Not for very long either, his readings showed Keith’s core temp to be drastically below average but hovering above death. Shiro dug slush and snow away from Keith's white face. He found his arms, his torso; his legs were in the deepest--

"Holy crow!"

Now that the gang was all here Shiro felt the urge to get out of here, faster. Shiro’s instincts kicked in faster than his panic. Keith’s armor had been compromised, his Bayard blipping with energy not far away from where he had collapsed. Why he’d needed it out in the first place was the first reason Shiro wanted the hell outta dodge. Clasping the fallen weapon in his hand, he stored it and swung his attention back to Keith.

He was unconscious and had been for some time. Shiro expected no pulmonary activity on his scanner. How long he’d been under was hard to say but it had been long enough for the ice to completely surround him. With his metabolic rate slowed to such an extreme, there was still some ironic chance of survival.
Analytics be damned. Keith was an idiot. Using his tech hand, he ignited the layer of ice that had formed around Keith’s still body, soaking through the hard edges of the suit and making his panicked movements slick and clumsy. Breaking the rest with his fist until it was raw and numb from cold, he forcefully wrenched Keith’s limp body up and out, cradled securely in his arms, leaning him against his heaving chest.

“I gotcha, kid.” He breathed in relief against him. “I’m here now.”

Keith was beyond hearing but it didn’t matter. He could be dead and it wouldn’t matter. He took a deep breath knowing everyone was waiting on his word.

“Keith doesn’t have much time. Everyone back to the castle NOW! Lance, you got Red.”

From Lance came only a silent but rapid affirmative. From Hunk there was panic.

"You found him!? How is he??"

Pidge echoed his concern.

"Is Keith alright?"

Shiro could not lie.

"No."

Hoisting Keith’s dead weight against his shoulder, he fought the snow back towards his lion, the frigid air burning his lungs like fire. The Black Lion’s shape materialized through the flurry of snow blinding his line of vision. Had it come to find him? Sought him out as he had done Keith? It didn’t matter now. With a powerful rumble that shook the ground it bent its head and opened wide its cavernous jaws, ready to retrieve its pilot.

Shiro did not have a tick to waste.

Away from the din of the elements, Shiro could better assess. Keith was unresponsive and hypothermic, that much any rookie could determine. Shiro knew instantly what a scan would already tell him. Keith needed oxygen support and an open airway. Then he would need rewarming in measured intervals.

Jamming his fist into the nearest storage pack, he located the emergency oxygen every lion stored. Securing the clear plastic mask over Keith’s nose and mouth, he waited until he heard the gentle hiss of air flow before wrenching out one of the trauma blankets from above. The boy’s blood had to be the consistency of slush in his inactive veins, his heart would have halted to a stop hours ago with nothing to move through his system. There had been no cardiac activity for their sensors to even pick up, no active synapse intact enough for him to breathe on his own. Keith’s body had shut down to preserve it, his armor the only thing keeping his metabolism from failing permanently. Shiro grimly understood how close to the edge the Red Paladin had brought himself.

“Pull through, Keith.” He grit his teeth. “I ain’t asking.”

With a growled curse, Shiro ripped away the protective gloves with his teeth. Flesh fingers still numb from cold, he located the zip at the side of Keith’s own bodysuit, peeling it away to expose his abdomen and chest. Though his extremities were blue with frostbite, the rest of him was alarmingly white, muscles rigid with cold as his blood pooled into vital organs for survival. Black’s generators emitted a constant heat source but she was cranked up much too high to safely regulate Keith’s body. Too much heat too rapidly could result in cardiac shock. Shiro stared at his cyber prosthetic hand,
feeling it thrum with energy. How he wished it could serve them now, ignite Keith's heart back to movement. But all it could do was harm, leaving a burned scar against already damaged skin.

Suddenly, Shiro knew. Scrambling for the zip at the base of his neck, he stripped down to the waist, shrugging out of his bodysuit. Although the blast of cold air inside the cockpit against his chest made him shiver slightly, he was many degrees warmer than Keith right now. His own heart, pumping fast, would generate enough gradual heat for them both. Tucking Keith securely underneath his bare arm, he held the limp paladin still with one hand and somehow managed to settle back into the pilot seat. With his cyber prosthetic, he sent an urgent digital message to Black.

