The Oncoming Darkness

***House Marka Ragnos***

Fiction Event

by Darth Vexatus

Prophet Darth Vexatus (Sith)/Marka Ragnos of Naga Sadow, #188

**Orian System**

**Tarthos**

**Kar Alabrek Spaceport**

Engines revved, exhausts fumed, and the indeterminate chatter of untold ordinary citizens loading their transports or nattering to friends and family members as they went through customs and had their baggage checked all filled the spaceport. To the naked eye, the catwoman currently stepping up the ramp of a small, ageing *Lambda*-class shuttle, which had had the old Imperial white livery resprayed black, would have not stood out as anything untoward.

However, the grey-green Falleen lurking in the shadows nearby continued to look on with interest, as a human male- probably mid twenties, early thirties at best, but definitely too young to have remembered the days of the Galactic Civil War- shepherded the feline Cathar female onboard the waiting shuttle. Most people would not have noticed what was wrong, but to the eyes of the Force, the catwoman’s overriding sense of *reluctance* was unmistakable.

The Cathar quickly shot a glance back over her shoulder at the man- who was not outwardly holding any weapon, but the Falleen of all people knew that that was no proof that the man was ‘unarmed’. The human male’s expression remained hard and did not change. He simply gestured back up inside the shuttle, and- without words- silently made it clearer still who was in control.

The woman’s response was simply a sigh of resignation, and she turned her head back to the ramp and proceeded to climb onboard. It was so apparent that she had no interest in doing so.

But she did not try to resist.

The Falleen’s own attention now moved to her human ‘escort’ who remained at the foot of the ramp, presumably while his associates onboard the *Lambda* shuttle took charge of the Cathar, to do... well, the same as they did back on Antei, most likely.

The human male stiffened a fraction and turned his head in the Falleen’s direction.

The human caught Xanos’s own eyes briefly, but only for a fleeting moment, before the human continued to take in the surrounding area, not looking directly at the Prophet, but probably just feeling for something that the man felt he had sensed in the back of his mind. After taking in the crowd gathered around the Falleen, the human’s posture relaxed again, his shoulders loosening, before he looked down at his left wrist and keyed into the comm unit built into a metal bracelet.

Not prepared to let this one escape, the Falleen started making his way toward the shuttle.

He had already passed through security- which had not been hard, and had only taken a wave of his hand to deflect the attention of the spaceport’s guards, the weak minded were so easily led- and it was a simple task to gently manoeuvre his way through the crowds of passengers waiting their turns to board their own transports. As Xanos drew nearer, the male at the *Lambda* shuttle continued to quietly tap away on his wrist commlink, seemingly deep in thought at his task.

Only a dozen metres separated them now, and the Falleen took a moment to inspect the black shuttle. It bore no markings or identifiers. Inside, he could feel the faint spark of two lifeforms, one was definitely the Cathar, the other... to him was alien, but he had been around enough humans to recognise their distinctive stink without any difficulty. In addition, the lone human onboard carried the same recognisable spark of the Force that the one outside did, which even though they may both have been trying their hardest to suppress it, their fledgling strengths in the Force was unable to shield their Force signatures from the Prophet’s unrivalled senses.

Xanos closed the final gap and approached the human still typing away on his wrist.

The general humdrum and noise of the spaceport masked his own footsteps, although the Falleen’s pheromones would be no use with the all pervading smell of engine oil and exhaust fumes coming from the various models of Sienar, Corellian or Hoersch-Kessel freighters, along with the occasional antique Rebellion or Imperial-era starfighter- all of them officially with their weapons deactivated for civilian use, of course- or not, as the case undoubtedly was with many.

The inability of Xanos to make use of his pheromones was not an issue, however, because even before the human finally acknowledged the slightly uncommon lizard-looking alien in front of him, the Falleen had already closed his own eyes and latched his thoughts onto the surface of the human’s, and had already begun probing the annals of the human’s subconscious for an entrance.

The human forgot about his wrist comm and his hand instead moved quickly to a holster on his hip, which on the surface had the conventional look of a blaster holster, but the second the cover popped open, the polished cap of a lightsaber hilt was unmistakable.

Not that the lightsaber did the human any good, however.

