**Fading Light**

Nicht Ka

**Fiction Event**

*by*

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Lionsbane



*A day shall come*

*when stars go black*

*and even your sons*

*are no more than ash*

*as time becomes undone.*

*—* from the Prophecy of the Final Way

**Runculo**

**Galactic Center**

Golden rays of starlight stretched out into the horizon. The golden energy radiated in all directions, spreading away from the lifeless surface of the rocky planet out into space - and beyond. Trevarus had explained the source the last time the three sorcerers had visited this strange and most magical of lands, which was nestled deep in the heart of the galaxy, but the mysterious golden energy was not why they were here now, nor had they the time.

“The end cannot be stopped,” the Oracle was saying, perhaps explaining the reason for his absence to his two apprentices, who had both left in search of him over a year ago, leaving behind the Dark Brotherhood and its war, or perhaps Trevarus was simply thinking out loud.

“Master,” began Xanos slowly, his eyes never moving from the cosmic display, “the future remains unknown to me.” Even if the Falleen rarely showed emotion on the surface, choosing instead to keep his thoughts hidden, it was difficult even for him to feign his acknowledgement of one of the universe's great mysteries - nor could the Oracle’s apprentice hide the discomfort the two farseers both shared at their great power having been neutered. “If doubt still exists...”

The sentence went unfinished.

Nearby, the third of the trio of sorcerers quirked a thin red eyebrow. “Helpful,” quipped Sildrin, unimpressed and a little irritated at the two masters' frustrating habit of silent half-conversations.

Trevarus turned to face her and gave an uneasy smile - it was rare for the "all-seeing" oracle to so openly display even the faintest hint of concern, but Sildrin was too good at reading others to fail to notice, although she kept it to herself for the moment. She was no fool, and understood all too well how it felt to go blind - and gone blind both Master Trevarus and Master Xanos had. Their much vaunted foresight had grown unreliable, their visions of the future called into question - she had been there when the Oracle’s apprentice had foreseen the Grand Master’s death at the hands of Darth Pravus, joining Xanos on the ranks of the Dread Council, such that the pair could remain a part of the inner circle in the new order of power, only to then watch as the Prophet’s visions fell apart, and the future head down a completely different path to the one he ordained.

Sildrin herself may never have placed the same blind faith in the Oracle or his apprentice’s visions as they did, but it did not change the fact that even she had noticed a shift in the Force. Everything had pointed at Muz’s death two years ago, but Pravus’s coup never came to pass...

“Lady Dragon,” replied Trevarus, “do forgive the choice of phrase, but you are old enough to remember the foundations of our brotherhood, yes?” He paused for a second, but did not wait for her response. “What I foresaw - what Ronin and Astatine denounced, but Firefox, Jac, Mav and the Seven heeded - marked the *rebirth* of this brotherhood, and its only chance for survival.”

Sildrin studied the Oracle as he gave his little speech. Eventually, she nodded; there was only one thing Trevarus would be talking about, even if his prophecies of the end of days had been forgotten during the disorder left by the conflict with the Yuuzhan Vong and the chaos today that had been born of that same war. “*The Final Way*,” Sildrin answered. “I have not forgotten... even if the Dark Brotherhood has.” The sorceress made no effort to mask her open contempt - though it was far from a secret how little regard Sildrin had had for the Grand Master and his crusade.

A modicum of satisfaction briefly came back to the Oracle as another ray of starlight flooded up from a crevasse nearby. “It is comforting that at least I chose my apprentices well.” Trevarus’s face returned mournful again. “The Brethren... have lost their way. We must show them the path to rediscover it before it is too late, and *that*, my apprentice, is the *reason* for Lord Ashen’s war.”

The sorceress furrowed her brow. She had never cared for Trevarus’s riddles, and was too tired of his refusal to speak plain and explain the purpose for their visit here to Runculo, or for the countless lives that had been pointlessly lost in the Dark Crusade. “Tell that to the people who have died, Trevarus,” Sildrin retorted, “or the many that *still* plot the Grand Master’s downfall.”

That last comment briefly brought a disparaging scoff to the corner of the Oracle’s lips.

