



The Path of Love

By Malfearak Asvraal (16826)

The smoke spewing from an exhaust vent shielded the young Kessurian as he ducked into a cramped alleyway between two towering apartment buildings. He walked at a brisk pace, quick enough to put some distance between him and his pursuers, slow enough to avoid arousing suspicion. He was tall for his age, having seen no more than fifteen winters, a lanky lad with arms slightly too long for his growing body. Still, with his hood masking his youthful features, he could pass for an adult. What the hood didn't hide so well was his distinctive, horn-like montrals, but that didn't worry him all too much. The blue-suits hounding him weren't a particularly smart or perceptive lot.

Night had fallen over the Coruscant sector an hour before, the sky above gradually turning from vibrant pinks and purples to muted blacks and blues, the bright lights of the city world fighting back the stars. He hated this place. He hated everything about it. The unending hum of civilization, the soulless durasteel floor beneath his feet, but more than anything else, he hated the lack of stars in the sky. He could still remember his first night at the family's retreat in the farmlands of Dantooine. He had nearly cried when he witnessed the infinity of the universe painted across the night sky, and most of all, the river of lights that formed the core of their galaxy. Here, on this cold, dead world of technology, he could practically count on his fingers the stars bright enough to cut through the light pollution.

Oh, how he longed to be free of this place.

He came out of the alley onto a walkway flanked on one side by the residential district and overlooking the city levels underneath on the other. Buildings of countless shapes and sizes made up the skyline, sprouting all around him in every direction as far as the eye could see, crisscrossed by the sky-lanes, now alight with zooming speeders and spaceships. Towering above it all, he could just make out the sinister silhouette of the spires that had once been part of the Imperial Palace, and the Jedi Temple before it. His destination.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the little prince," said a female voice behind him. Startled, he whipped around to find a green-skinned Mirialan grinning at him, her smile sharp, almost vicious. She wasn't much older than he was and a head shorter, with a round face, soft features, and strong cheekbones. Black, geometrical tattoos formed a point down over her forehead towards her rounded, upturned nose. Another tattoo, this one on her neck, marked her as a member for the Ark Nova gang. Her golden eyes were wide and bright, almost glowing in the penumbra, the eyes of a predator ready to pounce. She pouted as he stood unmoving, silent, silver eyes glaring from underneath his hood. She moved with a deliberate sway of her hips, circling him, tracing a long, sharp-nailed finger across his collarbone and shoulders. "Well, aren't you going to say hello?"

"Hello Naviene," he said bluntly, but a grin of his own blossomed on his lips.

“I was starting to think you wouldn’t show up,” she said, her brow furrowed. Then she flicked her black, braided hair, all smiles as she spoke in a parody of a haughty tone, “but I do profess, the little prince could never resist me.”

He responded to her theatrics with a shrug, “Had to take an alternate route. Mother’s guards were onto me,” he explained.

“No surprise there, you sneak like a reek in a marketplace.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who sticks out of the crowd,” he said, motioning to her outfit. She wore a yellow and black-stripped, form-fitting jumpsuit with reinforced knees, elbows, and knuckles. Colorful motifs and designs were scribbled, painted, and etched on both the jumpsuit and her black Kolka-hide crop-top vest, looking like the kind of graffiti gang artists painted on walls. She wore the kaleidoscopic colors of the Ark Novaes like a mark of pride. It would take but one look for the Coruscant Security Force to identify her as a gang member. If the crackdown on gangs these last few years were anything to go by, they wouldn’t be gentle with one of them showing their face in the top levels of the city.

“I am what I am, Mal,” she said, her words like the slash of a knife as she pulled away from him, her eyes a raging fire.

He stepped forward, taking her hands in his, “You know that’s not what I meant.”

She looked away. He moved closer still, lifting one hand to cup her chin, turning her face back towards his. They were so close that he could feel the warmth of her breath wash over his lips. His hand glided from her chin to her cheek and leaned in. She squeezed his hand in hers but pulled away from him.

“I am what I am,” she repeated, this time with a tinge of sadness.

