

Warning: Mild angst & violence.

“Fight!” Zarkon sneered. “Or are you afraid?”

Lotor snapped his head up in the direction of the balcony where his father sat watching him spar in the arena. He locked his jaw and controlled his anger. If he gave himself to it, he knew he would make a mistake and he could ill afford that luxury. The two robeasts attacking him would grant him no mercy. He had been evading them by dodging and leaping, trying to tire them out, or bore his father enough for him to call off the performance.

“I was giving you some sport,” Lotor replied deprecatingly. “I figured you needed amusement, Your Majesty.”

Zarkon narrowed his eyes. “You bore me! Release more beasts!” he commanded.

Lotor groaned. He was tired and cantankerous. The letter had arrived at the Academy the night before, his father summoning him home, since it was his reading week – or at least a short interval from his classes. Lotor had planned to just stay at the Academy and possibly go visit Serath again rather than go to Doom. He hated going home and seeing his father. The letter, however, had changed his plans. With a resigned sigh, he steeled himself for the onslaught.

Zarkon studied the red headed hybrid in front of him. He could not understand how the boy had been born with such luxurious red mane, which almost reached his knees, considering Doomites were hairless and his mother had been a blonde human. In fact, Lotor had very few Doomite features. Only his eyes and ears were distinct.

However, Lotor had made him proud even if no one knew of this, especially not the Prince himself. Zarkon had believed that Lotor would have long since died, unable to cope with the aggressive Doomite and Drule societies. He had seemed so weak and frail when he had been younger, so much smaller than any other Doomite boy his age, and with his odd pale skin. But Lotor had gone beyond his expectations.

Already Lotor had changed uniforms. In the Academy, the students underwent uniform changes according to their grade point average. From grey Lotor went to grey with black stripes and was now wearing grey and black. All of this accomplished in three years; his marks were outstanding and his physical performance phenomenal. Zarkon had no doubts that he would get the full black uniform, the highest ranking of them all, if he progressed as he had been and survived the Academy. Even if it had been over a century since anyone had been given the uniform. The student had to excel in both academic and physical training before being so recognised.

Zarkon eyed the blades in Lotor’s hands. It was clear his son was not familiar with them, and with his sharp eyes, he saw Lotor’s chest heaving, evidently strained by the effort of wielding the long and heavy swords. He smiled lightly. The show at the arena would prove interesting. He had received the report about Lotor being awarded with the weapons and he had been very proud. The pale, feeble-looking boy was stronger and more talented than any Doomite, or Drule, for that matter that Zarkon had ever seen.

Indeed, he was very proud of his son.

“Fight!” Zarkon bellowed.

Four robeasts rushed at Lotor. The first two advanced ahead while the other two trailed in their wake from different directions, intending to box Lotor in. The Prince, however, recognized the attack for what it was. He threw one arm out, blade at an angle, and parried the first blow from the front. Twisting his wrists expertly, he hooked the edge of the blade on his opponent’s sword hilt and disarmed the robeast.

His senses suddenly warned him that the robeast coming from behind him was dangerously close. He threw one leg back, as if slipping, and, turning his second blade at a hundred and eighty degree angle, he stabbed it backwards at the robeast’s centre. It howled and dropped.

Again, preternatural senses alerted him of danger. His eyes flickered from side to side and he saw the other two robeasts approaching with their swords pointing out, ready to impale him from both flanks. He smiled mischievously and waited till the last possible moment before leaping out of the way, letting the robeasts run one another through.

As he landed, he brought his blades up in a cross before his face, since the first robeast he had disarmed had recovered its sword. Lotor smiled lightly and threw himself up into the air. He turned upside down, weapons poised perpendicularly from his body. The

robeast shrieked but before it could bring its blade into the right angle to hit Lotor, the latter uncrossed his arms.

The robeast fell in mid step, its head cleanly severed from the body. Lotor righted himself with another twist, still in the air, and landed on his feet. He looked up at his father after a moment.

“Was that more to your satisfaction, Your Majesty?” Lotor asked sarcastically.

Zarkon had to admit, albeit only to himself, that even though he despised Lotor’s fighting methods, it was certainly effective.

And the brat can fight upside down, he thought, impressed. “Not bad,” Zarkon snorted. “Now go and wash yourself. Dinner will be served soon.”

Lotor allowed the water to pour over him for long moments before he moved for the soap. The high pressure and intense heat felt like it would not only clean his body, but also his very essence. He opened his eyes slowly, letting the water massage his tired arms and shoulders.