“Ah, yes,” Trevarus said, his expression souring at the mention of the traitors that had challenged the Iron Throne and sought to depose Muz’s long rule, from Michael Halcyon and Raidoner, to Pravus’s failed coup and the countless number who that very moment still stalked the corridors of power, biding their time, “the fools who think themselves hidden will soon meet their fate.”

The Oracle inclined his sight toward the heavens above as a new thread of light coiled beneath a black stone not far from Trevarus’s feet before it rose into the space directly in front of him and then soared upwards into the golden night sky - toward life.

“We have what we came for,” the Oracle said, sounding severe, “it is time to begin anew.”



***Avenger II***

**Nicht Ka**

Battle raged outside the principle viewport on the bridge of the Super Star Destroyer. Frigates, battlecruisers, and starfighters of varied manufacturing origin and design shot past at speeds near approaching lightspeed, letting fly streams of blasters and lasers and ion cannons, along with the red and blue explosions as countless dozens, no, countless *hundreds* of proton torpedoes and concussion missiles struck their targets and detonated, sending fields of shrapnel spiralling out into the dark and empty void of nothingness that stretched to infinity beyond the *Avenger II*.

The Grand Master of the Dark Brotherhood stood at attention at the front of the bridge, his gaze fixed in cold, focused determination as he watched the endgame approach. For the past two years, the rogue forces led by Esoteric had martialled against him: but no more. This was the final battle; this was the last act before the curtain fell on Korriban itself.

The aptly named Nicht Ka was not Korriban, but... this battle would be the end of Esoteric.

And the end of the plague of locusts that had clustered around Muz Ashen throughout the long years he had stood upon the Iron Throne. *Stood*, not *sat*, because the Keibatsu had always made sure to keep one eye behind him, never naive enough to relax - and allow his assassins the time to strike. He had learned those lessons many years ago, back in the days fighting alongside his brother, Nekura, and later from the late Darth Sarin - before his brief mentor was struck down.

But that fate would not befall Muz. He had learned from his predecessor’s mistakes.

One of the bridge officers climbed out of the crew decks and approached.

Muz’s hand did not move to his lightsaber - because his hand was forever perched at his waist over its hilt, ready to grasp the handle and ignite his blade at any moment. There were few others in the galaxy with as much knowledge in the Jedi Arts, and none would take the Grand Master by surprise with a blade and live to tell the tale.

Not that it mattered right then; Lieutenant Clavis was no threat.

“My lord,” Clavis said, bowing his head a little as he drew nearer - but carefully keeping an understandable distance. “Our forces have begun their siege of the Hexagonal Fortress.”

The Grand Master gave the young officer no response apart from the most fractional tilt of his head to signal his acknowledgement, before turning back toward the battle outside the viewport, nothing would stop their forces now, and those who stood against the brotherhood would—

Suddenly, Muz sensed a new presence behind him.

The Grand Master pivoted on his heel, finding Clavis clutching at his own throat, and gagging for air. Muz’s eyes took in the entirety of the bridge: officers down in the lower bays were all still going about their work, or else - those close enough to pay attention - had inclined their heads and with fast widening eyes were looking at what was happening to Clavis with horror.

Clavis continued choking as Muz reached out with his senses - the presence was growing stronger, and seemed to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Clavis’s eyes rolled in their sockets, his body surely unable to survive for more than another few seconds.

The Grand Master’s eyes blackened as he took in the room again, his lightsaber now already ablaze the colour of midnight, as he fed on the Dark Side, on the life force of those in the bridge, on the death and agony down on the world below, and reached out, feeling, sensing...

“*You*,” Muz said, with an audible sigh, and deactivated his lightsaber.

Clavis’s hand released his throat and the man’s arm dropped as the officer relaxed - or at least, as the body of the young man relaxed. In the lieutenant’s eyes, however, a distant violet ember now flickered, faint enough for most to barely even take notice, but distinct enough that the Grand Master recognised its origin in an instant:

“This is not the time, Trevarus.”

The Grand Master did not sound amused at the oracle’s intrusion on the eve of their final victory.

