"Uh," Pidge said, "Lance? Buddy? What's the deal?"

"That's Lance?" Hunk shouted, somehow still ramming ships away from the castle; Keith felt like bubbles were bursting in his head, effervescent pops of giddy fear mixed with conviction. Lance, he thought, Lance feels like this. "Thank God, I thought I was going crazy for a second."

Notes

I didn't mean to write this, but I saw a couple of 'magical paladin psychic bond' fics and I had to get in on it while I could. I can't believe I've written fic for a giant robot cat cartoon. What a weird, wonderful world it is.

Title from Fifth Harmony's song, "All In My Head (Flex)."

EDIT: Please go and leave very nice comments and likes on baconater4ever's art for this fic, here! Thank you so much for making it! <3

See the end of the work for more notes

It started off so subtly that none of them were even really aware of what was happening. It only occurred when they were fighting, when they were in the lions or formed into Voltron -- that was
when it was the strongest, like their physical connection amplified it. At first it was like a gentle pressure on their minds, this nudge of something other, but it was easily ignored or dismissed in the heat of battle.

And generally, they were already feeling the same thing anyway -- it wasn't like there was a broad spectrum of emotions that you went through when you were flying through space, fighting an alien enemy. But over time, Keith had started to notice this flicker of -- something, something that was distinctly not him. And then suddenly, during their latest fight against the Galra, it exploded into his awareness, grabbing at his attention and pulling his head away from the fighting.

*It* was this awed, reckless delight, pulsing like fireworks in the back of his mind, and it felt so strongly of *Lance* that the Red Lion pulled up short in battle, Keith struggling to understand what was happening. Through Red's screen, he could see Pidge and Shiro similarly distracted, though they didn't stop like he had.

"Uh," Pidge said, "Lance? Buddy? What's the deal?"

"That's *Lance*?" Hunk shouted, somehow still ramming ships away from the castle; Keith felt like bubbles were bursting in his head, effervescent pops of giddy fear mixed with conviction. *Lance*, he thought, *Lance feels like this.* "Thank God, I thought I was going crazy for a second."

Keith forcefully shook himself and pushed Red back into motion, propelling himself off the floating wreckage of a battle cruiser back into combat.

"What are you guys talking about?" Lance asked, guiding Blue around the firefight with an almost insolent corkscrew turn, and it was so weird, but Keith knew he was smiling, could feel it like it was his own mouth. He touched his lips just to be sure, and then felt himself flush for no reason.

"Guys," Shiro called, "Let's focus. Lance, we can feel your emotions for some reason, tone it down until we can take the time to figure this out. We need to keep distracting them until Allura is ready."

"What the fu--" Lance said, only to be cut off when the Castle of Lions unloaded an ion beam at the Galra merchant station they'd decided to raid, effectively halting the flow of ships coming out of the base by blowing the exit the fuck up.

Pidge was cheering, and Shiro was telling them to retreat to the castle so they could leave, but all Keith could hear was a soft buzzing in his head, and beneath that, a distant mortified confusion, simmering deep down in his throat. Lance didn't say anything the whole way back to the castle.

As soon as they stepped out of the lions, the feeling dissipated, as if it had never happened. Pidge was out first, nimbly throwing themselves out of Green's open mouth and over to Blue, where Lance was just now appearing. As Keith stepped out of the Red Lion, he felt his awareness of Lance evaporate into nothingness.

"Lance," Pidge said, "How did you do that?" They grabbed Lance by the collar of his jacket, pulling him down and peering into his eyes like they could figure out what had happened just by staring Lance down.

"Pidge!" Lance yelled, trying to pull back, "I don't know! I don't even know what you guys are talking about, it didn't happen to me!" He managed to pull Pidge's hands out of his shirt and stood...
up straight, running a hand through his hair in a gesture that looked odd on Lance, who was almost never frustrated or upset where people could see.

"It was weird," Hunk said, pulling his helmet off and wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. He and Shiro were hauling stolen Galra equipment out of Yellow's open mouth, but they clearly were more focused on Lance. "It was like we could feel what you were feeling. You were super excited about fighting those Galra ships, dude."

Keith glanced at Lance, trying to figure out what he was thinking. Lance's face had gone slack with surprise, but now he was pursing his mouth, looking uncomfortable. Hunk was technically right, but Keith thought that there was nuance to the way Lance had been feeling during the battle -- it wasn't just excitement, it was this joyous and terrifying wonderment of flying and surviving and risking everything just to save others. It was like Lance was piloting Blue with his entire life flashing before his eyes. Keith hadn't known that Lance could feel things so deeply, which was weird, because Lance was so demonstrative all the time. It should have been obvious that he would have strong emotions, but this was -- different. Keith wasn't sure why.