The Prophet had by then already penetrated the man’s mind, and it only took the slightest of commands to be driven straight into the human’s thoughts for the man to refasten the cover over his blaster-cum-lightsaber holster, and be left standing there, unarmed, and immobile.

“Step aside,” the Elder commanded, and the human proceeded to do just that.

Indifferent to the rest of the rest of the spaceport- who themselves were indifferent to the events unfolding at the foot of the ramp up the black shuttle- the Falleen approached the shuttle ramp.

Xanos’s eyes continued to bore into the depths of the man’s subconscious, never breaking eye contact. Beads of sweat pooled on the human’s forehead, one tear falling from the corner of his left eyelid as the muscles beneath the man’s skin tightened, trying to resist and fight back- but it was useless. The Prophet’s hypnotic claws had pierced deep into the man’s inner psyche, and they were continuing to clasp the weak minded man’s thoughts in a grip like a vice.

Even though the human’s stunted command of the Force was sorely lacking in comparison to the Prophet’s, the man continued to shield his thoughts, however, having evidently received training specifically to resist such mental intrusions. Through gritted teeth, the man tried to talk:

“I... will tell you... nothing.”

There was an audible *crack*, and the muscles in the human’s face tightened into a cringe. A thin red line of warm blood ran down his bottom lip. Even though the man still could not move, being held in the Falleen’s psychic grip, a shudder still swept through his body, originating somewhere from inside him. His throat visibly convulsed, and even the Prophet’s mental control could not hold back the man’s involuntary cough, which spat blood up into the Faleen’s grey-green face.

The human’s eyes rolled back in their sockets, and Xanos felt the spark of life fade out of him.

More blood dribbled from the dead man’s mouth while he continued to be held upright by the Elder’s invisible hands. The Falleen released him and the human’s body collapsed face down onto the foot of the loading ramp of the *Lambda*-classshuttle. Unfortunate.

A couple of nearby civilians had caught sight of what had just happened, but simply turned their heads away to look in the other direction. Like usual, nobody wanted to get involved in someone else’s problems, and even the lone Twi’lek nearby, who continued observing the Falleen, simply put her head down and kept her hands in her pockets, clearly nosy, but trying not to be obvious. Xanos nevertheless reached out and nudging the woman softly in the Force to allay her interest.

The Elder knelt down over the body of the human and rolled it back over.

The man had clearly broken open a poison capsule fixed to one of his teeth. That explained the sharp *crack* before. Xanos reached under the man’s wrist and unclasped the bracelet the man had been using earlier. The comm device had automatically turned off when the man had stopped using it. It was fairly standard issue and had no noticeably remarkable features to identify it.

He keyed the activation switch but nothing happened. He pressed it again. Still nothing.

A moment later, though, there was a small spark flash over the keypad, which was accompanied by a problematic crackle. Smoke. It had shorted itself out. A deliberate failsafe, no doubt.

No matter. He could reach into the object’s past later. But for now..

The Elder glanced back up the ramp into the shuttle. The life signatures inside had grown more polarised. The second human felt much the same as the one who had killed himself rather than betray whatever information he believed his death could hide, but the Cathar woman, her presence in the Force had weakened, and felt much more frail than before.

The comm bracelet could be examined later. The catwoman was the more immediate concern.

The Falleen headed up into the small shuttle.

Even though the holding bay was on the surface no different to any other *Lambda* shuttle, where most would have had seating for half a dozen passengers, this vessel had been refitted with a wide array of comm units and sensor suites. In the middle, there was then a large, two metre wide projection of the planet Tarthos, its geography and settlements all marked, and- more significantly- a number of brightly illuminated red sigils that glowed and pulsed.

To the side of the hologram of Tarthos, a separate projection identified the sigils meaning:

Undesirables

Beyond the holographic map of the planet, the catwoman was on her knees, her face bloodied and bruised. The human he had sensed was standing behind the Cathar, a pair of heavy, cold, metal gauntlets completely covering both of his hands. There were specks of blood over the gauntlets’ knuckles. The Cathar woman retreated a little when the man stepped straight over the top of her so he could address the Falleen intruder on his shuttle face-to-face directly.

