**In the end**

Rosh Nyine, #12671, House Shar-Dakhan of Clan Naga Sadow

Wasteland

Two sets of deep footsteps would have been the only hint that someone was alive on the inhospitable surface of the snow-covered tundra that was being ravaged by a furious blizzard. The footsteps were not lasting long though, erased by the terrible weather of *Ziost*, once homeworld of the *Sith* and the last target in the *Dark Crusade* together with *Dromund Kaas*.

That the presence of someone on that place could not be detected by anyone seemed to fit one of the two travelers leaving the footsteps behind them, walking with effort trying to reach the mountains in the horizon while pulling from the second one with a leash attached to his neck. If someone would have seen the strange pair of humans, especially someone from the *Dark Brotherhood*, they would have immediately questioned them about their destination and purpose there. But no one would see them, no one could save the drugged man that was being led to an unknown destination.

The leading man and the prisoner were dressed alike, wearing snow environment suits that protected them from the otherwise deadly climate, but there was a subtle difference. One of them, was wrapped in a robe that could have been brown but was entirely covered in the white of the snow. He was not wearing any protective helmet either, revealing his tired facial features to the blizzard; defiant, yet tired. The leading man. Someone who had been taken away from the *Shadow Academy* after three standard years of training as a secret weapon for his Clan. Someone who had succeeded, someone who had failed. No one would have recognized the proud member of the Obelisk order who had given the speech in front of all his Clan’s forces, starting the last episode in the *Dark Crusade* to all of them. How proud had he been, how confident of his success.

How wrong. Now, beaten physically and psychologically, *Rosh Nyine*, once a rising star in the *Dark Brotherhood*, had embarked on a personal quest to find what the Academy had not been able to give to him, the understanding of politics and machinations lurking in the shadows of the Brotherhood. He had been trained to be a tool, a weapon to use against the enemies of his Clan and the Brotherhood, but he had not been prepared for the invisible attacks of treachery that he had been too blind to see.

Under the hood that barely protected him, a beard, partially frozen, was one of the signs that showed the changes that he had suffered during the Crusade. A symbol, he liked to think, of maturing, of change and evolution. Behind him were the glorious triumphs on *Korriz*, where he had been victorious over and over again lighting the flame of hope in his Clan. Behind were the much coveted positions next to the Dark Councilors, the initial victories that he had led against the overwhelming forces of other Clans and Houses on the surface of *Ziost*.

Yes, he had changed much, and the Crusades had been the catalyst of all these changes. Pulling from his prisoner, the young former Aedile of the House *Marka Ragnos* wondered if he had tried too hard to do his best, to bring his Clan back to the glorious days of the past. He had fought with rage and fury and had found that no matter how many enemies he would defeat in the fields of battle, nothing would change if he didn't master the art of the intrigue and diplomacy.

Yet he was not defeated. In his eyes burnt the flame of determination, the desire of becoming stronger and stronger, the desire of being elevated far beyond where he had been and, as the *Sith* code said, break the chains that imprisoned him. He would not step back again, and no obstacles would stop him from moving forward.

Obstacles like the one he had chosen to face at those moments, defying the blizzard that threatened to kill him and his prisoner, a journeyman from another House, strong in the Force, that he had brought with him hoping that it would help to achieve his goal at the end of his mission. But now he had to find refuge, and soon, or both would perish.

Rosh had studied well the place they were crossing, and knew that below the thick layer of snow there was solid rock. Afraid that his prisoner would not make it to his destination alive, he walked towards him and gave him another dosage of relaxing drugs, enough to take him unconscious. The prisoner, powerless, already drugged and barely aware of where he was didn’t put up any opposition, exactly the way Rosh wanted him to be. Taking his lightsaber and igniting it, the young member of *Naga Sadow* walked a circular path carving the snow below him, creating a cylindrical path of emptiness in his path. Then he walked again and again, turning the ice into steam that barely had time to raise from the floor to transform into particles of ice and be carried away with the wind.