"Why was it just me?" Lance asked, frowning a little. "Are you sure that's what it was? Maybe it was just you guys picking up your lion's brainwaves again or something."

"It was you," Keith said quietly, and Lance flicked his gaze his direction so quickly that Keith startled a little. "It just... felt like you," he added, when Lance just continued to stare.

"It was him," a new voice said, and Allura stepped out of the lift, still in her battle suit and flushed with victory. Her hair was wispy around the edges of her updo and she was beaming. "It's wonderful news, Paladins! It means you're finally connecting as one! Well done, Lance!"

Lance blushed a little under Allura's praise. "Uh. What did I do?"

Allura patted him on the shoulder. "You've opened your mind up to the others fully! All of you will soon be able to connect with each other while you're in battle, especially now that one of you has begun the connection."

"All of us?" Shiro asked, frowning slightly. "And what exactly does 'connect' mean?"

"Good question!" Coran said, pointing at Shiro. "It means you'll be able to understand what the others are feeling during battle, allowing you to improve your fighting synchronicity and reaction times! You'll instinctively know what the others are doing without the hindrance of actually trying to articulate it! It's incredible, isn't it?"

"Your lions facilitate the connection," Allura explained, "because they're connected to you and to each other. It is not an invasion of privacy, but rather a projection of intent. You are simply conversing with each other the way you would converse with your lions -- it's a better form of communication for battle. Because Lance has opened the connection, the rest of your lions will plug into it in no time."

"This is so weird," Pidge said, scrunching their nose, "Is it really necessary? Like, can we turn it off?"

"I'm afraid not," Coran said, "Or at least not right now. The last paladins were able to control the connection somewhat, but they'd been training their bond for years and years at that point."

"Okay," Shiro said, spreading his hands in a placating gesture, "We'll figure it out. For right now, though, it wasn't so much a help as a hindrance. We all need to try to limit how much we send through the connection the next time we're in the lions so we don't distract each other, okay?"
"Yeah," Pidge said, "Keith totally froze up when Lance was projecting earlier." Lance whipped around to look at Keith again.

"You did what?" Lance said, grinning. Keith felt a blush spread across the bridge of his nose. He glowered.

"Your dumb feelings were crowding around in my brain. No wonder you're so clumsy all the time if that's what it's like in your head," he said, growing even more annoyed when Lance didn't seem bothered by the insult.

"Sorry you had to experience real emotion for once, dude. You'll get used to it," Lance said, waving a flippant hand at him. "Don't worry, Shiro, I'll be good," he added, flashing a grin.

"Uh huh," Shiro said skeptically, but they all turned to leave the hangar. Pidge was still questioning Allura and Coran about the connection, Hunk was asking Shiro about the shipment of parts they'd managed to salvage off the merchant station, and Lance was lingering behind. He was practically fidgeting at the entrance, dragging his feet and casting covert looks at Keith under his lashes. Keith ran a hand through his sweaty hair, lifting it off his neck, and then caught up with him, ignoring the flutter in his throat. They walked in silence for a moment, but Keith could tell Lance was building up to something.

"Was it weird?" Lance asked suddenly, looking oddly hesitant. His hands were twitching a little with nervous energy. "Being in my head, I mean," he added, like Keith didn't know what he was getting at.

"Uh," Keith said, because for all that it had been distracting, it wasn't like it had been bad. Lance's feelings were bright and guileless and warm, and Keith was surprised to find that he was actually kind of looking forward to experiencing them again. "It was fine. I mean. It wasn't weird."

Lance continued to look at him for a moment, studying his eyes intently. Keith felt his stomach quiver for a second, because Lance had never looked at him like that before, like he was looking into Keith. "You didn't feel... no. Okay." Lance's shoulders relaxed a little, releasing a tension that Keith hadn't really been aware Lance had been holding. "Awesome. Hey, you wanna spar tomorrow morning?"

"Sure?" Keith said, a little thrown off by the sudden change in topics. "0900 good for you?"

"Yeah yeah," Lance said, already jogging away, no doubt to get to his room and shower. Lance was particular about post-mission showers. "See you then, bro."

After that, they all started picking up on it, in bits and pieces. Keith caught a flash of Hunk's alarm during one mission, a burst of feeling aimed at him that had him jerking Red's controls up and away just in time for the ship that had been sneaking up on him to fire into nothingness. Lance swooped past and froze the ship in place so that Hunk could smash it apart, both of them whooping in delight.

"Dude!" Hunk yelled, "That was so cool! I didn't even have to say anything!"

So they began to learn about the bond.

