

Warning: Mild violence and sexual innuendo.

The boy, for he was still considered such by his elders, looked up slowly from his prone position on the ground. The man before him backed up a step, crossed his twin swords before himself and waited. Slowly the boy stood up, dust from the ground of the arena falling from him. He shook a strand of red hair from his saffron eye and stared back at the man.

"You have two choices," the man offered casually. "Forfeit your round or continue."

The boy looked around, regarding his classmates. He knew that he would be shamed if he forfeited the round. In fact, he would not be allowed back into the arena for practice for at least a score of days. That was the punishment for anyone who gave up a fight.

He also understood that he had to maintain the reputation he had worked so painstakingly to create. The Drule and Doomites had been enemies of old, with a shaky alliance keeping the Drule, the stronger supremacy, from destroying Doom. The child was not only a Doomite, but a hybrid as well. The competition for domination betwixt the two races also propelled him to achieve the grandest accomplishments possible.

"I will continue," he declared, his jaw set.

The man nodded, smiling subtly. "You are unarmed," he pointed out.

The boy shrugged. "It is only a matter of time before I am once again armed."

Without any warning, the man lunged towards him. The boy had only enough time to leap backwards in a graceful pirouette. However, he knew the man would shadow his move and as he landed on his feet, he dropped to the ground and rolled, tucking his legs tightly against himself.

As soon as he deemed he was safe enough he shot out his legs, the momentum bringing him to his feet and he sprang with another leap towards one of his fallen blades. He brought it up in time to parry the downward chop from the man. The second blade came in a horizontal arc, intending to sever his upper body at the waist. He understood his predicament and threw himself onto his back, flipping head over heels, the motion bringing him to his feet again.

The man smiled again. "The other blade. You're still rather vulnerable," he declared mockingly, knowing that it would tear at the young Prince's pride.

He was not disappointed. The boy leapt up again and through a series of arabesques began to make his way towards the other fallen blade. The man understood the motion and darted to shadow his acrobatic pupil. As the boy landed, the man lashed out at him with both blades; one at neck level, the other aimed straight at the heart.

Ducking and twisting his body, the boy accepted a vicious sting on his arm, instead of his chest, and watched as wisps of his hair fell to the ground cut away by the blade. Still in that awkward position, he retrieved the second blade and brought them up crossed to avert the downward swing from one of his opponent's blades.

The impact sent sparks, the ring of metal clashing echoed throughout the arena. The boy felt his arms go numb from the collision, but knew he could ill afford to succumb to the discomfort. As the second blade came predictably towards his waist again, he feigned a move with one of his. The man brought the sword in an upward motion to counter it and the boy smiled. Before the man could comprehend the implication behind the smirk, the boy kicked him hard in the abdomen, pushing him away. He then rushed over to the fallen teacher and placed twin blades on either side of his neck.

"You have two choices." The boy mimicked his mentor right down to the same unconcerned tone. "Forfeit your round or continue."

"Do not be foolish," the man responded.

Twin blades came up, but met empty air as the boy threw himself up and out of reach. As the man rose to his feet, he felt the cold touch of metal against his neck from behind.

"You have two choices," the boy repeated in the same off-hand manner. "Forfeit your round or continue."

The man laughed and allowed his blades to fall to the ground. The boy withdrew his, still watching the man warily.

"Well done, D'ssat," the man conceded. "You still have much to learn and a few rusty spots, but you have speed." He arched an eyebrow. "That will always be your main weapon. Your co-ordination and equilibrium are also quite good. There are few who can master twin swords and even fewer who can work in unison with their feet."

Lotor nodded, understanding that the complement had not been earned easily. It was his third year in the practice field and he had stained the sandy ground too many times with his own blood. Of all the students, he seemed to be the one carrying most scars. Twin sword fighting was the most dangerous weapon style in the Drule Academy. Few survived the intensive training. Fewer heard this particular man giving out praises.

“Tomorrow then?” Lotor asked quietly.

“Aye, youngling, tomorrow,” the man affirmed, seeing the Prince finally mastering the arduous melee fighting style. “I would like to extend through lunch if that would suit you.”