After a few long minutes of hard work, a hole deep enough to reach to the stone layer had been created in the ice-covered tundra. A hole that would protect Rosh and his prisoner from a certain death. Taking the body of his prisoner and lowering him into the hold, he jumped down into the improvised refuge and got a blanket out from his travelling supplies. Using a few of his knives, which he always carried, Rosh created an artificial ceiling that would be soon covered in snow. A deathtrap if he didn’t carry portable oxygen masks and a thermal unit. His studies of different cultures in the Academy had proven useful many times, and understanding the way of living of native species of snowy planets would save them. A stroke of luck he would have thought, if it wasn’t for his firm beliefs in the *Unifying Force*. Tired from the effort and confident in the potent sedatives used on his prisoner, Rosh put a breathing mask on the prisoner and himself, then covered both with a thermal blanket and laid his head back to get some rest. His destination was still far, and he would need all his energy to reach it.

In his slumber, terrible nightmares assaulted Rosh. Did he had to renounce to everything? Why had he done so? Member of his Clan and protectors of his career between the high ranked members of the Brotherhood turned their backs on him for his decisions, leaving him to fight alone for the organization. How wrong he had acted, how selfish and stupid. He would never raise again, he would be an outcast forever, familiar voices repeated over and over. The Crusade has destroyed you, a broken tool of war that is discarded once it has outlived its usefulness.

He woke up covered in cold sweat, trembling, possessed by fear. But Rosh knew that fear was just a tool, and turned that fear into rage, and in his rage he found reassurance that he had acted correctly. He was far from being useless, quite the contrary. He would prove to everyone how strong his determination could be. Controlling his breath, he let his thoughts overcome the fear and fell back in a dreamless sleep.

Journey

A knife on his neck was the first thing Rosh noticed when he woke up again. It seemed he had made a mistake and the prisoner had somehow overcome his drugged state. Rosh didn’t open his eyes straight away, but savored the fear coming from the prisoner, able to move and think, but still too dazed to be of any harm. After a short time, he opened his eyes, offering a cold gaze to him.

“Whe… where am I? What do… do you want from me?” babbled the prisoner.

“You’re on Ziost, as a prisoner, and you’re a gift,” replied Rosh. He had not spoken with anyone in days and felt like sharing some words with someone, even his captive.

“A… a gift?” The man put the knife away from the neck of the young equite as he stumbled backwards in fear. He probably thought that he was to be fed to a creature or something similar, Rosh thought. In a way, he was right, but not entirely.

“Exactly, you’re a gift to an old… friend of mine. Don’t worry though, you’re not going to die, and if you think you’re going to be devoured by some kind of beast you’re wrong. Most likely you’re going to become more powerful than you ever dreamed of.” A soft smile drawn on Rosh’s lips, thinking on how his old ‘friend’ would react to his visit. He was playing a dangerous gamble with his mission, but considering his situation, it was either winning or losing anyway. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s work I have to do, and far we have to travel, and I cannot let you go around being aware of your surroundings,” Rosh said as he shot another dose of tranquilizer drug from a dart in his bracer towards the prisoner. A few seconds later, the captive lowered his arms, letting the knife fall from his hands to the floor, completely subdued.

With a slight shake of head, Rosh recovered his knife and put it back with the supplies. He would never be good enough at using paralyzing poisons or drugs, and in a way he felt less defended having replaced his usual lethal poisons with tranquilizer drugs, but it was necessary for his mission, a need that fortunately paid off. Damaging the prisoner would have ruined him as a gift, jeopardizing completely his objectives. Relieved, he rummaged between the supplies looking for a portable holopad to get reports on how his Clan was doing on the rest of the planet.

When he turned it on and looked at the last reports, he felt desolated. It looked that the initial victories of *Naga Sadow* on *Ziost* had proven useless, as the Clan *Arcona* had overwhelmed their enemies with massive armies, practically taking control over the planet. There were no news that indicated that Rosh had abandoned all his positions, though. Understandable, he thought as he noticed a private message blinking on the screen. He opened the message and found surprised that he had been transferred to House *Shar-Dakhan*. He might be redeemed after all, if he played his cards right, said Rosh to himself as he turned off the holopad and placed it back with the supplies.