Pidge tended to project a curious, determined focus, tinged with annoyance whenever something
wasn't going their way. Their projections came in sharp points, don't do this, avoid that -- it was a little like being poked, though not exactly painful. Shiro was a calm, confident presence at the back of his mind, unwaveringly devoted to keeping all of them in line and safe. His projections tended to feel like a hand at his back, gently pushing him along. Hunk was a strong, full blast of feeling, sometimes worry or fear but also a kind of practical nudge of support and reassurance here and there. He felt like a stabilizing force between all of the energies.

Lance was still bright, and cheerful, and sometimes terrified and reckless and wild -- Keith didn't want to tell the others, but he felt Lance the most, possibly because Lance felt more than anyone else. His emotions felt like little flickers of fingertips tapping against Keith's cheekbones, or the side of his neck, or over the top of his head. They were impulsive and unapologetic and kind of amazing, which baffled Keith to no end. It should have been annoying to feel Lance crowding around in his head, but instead he found himself looking forward to their missions, to getting to feel that unending tide of emotion roll over him.

Keith knew that he was sending his own feelings out, but he didn't know what it was like for everyone else. He didn't even know if everyone else felt the things he did through the bond -- and he was too embarrassed about his reaction to Lance to really ask. It wasn't like they were intentionally thinking things at each other. Keith's first time to properly connect had been when he had been alone on the far side of a planet they were trying to liberate, frustrated and stuck behind enemy fire, and he barely had time to realize I need help before Lance was pushing through the line of Galra ships, firing relentlessly and opening a path to Keith's freedom.

"I got you, Keith," Lance said, and Keith could tell he was smiling again. His own mouth curved.

"Thanks," he said, and tried not to think about the fact that seeing Blue rise over the tops of those ships had set his stomach shivering with excitement. Fuck. He imagined slamming a door closed between himself and the others, imagined a wall of glass erecting between his feelings and Lance, imagined that it would be that easy to keep them from seeing, and prayed that nothing had gone through. Through the connection, Lance's emotions never wavered -- maybe it had worked? Keith pushed Red into the opening Lance had made, tentatively feeling that none of the others were reacting. He was safe.

He matched pace with Blue as they sped toward the others, trying not to think at all.

Keith wasn't sure when this thing with Lance started. He tried to pin it down to a particular moment or interaction, but the truth was that he'd fallen into his feelings before he'd been aware of what was happening, like he'd been floating along in the ocean and then suddenly realized he was drowning and there was no way back to the surface. He just looked at Lance one morning over breakfast and sleepily thought, I really like you. Lance wasn't even doing anything special, yawning and rubbing at the corner of an eye with his fist, but Keith's heart stuttered in his chest. It was like a huge swell of feelings were crowding up into this throat, threatening to spill out like hiccups. He could barely breathe through this revelation, hearing I have feelings for Lance echo through his mind over and over again.

Shiro noticed, of course, because Shiro noticed everything, but thankfully everyone else was too tired or distracted by food to realize that Keith was losing his mind over Lance, who was sipping the Altean version of coffee with little contented noises that made Keith flush. Shiro raised an eyebrow inquisitively at him, and Keith shook his head subtly, widening his eyes in a plea for Shiro to keep quiet. Shiro pressed his lips together and smiled reassuringly.
Keith ate breakfast in a daze, determinedly avoiding Lance's eyes and then rushing off to the training deck without saying a single thing to anyone. He heard Lance say his name as he hurried out of the room, worry edging it into a question. He clenched his fists and ignored him, running down the corridors of the castle, heart thudding with every step.

This was ridiculous. He liked Lance, more than he could remember liking anyone his entire life. The realization tumbled into memories of the last few months they’d been together. He liked Lance’s big, obnoxious laugh, and his cocky smile and his serious eyes and his warm skin. He liked Lance’s tendency to sing in the shower, and his ability to make anyone laugh with a terrible pun, and the way he sometimes sat in the control room and looked out at the stars without saying anything for hours. He liked that Lance was bright and crazy and endlessly open when they were in their lions, he liked that Lance was always at his back without a word; he liked that they still fought over little things, bickering about hairstyles or whether or not Red or Blue was faster or who was better on the training deck. He liked his broad shoulders and his curved lips and his long, long legs. He just -- really liked Lance. He closed the door to the training room behind him, burying his face in his hands and pressing his palms to his burning cheeks.

How could he keep this from everyone when it felt like his entire body was humming with thoughts of Lance? His stomach was tangled in knots, his heart was shaking, his hands were trembling; all it would take was one offhand emotion leaked through the bond and everyone would know.