He stayed there, silent, unsure what to say. He should have reassured her, he should have told her that it didn’t matter where she came from, or what she had done. He should have told her that they belonged together. Part of him wanted to believe it. But he did not want to lie to her. They were from different worlds, literally and metaphorically, and his mother would never approve. He struggled to find the words, and before he could, she started walking away from him, down the walkway towards the spires of the former Imperial Palace. She stopped and looked over her shoulders, her eyes shrouded in shadow.

“Well, are you coming or not?”



Mal jumped down a slanted wall and turned back, offering his hand to Naviene as she did the same. She slapped it out of the way, making a grand show of rolling her eyes, then elbowed him in the gut as she passed him by. He grunted, then followed after her, chuckling. They moved in silence, bent low and light on their feet, keeping out of site behind the cover of a short wall. The sound of voices speaking over a comm channel caused them to pause. It was hard to tell exactly where they were coming from. Whoever it was, they weren't close by, but it meant they weren't alone. Naviene peered over the edge of the wall. As she did so, his eyes were drawn to her, to her body, her forms accentuated by the soft glow of night. His breath caught in his throat. His fingers longed for her soft, green skin, but before he could muster the courage needed to reach for her, she moved out of reach, pressing on. He followed, chastising himself for letting his mind wander. He was on the brink of witnessing history, and here he was lusting after a girl. One who had, not an hour past, shown clear distress at his signs of affection. Naviene was right. She was who she was and he was the son of esteemed Kessurian emissaries. No. Wrong. He was the son of *disgraced* emissaries, and known Imperial conspirators, now under house arrest pending investigation. He didn't belong here anymore than Naviene did. He was quick to forget that fact. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe they were the same. He shook his head, trying to derail that train of thought. *Mal, you're such a fool*, he told himself. He was better than this. He had to be better. He could not let his mind wander like some lovesick Massiff pup, but even as he thought so, his eyes wandered to her form slipping from cover to cover ahead. He hissed, forcefully shifting his gaze toward his goal.

The former Imperial Palace loomed overhead, oppressive and ominous, its spires like the spears of forlorn guards, aimed skyward. Even now, in the darkness, it was grandiose in its own dark way, a structure unlike anything else on Coruscant. It could scarcely believe that it now lay within reach. He had long dreamed of seeing it up close, of delving inside its storied corridors, but now that he was here, he was overtaken by a sense of dread that he couldn't quite comprehend. It was a strange sensation, his ash-pink skin prickling, as if his blood was freezing over inside his veins. He rubbed his hands together and blew out a breath, half expecting to see a puff of smoke. There wasn't one. *Just your nerves*.

"We're almost there," Naviene whispered, startling him.

"I can see that," he answered flattely.

"Ok, smart guy," she said, her whisper a sharp knife. "Maybe I should let you find your own way inside?"

"That, huh, that might be a little tough," he conceded, "I don't imagine they answer to knocking."

She laughed, louder than she should have, and they both tensed up and fell silent, huddling together behind their cover. They looked at one another, golden eyes locked onto silver, and he could again feel her breath on his face. Mal swallowed hard, fearful of being discovered, though perhaps more so because of the flush of being pressed up against her. Moving slowly, they both turned and peeked their head above cover in the search for nearby guards or onlookers. A pair of blue-suited Republic soldiers filed down a ramp some distance away, their reflective white helmets clearly giving them away, but they seemed too far away to have heard anything. Mal and Naveine sank back down, sitting side by side on the ground, back against the low-cropped wall hiding them. She turned to him with a grin as she whispered, “No, little prince, I don’t reckon there’s anyone in there to greet your majesty.”

She was right. The Imperial Palace had fallen into disuse in the years after the signing of the Galactic Concordance. Mal couldn’t help but feel a tinge of sadness that a building of such historical significance could be locked away and forgotten. He had read all about it, its history dating back millenia to the founding of the Jedi Temple and further even. Legends suggested that the temple had been built over the site of an ancient Sith shrine in an attempt by the Jedi to nullify its powers. It was all so very fascinating to him. Naveine, on the other hand, had appeared wholly uninterested, even bored, when he had told her about it. But then again, it had been her idea to infiltrate the palace. At first, the notion had terrified him but it had quickly dawned on him that it may be his only opportunity. He had begged his mother to file for motion of exception with the planetary government so that he may be granted access to the palace for research purposes. She had refused every time, reminding him of how such a request might look considering their current predicament. Not for the first time, he cursed his father and his dealings with the Imperial Remnants.

