



*RAGE OF THE  
SHADOW WARRIORS*

# PARIAH

By Corran Fett

"Rise and shine, scumbag."

The big man awakes. The 'cage'-chair he had been on releases him from his chain, but his hands remain tied. He stands up, only to face the muzzle of a heavy blaster rifle, aimed carefully at his chest.

"You might want to be careful with that, Crane," he says to the man holding the rifle, unimpressed. "You could hurt somebody."

The other man, Crane, just points him towards the small ship's exit. The ramp lowers, revealing a dusty, grungy plateau of rock high in the mountains of Rattatak.

"The Abyss. You know, you always take me to the nicest places, Crane."

Obviously feeling uncomfortable—in spite of his dominating role—Crane forces the broad shouldered Rancor of a man to step out, and answers, "I hear the food's good as well. Can't say I'm gonna miss you, Tite."

The tall, brawny man, Tite, doesn't reply, and Crane continues.

"Hox is a businessman. Now, play nice and we can get this over with quickly."

"It's already over, Crane." Tite nods towards three men approaching over a bridge from another plateau. In the middle is a fancy dressed Devaronian with pointed horns, a 'businessman', with two armored guards next to him.

Ignoring Crane, Hox walks directly up to the tall man.

"Gladus Tite," the businessman says, not without loathing in his tone.

"The Hox," the big man retorts, likewise with a certain undertone.

"Finally come to stay, eh? Well, as of this moment the Abyss owns your ass..." He pauses. "I own your ass."

"He's all yours once I sign him over, Hoxie," Crane interrupts, but Hox just ignores him, once more.

"You are not going to be a problem, are you, Tite? 'Cause my boys and I like solving problems."

"Crane said you were ugly up close," Gladus Tite takes the word. "For the first time, I gotta agree with him."

"Hmmm... nice try."

"I do what I can."

"Already trying to get under my skin, are you, Tite?"

"It'd be easier... if I had something sharp."

Before Hox can reply, Crane slams his fist into Tite's belly, hard, sending him to unconsciousness. Everything goes black, then.

Having spent weeks in the only real prison on Rattatak, Gladus Tite already began to think he wouldn't manage an escape, ever.

The Abyss was one of the most infamous prisons in the galaxy, giving the galaxy's worst scum a last stay. Unlike other 'jails' on Rattatak—the rocky planet was full of them—The Abyss was made for long-term sentences. The other 'prisons' were more gladiatorial arenas than actual prisons, where condemned thugs were fighting against each other for their lives, under the watch of terror organizations and miscellaneous lords and barons in the underworld, to find the best soldiers and gun-for-hires for their cause and needs.

The fact that he had to sit in jail, and could not fight his way out, unsettled Gladus. He was adamantly confident that he would have managed latter. And an escape from The Abyss was, frankly, impossible. Nobody had ever managed that, and nobody ever would. But the same was said about The Maze, Perdition, Caranandiroo Theta, Tch'tkaarr's Nest, the Desolation Alley, and various other prisons Gladus had been to and got out of.

In the past few weeks, Gladus hadn't spent much time on making friends—foes, on the other hand, would and had come, in any event. Still, even The Abyss couldn't last without the main element of the Rattatakan 'culture': the fights. In The Abyss, however, they were only low-scale and, usually, non-deadly.

Gladus had made himself quite a name in the fights, not having lost a single one of them—but not that he needed any more 'reputation'. Although he wasn't talkative on questions about what had brought him into jail, he was already enjoying a certain reputation in the underworld. Nevertheless, his notoriety eventually would lead to the very thing he had been anxious to do: to fight in a real arena, to fight for life or death. To escape.

He was sitting on a bunk in his dingy, stinking hexagonal cell, waiting for the guards to fetch him, as the door finally burst open, with Hox and three of his guards standing outside, their blaster rifles at their ready.