He was still trying to understand why his father had called him home, and also make him fight in the arena. He had no doubts that Zarkon knew of this latest achievement. What Lotor couldn’t understand was why his father had made him prove his worth. They were both well aware that bribery did not work at the Academy. And even if he had found a teacher corrupt enough to accept it, it would prove fatal at a later date. Passing a grade without being prepared for the next meant death in the hands of the oncoming teacher. Even rank and social status meant nothing to the Academy. There he was simply Lotor D’ssat, a Doomite hybrid.

Sighing, he allowed the water to wash away the thoughts along with the grime covering his body.

Zarkon took his usual seat, watching the arrangements for the dinner. He had made sure that some of Lotor’s favourite foods were prepared. He scowled at that thought. He figured that at least part of the reason Lotor was so small was because he didn’t eat.

And what do I care if the upstart lives or not? Zarkon questioned himself not for the first time.

Yet, he cared. He remembered when the twin boys had been born ten and three years before. Despite himself, he had felt an urge to hold the boys, then blond, close to himself. A dam had ruptured within him, allowing a flood of paternal emotions forth. However, he had suppressed it. He had grunted, acknowledging the birth, and had left.

As the young Princes grew, their hair darkened to red and, spoiled by their mother, they became wily and mischievous. Zarkon had been none too pleased, but found himself developing a foreign patience. The punishments he had employed on the children were not as severe as had been expected.

Finally, a third addition was made to the litter. Zarkon had not been pleased by the birth of the girl, and he had especially hated the fact that Lupus and Lotor had grown very attached to their sister.

Out of the three, however, Lotor had always shown his superior intelligence and prowess. He was the leader and often displayed wisdom beyond his years. He learned all that his mother had taught him. He was an avid reader and could play any instrument put in front of him after a quick demonstration.

If it hadn’t been the fact that Lotor had looked like a runt, for a Doomite, Zarkon would not have hesitated to proclaim his pride.

His reverie was suddenly interrupted by Lotor’s entrance into the hall. He was dressed in his royal uniform and Zarkon did not fail to see the hilts of the twin swords jutting from under Lotor’s cloak. He smiled subtly. Lotor had finally learnt that one should never be unarmed. Lotor bowed and took his usual seat.

“Here, Lotor,” Zarkon pointed to the intricately carved chair beside his. “As Crown Prince, you should sit in the appointed place.”

Lotor startled but recovered quickly, standing uncertain if this was a trap set by his father.

Zarkon drew patience from his very limited well. “You’re of age now,” he explained simply.

What? Thirteen? Lotor thought confused.

However, he noted the look on his father's face. He knew that if he didn't comply he would suffer, painfully, for it. He realised that even if his father was setting a trap, the consequences of not obeying would be far worse. Swallowing involuntarily, he moved to take the assigned chair.

"Your reports are acceptable," Zarkon commented casually, after Lotor sat. "However, you're also a trouble-maker. All your teachers have the same complaint to make."

Lotor sighed and stabbed at the cheese in front of him.

"Don't you even have an excuse?" Zarkon raised an eyebrow.

"Accident?" Lotor mumbled, twirling a ring around his finger.

Zarkon slammed his hand on the table, upsetting several goblets. "Try again!" he growled.

Lotor sighed. "Things just happen..." He looked wryly at his father. "Besides, you weren't exactly a model student." He cocked a sardonic eyebrow.

Lotor realised his mistake immediately. He ducked the fist that flew his way, jumped out of the chair, knocking it over, and ran to the other side of the room.

"Get back here!" Zarkon snarled.

"I don't think so," Lotor crossed his arms.

Zarkon lunged at him. However, since Lotor was already far enough, he darted off deep into the castle. Contrary to what anyone expected, he climbed the wall in an empty room and hid in the rafters. He lay back, controlling his breathing and listened to the kaffuffle going on under him.

For a long time Lotor stared at the ceiling, still wondering why he had been called home. Soundlessly, he sighed dejectedly and startled suddenly as his eyes caught something on the ceiling. He glanced down and waited until the room was vacated again before standing up and leaping up to the higher rafters.

To his delight, he found a hatch. He opened it and crawled into the passageway the lid had revealed, in awe at his discovery. Although relatively clean, the passage clearly showed its lack of use. Lotor's eyes gained their lambency once he placed the hatch lid back into place and was plunged into near darkness. Dim lighting offered very little illumination but this still granted enough light for him to be able to see. He looked around and scowled when he could not determine its source.

"And what have we here...?" he mumbled to himself and set off to explore his findings.

Zarkon was growing worried, and this in turn resulted in anger and frustration. Lotor had been missing for almost a week and none of the usual hiding spaces had produced the Prince. All crafts, including the Prince's personal fighter, were accounted for at the hangar and launching dock. None of the guards, placed at every doorway, had seen or even heard Lotor.