Lotor thought for a moment and nodded.

“Dismissed.”

Lotor ran out, dropping the practice blades carelessly on the weapons rack. Outside the arena he found several other young Drule boys resting from their intense training or classes. He spoke with no one. He continued running until he found a remote spot within a grove of gnarled trees.

“About time,” the Drule boy already there greeted, sitting beside a large box filled with food.

Lotor sprawled beside him, stealing a large wedge of cake. “Ghrapho will be my death yet.” He chomped down on the cake.

The boy laughed. “That’s because you’re obsessed. But then, you’re always obsessed over something.”

Lotor swallowed. “Like you’re one to talk!” He examined his cake briefly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hazar, you’re constantly obsessing over your marks. It’s sickening.” He placed another piece of cake in his mouth.

“Well, excuse me, Mster Math. I don’t handle things as well as you do.” Hazar shrugged, the matter seeming not to bother him at all. “Why are they making me take Math anyway?!”

“Cuz it’s fun,” Lotor stated with his mouth full.

“If you’re a masochist, I suppose,” Hazar uttered thoughtfully and laid back on the ground.

“You know, I was thinking that maybe we need a field trip,” Lotor announced casually.

Hazar closed his eyes, pretending he was deeply asleep.

“That’s not going to work. You’re too stressed out.” Lotor regarded him briefly. “We’ll go out for the night and come back again.” He shrugged. “No one will find out.”

“We’re gonna get caught,” Hazar commented.

“You always say that and we never do.” Lotor waved a dismissing hand. “Besides, it’s my birthday.”

Hazar opened one eye and looked at Lotor. “It was your birthday last Wednesday,” he retorted flatly.

Lotor shrugged. “It’s always my birthday!” He grinned. “So what you say?”

“I have homework.”

“I’ll do it for you. It won’t take me long.”

Hazar knew that what Lotor was saying was true. Despite the fact that Lotor was a grade lower than him, being the younger of the duo, Lotor had a knack for Math and could solve problems with his eyes closed. Hazar sighed, knowing that if he agreed and Lotor did do his homework, whereas he would score a perfect mark, he would still be clueless.

“I’ll tutor you later,” Lotor said, seeming to have read his thoughts. “Don’t sweat it, dude. All’s cool.” He smacked Hazar on the forehead.

Hazar startled and sat up. “Why do I keep following you down the road of sin?”

Lotor scowled. “Because it’s fun?” he hazarded.

Hazar threw his arms up in defeat.

Lotor stretched out and closed his eyes. “Come, relax, will ya? What could possibly go wrong? We’ve been doing this since I got here without ever getting caught. Why would it change now?”

Lotor and Hazar scaled the perimeter wall easily enough and found themselves outside of the Academy shortly after. They remained in the shadows using the scarce vegetation for cover as they rushed away. As soon as they deemed they were far enough, they broke cover and returned to the main road.

“Easy as pie!” Lotor smirked.

“Too easy,” Hazar countered, though his tone was careless.

Lotor rolled his eyes, used to his friend always being more reticent about clandestine activities than him, even if he never expressed his view in the matter. He then grabbed Hazar’s arm and ran towards the village.

“Do you think you’ll ever live in a place like this?” Lotor asked as they entered the main street, lined with tall two-storey buildings, which served as housing. “I find it so peaceful here,” he sighed. “Do you think I could run away and just stay here?”

“You?” Hazar asked flatly. “You would die of boredom and demolish the village trying to find entertainment. You find it appealing because you only come here once in a while.”

Lotor shrugged. “Still. I really...”

A soft call interrupted him. The two boys whipped their heads towards the direction of the noise. They startled visibly as they regarded the scantily clad woman, her features made more appealing and exotic by a touch of rouge and lipstick. She stood between two houses and was rather succulent and appetising, her hair reaching some length past her waist.

“Out for a stroll in such a beautiful night?” she purred softly.

“We’re so dead,” Hazar whispered unconcernedly to Lotor and went towards her.

“And what are you doing out so late?” he smirked, knowing the answer he would receive.