He had to shut it all down. He couldn't deal with everyone finding out, Lance finding out, because then Keith would be the reason the entire universe came to an end. If Lance had to reject Keith, they would never be able to form Voltron, and Zarkon would have no one to stop him from taking over everything. He had to bury his feelings where no one could find them, because Voltron was all Keith had now -- he would not lose his new family because he couldn't control a crush.

It was easier said than done. He hadn't realized how much time he spent talking to Lance, or practicing with Lance, or just sitting quietly in the common area with Lance, until he actively restricted himself from it. He had to stop himself from going to see him two separate times, halfway down the hall to seek Lance out after their latest mission.

Lance had been giving him wounded looks for the last week; every time he frowned because Keith told him he was too busy to spar, or had to go to his room for something instead of hanging out in the observatory, Keith's stomach ripped itself apart with guilt. It hurt to put that expression on Lance's face, but all it did was reinforce that he had to stop himself from feeling this way before it got even worse. If he let his feelings get any deeper, there was no way he'd be able to be around Lance, much less work with him to save the universe.

It was for the best, Keith told himself, ignoring the ache in his chest he was carrying around like a bruise.

"I know what you're doing, you know," Pidge told him one evening while he was cleaning his sword in the common area. They looked up from their computer screen and quirked their mouth at him. He couldn't tell if it was a patronizing smirk or a sympathetic one. Keith tensed but kept his face calm.

"Maintaining my weapon?" he asked, deliberately casual. He knew Pidge was too smart to be
fooled, but there was no way Keith was going to open up this conversation of his own free will.

"Keith," Pidge said, rolling their eyes, "You know it's okay, right? It's not gonna mess up the team if he finds out." They smoothed a lock of hair behind their ear and set their computer to the side, clearly intending to follow through on this conversation. Keith tightened his grip on his sword and wouldn't meet their eyes.

"Pretty sure it would," he said flatly.

"You don't know that," Pidge said, crossing their arms. "But you know what is gonna mess up the team? Lance thinking that you hate him now because you can't spend more than five minutes with him before you run away." Keith winced, a familiar hollowness filling his chest at the admonition in their tone. "Everyone has noticed, Keith. The rest of us know what you're trying to do, but to Lance, it just looks like you're pushing him away for no reason." Everyone knew. Everyone already knew. Keith felt the hollowness give way to panicked misery, thinking of the other team members talking among themselves about Keith's stupid feelings for Lance, about whether or not he was going to ruin their mission. His entire body felt numb.

Pidge seemed to notice, because they looked worried all of a sudden. Their voice gentled a little, and they reached out and touched his arm softly. Keith tried not to flinch away. "Keith, I get it. You're worried about yourself and about the rest of us, about Voltron. But it's not helping anyone to run away from him."

Keith had known on some level that Lance would be hurt by him trying to distance himself, and he knew that it could mess up the team dynamic. But the thing was, in the long run, it was better for everyone if there was a clean break between the two of them, if they could remain allies and nothing else. Keith knew himself well enough to know that if he spent any time with Lance as friends, he was going to fall deeper and deeper. He already felt like he was the ocean tides being pulled into shore, helpless against the moon's effect -- like he was helpless in the wake of Lance. Keith had to stop himself now, and that meant stopping everything.

But Pidge was right. It was too noticeable, and he was putting everyone at risk by shutting Lance out without reason. He would just have to be more subtle about it. He couldn't do that. He wouldn't be the one to ruin this family, the first real family he could remember having.

His fingertips felt cold. He took a deep breath and said, "You're right, Pidge. I'm just... scared, I guess. I'll stop avoiding him, I promise."

Pidge didn't look convinced, but they smiled tentatively at him. "We just want you to be happy, Keith. Both of you." They squeezed his arm and then turned back to their computer, thankfully ending the conversation. Keith closed his eyes and tried to believe that it was possible.

He stopped leaving the room when Lance was around, had casual conversations with him and even sparred with him a few times. Lance seemed thrilled at first, clinging to his arm while they walked down the halls, punching him on the shoulder when they finished up a practice session on the training deck. A tension that had filled the castle seemed to dissipate, and Keith realized how much of a bad idea his initial plan had been.

But being around Lance also meant that his heart skipped constantly, that he was looking for excuses for his red cheeks and his sweaty palms and his breathlessness. He let Lance crowd
around him for a few days, and then he began to back off again. This time, he didn't leave the room, but he did politely let Lance talk himself into a one-way conversation. He started sitting a couple of seats down from Lance during downtime in the common area; he still participated in the discussions and games they played, even spoke to and argued with Lance a few times, but it was nowhere near the level of enthusiasm he'd been displaying before. Keith ruthlessly pushed his feelings down every time he was with Lance, locked them in a box in his mind and tried to maintain a friendly disposition. Lance seemed puzzled, but Keith was still spending time with him, was still being a part of the group and clearly didn't hate him. What could he say?