_Take us home._

Even on autopilot, Shiro knew he would need to keep one hand on the throttle to navigate them away safely. Beneath his tense bicep, Keith's skin was hard and cold and it was all he could do to keep his panic from flaring when the mask slipped down on Keith's face. Once secured, he found the trauma blanket again and halph-hazardly draped it over them both. _God, he was so still._ He grit his teeth against the frigid hardness of Keith’s skin pressed up close to his, bracing himself to concentrate on the star maps flashing across Black’s navigation unit.

The Black Lion surged upward and out, away from the violence of the storm beneath them, its course headed straight for the castle.

Coran was speaking.

Shiro shouldered past him with the heavy body in his arms. The castle was so complicated, he'd read and spent nights looking at maps on his com screen for hours and it still confused him-- He just had to get to the pods.

"This way," Lance stopped him with a light touch on his shoulder. "Down there."

Shiro's breath hitched in effort, and pulled Keith's body closer so he could stand. "Lead the way," he shook his head, his vision was blurred from the intense cold. "I-I can't see very well."

"I got you."

Shiro was hauled up. He could smell Lance's leather jacket, he could feel Lance pulling him forward when he wasn't sure he could take another step.

Coran was still talking, a blur of numbers mixed with orders, and now there were two, not one, set of arms supporting Keith. Shiro’s arms trembled from panic and exhaustion. His sluggish brain was fixed on one goal—get Keith to the Cyropods. It didn’t take them very long to cross the corridor into the medical wing and instantly Coran moved to take hold of Keith.

Reflexively, Shiro’s grip tightened around the body in his arms.

“Shiro. We’ve got him.” Allura’s calm reached him, her hand on his arm. “Give him to us.”

It was all too much. Shiro felt his eyes slipping closed before he could stop them.

"WOAH!" That was Lance. Definitely Lance. "He's goin' down-!"

Shiro’s trembling arms dropped to his sides as he slumped forward to his knees, sending whoever was in his way firmly out of his way. He knew it was Lance that was trying to keep him from crashing face first onto the floor, Coran lightening quick seizing hold of Keith’s body before it could touch the surface.
"Careful! Any more trauma will make it harder—" Shiro roused, weakly pulling on the hands on him.

"Less talk, more saving Coran!" Lance shouted, now keeping Shiro down on the floor with a grip like iron. Hastily, Coran worked to remove the tattered and cracked casing of armor, stripping it away to fully expose Keith’s skin. Sickly blue and oxygen-starved, the sight made all but the Alteans queasy.

“Princess, I need—“

“On it.” Allura slipped the prepped syringe cannon into his ready hand. Quickly, Coran turned Keith’s head to the side, peering closely.

“Hard to locate a vein, his skin’s frozen solid.” He growled. “Here goes.”

With a hiss, the contents of the syringe emptied directly beneath Keith’s jaw. Coran firmly tapped the unyielding flesh of his throat with two fingers, waiting.

“What the--?” Lance began. Pidge took over, staring glassily at Coran as he hunched over Keith’s prone limbs. She did not blink or move.

“Epinephrine. For his heart.” She murmured loudly enough. “The cyropod tech won’t mean anything without a sinus rhythm.”

“Holy crow…” Hunk breathed. “You mean he’s…?”

“No more! Princess, activate the Pod.” Coran barked, lifting Keith easily into his arms. The pod’s reflective chamber misted over, opening to receive. Keith's entire body, now bared, appeared more dead than alive behind the glass. His lips, hands and feet were still blue, his chest unmoving. Lance pulled Shiro to his feet as Coran began running the diagnostic.

“The Pod environment is programmed to return anything in it back to stasis. “ He explained breathlessly. “Right now, Keith’s not breathing on his own and that stimulant injection got only marginal cardiac response. The settings are working now to bring his heartbeat and temperature back up gradually at a safe rate. I’ve adjusted it to human calibrations but thankfully your biology isn’t too far a cry from ours.”