“You’ve some nerve, Sith,” the man said, and rapped both his armoured fists together.

The Prophet was not there to exchange idle threats and reached out to touch the man’s mind.

The human sneered in response. “Fool,” he began, and took another step forward. “Your mind tricks won’t work on me. The steel curtain around my mind is impregnable to your tricks.”

“I do not,” Xanos replied evenly, his voice neither angry nor serene as the lighting in the room dimmed a little, as if a veil of mist had begun to rise up around the Falleen, “employ *tricks*.” In fact, his skin had flushed a little stronger shade of green, and the filtered air onboard the shuttle was now growing... thicker, headier, as his pheromones began to secrete into the much cleaner air on the ship compared to the heavy smell of exhaust fumes and ozone that had been outside.

The human rolled his eyes and snorted a laugh. He reached down and wrapped his armoured hand around the butt of a large heavy blaster pistol that was strapped to his left waist.

“*Hmmpf*,” he grunted. “We should have put *your* kind down with all the other undesirables.”

The man lifted his blaster out of its holster and raised it toward the Falleen. Xanos, however, continued to remain silent, his mind elsewhere, working unseen, almost like he was not there.

“And they call you a Sith?” the man mocked. “The Sith should be *strong*. We are *warriors*.”

The man fired, but just as he did so, something dropped from the roof of the shuttle’s roof, and caught the blaster bolt. A painful screech growled from whatever it had been, and- automatically- the human’s eyes darted from his original target, following where the... creature? had gone.

There was something hidden in the shadows underneath where the holo-projector stood in the middle of the room. He aimed and fired again. Whatever it was darted away and he missed.

The man looked back up at the Falleen- only to discover the Elder was no longer there.

“Face me!” snarled the human. “Or are you too afraid??!”

There was another growl nearby and instinctively the man’s head looked back in the sound’s direction- only to immediately spot an unrecognisable hissing, snarling creature that he could only mentally interpret as some kind of *thing* had already launched itself into the air and was springing straight in his direction. The thing shot toward him. He fired.

And again.

And then again.

The creature snarled with each bolt from his blaster pistol, but it did nothing to stop its approach. Its leap had taken all of a couple of seconds, but in that time, he had been able to get a better look at it, realising it was little more than a couple of feet high, with two arms and two legs, almost like a small child, but one covered in scales and spines down its back and arms and thighs, with two daemonic-looking horns jutting out either side of its forehead, and a set of ghastly, haunting red, fiery eyes sneering straight back in his direction, hungry, its teeth sharp, pointed.

“What in the name of fu-”

Before he could finish the word, the unholy... *thing* was on him, and biting and clawing at his chest with its deep talons. Its snarl went right to the depths of his soul, an ear piercing screech, like a mix of some sort of banshee’s wail and the death rattle of the dead and dying. He felt the claws slice through his skin, as the thing ripped flesh away, tearing chunks out with its feral teeth and digging whole lumps out of his abdomen with its clawed hands.

He... could not even hear his own voice when he screamed.

The human didn’t even know what was going on. He didn’t even bother to try and fight it off. It was unnatural. This... thing should not exist. What was it? His mind was in circles, almost like he had already died and his spirit was now just looking down and watching his body’s last moments as this infernal demon ripped apart his mortal vessel and shredded it like he had never been at all.

Only when he felt- or watched? he could no longer tell for sure what was true and what wasn’t- when the thing crawled higher up his chest, and clung onto his head, so that it could stare straight back into his face- did he inally feel the bolt fired from his own blaster pistol when it penetrated the middle of his chest and ripped through his lung, exiting straight out the other side.

In that final moment, the creature in front of him smiled its sickening, hungry daemonic smile, and dissolved into a cloud of smoke, and when the smoke finally cleared and he looked down, he found that the hole in his chest was all there was, his clothes still fresh and new, his fabric not smeared in his own blood from where the thing had clawed out his insides.

He felt his legs give out and he collapsed onto his knees.

When he looked back up, he found the Falleen standing over him, his blaster in the alien’s hand.

Xanos gave no sign that he took any pleasure out of the man’s dying words, nor any annoyance. It simply had had to be done. That was all there was. Whoever the man had been, and whatever his purpose, the Elder would discover that back at the palace when he had time to peer into the records imprinted on the other man’s comm unit.