"You know," the Devaronian warden started, while two guards were harshly en chaining Gladus and pushing him to the door, "I have never quite felt comfortable with the thought that you might actually die down there, in the Pit. What obviously would be a shame—we don't want our prisoners to be redeemed in such a way. But Abbott," he nodded to the black-completed third guard, who wasn't wearing a helmet and was the highest-ranking guard, "eventually convinced me of my fear being entirely unnecessary."

"Indeed," the Abbott said. "You just wouldn't die away that easily."

"Oh, you guys are flattering me," Gladus replied, grimacing and scorn filling his deep voice. "Is there anything else I can do for you, lads? Apart from making you look embarrassed once I'm officially 'Gladus Tite, the first inmate to escape triple-max jail The Abyss'."

"Yeah... you can watch your tongue, koochoo," Abbott said and slammed into the prisoners chest, just so hard Gladus didn't collapse, but would feel the pain for quite a while. And Gladus did, as he grimaced once more, this time for real.

"No games this time, Tite," Hox ordered.

"Or what? You put me into prison?!" Gladus retorted, shaking his head in condescension. "If there's one thing in this galaxy you can use to make things worse for me, name it."

"Oh, we can," the Devaronian replied, and Gladus received another jar.

"Do your best," the convict said, barely groaning from the strike.

"Get him into the armory," Hox ordered the guards, "and give him the gear we prepared for him."

The guards lead him away, and as he arrived in the jam-packed armory, which was more a storeroom for really *anything*, he was surprised to see what they meant with 'gear'. There was a complete set of Mandalorian armor lying on a bunk, only the helmet and all ranged-combat attachments were missing. Next to it, however, there was lying an excellent model of a vibrosword with a curved blade as long as his leg. Although being born Mandalorian, Gladus never had worn a Mandalorian armor before.

Still, he was amazed about the fact that they had a perfectly fitting Mandalorian armor for him. But he also reckoned that there was more behind it—it probably wasn't even made out of Mandalorian iron, the very material that made Mandalorian armor so different and more protective from any other suit of armor in the galaxy. Nevertheless, he was glad he could wear armor at all—no matter what components it was made of, it still was better than a simple tunic out of fabric.

So, Gladus was released from the manacles to put on the armor.

One of the guards was playing around with the handcuffs, unsure whether to enchain the prisoner again or not. He decided for latter.

"No tricks, eh?" he said nervously, nearly stuttering, as he glimpsed Gladus's cold glance on him.

"Your lad here seems not to be so worried about me," Gladus said, running his hand through his wooly, graying beard and eying the calm second guard, who was moving his head as if he was talking over helmet-comms with his comrade.

*Armor's prepped. Cautious, now*, the convicted Mandalorian thought.

"Move it, dunghead," the second guard ordered, took the vibrosword and pushed him out.

They were walking through the dark, dirty and stinky corridors carved in stone for quite a while, before coming to a halt in front of a huge chunk of rock blocking the passage.

"End of the line, sleemo," the second guard said, his heavy gun aimed at the loose convict, while the other guard was speaking something into his headset.

"End of the line, indeed," Gladus repeated, deciding to make a move.

Before the guard could even react, Gladus extended the wrist-mounted vibroblades and stormed directly on the second guard, jerking away the man's gun and stabbing his blades deep through armor and flesh right into the guard's heart. Amazed at the actually working blades, the Mandalorian retracted the wristblades, picked up the sword and moved towards the still living target, who was aiming at him, but obviously hesitating for a shot.

Gladus, however, did not hesitate. He stepped directly in front of the frightened guard, who seemed to be pinned down and didn't—or couldn't—move a limb. Grabbing his opponent's right

shoulder, Gladus slashed the sword up from the belly on. The vibro-emitter was working as it should and the blade cut through armor and flesh like through a bantha steak. As the guard screamed and dropped to his knees, Gladus deactivated the vibro-emitter and brought the sword down with immense force, cutting through bones and the carotid artery. The decapitated guard's head rolled several meters away on the ground, the body just collapsing.