“Will he make it?” Shiro asked.

The laser display of greenish stats glowed across Coran’s face and the chief steward paused a moment to take them all in before answering.

“Can’t promise anything yet, Team. We’ll know more in a few hours.”

And that was that. For most of them, anyway.

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Coran had said a few hours. The numbers told a very different story.

A few hours meant nothing to him now. A few hours to hold onto an exhale from today was practically a second. Time melted away, his own consciousness a distant thing when everything counted on the numbers. He’d heard all the names for this interim a thousand times over. In the field for comrades barely holding on and for those waiting on their last breath. Touch and go. In limbo. Critical. Out of danger. In the clear.
That was fine with him. If Keith could wait, so could he.

“He’s not much to look at now but we’ll have him fixed in a jiffy!” He thought he heard Coran say. Shiro huffed and looked away.

The others had wandered in and out, each with their own individual methodology of concern. A hand. A glance. A word. Coran had even run a quick scan on him, advised and disappeared unacknowledged. His armor could wait. His body could wait. His lion could wait for those numbers to change. The Cyropod's dim blue light made the room feel quieter, surrounding everything in it with a calm Herculean glow. Shiro felt none of it. If Keith was not getting better, at least he was no worse according to the vital stats flashing against the reflective data feed.

He could tell when the cup of alien tea at his feet had stopped steaming that a few hours had passed. He had not even realized who had placed it there but his senses shifted at its scent. Hours and only now had Keith’s pulse evened out to an actual rhythm instead of the erratic spasms spaced too far apart. He had also started breathing on his own, on and off, according to the fluctuating oxygen levels within the encasement. His color had improved, the bluish tinge now all but faded except for the tips of his fingers and the edge of his lips. The rest of him was washed out pale, the blood barely stirring beneath the surface of his skin.

Shiro placed a hand on the glass, hovering over Keith’s face. His eyes searched for any trace of life. “What happened to you out there, kiddo?”

It might have been his imagination, strained and exhausted to the point of contortion, but he could have sworn Keith’s eyelids twitched.

The floor of the infirmary was hard after so long a time and the ache in his muscles had begun to cut bone deep. He named the gait of the approaching footsteps long before their voice came. Lance threw a blanket over his shoulders, glancing with disdain down at the untouched tea. “Hey, I made that for ya myself!”

Shiro mumbled what might have been an apology.

Lance crouched down beside him with a heavy sigh. He’d changed back into civilian clothes. There was a prolonged pause as Shiro felt him think of something to say.

“You….thinking about leaving the floor anytime soon?”

Shiro did not dignify that with a response. Lance shrugged.

“Uh…he looks better.” Lance offered.

“Coran says he’s in the clear. Close shave, right? His levels are all responding to the—“

“Lance.” Shiro cut him off, his eyes finally shifting from the cyropod to the Blue Paladin. “You should get some rest.”

“Nope. Not getting rid of me that easy.” Lance plopped himself down comfortably as he could manage on the cold hard floor. Shiro didn’t flinch but he did not push him away either. If Shiro really wanted him gone, he could make it happen and they both understood that. A beat passed. Then another. The soft whir of the cyropod and the intermittent blip of updated vitals was the only sound
for a time. It drove Lance quietly insane.

“Hey…” Lance began uncertainly. “Pidge pulled the data from Keith’s helmet.”

Shiro’s eyes glazed over.

“We’re not 100% sure but it looks like Keith might’ve made a bad judgement call on the visibility and strayed too far outta parameter. Guess hotshot lost control out there and Red just shorted out and stopped him.”

Shiro exhaled audibly, something between a sigh and a laugh.

“Leave it to Keith,” Lance muttered. “The only one not to call for help if he caught fire.”

Hesitantly, Lance placed an arm around Shiro’s shoulder and leaned into him, mildly surprised when Shiro allowed it. Physical contact with the Black Paladin was always a risk, given his past. One never knew, friend or foe, where exactly Shiro's head was. However, given the circumstance, Lance was willing to gamble on where it could be.