Clavis, now under the Oracle’s control, gave no sign of being bothered by Muz’s irritation at the interruption. In fact, the corner of the lieutenant’s lip had a slight twitch of amusement, although perhaps that was just Clavis himself trying to wrestle free of the distant sorcerer’s ministrations.

“That day four years ago, you were more welcoming, Lord Ashen,” Clavis answered, finally.

Muz studied Clavis for a moment, remembering. He had not forgotten their dinner back on Antei, or the day the Oracle had departed - with the Grand Master’s blessing - to investigate the visions that had been plaguing him for some time. Trevarus had claimed to have foreseen - or, perhaps it was more accurate to say, he had been *unable* to see - a day when the worlds that had once called themselves a part of the galaxy... disappeared, when whole races simply faded away, when the tapestry that held the galaxy together pulled apart at its seams, and everything that was known became unknown, with not even the great oracle himself able to gaze any further forward.

Muz had known Trevarus long enough - he had been one of his earliest mentors - to know better than to dismiss the visions out of hand, as indeed most of the rest of the Star Chamber had been wont to do, but the Grand Master knew better: the Oracle’s visions had led them this far.

Even if most believed Muz had forgotten, believed him a warmonger and nothing more, that was only because the fools were too blind to see it, because they lacked the sight to peer any deeper.

“Explain,” Muz answered at last, “but be quick about it. There is no time for your riddles.”

“I have my answer,” was all Clavis replied.

That perked the Grand Master’s curiosity. He studied Clavis intently - now slightly concerned.

“*And?*”

“That apprentice, who had known nothing of the Vong, and who remembered no great war...”



**Dark Hall**

**Antei**

Life continued on Antei like ordinary, which for Antei meant anything but. In the corridors of power, the metallic chink of heavy footsteps rang down the corridors as heavily armoured squads from the Nephilim marched through the Dark Hall, under express orders from the Grand Master.

Antei may have been left undefended right now, with the Antei Defence Groups deployed to the final operation on Nicht Ka, but that had been exactly like Muz had intended. The nest had been left abandoned, and so it was only to be expected that the worms and liars would crawl out from beneath whatever filth they had hidden under - and use this moment to enact their plans.

But Muz had been ready - and he knew where to go first.

Commander Phuria raised her hand in a silent gesture and her team leapt into action. One of the men clad from head-to-toe in their non-identifying black bodysuits keyed a datapad he had in his hand and the doorway in front of them burst into flames, and there was a loud crash as the metal plate slammed into an unseen piece of furniture on the other side when it was blown through the opening. The other ten members of her team surged through the still-smoking opening.

“Nobody move!”

Unseen protests followed the command - and then a blaster shot, followed by a loud thud - as the Nephilim unit took control of the chamber belonging to the Office of the Deputy Grand Master, as was indicated by the runes engraved into the walls, and the white warbanner possessing the golden symbol of the Sith Empire that hung just outside the former doorway.

“What is this?” snarled a male voice, the smoke slowly starting to dissipate enough for Phuria to make out the speaker’s close-cut blond hair. The Deputy Grand Master’s Praetor, Montresor. “My Master will hear of this,” the clearly irate man continued, having obviously been taken by surprise - or else doing an excellent job of faking his reaction to the Nephilim squad’s arrival.

Phuria entered the room, which was now littered with debris and broken furniture, with a number of staff huddling beneath the wrecked chairs or the few tables that still stood upright. None of them managed to hold her gaze for more than a few seconds before quickly looking away again.

It was right for them to fear her. She was the hand of the Grand Master. Her word was his word.

“Praetor Montresor, you are under arrest,” Phuria said, nodding at one of the other Nephilim to shackle the Praetor’s arms together. The Praetor stared at her in disgust, but she ignored his continued protestations that he would have her head for this, or that the Grand Master had been misled and that the true traitor was getting away with murder. “*Please*,” Phuria said dismissively, brushing aside his complaints, “don’t think yourself so special. You are just one piece on the Dejarik table - the others will be dealt with soon enough by myself and my fellow squads.”

