

Warning: ANGST, violence, sexual innuendo and mild language, character death.

“I love you.”

Serath looked startled at the murmured revelation brought. She regarded her lover briefly but before she could say anything, he placed a slender finger over her full lips.

“Hush. Don’t argue with me. Just take this from me,” he pleaded.

“You know this is wrong,” she responded quietly.

He shook his head. “No. Love is never wrong.”

“I am a courtesan and you’re a prince. It’s very wrong.”

“Never say that.” Lotor kissed her lips softly. “Nothing else matters.” He paused. “And I don’t want you to sell yourself anymore. I will supply you with everything you want and need.”

“No.” Serath pulled away lightly. “I cannot have that. Lotor, if anyone finds out about us...”

“No one will,” he interrupted. “At least for now. We’ll go on as we are; only you won’t see anyone else... Unless you wish to.” He arched an eyebrow.

Serath shook her head and snuggled closer to him. “I love you, Lotor. I have for some time.”

He held her tightly. “Then forget all else. We’ll be together forever.” He kissed her deeply.

Hazar stood before the Head Master, unsure as to why exactly he had been summoned to the interview. As far as everyone was concerned, his marks were high – thanks to Lotor – he had avoided troubles of late, and not skipped any classes.

“Sir?” Hazar asked.

The Head Master looked piercingly at him. “Where’s D’ssat?”

Hazar looked baffled. “I do not know.”

The Head Master leaned back in his chair, looking amused. “Do not think I’m foolish, boy. I know well enough that the two of you are quite close and know of each other’s activities.” He leaned forward, maintaining eye contact with Hazar. “What I wish you to tell me now, Morphay, is where D’ssat is. He has been missing for two days now. He returned from his trip home and then he was gone.”

Hazar shook his head. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since I left to go home during the break. I don’t know what he’s doing or where he’s gone to. He said he was going to stay here for the break,” he confessed. “That he went home is news to me. I haven’t seen him since I got back.”

The Head Master did not like Hazar. The young Drule seemed too indifferent to everything. He was next to impossible to read or predict, and this was an advantage he held over everyone. This displeased the Head Master tremendously.

“It’s your prerogative, Morphay. You tell me where to find D’ssat by your own will, or...” He shrugged, leaving the Hazar to conclude the sentence.

Although he did not look disturbed outwardly, Hazar was very much worried about Lotor, who had indeed been missing. Hazar suddenly considered his own welfare. He was well aware what the threat from the Head Master meant. He had an idea of where Lotor could be, however he did not want to reveal his friend’s secret.

He crossed his arms defiantly. “How many times will it take for you to understand that I do not know where Lotor is?” he asked simply.

The Head Master regarded him odiously for long moments before speaking again. He was resolute that even if Hazar was indeed telling the truth, discipline still needed to be administered to put the insolent whelp in his place.

“Take him away,” he commanded. “And persuade him to tell us whatever it is that he does know.”

Hazar pulled his arms free from the guards who had moved to constrain him and take him away. “I’m telling the truth!” he protested. “You’re accusing me unfairly and this punishment is unjust!”

The Head Master looked languidly at him. “We will see if your words prove true by the time D’ssat is found or returns by his own volition. If you’re not lying, you may execute the

same punishment upon me that is to be dealt on you. If you're lying, as I believe, then it will be your head."

Although Hazar did not like the idea of being sentenced to be reprimanded, he was powerless to say or do anything. He hoped only that he survived the castigation so that he could do the same to the Head Master.

"Are you not going to school?" Serath queried quietly.

Lotor looked up from the fruit he was eating. "Why should I? I'm happy here with you."

Serath giggled. They had inhabited the woods for nearly a week, living off the land and enjoying each other's company. Since her parents had died, Serath could not remember a time when she had been happier. She had been forced into her current existence once she had reached an age deemed old enough to handle a man.

"You're gonna get in trouble," she teased.

"They will have to catch me first," He answered amused, but his face darkened as he noted the black armbands on his wrists and their meaning. He knew it would only be a matter of time before his father managed to find him.

Serath sat beside him and took a fruit. "Why do you seem so unhappy? You have everything. You're a prince, you're rich and you're one of the best at the Academy. What do you lack?"

"Love." Lotor looked far into the horizon. "Everyone I've ever loved my father has killed. He killed my mother, and I know that he killed my sister, though I have no evidence. My brother got killed trying to kill me." He looked sadly at her. "All I have now is you, Hazar and his sister. And I'm so afraid of losing any of you."

She hugged him. "You won't lose any of us. Don't worry."

"I worry. I worry very much, Serath. I'm sick of living as I do. I'm sick of feeling pain and having to constantly prove my worth. How many times will I have to fight at the arena to show that I know how to wield my swords? How long will this go on for? I know that my time at the Academy will only last for another four years. Longer if I wish to continue and complete Honour Roll, providing I achieve the marks. But once I'm out, I'm still going to be doing the same thing. My father doesn't want a son; he wants another idiot to run errands for him. I'll be worse off than I am right now probably. At least a common soldier has no illusions that by being a prince, things will turn out differently."