Keith was relieved, and underneath that, sick with fear and guilt and worry. He wanted so badly to be able to reach out and hold Lance's hand, to stay up late talking about their homes and hobbies back on earth. Every time he kept himself from touching Lance on the shoulder as they suited up, there was a physical ache in his chest.

This is for the best, he told himself firmly.

He would have to live with it until it went away on its own.

"We're taking heavy fire over here!" Hunk shouted, practically pulsing the bond with anxiety. Keith gritted his teeth and struggled to make his way to where Hunk and Pidge were trying to fight their way through at least a hundred Galra fighter ships, the vastness of space around them streaked with pink and red beams of light. They'd been ambushed on their way through this galaxy, trying to locate a distress beacon. Allura was pretty sure the cry for help had been a trap all along, but they'd been forced into battle without any preparation, and they were all sending jagged streaks of frustration and worry and anger through the connection.

"I'm on it," Lance called back, pushing away from the rest of them, trusting Keith and Shiro to have his back without saying anything. Keith's stomach dropped as he watched Lance take a shot to the back, but Shiro cut the ship in half and blocked enemy access to the Blue Lion by planting his lion in between them. Keith flitted around him, attacking anyone who got too close, keeping a desperate hold on the connection to the other three. Pidge was nearly incandescent with fury, and Hunk was still worried but with a new edge of determination taking hold, which was a good sign. It meant they weren't hopeless, that they saw a way out. Lance was --

Keith felt his blood run cold.

Lance was not bright, or warm, or reckless in his mind. Lance was a still, frozen note hanging somewhere behind him, a sustained high pitched frequency instead of the usual excited tumble of emotions. Keith's breath grew labored, because he knew, instinctively, why Lance was feeling that way.

"Don't," he said desperately, wheeling Red around. He couldn't see Lance anywhere through the swarms of ships. "Don't, don't--"

Shiro finally picked up on Lance's silence and the strained connection and said, "Lance? What are you doing?"

Keith pushed past the Black Lion, searching frantically for any glimpse of Blue. There was only the sound of explosions and bursts of light as fire rained down upon them; the Green and Yellow Lions were picking their way through a straggling group of enemy ships, so Pidge and Hunk had
managed to escape, but Lance--

Keith's heart lurched. There. He was on his own, having led the majority of the Galra ships his way, and now was stuck on the other side of the quadrant with a battle cruiser between him and the rest of them. They couldn't take down a battle cruiser like that without forming Voltron, and they couldn't form Voltron without Lance.

A long, empty silence filled Keith's head.

"I'm sorry," Lance said, quiet over the comms. "I didn't -- I'm sorry." He felt like despair and fear and worry, but underneath that was a quiet acceptance. "You guys will be fine," he said, and Keith could tell that he was smiling, still smiling. His eyes blurred and he choked out a sound that might have been Lance's name. His hands were gripping the controls so tightly that they ached.

There was a pause and then Lance said, "Keith."

He didn't say anything else, but he sent a feeling Keith's way. It was soft and happy, wrapping comfortable around his mind; it was long nights and breathless sparring and feeling a body pressed against his own while they tussled on the ground, laughter echoing down hallways and late night snacks, conversations about their mothers and earth and how much they missed real, true sunshine. It was lingering glances and red cheeks and pounding hearts. It was -- Lance was --

The battle cruiser locked onto the Blue Lion and fired.

Someone was screaming through the comms; it took Keith a moment to realize that it was his own voice, and by the time he noticed he was already thrusting Red toward the thick of the enemy without pausing. The others were stunned on the edge of his consciousness, but they all jolted back into action as Keith burst through enemy ships relentlessly, firing without stopping to assess the damage. Red shook with every hit they took, but he kept pressing forward, to where he could see Blue hanging limply in space, completely dark.

"Keith!" Hunk shouted, voice shaky with tears, "Don't, Lance is--"

Gone, Lance was gone. They could all feel his absence like a gaping wound through the connection, but Keith clenched his fists and filled the emptiness up again with fury. He was so angry, angry at these fucking ships, angry at the others for acting like it was even possible to leave Lance here, angry at himself for wasting his time pretending he didn't have feelings, pretending that he wasn't head over heels in love with Lance, and he was especially angry at Lance, who had chosen to tell him, to show him that he might actually feel the same way at the last second before he -- before he --

He could feel the others fall in behind him, keeping the enemy off him as best they could. He could hear the ion canon on the battle cruiser charging up again, and dismissed it as irrelevant. All that was important now was getting to Lance.