“S’not your fault. You know that, right?” He whispered.

Shiro just continued to breathe.

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A cycle came and went before Coran officially cleared Keith from the Cyropod. His weak vitals eventually stabilized and his temperature was steady on the rise according to the data feed but Shiro wasn’t convinced until the bio shield lowered and he could hold him. Keith’s senseless body collapsed pliant and shuddering in his arms. He was lethargic but he was definitely alive as Shiro transferred him to one of the observation beds.

He would not stop shivering.

They'd put him in those blankets.

Coran assured this was a normal reaction to the healing process. It would take days for him to recover, perhaps weeks until he was fit enough to bond with his lion again. To assist recovery, Coran had him on a warm saline drip taped to the inside of his elbow, a telemetry monitor recording his vitals.

Shiro lowered his head almost between his knees. Blankets didn't look like foil. They were doing everything to regulate Keith's heat. He was the color of chalk, eyes half open in a near dead state. Looking down at his own arm, Shiro watched the alien metal pulse and glow; he flexed his grip and went to sit on the side of Keith's bed.

He dragged a hand across his face with a heavy sigh. Man, he was tired.

"Hey," he said, his glowing hand touching black hair. "You're okay."

Keith blinked at the sound of his voice. Eyes desperately refocusing, looking until he saw him. He couldn’t quite catch his breath between the garbled words in his addled brain. His lids fluttered closed again.

"I was- I was- Shiro I was-"

"Stop."
Shiro put his hand gently on Keith's chest. Keith wasted a lot of energy. Mostly on being angry. At himself.

Keith was still looking at him, his body shaking, his blue eyes locked and wavering. His voice was barely above a whisper. "I didn't mean to-"

Shiro silenced him with his mouth, lips pressed firmly against Keith’s in a panting sigh of relief. The body underneath him stilled, and then complied in a soft collapse.

When Keith started breathing in steady shallow breaths of sleep. Shiro carefully placed himself behind him, his back against the wall. With a sigh he even pulled up the foil blanket up over Keith's face. He flexed his cyber arm and hand, willing it to the temperature he wanted. He laid it down over his red paladin.

*His?*

He laughed a little to himself, feeling suddenly incredibly tired.

They were all His.
**Chapter Summary**

Keith recovers from his ordeal but his mind is still lost.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shiro was patient

He never thought about it until someone felt the need to tell him.

Time passed as it did, the massive ship drifted in and out of the stillness of space. The conditions were clear for once and Allura had set their course for a less turbulent constellation to allow time for Keith to recover. No engagements, no missions. Just training and waiting and boredom.

Shiro spent as little time away from Keith as possible.

He talked to him in the long stretches of down time, babbled away like he’d been slipped some of the good stuff. His memories began to drift back before realizing it was probably not what Keith’s unconscious body would want to hear. He changed up the trajectory to their current status. Pidge’s new work of genius. Hunk’s ability to swear in several alien dialects. Lance and how much better he was getting at the shooting range. Blam. Blam Blam.

Keith’s body slept and breathed and healed. That was the most he could do.

Shiro turned sometimes to his own memories. The taste of Obaachan’s *oden* and homemade *ichijiku nimono*. How he’d give his other fucking arm just for a taste of it again. He talked about the itchy collar of his military-style *gakuran* at the high school he’d attended and how much he hated it. Shiro found himself mumbling about all sorts of random nonsense, stories he was certain Keith had heard before but his tongue rolled them out anyway.

He wondered, more than once, if all this talk was more for him than for Keith.

The only time he’d stop in his rambling was to run a scan on Keith’s progress. Coran had instructed him to take regular readings of his temperature and pulse, though both had been fairly stable with few hiccups for the last three days in a row. It was a habit, a break in the routine and some reassurance that Keith was still with them.

Sometimes Keith’s sleep wasn’t so peaceful.