Serath marvelled at the young Prince's words. She had never expected a boy three years her junior to possess such wisdom. She held back tears of sadness at the helplessness of his situation. She wanted nothing more than to comfort him, to reassure him. However, she could not bring herself to lie to him.

"Don't be disillusioned, love," she murmured. "Don't try to guess what fate has in store for you."

"I'm not guessing. I know."

She shook her head, but he silenced her with a kiss.

"Let us enjoy what we have," he smiled subtly.

Hazar clenched his aching jaw tighter against the pain the lashes brought him. He had been taken to the underground room of the Academy, stripped to the waist and secured, spread-eagle, to the gyves hanging from the ceiling. His interrogator stood before him, arms crossed, leering at him, while the executioner stood behind him, employing the punishment.

The whip cracked again and Hazar grimaced, grinding his teeth, refusing to cry out.

"This could be much less painful," the interrogator sneered.

"Go to hell! I don't know where Lotor is!" Hazar spat.

The interrogator nodded his head and the whip licked Hazar's back viciously again. Hazar cursed Lotor mentally, wondering if he would ever learn that maintaining a friendship with the Prince meant shortening one's life considerably or at least bringing much unneeded physical pain.

"I'll ask you again..." the interrogator began.

"I don't know!" Hazar screamed, taking the opportunity to voice some of the pain he was feeling. "What part of 'I don't know' don't you understand?! Damn you to hell!"

"Hum... I was warned about your defiance," the interrogator smirked. "It'll be a pleasure to beat that out of you."

Hazar locked his jaw again against another sting of agony the whip brought him. He shut his eyes, willing his mind to blank so that he would forget about the eviscerating misery his body was undergoing. He donned discipline like armour, and hoped that he had learned all that he had been taught about this particular subject.

However, this proved to be futile as suddenly a new punishment was admonished upon his battered back. He did not have to open his lambent red eyes to see that a blade whip had substituted the leather. He felt each of the vicious, small blades bite deep into his skin. He cried out involuntarily at the agony.

“I see that you’re not invulnerable, pigeon,” the interrogator cooed sardonically. “How long will it be till you decide that protecting D’ssat is not worth the torture you’re undergoing?”

“I don’t know where he is!” Hazar cried out at the injustice he was suffering. “I honestly don’t know! Why do you not understand that?!”

The interrogator blinked slowly and the executioner crossed his arms, waiting for his next orders. Hazar found himself catching the breath he had been unconsciously holding for long moments, in expectation of another lash.

“Tell me, where do you go when you go to on your clandestine trips?” the interrogator asked simply.

Hazar looked baffled. “Say what?”

“Don’t try and play the innocent, Morphay. Let me assure you that the Faculty is quite aware of the students’ activities. We know that the walls do not contain you. We also grant you the freedom to go and pursue outside pleasures.” The interrogator gave Hazar a hooded look. “Do not forget that we were all students at one point in our lives. Whatever you do is nothing that has not already been done.” He paused. “Now, I will ask you again. Where do you go with D’ssat?”

Feeling shock not only from the intense physical pain, but also from the sudden revelation, Hazar’s young mind broke to the torture imposed upon him.

Hazar hung his head. “We go to the village.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” The interrogator shook his head. “It would have saved several layers of skin on your back.”

“Because you didn’t ask!” Hazar snapped aggravated. “You asked where Lotor is and that I don’t know.” He gnashed each word in frustration.

The interrogator looked amused. “No matter. Your punishment is over.”

“And I’m gonna make the Head Master pay for this!” Hazar snarled as he was released from the shackles. “This was unfair and I did not lie!”

“All in good time, youngling. For now, however, you’re still needed.” The interrogator looked at the executioner. “Take him. Make sure his wounds are treated and he’s well looked after.”

“What else do you want from me?” Hazar demanded. “I’ve said all I know.”

“And I believe you.” The interrogator said. “However, you’re still needed. Take him.”

“Don’t move.”

Lotor jumped up startled and heard Serath scream. He looked around and saw that he was completely surrounded by guards from the Academy.

“What...”

“Quiet!” the same Drule barked. “You’re in no position to ask questions. You have gone against all the rules and will suffer accordingly. Take him.” He motioned for the guards.

Looking around, Lotor saw Serath also being roughly dragged by other guards out of the woods. He knew well enough what the men would do to her but before he could react, he was grabbed from behind and held tightly. He struggled, unable to get away; he was much too small in comparison to the guards holding him. His swords lying on the ground a short distance from him and knew he would be impotent to reach them.

“Let her go!” he growled. “She has nothing to do with this.”

“She will be taken along,” the Drule informed him.

“How did you find me?” Lotor asked desperately. “At least tell me this much.”