The ship fired, but the impact was shot out of orbit by another beam. The Castle of Lions was suddenly in the fray, along with dozens of other ships from colonies they'd managed to free. Allura was shouting something through the comms, but Keith didn't bother to listen. All that mattered was that they drew the fire of the battle cruiser away from where Blue was still floating; Keith pulled up next to her, already out of his chair before Red could open the bay door.

Blue was cracked in a dozen places, electricity sparking over the outside paneling and several pieces of its body drifting around. Keith launched himself from Red, using his jets to maneuver into Blue's open mouth. There was a panel that should open the head up, but because the systems were down, he pulled his bayard out and jammed it into the opening, prying it apart. The door
grudgingly opened, and then he was inside the Blue Lion.

There was smoke in the air, and the sparks inside were more dense, trailing from wires and popping out of panels and screens. He ran through it all to the head, barely breathing, ignoring the explosions outside that sent shockwaves through the floating lion and had him stumbling.

The head was surprisingly more intact than anywhere else, although the main screen was cracked down the center. The pilot's seat was empty, and Keith's heart seized until he recognized the slumped figure on the ground. Lance. He crashed to his knees beside him, lifting him up onto his lap, turning his body over with shaking hands.

Lance's visor had sealed automatically when the interior of the Blue Lion had been compromised, so Keith couldn't see his face properly, couldn't tell if he was breathing or not. Heart pounding, he desperately pressed his ear over Lance's heart, praying he would be able to hear or feel something through the armor.

He waited, the space of a heartbeat and then another, and then two more, clenching his fingers around Lance's arm. He could feel the others flickering on the edge of the connection, as terrified and hopeful and worried as he'd ever felt them. He pressed against Lance's chest harder, thinking please please please don't leave me here, please don't go.

Nothing.

Nothing.

It was impossible. Keith sat up, chest heaving, and stared down at Lance's body sprawled across his lap, unable to process that this was really happening. There was no way that Lance could really be gone. Lance couldn't be -- Lance was necessary, Lance was unstoppable, Lance was everything. He was endless motion and terrible jokes and laughter and unending support and Keith needed him, needed him like air or sleep or a thousand other things that bodies needed to keep functioning.

He didn't realize he'd been saying this out loud until someone said, "Keith."

He couldn't tell who it was at first, because it was so quiet through the comms, raspy and low, like it was being filtered through static. He thought it was Shiro at first, and he opened his mouth to snarl some kind of response to him, to curse everyone in this entire fucking galaxy, when something gripped his wrist.

He looked down, uncomprehending, at Lance's hand wrapped around him. The grip was weak, but it was there.

"Lance?" he said, voice cracking.

"Is he okay? Is he alive?" That was Hunk, shouting at him through the comms, sounding like he was still crying, with Pidge and Shiro speaking underneath him, all of them pushing at the bond to try to feel Lance again. He still wasn't part of the connection, but he was here, in Keith's arms, and he was moving. "Keith, tell us something, dude!"

"Hey Hunk," Lance wheezed out, and yes, he was alive, he was alive. Keith felt the strength drain from his body; he felt like a star collapsing in on itself, like all of his ability to hold himself up had evaporated at the sound of his voice. He lowered his head to Lance's, breathing shallowly, and pressed their helmets together, pretending he could see Lance's eyes through the visor. "Hey," Lance said again, so quiet, just for him.

The others were shouting all at once, an incomprehensible calamity of excitement and chaos, but
Keith just let himself absorb the fact that Lance was still alive, that he was holding onto Keith despite everything. Relief was spreading like fire along his spine and through to his fingertips. He sucked in a huge, shaky gulp of air.

"Keith, you gotta get him back onto Red and get to the castle," Shiro said, pushing firm leadership through the bond. Keith struggled to pull himself together, still reeling from the shock of losing and gaining everything in the space of ten minutes. He felt like he'd aged ten years. "Coran has already prepped a pod and he's got med supplies ready in your hangar, we'll cover you but you have to go now."

Keith sat up, and Lance's hand dropped from his wrist as he moved to pick him up. A jolt of alarm shot through him, but he could hear Lance struggling to breathe now through the comms, and he winced when Lance made a pained noise as Keith scooped him up into his arms.

"Princess carry," Lance mumbled, and Keith found his mouth twitching, just a little, even now. It was so undeniably Lance, to make a joke while he was broken and bleeding all over Keith's armor, to do his best to help comfort others when he was the one who needed it the most. No wonder I love him, he thought, tightening his arms around Lance's shoulders, stepping as carefully as he could to keep from jostling him too hard. He didn't realize he was projecting his feelings to the other paladins until Pidge's surprise pricked against his mind, followed by Shiro's warm affection and Hunk's genuine happiness.