It was time to keep moving and hurry to his destination, since *Arcona* could have the control over the planet very soon and they would not take kindly a member of *Naga Sadow* in their new dominions. Opening a small hole with his lightsaber through the thick layer of ice that had formed over their refuge during his sleep, Rosh checked the weather. It was dark outside, terribly dark as huge clouds threatened to unleash their fury again over the tundra, covering any light that could provide the stars or the two moons of the planet.

At least the blizzard had stopped for a while, giving them some time to reach the mountains. Taking back everything he had set up during the night, Rosh packed all and placed it on the captive’s back. Opening a bigger hole on the ceiling of the refuge, he got outside and removed his breathing mask, pulling from the prisoner and doing the same as he crawled outside the hole. It was time to get moving again.

The journey towards the mountains went on for hours, both figures like small black spots in a white canvas. As the night moved on, Rosh wondered on how could he had helped his Clan if he had been taken out of the Academy sooner. *Naga Sadow* had fought hard in each planet they had set foot, but they had not managed to get a hold in any of them. What had they done wrong? They were one of the two clans in the Brotherhood and definitely had the strength to win battles. What had failed?

As Rosh kept walking through the snow and started feeling his legs getting numb from the effort, he understood, finally, why his Clan had not achieved victory. They had been pushed too hard, without time to rest. Maybe they began the Crusade with enthusiasm, but an initial defeat could lower the morale of the troops. They had kept struggling forward, losing important members in its way as the war effort was taking a heavy toll on their ranks. Without enough new blood to rekindle the flame of victory, they had failed over and over where they should have been victorious.

Who would lead the remnants of *Naga Sadow* back to more glorious days? Rosh had met all the Dark Jedi in his Clan and most of them had lost their fighting spirit, dreaming of older days when they were young and ambitious like him. The new ones were ambitious too, but their enthusiasm had been like a fire in the rain, defiant for just a few moments before getting extinguished. Was there any hope for *Naga Sadow*? Certainly the Consul and Proconsul were powerful and wise individuals, but Rosh doubted than that would be enough to raise the Clan to more glorious days.

He had hoped that by setting an example for the new members they would rally and follow in his footsteps, a legion of glorious and invincible Dark Jedi, an unstoppable force for Naga Sadow. He had been wrong. Instead of fighting their way to be on par with him, they had fallen to jealousy and discontent, watching him more like an enemy than a beacon to follow. Now he stood alone, an outcast within his own people, looking for answers of his own. His apprentice would have followed him, should he had called her, but he didn’t want to involve more people in his fall. This gamble he had embarked upon was his to face alone, and he would return with the power to tip the balance or he would die trying.

Only the faith his Consul had put on him despite his failures and the advice of some Dark Councilors kept him fighting. And there he was, at the feet of the mountains where he would face the strongest enemy he has faced ever. Only his father, *Jarik Nyine*, had been a match for him, and Rosh was not as strong as his father yet, neither a follower of the Light Side. The Dark Side would make him as powerful as his father or more, or so he had been promised. But when? The answer was somewhere in the mountains.

It was dawn already, and the long walk through the tundra had been exhausting. Not only had the snow tired him, but it seemed that with each dosage of tranquilizer to his prisoner he was growing weaker and weaker, forcing Rosh to pull harder and harder on him. Tired, he forced the captive to sit in a small cave and administered him another dosage. Determined to reach to the top with all his strength, Rosh sat as well and rummaged in their supplies for both food and the old map he had stolen from the *Shadow Academy*, hoping to find his objective. As he shared some of the food with the drugged man, Rosh extended the frail paper, a relic which had been covered with some kind of plastic substance to preserve it, and studied its contents.

Checking his holopad and tracing their position, he could see on the old paper that they had been walking in the right direction, and only a small trek of maybe two or three hours would get them to the end of the journey. Rosh could feel the emotions growing within him. Anger, fear, expectation… In a few hours he would have obtained all the means to become way more powerful or he would have died. A fitting end for the Crusade, he thought placing back the ancient paper and the holopad with the supplies.