“Wh... what are you...” The man coughed blood. “M... more K...Krath than Sith...”

The last remark finally warranted a response from the Falleen.

“Of course,” Xanos replied. “My Master was a Krath war mage. Perhaps the greatest sorcerer the Brotherhood has ever known.” The Falleen looked down at the man- a Sith equite, it seemed- in disappointment when he finally collapsed dead onto the shuttle’s otherwise unblemished deck.

Back on the other side of the room, a sob came, and Xanos turned his attention to the Cathar.

“D... don’t hurt me,” the catwoman muttered, afraid. “I... I will do anything.”

The Falleen turned, but even before his eyes had settled on her, his mind had already begun probing her own, seeking answers to her identity, to her reason for having been brought here, for the explanation for what it was these Sith had marshalled her to the shuttle only to torture her.

“T... they told me,” she began, seemingly aware of what the Elder wanted, “they said... that we were undesirable... that Krath... and Obelisk... and... and my people... were... were all...”

The catwoman looked up at him, her big eyes wide, tearing.

“They threatened my cubs!” she cried. “They said they would...” She could not bring herself to complete the sentence, but the rest was blindingly clear. “I said I’d go with them... do whatever they wanted... tell them everything I knew.”

“And what is it,” Xanos asked, “that you know?”

“I... I can’t tell you,” the Cathar woman replied, “if they find out... my cubs... they will be...”

“I am sure you know I could prise the information from your mind,” the Elder replied. There was no air of confrontation in his voice; the Falleen was plainly stating the facts. Even if the Cathar woman refused to cooperate, there would be nothing to prevent him extracting the information.

But... something held him back.

Unlike the two Sith who had abducted her, or the agents who had carried out the massacres that he had discovered on Antei just a few days earlier, the Falleen had never been one to take a life for no reason. Trevarus had always taught him *Control*, and why not to surrender to *Chaos*.

Xanos had already made that mistake ten years ago on Lehon back when he was younger...

“I can’t let you do that,” the woman responded at last, and frantically bent down and pulled out a hidden blade that she had secreted underneath her clothes, but presumably never bothered to use after she had come to the conclusion that her own resistance would only get her children killed.

The Cathar raised the blade, but not at Xanos, but rather against her own fur-covered throat.

“I would sooner choose death,” she said, and with one motion, slashed her own neck open. She dropped the blade, and could not stop her hand from reaching up to clutch the wound, even as her life blood rapidly spilled out of her, down her neck, down her chest, down along her thighs and legs. Her eyes at first remained locked on Xanos’s, but then drifted up, rolling back like the two Sith interrogators’ eyes had, before she finally dropped slowly, gently onto the floor, falling over sideways onto her left side, as the spark of life ebbed away, fast waning, until... nothing.

Ordinarily, Xanos would have foreseen this, and taken steps to have prevented it. His sight, however, like the sight of all those in Orian, was still reeling from the aftershocks of what had transpired on Ombus, the same aftershocks that had enabled the murders on Antei to go largely unnoticed. The Force was out of balance, and the future... currently unknown.

He reached down and tore off a seam of the Cathar woman’s clothes.

Like the Sith outside’s wrist comm, the Elder could peer into the history of the catwoman’s past to find out more of what had happened, but he would have to return to Sepros and do that later.

What was crystal clear, however, was that events were in motion, and a darkness was spreading across not just the Brotherhood, but the galaxy itself. His actions on Ombus had shielded Orian from the worst of it, having cut them off from the shockwaves permeating the Force, but... the barriers he had erected, the walls he had wrapped around the star system to insulate it from the outside would only hold back so much. He had to get to the bottom of what had taken place on Antei. The oncoming darkness may not have been able to be stopped, but they could be prepared.

As Xanos made his way back out into the spaceport to head back to his ship and return to Sepros, the second of the two Sith’s last words echoed in his head again. *M... More K... Krath than Sith.*

*Perhaps so*, he thought to himself, *perhaps so*.

Increasingly, what it meant to be a Sith was being rewritten, and the more he reflected on it, the more the Prophet was starting to question exactly where he belonged....

**The End**