“Watching out for stray boys...” she blinked coyly, “such as yourselves.”

Lotor stood frozen to the spot. He had seen naked women before, but he had been younger and had not understood the implications of pairings. He had been at the Academy since he was ten and had gone home only when his father had forced him to during the last three years. He usually chose to spend his breaks at the Academy itself rather than go home to face his father. Occasionally, Viceroy Mozak invited him to Province Five where he stayed with Hazar and his sister Dorma.

At that moment, however, a beautiful and seductive woman stood before him. Her body language was obviously inviting. He felt his body respond to her lure, but he also felt completely solidified, as if he had turned into stone and become an integral part of the road.

“Isn’t that a most kind gesture,” Hazar continued advancing slowly towards her.

Being older than Lotor by only a year, he was not much more experienced, but certainly was no novice to the carnal pleasures. Looking at the woman before him only stressed the fact that he wanted more of the forbidden fruit. He forgot completely about Lotor.

“There’s a price...” She blinked slowly.

“Aye... Nothing is ever for free,” Hazar stated in a hiss. He felt as if he was suffocating under all the tumult going on inside of him. “I am prepared to pay.”

“And your friend?” She arched an eyebrow.

Hazar scowled and was about to ask what friend she was referring to when he remembered. He turned and looked at Lotor, who was still standing rooted to his original spot. Hazar smirked and turned back to the woman.

“He will come, of course.”

She laughed. “Of course.”

Hazar went to Lotor and led him towards the alleyway. Lotor felt numb, his eyes focused on the woman’s alluring curves and strange needs propelled him forward. His pants felt too tight and constricting as more and more desire began to overwhelm him. However, fear continued to nag at him and he was not sure if allowing Hazar to lead him was wise.

Soon, however, any chance he may have had to escape evaporated. He was led into one of the houses. It was dimly lit and furnished with cheap, functional furniture. A beaded curtain led to a hallway with several closed doors.

Lotor continued to follow in a daze. The woman opened a door and entered, Hazar followed, still leading Lotor by the arm.

“Serath,” the woman said pleasantly. “Would you kindly help this young man...” she nodded at Lotor. “He’s... untried, it seems.”

Lotor blushed at the statement and regained some of his equilibrium. He snatched his arm away from Hazar and raised his chin regally. The woman from the outside smiled at him, and went to Hazar, leading him away and closing the door behind Lotor.

This is when he finally looked at Serath. She was much younger than the woman from the outside, with her hair reaching her knees. Besides a belt with a sheer veil covering her front, she wore nothing else, using her hair to cover her well-endowed chest. Lotor swallowed, feeling self control oozing out of him rapidly. She wore no accents, and it was obvious that she did not need to enhance her already beautiful and perfect face.

She smiled sweetly at Lotor and went towards him. Her hair swayed slightly, revealing secrets to the young Prince's eyes. He stared at her, enthralled. Even as young as he was, he was taller than she, and she had to reach up to kiss him. He nearly fell over her when the heat of her mouth merged with his.

"Come," she whispered and led him to the cushions and furs.

Lotor did not struggle and gave himself up to her.

He groaned as he was suddenly shaken out of sleep. He looked up slowly and saw Hazar standing over him. He rolled to his stomach and tucked his face into the folds of a fur blanket.

"Daylight will soon be upon us," Hazar announced, shaking him again. "Come. We must make haste."

"But..."

"Nothing. Or have you forgotten Ghrapho?" Hazar asked with a hiss.

Lotor groaned again. "Oh good gods..." he cursed. "Yes, I completely forgot." He sat up slowly. "Do you think...?"

"Yes, I do think. You, on the other hand, don't," Hazar interrupted acerbically. "You have weapons training first thing and Ghrapho will not look kindly upon you if you're late."

"I'm too tired!" Lotor protested.

"Well, that's your own fault." Hazar crossed his arms unsympathetically. "Get up, or I'll leave you behind."

Deep down, however, Hazar was very much concerned over Lotor. Ghrapho was a tough, rough and demanding teacher. He feared the worst for his friend: for a simple slip on his part, and he would not be leaving the arena alive. However, he also understood the consequences of not returning to the Academy. The latter outweighed the quondam by a considerable ratio.