Survival

Either because Rosh was growing impatient or because his emotions fueled him, they got back through the rocky paths up the mountains, Rosh tired but determined and the captive growing wearier and wearier. The former Aedile was concerned that the prisoner wouldn’t last long enough to make it, even this close, but there was nothing he could do for him but to move forward, hoping that he would reach his goal with someone to offer, and not empty handed.

The walk proved more difficult than he thought. First everything became quiet, so quiet that not even the wind seemed to disturb the silence. Rosh was not sure about how well protected from the weather the place was, but it was obvious that the presence of his objective had twisted the environment in a way he could not understand. There was much he had to learn about the Force, but even then he could not imagine how someone that was actually dead was able to keep such a powerful effect on his surroundings.

Then it came, the feeling of being observed. At that point there was no doubt, his goal, his objective, was aware of their presence approaching to his tomb. At the beginning it was just a small feeling, like the hunches he had before he was trained in the Force, but as they walked forward and forward he could feel the presence of his old “mentor”, which he had feared so much in the past and that still made him shiver at the thought of meeting him again. His father, which he hated so much for abandoning him and his mother before he was born, had been the only one capable of fighting him, and on those times the vessel the spirit had used (Rosh himself) had not been mature enough to unleash the full power of the host. Still, Rosh concentrated on his goal, dismissing any thoughts of the past and focusing on the moment. The Force had guided him there, for good or bad, and he would not turn back so close to the end.

The presence of the Force spirit became more and more obvious when big rocks started falling from the sides of the path, trying to block their way or crushing them on their fall. More than a few times Rosh managed to save his prisoner, which now was more a dead weight than anything else. At some point, the captive was not able to walk anymore, and Rosh didn’t have any other choice but to carry him on his back. When it became obvious that they were not going to turn back no matter how many rocks fell around them, the attacks, as fast as they started, stopped suddenly. The way was clear, the Tomb of *Vhiran Garamonde*, ancient Sith Lord, was awaiting their arrival.

There was an eerie and attractive feeling coming from the entrance of the tomb, located across a thin rock bridge that covered the gap between the path and the isolated peak where the tomb was located. Two huge stone statues, depicting Sith warriors holding arcane weapons, guarded the archway decorated with eroded symbols that led into a dark passage deeper inside. There were no plants, no insects, not even snow surrounding the entrance, just bones of former intruders scattered on the bridge. Considering that the fall from the bridge was of a few hundred meters, Rosh wondered how many bones rested at the bottom of the abysm below it.

The young Nyine, weary, tired, but not able to wait anymore to encounter the Force spirit that had tortured him during all his childhood, started walking slowly across the bridge, loaded with the weight of the captive on his back and evading the bones on the floor. This was it, all or nothing, power or void, his final gamble at the end of the Crusade. With careful steps, Rosh crossed most of the bridge.

It was just a few meters away when he noticed that something was wrong. Due to his exhaustion, Rosh had not been paying attention to the feeling that he had all the way towards the tomb, and now the lack of any presence at all had not alerted him of anything. But it was just that, the lack of any feeling, any presence, what was suspicious. It was like if the spirit had retreated at the moment he stepped on the bridge, expectant, waiting for something to happen.

Realizing that danger may well be closer than he expected, Rosh ran the few meters to cover the distance that separated him from a more solid, stable floor, and dropped the body of his captive aside, taking his lightsaber and igniting it, adopting a defensive position.

“The prodigal son returns!” thundered a voice from inside the tomb. “You have travelled so much, and yet for nothing, my old experiment. You will never enter into my sanctuary, fool. You’ll be a fine addition to my trophy collection, and maybe that will make your father come to me as well, don’t you think?”

Rosh didn’t have time to answer. As soon as the voice spoke his last word, several cracks opened in the statues, breaking slowly to reveal that they were not there just to scare visitors, but to actually kill them. As the stone broke and pieces started falling apart, the statues revealed their true nature, that of ancient robots, huge robots with strange weapons, ready to destroy him.

One of the droids carried a huge hammer, big enough to crush him to death. The other droid wielded two sabers, smaller than the hammer, but not less formidable. Knowing that the hammer would probably be slower due to its weight, Rosh took a heavy breath and ran towards the droid with sabers.