There were periods when he floated in and out of reality. The brink of death could do that to a man, tainting his subconscious as though it would never leave. Shiro was all too familiar, knew the absolute emptiness it caused and how little there was to cope with it. He could feel the terror in the restless twitch of Keith’s muscles, the hitch in his breathing.

When this happened, Shiro would place his palm across his chest and pat gently until the trembling stopped. That usually worked.
When it didn’t, he found other things.

Their language. He and Keith shared a common tongue though Shiro was decidedly the more fluent in it.

“Shikkari. Koko da yo…”

Hold on. I’m here....

If Keith didn’t settle right away, he’d call him by name.

“Kogane kun…? Aniki da yo.”

Keith muttered words in his dreaming, the one constant to Shiro’s ears was: “Aniki..” Elder Brother.


The others wafted in and out of the frame, Allura more than any of them insistent that Shiro change his clothes, care for himself, trade shifts for even a few moments. Shiro admitted that first hot shower after their mission brought him back to himself more than anything else. His muscles, which had been permanently tensed and rigid, loosened up and made his focus sharper. Moving was not torture anymore. He’d spent so many hours at his vigil he hardly recognized his body’s own distress. He’d been toweling his hair dry when a knock on his door made him pause. Pidge stood in the door frame, looking breathless as though she’d run the whole way there. She was smiling and giddy.

“Shiro, you gotta come!” She squealed.

“What is it?” Shiro snapped the towel off his shoulder.

“What is it?” Shiro snapped the towel off his shoulder.

“Keith’s awake! He’s asking for you!”

The immediate mood of the infirmary sent mixed signals the moment Shiro entered. They had all gathered at the bedside he’d spent these tense past nights fighting sleep next to. Relief held sway over the nervous tension in the small space and Shiro’s own only made it that much more palpable. Lance was in no way hiding his feelings behind any show of dignity. The expected gags and barbs were coming from him in a steady stream. Hunk said less, hugged more, but Keith was barely responsive to this form of affection. Not that Hunk gave a damn and truth be told, Hunk deserved his hugs back every now and then. Keith didn’t protest but he didn’t say anything either, sitting up in bed and blinking dazedly as though he wanted them all to vanish. He was alert, at least. A little weak around the edges but that would pass very soon.

“Quit handling him, he’s only just woke up and his body needs to adjust!” Coran admonished from the control panel. He was still muttering about residual tissue damage and the need for more reflex testing before Keith found himself back in a pilot seat.

“I’ll adjust his FACE, if you like?” Lance growled. Keith huffed a lukewarm laugh in his direction but said nothing more.

Shiro was not the only one who could expect that. Keith had drawn his knees up to his chest and looked like he wanted to disappear beneath the blankets. Pidge placed one small hand on his knee and simply smiled. She said nothing. Shiro was relieved to see the minute gesture reach Keith, some light returning to his dark eyes as he turned his head to gaze directly at her.

“We’re just glad you’re okay.” Pidge said and it was the only thing Keith needed to hear. While Coran spoke volumes about how fortunate he was and Lance interjected with his promise of playful vengeance, Allura knew that all the talk was making Keith more and more on edge. She spoke decisively.

“Keith, there will be time enough after you’ve fully healed to put to words all you’ve been through. Just know we are all here as your comrades to support you, whatever the need.”

A brief nod from Keith. Nothing more. Shiro clenched his fist but did not push. Keith was closing up. She deserved more than what Keith had to offer. However, Allura knew better than to press the issue further.

Shiro knew Keith was grateful for their presence in the way he lowered his eyes and hid his face behind the tangle of his bangs. One by one, they touched him and left him until all that remained was Shiro.

“Hey.” Shiro said finally, heart beating fast, unsure what was coming. He stood there next to the bed, letting the waves of Keith's cold silence roll over him like low tide.

Shiro had spoken only one word but that was all it took for Keith’s eyes to glass over. Only when he sat down on the bed and opened his arms did Keith fling himself into his stomach. Only then were the tears released. Keith’s body was shaking with rage and Shiro let him, holding on silently until Keith finally let go.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

“I heard you, you know…” The words from Keith's unused throat were scratchy.