He helped Lotor get dressed and the two left, running back to the Academy and taking advantage of the last remaining shadows to skulk back within the complex. Lotor made his way towards the dorms, his eyes speckled red from lack of sleep and he swayed lightly as he walked. Hazar shook his head and looked at the sky.

"Ghrapho," he stated simply.

"Stop tormenting me!" Lotor snapped.

"It's your prerogative," Hazar cocked his head.

Lotor stopped and hung his head. "Okay, it's my fault. I was the one who dragged you out..." He looked up at Hazar. "But did you have to..." He flushed and looked down.

Hazar went to him and placed a firm hand over his shoulder. "I didn't hear you complain last night..." He frowned. "Snap out of it. We'll talk about it later. Right now you better go see to some food and then rush to Ghrapho. You don't have much time."

Lotor nodded and went to the canteen.

"You're rather slow today," Ghrapho commented carefully, studying Lotor.

Lotor locked his jaw. He had consumed all the caffeine he could handle and eaten all the sugar he had found. He had gained an energy burst that had defied all biological probabilities, but he could feel the adrenaline leaving him. His movements were becoming sluggish and he did not need Ghrapho to point this out to him. His limbs, especially his legs, felt like they weighed a substantial amount more than normal each time he was forced to execute any motions.

He dropped his swords. "I forfeit."

Ghrapho startled. Out of all his pupils in his many years serving as the Weapons Master at the Academy, Prince Lotor D'ssat had been the only one he had found worth spending his time at the arena with. This has also been the catalyst for Ghrapho having chosen to become Lotor's Councillor; he rarely advocated any of the students. Even the last one to be trained in the twin-sword style did not equal the young boy in front of him. Lotor had grace, strength and speed. He was alert and could predict movements before they even commenced. Ghrapho narrowed his eyes, placing his swords, blades crossed, with their tips down on the ground in front of him.

"Your swords, D'ssat. Your request is declined," Ghrapho retorted.

Lotor wanted to groan. His mind was a jumble of emotions and he kept replaying his time with Serath over and over again. She had been patient with him, and he had surrendered himself completely to her after a time. He could not remember feeling as he had. He had indulged in the action over and over again until he had finally collapsed from exhaustion.

Looking at Ghrapho at that moment, however, he realised his mistake. There would be no chance for forfeit this time. He would have to either fight to leave the arena or he would have to be carried out defunct. Lotor weighed his options carefully. He had nothing to live for as far as he was concerned. He knew his father hated him and that if he ever went home he would be beaten and abused again. He had considered running away but he knew that if he was caught by the guards he would be shipped home and beaten all the harder. He remembered his words to Hazar the night before and wondered if he would be happier if he had been born to a simple family instead of the King of Doom.

Mainly, he wondered if he would have been sent to the Academy if he had been born to a lowly family. Aware, however, that he could not change his noble birth, he found a respite in the Academy notwithstanding having to be exposed to the Drule. In fact, he found the Drule easier to co-exist with than his father, though the Drule scorned him for not only being a Doomite, but also a human hybrid.

“To the death,” Lotor declared determinedly.

Ghrapho raised an eyebrow and looked amused. “That’s your last decision then?”

“To the death,” Lotor repeated.

“Yours or mine?”

“It matters not.”

With the simple response, Lotor dropped into a crouch, retrieved his blades and jumped up over Ghrapho’s head. The latter had rushed towards him, trying to imbed each of his blades in Lotor’s shoulders. Lotor had sensed more than seen the attack.

Ghrapho felt a sting on his back and knew Lotor had scored a hit. He spun and was honestly surprised not to see the Prince. Before he could fully acknowledge the intelligence, his senses warned him of Lotor’s presence. It was too late, and Ghrapho knew. He accepted another sting and spun, gyrating his swords. Lotor hopped back, but still received a few of cuts across his chest for his daring move.

“It seems that you’re in top form this day,” Ghrapho mocked and suddenly laser shrouded his blades. “Let’s add a bit of spice to this game.”