"Hagar! Find the boy! He does not possess magic! He can't just vanish," Zarkon barked.

"Aye, Sire!" Hagar promptly began her scrying. *Though I think you're very wrong in this assumption. That brat does possess something...* she thought.

Unbeknownst to her, Lotor had armed himself with a ring purchased from a warlock, which rendered him invisible to any scrying. He knew his father often employed this particular service from Hagar and he did not want to be spied upon. Thus, Hagar was unable to locate Lotor much to her dismay and Zarkon's increasing fury.

Meanwhile, Lotor found himself quite lost in the network of caverns, which ran within the walls of the castle. He was certain there were plenty of exits, like the one he had entered through, but they were well concealed and he couldn't locate a single one of them.

The only things that nourished him were several chocolate bars he had found in the many pockets of his cloak. He had no idea how old the sweets were; however, they provided him with the sustenance he required. He also had found a water pipe running through one of the tunnels, and managed to quench his thirst from the rivulets that formed along its sides.

Due to the conductive property of the passages, Lotor heard his father's angry calls, demanding his presence for an audience. He thought of calling back and enlighten his father

of his predicament, but changed his mind. His father didn't seem aware of the existence of the passageways. He would keep that for his advantage.

Zarkon looked piercingly at Hagar. "Have you no other voodoo stashed up your sleeve?" he demanded. "Find me the runt!"

"Sire," Hagar protested. "I have done all I can..."

"It's not enough!" Zarkon screamed.

And at that moment, Lotor landed in front of him, seemingly from the sky. He had found another hatch, which conveniently, for him, opened to the ceiling of the throne room. Figuring he had no way to escape anyway, he decided to simply present himself to his father and be done with whatever punishment his father was inevitably going to go to lay upon him.

Zarkon grabbed him roughly. "You will pay for your insolence."

Lotor cringed involuntarily. To his surprise, however, he felt not pain but only a set of bracers placed upon his wrists. He looked at the plain, dull black thick armlets in astonishment.

"Now I'll always know where you are," Zarkon pushed him away.

Lotor fell to floor, still shocked. He looked up at his father and back at his wrists, weighing the consequences of having a homing device permanently attached to him. He did not have to inspect the armlets to know that Hagar had enchanted them somehow.

He looked back at his father and saw him smirking ironically at him. At that moment he was not sure if he would rather be beaten senseless, the usual punishment, than have the bands marking him as King Zarkon's property. He began to feel physically ill, but swallowed back the bile that threatened to emerge.

"Why?" he managed to say above a whisper.

"Because I'm sick to death of you vanishing whenever the fancy strikes you. You will learn obedience one way or another." Zarkon paused. "And this will assure that, should you choose to betray me, I can find you easily."

Lotor swallowed again. His future seemed to be suddenly covered by an ominous dark cloud before his young eyes. He got up slowly; still feeling stunned, bowed and left for his apartments.

Zarkon watched the retreating form disappear, before he yelled at everyone to leave him. Once alone, he began to ascend the stairs leading to his throne. His steps, however, seemed weary and his shoulders were slightly slumped. Zarkon placed his large bulk on the throne and sighed heavily, focusing on nothing in particular.

Although he had been genuinely mad at Lotor for the weeklong disappearance, he was both impressed and curious as to how the boy had managed to elude discovery and capture. Deep down, he also felt relief in having found Lotor again.

No, he would not lose Lotor. He was too good to be simply discarded. He would prove a great addition to the King's forces once he completed the Academy. Zarkon had no doubts that Lotor would survive to graduate. Not only that, but also be on the Honour Roll. He also knew that by then, the Prince would no longer hold the strange ideals he currently had. The Academy would see to it that Lotor was thoroughly broken before granting him his leave.

And for all you are, I'm forced to chain you like a dog, Zarkon brooded. Why can't you be more obedient?

Had Zarkon been more caring and gentler, he would have realised that Lotor was exactly what he wanted. However the old King was harsh and cruel; he did not subscribe to emotion, believing that it made a man weak. What he didn't grasp was that all Lotor really wanted was to hear that his father cared and was proud of him.

Zarkon felt that by expressing any compassionate sentiment would turn the child into a weakling and not grant him the force and dynamics to become a proper warrior. Zarkon did not want his last remaining offspring to grow into a pathetic, snivelling creature; sealing the Prince's fate to never hear such proclamation of pride.

On the other end of the castle, Lotor lay quietly on his bed, waiting for sleep to overtake him. His mind was a mess of churning emotions; the foremost caused by the presence of the vambraces. He would find a way to rid himself of them, even if he had to cut his hands off.