

THE PRIMEVAL PATH

by Cyris Oscura

A single stone of a dull, sheen-less red lay at his feet. Yet, as he looked down upon it now, half-sunk in the dust, he pondered if truly it was there. It had not been so a moment past, he was certain of that much. He tilted his head to one side, willing the gem away but lingered it did, ever unmoving. So very stubborn it was. As his gaze remained locked upon the trinket, he felt the yearning take root in his heart; that baseless desire to seize it for his own. What use could he possibly have for it, here, now, on this festering world? He knew all too well that this was neither a matter of needs or wants. It was something else entirely. Something he only could understand. With an impatient snarl, he called upon the Force and ripped the item from its resting place. Sharply it rose until he could clutch it between two sharp, pointed nails. He brought it up to his one good eye.

“What *are* you, I wonder?” he mused with a crude, raspy voice.

He could sense the searing, merciless cold emanating from the rock between his fingers, yet, to let go was an unthinkable notion. How was it that he could feel such a deep connection to such meagre a prize? A machiavellian smile split his cracked lips.

“We are not so different, you and I, are we?”

This kinship, felt so keenly, was one born out of darkness. The bauble bore a strong link to the Dark Side of the Force and resonated with its power. Even now, he could not glance away from its crimson surface. He rolled it this way and that between his bony fingers, enthralled. He knew not how long he stared before he finally stuffed the stone in a pouch hanging off of his belt.

“We shall talk later, you and I. We will discover why it is you revealed yourself to me,” he turned his one eye to the bog stretching for miles before him. “You will tell me your story, will you not?”

Dragging the carcass of a black fur-coated predator he knew not the name of with his left hand, he sloshed through knee-high waters, pushing ahead as he had done for many a year, again, and again, and again. In truth, it no longer mattered just how often he had walked this path, nor did he care just how often he would do so again before the darkness reclaimed his atrophied body. Life would not quit this hollowed husk he wore for skin, not before he unravelled the secrets of this desolate moon ever shrouded by the Dark Side. He would never give up. *Or was it the Dark Side itself that forbade it*, he wondered. He cackled at another notion: perhaps was *he* the darkness. One day, he was convinced of one theory, the next, stricken by self-loathing and despair, he wore blame as a cloak. Had his coming brought this endless dark? He could not be certain of it. However, today, he knew the truth.

He took one more step before a voice stopped him cold in his tracks.

“That laugh, it does not befit you, Master.”

He shot one glance over his shoulder to the hooded woman suddenly standing at his side. Her black, synthetic armour, pristine despite the environment they endured, creaked with her every motion. Yellow eyes bore from the shadows of her hood into his mind. He withheld words for a moment as

he pushed onward through the murky waters, moss and grime riding the ripples left in his wake.

“If you will not speak, then I will. We have our quest, our journey to accomplish, and you waste your time- *our* time-with inconsequential baubles.”

He felt it then in his breast, the anger, long and dormant, as it rippled ever so faintly. As would a stone upon a pond, her words broke its still surface. He pushed these emotions to the edge of his conscience, or so he tried. Sariss had always known just how to goad him. She loomed over him now, her sharp face oh so close to his. Her breath was a cool breeze upon his disfigured face. When she reached to touch him, he recoiled, losing all semblance of control. With a primal growl ripped from his lungs. The Force rushed through him without warning causing him to lose grip on the carcass. Its toxic essence filled him to the brink until he could no longer contain it. He could not speak. He could not so much as breathe. He shuddered violently in the Dark Side’s sweet embrace. Unseen tendrils slithered up his arm and, abruptly, he thrust an open palm at his apprentice. So wide were her eyes as she was thrown in the air. He clutched his fingers. Sariss dangled mid-air, helpless, flailing her legs as her throat clamped shut. She gasped for air denied to her. She clawed at her neck with reckless abandon, drawing blood as she tried to free herself from some unseen hand. He laughed then, a sick, gravelly laughter. The yellow shimmer disappeared as her eyes rolled back in her head into her hood. A final, sickening crack filled the air as she went limp.

Silence, he thought, teeth clenched, *ever so sweet*.

He unclenched his hand and the corpse plunged. Sariss was swallowed by the bog without as much as a splash.

He could breath again. The sulphuric stench ever present in the atmosphere rushed to invade his nostrils. He swallowed hard as nausea threatened to deprave him of what little he had eaten that morning. Time and again he had promised himself that he would get used to the smell... He never did grow accustomed.

He allowed himself one final glance to where his apprentice's body had disappeared. "Once more we part ways," he said with nary a hint of emotion. He called upon the Force-this time in full control-and levitated the animal carcass from the murky waters. Moss dropped in soggy chunks. He was on his way without further delay, his thoughts circling back to the new artifact in his possession. How strong it resonated with the Dark Side. It tempted him even now...