Lotor did not like the look of the laser. He hadn’t recognised the blades when he had first met Ghrapho in the arena, but hadn’t given the matter much thought. Abruptly, he understood why Ghrapho had challenged him over the lunch period. The laser casing was probably going to have been surprise to be revealed then. Lotor resentfully realised that by dealing Ghrapho the cuts, he had precipitated the early disclosure.

Why can’t I just be left alone? Lotor thought aggrieved. All I want is a good nap!

However, his desire was not answered. He leapt again and cried out as Ghrapho followed him into the air and dealt a cut to his legs. Had it been only metal the cut would not have been as harmful. However, the laser cut deep, although it cauterised the wounds even as it inflicted.

Lotor fell awkwardly to the ground and rolled as Ghrapho came down at him, both blades poised and aimed for his chest. He used the tumble to get his feet under him and stood on his aching legs.

“You have two choices,” Ghrapho said casually. “Forfeit your round or continue,” he offered, studying Lotor carefully. He knew the boy would not last much longer.

Lotor pretended to consider his choices. Suddenly he smiled and flicked his wrist, sending one of his swords flying towards Ghrapho. His smile broaden as he saw Ghrapho take the feign and with a fluid motion he tossed the second sword. Then he exploded into motion.

Ghrapho cried out as the second sword impaled him deep in the arm. As he looked up, he saw a booted foot and then he was down. Lotor finished his move and landed just behind him retrieving his blades. He looked satisfied as he yanked the blade carelessly from Ghrapho’s arm, causing the other to snarl a pained curse.

“You have two choices,” Lotor arched an eyebrow. “Forfeit your round or continue.” He spun one of his blades and plunged it deep into the ground, barely missing Ghrapho’s neck. “Let me assure you that I don’t miss, teacher mine,” he offered.

“I know,” Ghrapho rebuked, less than amused knowing that Lotor had missed the stab on purpose. “Forfeit.”

Lotor withdrew but kept his blades ready. He recalled vividly the day he had trusted his teacher's surrender only to be attacked when the latter stood up. A vicious scar ran down and across his chest; a daily reminder to never trust an adversary.

"It seems that you have proven your worth, Lotor D'ssat," Ghrapho admitted casually, sheathing both blades and undoing the belt. "I have waited for many years to present the next master with his rightful tools." He extended the hand holding the sword-belt. "Good luck."

Lotor's blades fell from his hands again from shock. He looked at the swords and then up at Ghrapho. He could not believe that not only he had been acknowledged, but he was also being gifted the double-edged swords with the laser casing.

"I..." He stopped and shook his head.

"Nothing, Lotor. The blades are yours. In time you will learn to wield them and work with them. You will find that although they will seem heavy and cumbersome at first, they will make you adapt to them and thus you will become deadlier in combat." Ghrapho paused. "I present you Mourn and Rue."

Lotor took the blades gingerly. He felt their weight and wondered if he would ever be able to handle both blades simultaneously. He looked at Ghrapho and remembered how easily he had wielded them. He then scowled. Replaying the fight with Ghrapho, he realised that his teacher had also seemed slow during their spar. He scrutinised the blades carefully. He was not so certain if he wanted the very thing that would take away his best asset: speed.

"You are young yet and you can grow with them," Ghrapho uttered, as if sensing Lotor's thoughts. "The blades will never become one with the old. They like the young. They were never for me; however, I know they will be yours."

"How long until I have them mastered?" Lotor asked.

Ghrapho shrugged. "It varies. Their history does not possess mathematical precision, young one."

Lotor recognised the teasing immediately. In fact, he was used to it, probably being the only one in the Academy who liked Math. He buckled the belt and withdrew the blades. He could feel the strain on his arms from their weight. He nodded at Ghrapho, sheathed the twin swords and left the arena.

He considering getting something to eat before his next class, but gave up on the idea. Instead, he went to the dorm and went to sleep. He didn't care about the consequences for cutting classes and only hoped that whenever he did wake up, Serath, Mourn and Rue were not simply part of a dream.