Montresor scowled at her, clearly struggling to make sense of exactly what she was implying.

“Take him away,” Phuria said, waving her hand to dismiss her squad, and making clear she was not here for further chatter. Kenath Zoron had already been arrested and taken to Codei Prison for questioning, as had the staff members of the Master-at-Arms. Phuria shook her head as Montresor was marched out in silence, before she checked her datapad again for their next objective. “Prepare a shuttle to Lyspair,” Phuria said aloud, knowing one of her Nephilim would immediately open a comm channel to the Shadow Academy control tower. There was no more concrete proof against the Headmaster than there had been against the new Deputy Grand Master or the Master-at-Arms, but theirs was not to wonder why: they had their orders.

*All* were to be considered traitors until they proved themselves otherwise.

Simultaneously, across the star system other squads were carrying out parallel operations in tandem to Phuria’s own. They had passed the point of interrogating suspects for information and only acting afterward: no, Operation Lionsbane had come direct from the Grand Master himself; all the Dark Council’s staff were to be rounded up, *without exception*. The stakes had got too high, and Lord Ashen was at last taking steps to clear out the last opposition to his rule.

And to set an example to any others - even if they had not yet risen against him - that it was futile to stand against the Iron Throne.



***Avenger II***

**Nicht Ka**

“...the Final Way has started,” Trevarus finished. “There can be no preventing what is to come.”

Muz studied Lieutenant Clavis’s face, presently forgetting about the battle raging outside the viewport behind him. The Dark Crusade had served its true purpose, and the Oracle’s return - and in particular, the providence that Trevarus had returned at precisely this moment - proved the Grand Master had been right: the brotherhood had needed to be readied for what was to come.

“Are you certain?” Muz knew the Oracle would not have said anything if he hadn’t been, but... this was too great a threat to everything they had - or ever would! - build to not make sure. He’d wanted to believe the strange boy Trevarus had found out in the Outer Rim, whose world had been razed by the Yuuzhan Vong, but had now... been rebuilt, had just been suffering amnesia, had been so traumatised by the brutality of the war that he had blocked out the memories, or else just playing an untasteful practical joke, when the boy had claimed to have remembered nothing of any invasion, nor reacted to any stories of the alien savages. But something had not added up, the boy had been too young to have concocted such a detailed narrative that was so at odds with what Trevarus - and Muz - had both considered historical fact. Something had been very wrong.

Most dismissed Trevarus’s stories as fantasy, some of the Star Chamber even calling for his excommunication and for him to be sent into exile, but Muz - albeit with great reluctance - had accepted that despite his best wishes, despite all he had believed since the moment of his birth, despite the *impossibility* of what Trevarus proclaimed, there would come a day when the Shadow Academy filled with other young acolytes who knew of no galactic invasion, whose knowledge of the Jedi and Republic no longer matched the stories that the Grand Master had grown up with, the stories that he had *lived* and *fought*. Muz still could not understand how it was possible, as if two worlds had collided, as if the Force had somehow flowed down a different path to the one that had been intended, but the reasons made no difference: the Final Way had arrived, far sooner than even the Oracle had foreseen in his visions which so long ago had led them to Antei, and the Dark Brotherhood had to be prepared - the Dark Brotherhood had to find a wayto survive.

“I have spoken with the Five Priestesses,” Clavis began, a slight look of consternation slipping into his face, “they were not... that forthcoming with information.” Muz quirked an eyebrow. It was not surprising. The beings of the Force rarely dealt with those who were not in perfect Balance - and if the Oracle was anything, it was anything but balanced. In any case, Trevarus continued: “But no. The end cannot be stopped. The ship of time has struck an unmovable rock and been sent off course... all we mere mortals can do is try to hold on and not be thrown off.

“Time is changing, my old friend,” Clavis said, dropping all formalities, “we must all be ready.”

Muz almost thought he heard a hint of *fear* in the man’s voice.