“Morphay was persuaded to tell us where you boys run to whenever you leave the Academy. We went to the village and another whore told us that this girl had left to spend time with her lover in the woods. It was a simple matter to comb this place out.”

Lotor locked his jaw. He felt some comfort in knowing that at least it hadn't been the armlets that had given his position away. As he was dragged away, he wondered what had persuaded Hazar to tell the Faculty about their furtive trips out of the Academy.

He watched in anguish as the men led Serath roughly; she cried out and struggled futilely against her predicament. The Drule seemed to draw enjoyment from every single one of her whimpers and continued to maltreat her as they walked.

"Stop!" Lotor screamed.

He cried out involuntarily as the guard holding him slapped him hard.

"Quiet, whelp," he sneered.

Lotor locked his jaws and continued watching Serath being pushed and shoved by the men.

Why do these things always happen to me? Lotor thought woefully. *Oh, Serath, know that I love you and I'll get you out of this. I just hope you can forgive me... Why am I thus cursed? Why does misery keep itself as my constant companion?*

The trip was short and soon Lotor found himself at the arena within the Academy. He was given his swords back, to his surprise, and stood looking around the vacant seats. Only the Faculty was present, but they were also in the ring, forming a semi-circle around him.

The Head Master stepped forward, arms crossed, his eyes looking calm and cold. "D'ssat, what you have done is quite inexcusable," he said with a calculating tone. "You did not have leave to miss school for the recent time period. You failed to attend your classes and you were sharing the company of a female, which as you know, is not looked kindly upon by the Faculty. What have you to say for yourself?"

"It was an accident," Lotor responded quietly and kicked at the ground.

"Not good enough."

Lotor sighed. *Why not, damnit? What dse do these people want me to say?* he thought dejectedly.

"The Faculty has met and decided on a fitting punishment for you. Execution is not an option," the Head Master intoned meaningfully. "However, you will be given two other choices."

Lotor locked his jaw. He hadn't expected to be pardoned so easily. Fleeing from the Academy was punishable by death. He was about to ask why his castigation was to be different, but startled visibly as he saw Hazar and Serath being brought into the arena. Both looked battered, and blood stained their torn clothing. However, Hazar stubbornly kept his chin up, looking defiantly at everyone present. He locked gazes briefly with Lotor before he focused back on the members of the Faculty.

"Your choices are as follows..." the Head Master began. "You will unsheathe your blades and execute one of them. The decision is yours." He smiled subtly.

Lotor fell from the shock the words brought him. "What?!" he exclaimed.

"You heard me well enough. One of them will die by your blades this day. Choose one." The Head Master allowed his arms to fall to his sides. "And be quick about it, lest both are lost forever to you."

"I..." Lotor began but shook his head.

Looking at Serath, he saw a woman whom he had fallen in love with. Shifting his gaze, he looked at Hazar. He saw the only friend he had and would, likely, ever have. He was also the brother he had lost and knew, lucidly, that Hazar would never betray him. In the torment of emotions assaulting him, however, he blamed Hazar for what had befallen all of them. Mainly he blamed Hazar for forcing him into the horrible quandary he was currently in.

Mourn and Rue fell to the ground with a hollow echo, as Lotor lost complete control over his body. He heard a clicking and looked up to meet the Head Master's disapproving eyes.

"Execution is not an option," he announced tonelessly and retrieved the blades, handing them to Lotor. "Stand up and face the consequences of your actions!"

Lotor took the blades numbly. He stood up as tall as he could and considered, fleetingly, decapitating the Head Master. However, something held him back. He began to loath himself for his own fears.

And suddenly his heart shattered as he made up his mind. He would carry out the command and he would face the consequences. He also knew that he would never heal from this act, just as he never would heal from witnessing his mother's death, learning of his sister's disappearance and facing his brother's betrayal.

Had Zarkon been there, he would have been very proud. As he had hoped, the Academy was breaking his son to become the perfect warrior. The young Prince had never killed in cold blood before. This was the second step towards his father's goal for him.

With a speed that astounded everyone present in the arena, Lotor exploded into motion with a guttural roar. He brought Mourn and Rue in perfect synchronisation and spun towards his target. Mourn came in a whirling arch, while Rue countered the direction, gyrating in another deadly curve. Both blades were shrouded in their laser casing just as they came into contact with flesh, coming cleanly on the opposite side from which they had started their incision.

Lotor concluded his move exactly where he had started in front of the Head Master. He looked down, refusing to see the form fall from his action. He could sense the others gasp involuntarily and finally looked up when he heard a voice again.

"Your punishment is concluded. I hope you have learned well." The Head Master inclined his head and he left the arena followed by the Faculty.

Lotor remained still until he felt a hand on his arm. He kept his head bowed, fighting back the tears and the ache in his heart.

"I am sorry," a familiar voice murmured. "I never wanted this to have happened."

Lotor nodded and remained quiet.

The consoling hand led him slowly towards the glade which the Prince was so familiar with. Lotor, the brother and friend, needed comfort more than ever at that time.