“*E chuta, sleemo,*” Naveine hissed from up ahead, tearing him from his reverie. She motioned for him to follow her. When he joined her, she jabbed him in the ribs with what he recognized as a security spike as she admonished him, “Get your head out of the stars. We’re almost there.”

She led him to the base of the palace and after some time of searching, they found what they were looking for: a maintenance tunnel, its hatch door lit only by the red, telltale glow of the access panel. Naveine held the slicing spike between her teeth as she set about working. With a flick of her wrist, she produced a slender vibroknife and pried the cover off the access panel, letting it hang by its wires. The knife disappeared as swiftly as it had appeared. She then pulled the spike from her teeth and stabbed it into the droid access port.

“Here goes nothing,” she announced.



Mal felt like a kid sneaking out to the Boonta Eve races as he slunk from shadow to shadow through the intricate corridors of the Imperial Palace, Naveine in tow. Flush with excitement, a sharp-toothed smile split his face from ear to ear, his eyes wide like a puffer pig's. He traced his fingers along every nook and cranny, every etching in the walls and pillars. The architectural work was impressive, and though the Empire had sought to strike all traces of the Jedi from their former residence, the intricacy of their ancient work shone through the cold, immaculate retrofitting of Imperial architects. It was much like a city built atop old fortifications. In most places, the ancient foundations were invisible, but here and there, they poked through as a reminder that they were still there. You just had to know where to look for it.

The cold, foreboding sensation he had felt outside still clung to him, growing in strength the further they delved inside the abandoned palace, but he ignored it. Why would he worry about the unknown when standing in the face of history? It was probably just anticipation. He moved down the hallway at an increased pace, eager to uncover the palace's hidden secrets, all but dropping any pretense of stealth. Each footstep clacked against the polished stone floor, reverberating in the silence of night but there was no one around to hear them. It was clear now that guards patrolled the outer courtyards, but they weren't allowed inside anymore than Mal or Naveine. They had come across a protocol droid, old and creaky, barely able to move its oil-depraved carcass as it gave out a startled, "Oh my!" At first, Naveine had wanted to disable it, but seemed to have a change of heart after looking it over. It was clear the droid wasn't going to alert anyone so they let him be.

"So," Naveine asked as she shadowed him. "What are we looking for?"

"History," he said, his tone hushed by the weight of the word.

"Uh, you can't sell history," she said.

His brow furrowed and drew to a stop. He turned around, his eyes serious, "We didn't come here to steal, Naveine. Did you—"

"Oh please," she interrupted him, her golden eyes flaring up, her tone sharp and defensive. "I got you in. You're not expecting me to leave empty handed are you?"

Mal frowned at her. This was not what he had expected. This certainly wasn't what he wanted. He was an academic, not a thief. He had wanted to delve into the mysteries left behind by the Emperor. Not rob the palace. What had he been thinking?

"That's not why I wanted to come here," he said.

"Don't be naïve," she hissed.

“I thought that we...” he said, trailing off as the words died in his throat.

“Oh little prince, did you not see my clothes? You’ve been eyeing me up and down all night. What, did you think I was your little princess,” she said, mocking him as she fanned her face and batted her eyelashes to illustrate her point.

He looked down, ashamed, angry, his cheeks on fire.

He turned to walk away but she was quick to react, taking hold of one of his hands. She didn’t let him go, held it until he turned back towards her, ready to argue. He was about to speak when she placed her free hand to his chest, leaned in, and planted a kiss on his cheek. He was swept up by her golden gaze and his breath caught in his throat. He could have spent an eternity lost in them. Her demeanor and her voice were both softer as she spoke, “I’m sorry. That is unfair of me.”

“I, huh, I will find something to make it worth your while,” he said. She had helped him get inside a place he had dreamed of visiting. It was only right that he paid her back. They’d already broken a half dozen laws breaking into the place. Stealing a few trinkets for her to sell on the black market couldn’t do much more damage. He suddenly remembered something from the schematics he had downloaded from the public archives. “There was this vault.”

“Think we could get in?” Her gaze was almost expectant, like that of a Loth-cat waiting for a treat.