He could not recall when he had abandoned the animal carcass. One moment it was hovering behind him. The next it was gone. Yet, the dead creature was the least of his worries. He had meant to head to his hideout. There he would have skinned the beast, quartered its meat and readied rations that would last him weeks. The dark cave he had made his home was nowhere to be found. In fact, he

should have been standing in the middle of a crag-ridden wasteland by now. Instead he stood amidst deformed trees the likes of which he had never seen before. These trees were turned inside out, the trunk opening up at the top where long, gnarly branches twisted back downwards to burrow in the earth. Ancient-looking vines blanketed the entire area. Over the ground they crawled. Up and around the trees they slithered. It was quite the sight to behold. The air itself was like nothing he had experienced since crashing on Vanir II eons past. There the stench was all but gone. The frigid air froze the moisture across his mustache and down his long, graying beard.

He shuddered then. With a deep, drawn out breath of welcomed fresh air, he called upon the Force, bid it to raise and maintain his body temperature.

He did not know what had lead him there nor did he know just what drove him onwards even now. He pushed past another tree, climbed over its roots-or was it its branches-and continued moving deeper into the forest. He continued in a singular direction for miles and miles. It was as if something called to him. Or was he being lead rather than beckoned, his leash tugged by some invisible hand. These very questions were pushed to the back of his mind the deeper he advanced. Through the Force, he sensed the presence of creatures on the edge of his periphery. They were large, feral quadrupeds with thick muscles. He could make out ever faintly the scrapping of their claws across dirt and wood. He felt their primal hunger as if it were his own. This did not slow him down nor did

their presence concern him for he was one of them: a feral beast running alongside kindred spirits through these forsaken woods.

When he suddenly burst into a wide clearing, he dug his feet in the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust as he slid to a halt. A steaming swamp spread across the clearing up to the base of a monstrous tree at its center. He stood there in silent contemplation, taking in the sight. So gargantuan it was, the tree could have housed a small village on some backwater planets. It too folded onto itself, its branches digging back into the earth around it, creating natural arches from which dangled countless vines. Something along the trunk drew his gaze but he could not quite make out what it was; an opening perhaps? He needed to be closer if he was to see properly.

As he placed one single foot into the swamp, the world exploded around him. There was a blinding flash. A storm of emotions tore through his mind. He hissed and clutched his head, digging sharp nails into his scalp. It was as if a thousand voices screamed at him all at once. A lightsaber shrieked to life before his eyes. The plasma faded, giving way to Sariss' yellow eyes. *Away with you*, he moaned. Without warning, pain overtook him and he buckled. Shrieking, he fell to his knees waist deep in the swamp. There was a laughter. No. A scream. Someone was dying. Starfighters shot overhead. Had there been an explosion? He was breathing so hard now that his throat burned. With each screeching breath the world seemed to shrink around him. Another lightsaber blade drew alive. This time it was his brother standing before him. He only glimpsed Agart's arrogant

smirk before he too was gone. There it was. He knew he had heard Sariss' laughter. A full battalion of the Black Brigade appeared before him, his very own army. Every single trooper in sight trained their rifles on him. One raw, guttural roar ripped from his throat as he lunged with the Force uprooting entire trees nearby. Something struck him and he fell forward, submerged by the swamp.

Peace at last, was the one thought on his mind.

An eternity seemed to pass before he regained consciousness. When he did so, he found himself standing-not lying or sitting but standing-beneath the monstrous tree, his clothes dry but for his soaked boots. A warm, sticky fluid ran down the sides of his face. He reached to wipe it away and came away with bloodied hands. He took one step backward on shaky legs.

"Do be careful, Master. You look unwell," quipped Sariss, amusement dancing on her voice. He turned to find her sitting upon a boulder, her back against the trunk. She offered him a smile. She appeared younger than she had before. Gone were her black armor and her hood. She was instead dressed in the Jedi tunic she had worn when he had first encountered her. The yellow glimmer in her eyes was instead green.

"We are at our journey's end, you and I," she announced as she turned her head towards a gap at the tree's base. Tall enough for a Wookiee to pass and wide enough to fit a Hutt, it was pitch black inside.

It dawned on him then. Never had he treked so far from his cave. Never had he dared to. Year after year, he lingered near the Obsidian II's crash sight. What

if someone came for him? Did the shuttle's distress beacon not transmit the distress signal still? What a fool he had been. So many years wasted to futile hope when such secrets lay upon this world. Yet he wondered just what had drawn him here that day? No... he realized now that many a days had passed since... since what? He sighed. His mind was a mess.

His apprentice was standing before him again, this time back in her black attire, her face shrouded. He knew all too well that she could not truly be there standing before him at that moment. Sariss had perished a decade past at the end of Jedi usurpers. Yet, she *was* there, tapping one gloved finger against his chest, against the red bauble hanging from his neck. *When did you get there*, he wondered glaring down at the trinket.

"Complete your journey, Master," she whispered as she turned and passed through the gap in the trunk. She gave him one last smirk before disappearing.

He could not fully grasp what had happened that day. Nor would he for some time yet. But for all of his questions, the path ahead was clear to him, clearer than it had been in ages. He clenched his one good hand over the dull, sheen-less red stone and entered the darkness.

I am home.