**The Dark Crusade**

Ziost

**THE LAST CRUSADE**

*by*

*DP Darth Vexatus (Sith) / PCON / Clan Naga Sadow, #188*

Fear prophets and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them.

— Umberto Eco

***Firefox*-class carrier *Final Way***

**Naga Sadow Flagship**

**Ziost**

It had all been for nothing.

On the flagship of the Sadowan Warhost, bridge officers unquestioningly scuttled to and fro like ants to carry out the orders of their unseen queen. In one of the banks of computer consoles beneath the main concourse, one of the Chiss crewmen barked orders over his commlink to one of the countless wing commanders outside, somewhere in the depths of space around Ziost. Above the blue-skinned Chiss, red sigils marking the interceptor squadron swarmed like flies, diligently responding to their hive’s orders.

Amidst the orderly and disorderly facades, the flagship’s captain stood tall, his chest held out proud, knowing that even in defeat, his true lord’s goals had been achieved. Ariac Simonetti was an old man now, his hair having long since gone white, but he remained one of the closest to the absent leader of the Sons and Daughters of Sadow, who had been missing since back before the Crusade began. Astronicus Sadow had been wise, having disappeared into exile back when the Horizon plague had first been sewn by the now-deceased Archibald Zoraan. But the Sadow Overlord’s goals had not been forgotten.

In the end, a Son of Sadow still sat on the Iron Throne. Even if Darth Ashen’s loyalties were now his own, why had Clan Naga Sadow needed risk its own lives, when the Dark Brotherhood could be used like cattle instead? In the end, Lord Ashen’s crusade had still carried out the Sadows’ goals for them.

That was the Sith way.

The true heirs and masters did not do the work when their vassal empire could carry it out for them.

But none of this concerned two robed figures that were standing alone up at the front of the bridge.

It seemed as if the admiral and the rest of the crew kept a wide berth from the pair, both of whom were staring out into the depths of space, paying little heed to the planet that the fleets of the Dark Brotherhood presently circled, its forces having returned to claim back the throne of the ancient Sith Empire. Burning hulks surrounded the world, a mix of shattered frigates and triangular Star Destroyers, venting bodies and clouds of debris, whilst the tumbling sphere of a broken TIE drifted close by, outside the viewport.

The taller of the two cloaked figures gave the flaming orange ball of molten durasteel no notice.

Like the shattered hulks themselves, the Elder’s mind was far adrift, this final battle’s outcome of as much consequence to him as it was now to the frozen bodies that floated through the vacuum of space.

The flame-haired woman beside him let out a small sigh.

“We are not going to the surface, then.”

The taller figure turned his face away from the distant stars before he answered.

“No,” the Elder said, his voice even deader than normal, “Trevarus has already been.”

The whole Crusade, the Dark Prophet and his stolen student had journeyed the worlds of the Sith in search of answers, seeking a solution whose name they did not even yet know. But every time, they had found nothing but shadows. From the citadel on Khar Delba, to the libraries on Athiss; it had all been a waste. Every time, the ancient archives and forgotten storehouses, ruined temples and hidden tombs had already been plundered over the course of the many centuries and millennia that had long since passed.

And whenever they had not, someone had recently been there before them.

Darth Vexatus had returned to the Brotherhood again for one reason and one reason alone: to seek answers to his body’s collapse, but at every stage, it had been as if a shadow had already walked the same path before. Even where there had been vaults miraculously left untouched, lost tombs only recently rediscovered, someone had already been there in the days before the fleets of the Crusade arrived.

He had cared nothing for Sadow or its glory. He had cared nothing for the Clan he had once led.

The one who had once been the eighth of the Seven and champion of Sadow... he died many years before.

But in the days since then, many more had joined him in death, deserted or disappeared, it had been all too easy to insert himself back into the corridors of power. What choice had the ones left behind had? Malik may have known the Elder was not there to further the grand designs of Lord Astronicus, but the Neti’s options had been exhausted. And it was not as if the Dark Council cared, when the Dread Masters now stalked Antei’s halls, lurking in the shadows, waiting for their own time to finally make their move.

The Dark Brotherhood was in ruin and would burn before the end.

But Darth Vexatus cared nothing about what would soon transpire. His concerns were elsewhere.

“I feel him,” the flame-haired woman said. “The Dragon’s cries will not be contained much longer.”

The Dragon.

The woman did not need to explain for her master’s benefit. Lord Vexatus already knew of what she spoke of. The monster that twenty years ago had been given form by Faethor Dejarc. Shan Long.

Eight years ago, his own Master had sought to control it on Lehon, but the fool oracle had been bested. Even Jedgar Paladin, with all his and his Star Chamber’s knowledge, had lacked the answers Trevarus had needed to wrest control. Those had been lost years earlier, when Faethor had been lost to the light.

And now the chains Darth Ashen had shackled the Thunder Dragon with… they were crumbling.

The death of Chi Long had had unintended consequences. Or… perhaps this had been the revenge that Archibald Zoraan had intended all along. It was strange that the defeated Dark Lord’s student had recently returned, stranger still that Pyrolius Torquemada had not returned home to his seat of Yridia… but to the halls of the very man who led the crusade against the dark wizard the first time.

If Zoraan’s ghost lingered still, he would probably be laughing.

The Grand Master may have been gone... but Trevarus would not be far behind him.

“We shall not stay for the end, my apprentice,” the sorceress’s master said, “time… grows short.”

Trevarus had beaten them at every step.

But the all-seeing oracle had made a rare error in the sands of Jaguada… leaving behind the shard of a shattered holocron that now held the answer to where they would finally find him.

And the end to this dark crusade… not the false war that neared its conclusion on the icy sheets of Ziost… but the true battle that had begun two decades earlier when first Archibald Zoraan and Faethor Dejarc had taken up arms against one another. For the dragon that had been unleashed in that conflict still lingered.

And in the darkness, it hungered.

THE LAST CRUSADE HAS BEGUN