“We’ll have to see, now, won’t we?”

He grabbed her hand and guided down the corridor.



The blast door to the vault was a massive and intricately decorated disk. It was built with rings fitting into one another, each one carved with a series of symbols which Mal did not recognize, a fact that surprised him. He had spent the previous day brushing on Jedi glyphs, fully expecting to encounter them inside the palace. These were different and definitely not of Jedi make. They were crude, shaped from notches and holes cut in the stone. This was actually the second of two blast doors. Naveine had made quick work of the first, a blast door no different from others one might find in an Imperial facility. She was proving to be quite a talented slicer, something Mal had not known about her. But this door, it was different. For starters, there seemed to be no terminal and no discernible power source.

Naveine kicked at a metal panel she had previously pried away from the wall and watched it clatter across the floor as she half-sat, half-slumped to the ground, cross-legged and panting. She shot him a dejected glare. "I have no idea, Mal. I've tried everything I could think of. I can see a mechanism, but I don't know what controls it. Nothing out here, I can tell you that much."

Mal stared up at the ringed door, running fingers through his cropped, silver hair. He realized he'd been grinding his teeth, so the point where his jaw was hurting. He wanted to get through that door. He *needed* to. They had come so far. He couldn't give up now. And she couldn't either. He wouldn't let her. He wouldn't tolerate her weakness.

"Come on. You're the one with the big brain," she said, humor in her voice despite her frustration. "You've never seen anything like this in one of your big books before?"

"No, ok? Never," he snapped, wheeling on her. He realized his fists were clenched knuckle-white.

His reaction caught them both by surprise. She flinched, then sat there staring at him, mouth agape, eyes throwing daggers. He turned away from her with a groan. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he paced about, shaking his head. That wasn't like him. He had plenty of flaws, but rudeness and impatience had never featured on that list. No. The weight of the palace was bearing down on him. That cold, eerie sensation had gotten worse, far worse, to the point where it was affecting his behavior. What could possibly cause this?

"Don't you feel it?" he asked her.

"Feel what? Annoyed? Yeah, a little bit," Naveine answered.

"No, no. I mean, huh, I mean sorry. But no. I mean that sensation. Like, huh, like evil lurking," he stuttered, the words tripping over one another out of his mouth. She met him with a blank stare. *She thinks I'm crazy*, he thought. *Blast her!* His hands were shaking now. He took a deep breath, trying to push back the dread, the anger. He forced his attention back to the accursed door. He leaned against it, palms pressed to cold, lifeless metal, then let the air out of his lungs in a drawn out sigh. He closed his eyes and pictured the door in his mind, the runes, the rings, the glyphs. There had to be a solution.

That's when he felt it. He wasn't sure what it was, He couldn't quite explain it. A tingling at his fingertips, an energy flowing from the strange door. It was there, beckoning him, begging for his attention, bade him focus, and so he did. There was a rumbling sound, like stones rubbing on stone, and sure enough, the rings began to spin, one by one, layer by layer. He stumbled back as Naveine jumped to her feet and ran to his side.

"What did you do?" she asked, excitement replacing anger.

He stood slack-jawed as the wheels settled into position one at a time with hollow thump. The only answer he could offer was a whispered, "I don't know."

Finally, the central ring ground to a stop and a tick-ticking sound filled the chamber. After a moment, the door rolled aside. Mal was frozen in place while Naveine whooped and ran inside, slipping through the opening before the door came to a halt. He looked down at his upturned palms, the strange energy still tingling on his skin, power unlike anything he had felt before. Why hadn't Naveine felt it while inspecting the door? Why did he?

The door to the vault now stood open, a great wide maw, dark and menacing. Tendrils of darkness poured from the opening, seeping into the world like blood from a gaping wound. The shadows slithered towards him, forcing him to take a step back, then another, but there was no escape. His very existence was engulfed in darkness, a sense of impending doom overtaking him..

"Naviene," he croaked..

"Oh Mal, you have to see this," he heard her call to him from across time and space, awe and wonder in her voice as it reverberated across the eons. He reached out to her but she was nowhere to be found.