He was embarrassed, but it was spilling out of him like an overfull cup, all of his joy and love and worry and relief leaking through to the others, and he couldn't have stopped it if he wanted to. He was vaguely glad that Lance was still removed from the connection, because the last thing he needed was to be bombarded with Keith's emotions while he was still on the brink of death.

Progress was slow because Keith froze every time Lance's breath hitched or he groaned, but they finally made it back into Red. When the doors sealed, their visors opened and Keith could finally, finally see his face again. There was blood streaked down the side of his head, and scrapes and bruises across his cheekbones, but his eyes were open and he was smiling. Keith wanted to press his mouth to that smile, swallowed against the urge to just touch him. This wasn't the time.

"I've gotta set you down," he said, moving Lance to the floor next to the pilot's seat. There was a bed in the rear of the head, in case they ever had to stay in the lions for an extended period of time, but Keith couldn't bear the idea of Lance being too far away. "Try not to move, okay? Just -- hold on, I'm gonna get you to the castle."

"'Kay," Lance said, closing his eyes. "You have..." Lance gestured weakly, and Keith realized he was trying to point to his face. Keith touched his cheek, surprised to find it was wet and cold with tears. He flushed, wiping them away. He touched the top of Lance's head briefly, then dropped into his pilot seat -- Red was waiting for him, primed to go. He barely had to touch the controls and the lion leaped forward. He cast a quick though to the others, remembering Blue floating alone in space behind him; he knew Lance would be distraught if it was captured or abandoned, but he couldn't spare the time to get it back to the castle himself. Shiro acknowledged him through the bond, already headed his way.

In the time that Keith had been saving Lance, the fight had somehow managed to wind down. The ally ships Allura had called on had been equipped with enough firepower to overpower the battle cruiser, and even with two lions out of the fight, the other paladins had managed to destroy a huge swath of the Galra ships. Keith felt a surge of fierce pride in his team; they reflected it back to him, and Pidge and Hunk acted as escorts as he cut his way through the remaining ships back to the castle. They didn't take fire once.

Inside the hangar, Coran waited with a floating stretcher, impatiently pushing into Red's mouth as
it opened to help Keith carry Lance over. "Oh Lance," Coran said softly, running his hands over the armor and feeling for injuries. They removed Lance's helmet, both grimacing at the blood coating the inside; Keith had to physically hold himself back from touching the wound, terrified of hurting him but aching to touch him and confirm that it wasn't as bad as it looked. It looked really, really bad.

"Don't 'oh Lance' me, Coran," Lance said, not bothering to open his eyes. His arm was dangling over the edge of the stretcher as they rushed him to the healing pods, so Keith gently lifted it and set it down at his side. Lance raised his hand and grabbed hold of Keith's fingers as they pulled away, and the strength that he gripped them with startled Keith for a moment. He glanced down at Lance's dark hand wrapped around his pale one, and squeezed back as gently as he could.

Lance was almost in the healing pod before he spoke again. Coran entered the starting sequence for the cryogenics, and Keith maneuvered Lance into position, propping him up and trying to keep from putting pressure on any of his injuries.

"I meant it," Lance said suddenly. Keith looked up from where he was adjusting Lance's body carefully, to find that Lance was looking at him with his dark blue eyes open, and the softest look on his face Keith had ever seen. "Earlier. Before. I meant it."

Keith's heart shuddered in his chest. "I know," he said. Lance smiled weakly; it was the most beautiful thing Keith had ever seen. Coran called for him to get out of the pod so it could seal, and Keith gave into an impulse and put his hand to Lance's cheek, pressing against it briefly. Lance's eyes widened.

"Me too," he said, and then stepped back and let the door close.

Lance was in the healing pod for a full week. He'd broken multiple ribs, and had suffered from internal bleeding, a mild concussion, and various other bruises and fractures. Keith wanted to spend every moment waiting for him, but the team wouldn't let him; Allura set him to the task of helping Coran repair Blue, who Shiro had managed to drag back to the castle. Pidge regularly made him help them with small chores around the castle, Hunk forced him to come and eat, and Shiro refused to allow him to sleep in the healing pod chamber.

Every moment spent away from Lance's side left Keith in a mild panic, terrified that something would go wrong while he wasn't there and he'd be too late, but he also knew it wouldn't do any good to break down while Lance recovered. He wanted to be able to have the conversation they were going to have without worrying about anything interrupting them.