Shiro gave a wry smile. “Yeah? Heard me going on and on about grandma’s cooking like a looney old man?”

“No.” Keith ground a fist into his eyes roughly. His gaze fixed on some point in front of him, staring but not really seeing. “Can’t really put it in words right now.” He paused then muttered slowly, taking considerable effort to construct thoughts and emotions with words. “Just…your voice. It was there. Everything….went white but I…I heard you.”

“Keith, that’s not possible.” Shiro turned his face away. “You left us for a spell, buddy. Your heart stopped. You were in a coma for over a week.”

Keith flinched to communicate that he had already been made aware. Shiro sighed, unsure what else to say. Keith would bounce back, of that there was no doubt. Before he was even at full capacity, he’d be slashing away at his guilt in the training room.

“S’not ok.” Keith muttered.

“I know.” Shiro squeezed his shoulder. “And it won’t be. Not for a while. We’re on the same page.”

Keith smoldered beneath his hand and Shiro wondered if he’d manage to pry any more words out of him today. He was not magical nor was he a saint but he knew his paladin’s heart and felt, more than knew, when it was troubled.

It was time to shift the trajectory before a full on explosion erupted. Shiro gently but firmly laid Keith back down on the pillow and righted his limbs.
“Anyway, you should rest.”

“I’m done resting.” Keith seethed. Shiro shook his head.

“Sorry kiddo. These numbers say no. Besides, yer not done until Coran, Allura and I give you clearance. No arguments.”

Keith turned his face away. Now Shiro noticed the slight flush to his cheek that hadn’t really gone away when the room emptied, his brow faintly damp with sweat.

“Couple more days, alright?” He tried, lamely. “Stats read you’re still running a slight temp. Let’s get it gone before you kick my ass on the training deck again, ok?”

Keith’s lack of response made him hopeful that it was.

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It didn’t take long before the surface smoothed out again.

Keith’s silence was, if anything, more intense but this was the only notable change in Shiro’s mind. He craved reports, information, hungry for every iota of fact that had passed since he’d been out of commission. The crew feigned their compliance to his demands, hiding their disquiet among them. A week had passed and still Keith would only initiate verbal exchange with only Pidge or Shiro. Even that had its limitations.

Shiro watched events unfold as the days passed, sensing a break. He watched Keith now as though something had changed. More closely, more cautiously. A break was coming, of that he knew. Keith’s silent rage was textbook, as predictable as the clock on his wall. So it was no surprise to anyone when a glanced blade from a blocked thrust turned into a full bodied shove between Lance and a wall in the training deck in the middle of the night.

“GET OFFA ME MULLET!” Lance warned, his sweaty face inches from Keith’s snarl. "BACK THE HELL OFF!"

Hunk and Pidge were no idiots. Pidge was on her com already and Hunk, for all his worth, attempted to place himself between the two paladins and imminent destruction.

“Earth to Keith! C’mon dude, let him go.” Hunk found it difficult to keep his voice steady as he grunted, trying to pull the two apart without becoming involved himself in the promised violence.

Shiro nearly took out a table stacked with crystal samples in his haste to reach the deck. What he found was Hunk, red in the face and exhausted, wedged between Keith straining against Hunk’s powerful frame to get at Lance, equally intent on bailing out of the scenario.

Shiro used his military voice.

“AT EASE!” He bellowed.

No one responded. Least of all Keith.

“Shiro! You’ve got to do something!” Pidge pleaded. “He’s not listening! He’s gonna hurt Lance.”

“Keith, stand down!” He barked, moving in close to reach him. ”That’s an order, soldier!”

Heaving and straining, Keith did not relinquish his hold on Lance’s collar. For his part, Lance’s
muscles were trembling with the effort of keeping Keith at bay. Shiro regretted it but he had no choice. Igniting his cyber hand, he grasped Keith’s arm firmly and forced it up hard and away from Lance’s body, releasing the two with a loud grunt.

“You stupid son of a QUIZNAK!” Lance yelled. “You nearly broke my neck!”