Something lived in that darkness, though he could not quite tell what. He heard it. Felt it. Laughter, faint at first, grew progressively louder until it rang in his ears, until it was the only sound. Cruel, breathless laughter, squealing, evil, ruthless. He clamped his hands over his ears but the sound echoed inside his mind. There was no escape.

"Please, Naviene," he whimpered as he fell to his knees.

Then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. Mal was left on his knees, panting, holding his ears, cold sweat pearling on his forehead. Nausea threatened to over take him so he forced himself up to his feet, hands trembling as he pushed off the ground. He lurched as the room spun around him. He reached out for something, anything, to steady himself, but there was nothing. A million thoughts racing through his mind. Maybe he was going mad. He would have collapsed if not for Naviene's hands. He nearly jumped out of his boots as she wrapped her arms around his waist in an attempt to steady him. He found himself peering down into the golden, starlit ocean of her eyes.

"Mal? What's going on?" Her eyebrows were furrowed with concern.

"Sorry," he said, breathless. It was all he could think to say.

She took his hand, smiling, "You have to see this."

She led him towards the vault. He followed numbly, his steps wobbling. Had it been anyone but her leading him, he would have pulled his hand away and turned back. He wanted to leave this place. He wanted to get as far away from that dark cave-like entrance as he could, but then he saw it, and he could not believe what he was seeing. To his surprise, the vault was nothing like before. Gone was the evil, shadow-bleeding cave. In its stead stood an immaculate chamber of metal and shelves, bathed in bright neutral light, an industrial storage room like any other. Why was something so ordinary guarded by such a strange glyph-etched blast door? Items of all kinds cluttered over the counters and shelves. Vases, statuettes, medallions, boxes, weapons, countless objects of indiscernible purpose. The real prizes lay arranged neatly inside ornate glass displays. He could tell from a glance that some of these artifacts were priceless. One display in particular caught his attention. Behind the glass, he watched a dazzling array of intricate metal cylinders of different shapes and sizes. Whatever they were, a strange energy emanated from them, an energy not unlike that of the blast door. By all accounts, he should have been excited, ecstatic even.

He wasn't. All he could think of was her.

"Isn't it amazing?" Naviene asked. A wide smile on her lips. Her eyes were glistening. "It's everything you wanted."

He should have agreed. She was right, it truly was all he had desired. His eyes could not leave her smile. Her lips.

"I'm sorry," he said once more.

Naviene craned her neck and cocked an eyebrow. She laughed. "I know. You've said it a few hundred times already."

His hands found their way to her hips. He pulled her close. He knew that he was being selfish, arrogant even. He knew he was distraught by the... what could he even call it? A vision? He knew he was desperate to be comforted after that ordeal. He embraced that desire. It was clear to him now that she was *everything* he needed. Only she could comfort him. Only she wielded that power. Not just here, not just now. It had been her and only her ever since the day on the rooftops when they first met. It didn't matter where she came from. It didn't matter what she had done. Even now, on the brink of madness, or perhaps because of it, he realized he loved her. He realized that she made him whole.

To think that he'd made her feel lesser before, it wounded him deeply. So, again, he repeated it.

"I'm sorry."

It was clear that she didn't understand why he was apologizing. It didn't matter. Maybe someday she would. Maybe he would explain, but not now. He leaned in, brushing his lips softly to hers as he closed his eyes. Then he pressed into her. He half-expected her to recoil then connect her fist with his chin. He didn't care. *Hit me. I am nothing without you.* Her lips parted to his and they kissed. He pulled her tighter against him, greedily so, and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Oh ain't that just touching?" a rough, sniveling voice interrupted them.

"Oh no," gasped Naviene as she tore away from Mal, eyes wide.

Mal wheeled around to find six figures barring their way out of the vault. A rough bunch made up of two Rodians, a horned Devaronian, and three Humans; six figures dressed in yellows and blacks, their clothes covered in colorful flourishes. Like graffiti.

"Naviene?" he asked.

"Shut up, boy," the Devaronian snarled as lunged forward. The world exploded into stars as he back-handed Mal, sending him rolling over the counter through what had to be priceless artifacts. He crashed to the floor with the sound of pottery shattering around him.

"No! Shen!" Naviene screamed as she launched herself at the Devaronian but he shoved her back with seemingly little effort. Her head smashed into a storage shelf as she went down.