All of his time not taken by the others was spent sitting quietly with Lance, thinking of what he wanted to say.

Everyone crowded around when Lance was due to be released, but they let Keith to be at the front to catch him when he stumbled out. The whoosh of the door opening made everyone tense, but Lance just blinked, opened his eyes, and then swayed forward, falling into Keith's open arms. His body was cool to the touch, but his breath was warm where it fanned across Keith's neck, making him shiver. Lance huffed out a laugh, and then straightened in the circle of Keith's arms without pulling away.

"Hey guys," Lance said cheerfully, face still buried in Keith's neck. "Long time no see?"
"You jackass," Pidge muttered, pushing past Hunk and Shiro so they could pinch Lance's arm. When he yelped, they crossed their arms. "You don't get to do stuff like that, Lance." Their voice wobbled a little, and Shiro rested a hand on their shoulder; their mouth firmed at his touch. "We would have helped you, if you'd just let us."

Lance finally pulled away from Keith, moving to wrap his arms around Pidge tightly until they relaxed and hugged him back. "I'm sorry, Pidge. I didn't mean for it to happen. I promise." Behind them, Hunk let out a sniffing noise and then wrapped the two of them up in a hug, squeezing so tightly Pidge squeaked a little.

"You gotta be more careful, dude," Hunk said, wiping his eyes when he finally let them go. "We're all a family out here, and that means we gotta stick together. Don't be the hero." He gently punched Lance's shoulder, and Lance laughed.

"But I do it so well, Hunk," he said, and winked at Allura, who rolled her eyes and then threw herself into his arms.

"Lance, you absolute idiot," she said, voice soft, "If you ever do something like that again I will have you thrown out of the airlock." He made a protesting sound that was muffled by her hair, which was covering his face. She leaned back, kissed him on his forehead, and then pointed a finger sternly at him.

"Got it, princess," Lance said, holding his hands up.

Coran patted his shoulder gently, and said, "Don't you worry, Lance, the Blue Lion will be up and about in no time, just like yourself. In the meantime, you have mandatory rest, and if you try to avoid it I'll throw you out the airlock myself."

Lance gripped Coran's arm. "Blue is okay? It made it?"

"You were in about the same state," Shiro said dryly, and stepped up and hugged Lance tightly. He whispered something in Lance's ear that Keith couldn't hear, but he saw Lance's eyes go wide and wet, and heard Lance reply just as softly. They pulled apart, and Lance wiped his eyes roughly.

"Well," Pidge said, looking at Keith with poorly disguised amusement. "I've got things to do. Hunk?"

Hunk nodded vigorously, grinning. "Oh yeah, the stuff. Let's go, Pidge."

The others cleared out without bothering to make something up, and Lance rolled his eyes at Keith when the doors closed.

"Do they think we're idiots, or are they just enjoying this way too much?" he asked, groaning as he sat down on the steps that led to the pods. Keith sat beside him, close enough to feel the warmth coming off his skin.

"The second one, I think," he said, smiling. Lance looked at him out of the corner of his eye, and Keith flushed when he realized that Lance blushing a little, pink across the bridge of his nose.

"So," Lance drawled, "That. Was a thing, that happened."

"Sure was," Keith agreed.

"That thing," Lance pressed, leaning closer to Keith. "Where we, you know, confessed feelings for each other. Romantic ones."
"Yep," Keith said, leaning back into him. Their hands overlapped, and then gripped one another.

"Okaaay. Are we gonna have the feelings talk now or later because--"

Keith cut him off with a kiss, pushing him back against the pod glass and pouring all of his worry and happiness into it. Lance opened his mouth in surprise but immediately kissed him back, winding his arms around Keith's neck. Keith took the opportunity to plunge his tongue into Lance's mouth, turning the kiss hot and wet and desperate.

"Okay, later," Lance said, pulling back to breathe. He gave Keith a moment to laugh, and then dove back in, kissing him with all of the fervor he usually showed when piloting the Blue Lion. Keith shivered, fingers digging into Lance's waist, pushing his head against the hands that Lance was winding into his hair.

They would have the talk later, Keith knew. He'd spent days thinking of every single thing that he wanted to say to Lance, all the ways he wanted to take the feelings they'd shared through the bond and put them into words. They would have to discuss how deep their feelings were (they were pretty deep; he knew his own heart, and what he'd gotten from Lance during the fight had been just as intense), what it would mean for the team, what it would mean for them to be paladins and boyfriends.

But that could wait, he decided. For now, he just wanted to kiss Lance, and to hold on. Lance seemed to agree.

End Notes

Check me out at my tumblr. Also I'm trying to use my twitter again, find me @apvrrish.

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