The Grand Master breathed out a long, audible sigh, momentarily indifferent to what the crew would think of their lord’s fleeting look of concern for his and his family’s futures. He had hoped Trevarus would discover another way, hoped the Oracle’s wanderings would arrive at an answer that neither the Jedi nor the Sith of antiquity had ever found. But that had been idle fantasy and prayer. What was coming was beyond any one order of Force wielders, this... was the work of gods, and beings far beyond the understanding of any of them. Even Muz. Or Trevarus.

Or even the great Luke Skywalker himself.

The Grand Master looked back out the viewport. More flaming hulks had joined the sea of destruction that had been there when he had last studied the battle overhead Nicht Ka. He could make out fields of glass shining up from the surface itself, where the former flagship of the late Archibald Zoraan had now rained destruction upon the landscape, devastating whole continents.

“My mission is nearly complete as well,” Muz said idly, keeping his attention on the battle.

Behind him, Clavis remained silent, leaving the Grand Master to his own thoughts for a moment.

“The last traitors have nearly been dealt with,” Muz continued, “on Antei, it will only be a matter of time before every last sycophant and would-be deserter or heretic has been cleansed.” The Grand Master’s voice sounded neither pleased nor angry, but merely stating facts. He had known the identity of the ring-leaders from the start. Had each one of them believed him a fool? Did they not realise why he had first elevated them to the ranks of the Dark Council to begin with? Like Vitiate so long ago, Muz too had understood the *real* purpose of the Dark Council.

To bring his enemies together - where he could *crush* them.

The Clans may have called him a fool. They may have questioned the numbers who had been led to their deaths, who had died, all purportedly for the vain glory of the Grand Master... but they would soon see. Trevarus had now confirmed that Muz had been right to weed out the weak and to make the Dark Brotherhood ready for the end of days: there would be no place for the weak in the new order of the galaxy, for only the strongest would be able to survive what was to come.

Those who could not hold on deserved their fate.

He would shed no tears for the dead - and even less for traitors whose blind ignorance of the true threat facing not just the Dark Brotherhood but *time itself* threatened the survival of everything.



**The Shadowlands**

**Antei**

The upturned shell of a landspeeder teetered on the edge of the chasm that divided the sunside and shadowlands of Antei. The QH-7 Chariot may have been a military transport, but not even the strongest deflector shields from the Dark Council’s contacts in the Roche asteroids could survive a head-on blast from a rocket propelled grenade made by the same Verpine engineers.

Even though several hours had passed since the attack, the smoke still rose from the wound that had been opened in one side of the landspeeder, leaving a shape that was closer to a cracked egg than the impregnable canopy that had rolled off the production lines of Uulshos Manufacturing.

In the Shadowlands, a solitary figure stood on a nearby outcropping, his or her face hidden beneath a heavy cowl, and any distinguishing features masked by the loose robes that they had wrapped around them to protect them from the harsh winds that battered the Du’san boundary.

The figure raised a wrist to their mouth. “On site,” he or she said. “Nothing to report.” Whoever the watchman was, friend or foe, loyalist or heretic, remained unclear when they turned away. As the watchman disappeared back into the Shadowlands again to join the other ghosts that haunted it, something stirred on the site of the downed Chariot, but the figure was too far away to notice.

A quiet groan elicited from underneath the wreckage as a blood-soaked hand reached out...



**Runculo**

**Galactic Center**

“The one that should never have been raised to Grand Mastery remains a risk,” Trevarus said.

The astral projection of the Grand Master gave no objection. Pravus had been a wild card from the beginning. His attempted coup had failed, but... it was not the threat to Muz’s own life that was the problem, but the danger the man posed to the stability of the whole of Antei. Just as Lady Tiamat had intended all those centuries ago, Antei was the Ark that would carry the chosen into the new dawn, and in the days ahead the Dark Brotherhood needed a leader that understood the challenges to come, not an unhinged outsider whose own motives remained unknowable.

“We will see,” was all Muz finally said and the astral projection faded.

There was nothing else that could be said. Pravus might be dead already - or he might not, it was impossible to always see the future, even at the best of times, and especially now with the Force so out of balance, so much so that not even the Oracle himself could foresee what was to come...

**The end…?**

**…or perhaps a new dawn.**

**References**

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