"You did a good job, Vi. It was smart thinking, using that protocol droid to leave us a message. But don't test me. Don't get sentimental now." The threat of violence oozed from his words. Shen turned his back on her and began rummaging through a nearby shelf, smashing away anything he must have deemed worthless. "Look at all this. It's a wonder the Republic didn't empty it."

"We'll be rich," cheered one of the human thugs.

Confusion and realization waging war inside his mind, Mal didn't know what to do. What could he even do? Through the confusion, he barely registered the blood oozing from the gash in his cheek. His thoughts quickly went to Naviene. Had she betrayed him? Used him? Had it been a ruse? Fake? All those heartfelt talks, all those evenings on the rooftops, it all meant nothing? Their kiss... no. It couldn't be nothing. He had to know. The six thugs set about pillaging the chamber to the sound of things being smashed.

He kept low as he crawled across the floor on all fours, working his way around the counter over which he'd been thrown. He saw her, laying on her side with her back to him, barely moving. He noted the telltale motion of her breathing. Relief washed over him as he reached her. He rolled

her over, cradling her head in one hand. She groaned, grimaced, then saw him. The pain in her stare was clear.

“What is happening?” he asked, his voice a whisper.

She looked at him, tears glistening. “I am so sorry.”

There was none of her usual spunk in her gaze. None of her defiance. There was only defeat and hopelessness. That’s when he realized it. They were going to kill him. She knew it too. There were no alternatives, no other outcomes.

Hands grabbed him, yanked him to his feet and away from her. He reached for her as she reached for him and their fingers brushed together. Then they slipped away. Mal roared as he spun on his assailant, throwing his fist with all his might. It cracked the horned man across the cheek but he barely flinched. Shen grinned. A vicious grin. A deadly grin. Mal staggered back as the brute pulled a blaster from his hip.

“Big mistake, boy,” the Devaronian growled.

“Shen, please,” Naviene begged as she climbed to her feet. “Please, we can work something out.”

“That’s enough from you,” Shen snarled. A flash of red lit up his sharp, cruel features. Naviene was dead before her body hit the ground, a smoking hole in the center of her chest, shock lingering in her golden eyes.

Lifeless golden eyes.

A bestial roar ripped through the chamber, inhuman, raw, primal, as Mal launched forward. Something instinctive drove him to reach out with his hand and glass shattered. He didn’t know what he was doing. He barely registered it. A cylinder, cold yet blazing with power, met his palm and he clamped his fingers down around it. A distinctive *snap-hiss* of energy cut through the air. Everything that followed was clouded in a red haze. He wasn’t Malfearak Asvraal, son of emissaries. He was something else. He was a shadow. He was vengeance. He was *hatred*. His life, his path, everything changed in that moment.

When he finally came to his senses, he stood over the dismembered remains of two Rodians, a Devaronian and three Humans. The vault was ransacked. Shelves lay toppled, displays had been thrown and smashed. Great, arcing scars marred the walls, some of them glowing orange still. The stench of carbonized metal and burnt flesh hung in the air around Mal. A blade of crimson plasma hummed in his hand, jutting up from the cylinder in his hand. He could feel its satiable hunger as if it were him. As if it were alive. A lightsaber. The weapon of the Jedi.

He dropped it, realising what he had done. The blade died, retreating into what he now realized was a lightsaber hilt as it clattered at his feet. His eyes found Naivene's corpse, undisturbed where she had fallen, her eyes locked onto oblivion. He sank down next to her, back against a fallen shelf, and pulled her into his arms. With his free hand, he closed her eyes, and cradled her head against his chest.

"I'm sorry," he repeated once more.

Then, he wept.

It would be some years before he understood the events that had transpired that day and it would be a while longer before he fully grasped the implications. In his later years, he came to view this day as the day when he took his first step into a wider galaxy, the first step in a journey that would span decades.

He never forgot Naivene or the intense emotions he had felt in her presence. After all, it was through his love for her that he had discovered the Force.

Flowing through all, there is the Force

*There is no love without passion.
There is no passion without desire.
Through desire, the strength to act.
In our actions, we are reborn.*

*There is freedom in life
There is purpose in death*

The Force is all things and I am the Force



The End