Smiling seeing the droid creating a defensive barrier with both sabers, Rosh took a leap when he got close enough to it, directing his saber straight to the droid’s. Much to his surprise, the droid’s sabers, who didn’t seem anything but common metal sabers, didn’t break under the attack of his lightsaber, but resisted the strike like if they were lightsabers as well. Rosh only knew one metal that could do that, but he didn’t have time to think about it so he placed his feet in one of the sabers and jumped backwards to move away from the droid’s counterattack.

His agility and senses impaired due to the weariness of the travel could not prevent the attack that came from behind. The droid wielding hammer managed to impact him, with Rosh only partially evading the impact, strong enough though to send him flying against the archway. Nyine felt his lungs out of air and his ribs breaking on the impact as he fell back to the floor, spitting blood. If he had not been that tired this fight would have been way easier, but in his current state he was done.

But he had not travelled all this way to die at the entrance of his objective. No, not yet. He was a Dark Jedi, an Obelisk, a trained Force-user whose only focus was martial perfection. How did two droids dare to block his path? Getting back on his feet, he focused the anger coming from within him to put the pain away and he felt the Force flowing through him. Everything became slower for a second, two seconds, three seconds… as the droids approached to finish him a desperate plan crossed his mind. All or nothing, like he had thought since the beginning of the travel.

Raising his lightsaber again and placing his free hand behind him, holding his belt. Rosh started running again, this time between both droids. Away from the range of the droid wilding the sabers, Rosh started evading the crushing blows of the hammer once and again, breathing harder and harder as the blows made him move backwards towards the range of the saber.

Just before he fell into the range of the sabers, Rosh threw his ignited lightsaber at the head of the droid, hoping to destroy his optical sensors. As he did that, he jumped backwards evading the sabers of the other droid and yelled: “I’m here, you useless piece of junk! Get me!”

The droid, confused without any visual of his objective guided himself by his ears, striking heavily were Rosh was. The Dark Jedi jumped down from the saber just at the last moment, letting the hammer cross the air and crush the head of the sabered droid.

Rosh didn’t take a moment to breath and finally revealed what he had been hiding in his other hand all the time. A thermal detonator. In a frantic run, he launched himself against the remaining droid, who was getting ready to strike again, and planted the detonator in the droid’s hull, using all the power of the Force to push telekinetically the droid backwards. The droid took a few steps back unaware of the detonator, walking to the edge of the bridge, as the one with the crushed head fell to the floor, inactive. Seconds later, the remaining droid exploded, damaging him visibly, but most important, damaging the bridge behind him, that collapsed due to the explosion. The machine, still active but pushed even more backwards by the explosion, could not help falling into the abyss.

Rosh fell to the floor on his knees, coughing blood and grabbing his side with one hand. His ribs where broken, his lightsaber had disappeared from his view, and only the prisoner seemed unaware of anything, unconscious. At least he had that, his gift to trade for the knowledge of the Sith Lord. With a grunt of pain, completely exhausted and hoping his body would resist enough to finish his mission, he activated a distress beacon his clan used for medical emergencies and left it at the entrance, grabbing the prisoner by his clothes with his only working arm and crawling inside the tomb.

Gamble’s end

He had finally made it. After minutes of struggling to cross the passageway that led to the burial chamber, he left the prisoner behind and fell again to his knees, raising his voice.

“I’m here, Lord Vhiran, and I bring you what you most desire!” said Rosh with a voice full of pain.

A laugh was the only answer Rosh got to his words, as an ignited lightsaber, his own lightsaber, was put next to his neck. “Indeed you have, my son, indeed! But it seems that it is another who will earn the reward,” echoed a voice within the chamber. Surprised and exhausted, he turned his head just to see his captive, his prisoner, standing with the saber in his hand and a smile on his face.

“Thank you, friend, for bringing me here. It seems that all this time playing the humiliated, powerless prisoner has paid off. I see now what you were after, a holocron, isn’t it? I have to thank you after all, even if it has been really hard to keep those poisons away from my system all this time. Did you think I was a common journeyman, that House Taldryan would leave one of theirs behind against your pathetic Clan? Thanks to you I infiltrated inside Alabrek Citadel and obtained all your secrets. But what I could never imagine is that you would lead me to this, a holocron!”