“I’ll deal with him. Get gone NOW.” Shiro said with a nod to Hunk, signaling him to accompany Lance out of their situation. To his credit, Lance obeyed, rubbing his sore neck where Keith had bruised it. Pidge waited and Shiro did not dismiss her. She stood closest to Keith from where he shook and sweated on the ground where he’d been tossed. Shiro breathed deeply to steady himself first before turning to Keith and dropping down to one knee beside him.

“Keith…” Pidge said, worry in her voice.

“Wanna blame me too, Pidge?” Keith’s voice cut sharply.

“Hey!” Shiro snapped. “Cool your jets. You’re done for today.”

“Just today?” Keith raised his head and Shiro could see the pain there.

“Pidge, would you give us a minute?”

Pidge hesitated before turning around and exiting, her silent sadness adding weight to the already heavy air.

“You’ve been watching me.” Keith muttered, running a hand through his hair.

“Yes.” Shiro agreed, biting his lip.

“You want me gone too!” Keith affirmed, opening and closing his gloved fists.

“No one wants you gone, Keith.” Shiro’s attempt to make physical contact with Keith’s shoulder was met with a wrenched shrug.

“I made a mistake. Why can’t anyone leave it alone?” The sullen defeat in his voice was jarring.

Shiro didn’t want this talk. Especially because Keith’s own mind repeated it like a prayer before he went to sleep and every morning when he woke up. But some things had to be voiced and if Keith needed to hear it, it should be from no one else but him.

“You disobeyed a direct order, Keith. You endangered not only your own life but the safety of your lion.”

"I know- I just- I don't know where to go...sometimes..."

Shiro listened.

"I'm no where. Never have been--anywhere--"

Shiro slid down the wall until he met the floor. The training deck room was hot and still smelled of sweat and electric charge. Keith had come down a bit from his rage, his eyes no longer storming. His weapon fell away from his fist with a sharp clatter and his head hung low with a heaved sigh.

“Of course, you're some where. Yer HERE, Hey, look AT me!” Shiro pressed. He waited a few beats until Keith lifted his face. Such confusion and grief there, it made Shiro want to swallow his next words.
“You’re here.” He repeated, unwilling to let Keith disengage from his voice. “But you could do better with more respect.”

Keith’s body crumpled and all the fight seemed to leave him then. Shiro stretched out an arm and let Keith clutch his bicep. With a huff and a groan, he lurched them both back to their feet but before he could turn around and begin to leave, Keith’s arms encircled his waist again, clinging tightly, face pressed into his stomach.

“It hurts.”

He said through clenched teeth.

“It’s going to until you learn to deal with it in a better way.”

Shiro’s words calmed him and he felt Keith’s locked shoulders loosen up. Gradually, he shifted straighter, pulling away slightly.

“One that doesn’t involve breaking Lance’s jaw?”

“You will apologize.” Shiro stated. Keith nodded. “And then you will work to repair it.”

“His jaw?” Keith frowned.

“His trust.”

Shiro remembered the old way he and his brothers used to end arguments. A facial expression, a touch or a word that signaled closure for both. Keith's eyes had not yet left him, waiting for him to say or do something. Shiro stood there, speechless and dumb. He was overheated. He needed a cup of ice water very badly. Keith solved the problem for them both by taking Shiro's hand--the one that glowed with a mechanical pulse--and pressed it against his chest.

"Thank you, Aniki." Keith breathed. Shiro's fingers curled slightly beneath Keith's hand.

Chapter End Notes

Trying to bring this epic soap drama to a reasonable end. Keith needs his comeuppance and yeah, he’s got to be held accountable for his actions. No one better to do it than Shiro.

End Notes

Did I not completely rip this out of the intro to Empire Strikes Back?
Keith should be grateful he never gets stuffed into the hide of a Tauntaun. Or a deep-dish Chicago pizza.

Shiro is the hottest space dad ever and he cares deeply about his brood. Especially his dumbass ones.
I spend a lotta time scouring the intrawebs for the level of indulgent h/c that I crave and when I don't finds it, I gotsta makes it. Thank you for reading!

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