Rosh lowered his head. So it was the end after all. He had gambled, and he had lost. Deceived, betrayed, once again. Resigned to his death, he closed his eyes, not muttering a word. He was too tired for that.

“No! He’s mine!” echoed the Force spirit. “Take what you want, young one, and leave this chamber, but don’t kill your captor. There’s nothing I desire most than to see his life extinguished slowly under a long, unbearable pain.”

“So be it, whoever you are,” answered the man, lowering the lightsaber and walking towards the holocron. “Whatever I want, right?” he asked.

“Anything you want but the holocron, there are riches here beyond measure, but the holocron, the holocron is mine,” replied the spirit.

Rosh opened his eyes slightly and observed, knowing Lord Vhiran better than anyone after so many years being his vessel. The old Sith had something on his mind, probably the destruction of all the intruders.

The former captive laughed and took the holocron in his hand. “As if a spirit could stop me from doing whatever I want. I’ll take the holocron, and the life of my captor. Do you hear me?” yelled the man.

All became silent. There was no answer, nothing. It was like if the spirit had vanished as the holocron had been removed from its place. With greedy eyes, the man looked at the Sith artifact and then at Rosh, and smiled. But his smile was short lived, as he fell to his knees, holding the artifact. “Fool! You did just what I wanted, and now you, you’ll be my new vessel, my new body. Thanks to you I’ll live again!” roared the Force spirit voice once again. Small sparks started to form on the holocron, turning to small lightning that soon covering all the man’s body. His eyes illuminated like lanterns as he dropped the holocron and took his hands to his temples, like trying to get rid of the force spreading through him. In a strong feeling of horror and fascination, Rosh observed how the body of the man fell to the ground, surrounded by a pale purple light.

It was now or never. Fighting his body that urged him to faint, Rosh crawled using his arms towards the holocron and grabbed it with effort, closing his eyes expecting that he would not suffer the same fate than the Taldryan on the floor next to him. But the spirit was not in the holocron anymore. The Sith Lord had found a suitable body to possess, and had left his knowledge behind to finally obtain what he most wanted. Knowing that the man on the floor, now possessed by Lord Vhiran, would take at least an hour to be able to move, but fearing that another attack of any kind would kill him for good, Rosh started a slow and painful crawl towards the exit, grabbing his lightsaber on his way towards the exit.

A trail of blood, flooding slowly from Rosh’s mouth, mixed with the layer of dust accumulated on the floor over the centuries as he crawled towards the exit in what seemed hours for him. When he finally got out, the evacuation team had not arrived yet. Exhausted, hopeless but with his final reward on his hand, Rosh closed his eyes, telling himself that if he was to die, at least he would have accomplished his last mission.

When he opened his eyes, he was laying on a comfortable bed. A medical droid was attending his side, and the holocron and his lightsaber were resting on a table next to him. With a faint voice, Rosh asked: “The tomb?”

“Destroyed sir. You were quite fortunate that we made it in time. Your ribs were broken and had punctured one of your lungs. If the medical evacuation team had not arrived as soon as they did, you would be for sure dead,” answered the droid.

Rosh nodded slowly, glad to be alive. But a doubt crossed his mind. “What about the Sith Lord? Did they destroy him?” he asked.

“Sir? I’m afraid you were the only one in that tomb. Or what was left of it. When an exploration team was sent to explore the tomb were you had been encountered, they only found that it had collapsed. As I said, you were indeed fortunate of getting out of there alive,” the droid replied.

The exhausted Dark Jedi looked aside, through the windows in his room, at the vastness of the space. He expected that his Clan had managed to fight back, that they had won over Ziost where they had failed before. He had done his part, he has fought to the best of his abilities, and now he had ended the Crusade with more potential power than he ever had before.

The Dark Crusade was over. Only one question remained: where was Lord Vhiran Garamonde now?

- Rosh Nyine, #12671