After cleaning his bloody blades with a piece of cloth, Gladus stepped back and was just about to plan what to do next, as a sudden deep bawling sounded behind him as rock grinded against rock. Without haste, the escapee turned on his heels.

The rock that had been blocking the way was lifting now, and in the growing gap Gladus could make out several pairs of feet. Without a second thought, he stepped back and searched the guards for grenades—unfortunately, neither of them had any, so he grabbed one of the guns, after fastening the sword on his back.

Positively checking the safeguard, he aimed at the feet and pulled the trigger. But instead of a red flashlight and a loud noise of discharge, he only heard a faint 'click'.

"Mockups," an unwelcome, familiar voice sounded from behind the still rising rock, before Gladus was even able to curse.

"Tell me something new," Gladus said harshly, throwing away the fake gun.

The rock was now high enough to reveal the men in the corridor behind it at full height. The voice was belonging to Hox, who was in the front of about a dozen guards, with evidently real weapons trained on would-be-escapee.

"You're coming with us, now," Hox said in a tone that sounded as if to inhibit any opposition. "And no more tricks, this time. You want your fight, then stay calm."

"I do have my fun with the guards. And there are plenty more of them just waiting for an invitation."

"You wouldn't really want to waste your superior skills to such incompetent gun-for-hires. There are, however, plenty of worthy and equally skilled opponents in the arena." The Devaronian was obviously not at all impressed by the cruel course of action.

"You're lacking perspective. There isn't much difference in challenge between your guards and other thugs for me, considering that neither match my skills, if you go by that reasoning."

Hox sighed. "Then there's no other way. Open fire."

Knowing that they weren't firing deadly rounds, Gladus just stood there, smiling. It took two stun beams before he collapsed to unconsciousness.

Everything went black, then.

Not too long later, Gladus awoke.

"The air is thick. Smells of oil, machines, crushed rock... and something else," he said to himself, while getting up and observing the situation. He was still in his armor, his sword lying next to him on the ground, and ahead of him, he could make out a lattice, and a dark corridor behind it. "Fear."

He grabbed the sword, fastened it on his back and went over to the lattice. With ease, he pushed it away—it was not locked.

As he walked through the misty corridor, he could hear voices: laments, screams and evil-sounding laughter. He could hardly make out the many gangways crossing the main corridor, and he could barely see a thing, but he still knew when he reached the end of the corridor—he could tell by the sounds of a fierce battle going on behind another rock blocking the way, which lifted as Gladus had approached it.

As the rock had lifted to the top, he could see what lay behind it: a giant cave in the rocks with holes in the vertical walls for spectators—the so-called Pit, the second-largest gladiatorial arena on the planet, after the infamous Cauldron.

Taking the sword from his back, Gladus started moving towards the scene of battle. In the middle of the arena, combatants from all species and with all kinds of weapons (and even droids) were fighting each other, struggling for their lives.

Gladus, however, actually had not in mind to participate in the fight. His wrath was not for the other convicts, although some of them had a *problem* with him. His wrath was directed at the guards, the security, the Hox. He only wanted to find a way out of this prison—he had been in

several infamous jails before, most of them maximum security grade, and he had managed to escape from every single one of them, and he didn't want The Abyss to be the first exception.

In order to find a way out, he would, however, need to look into every single spectator-cave, because in the main cave, there were no exits apart from the corridor he had just come from. The only problem was that the spectators were all on upper levels, impossible to be reached without some sort of jetpack. Thus, Gladus took a closer look on the combatants in the Pit, who had taken notice of him in the meantime, too.

A mammoth Mantellian Savrip with mechanical claws instead of his hands, a pair of fierce-looking knife-wielding Nikto warriors, a savage Whiphid and several other condemned kinds of iniquitous scum—in addition to the strangest and fiercest alien species the Mandalorian had ever seen—were storming towards him, as if they had found a common target. Some weren't seeing it that way, however, as many of the approaching fighters were felled from stabs, shots, burns or other attacks from behind. But, much to Gladus's disapproval, none of them had any type of device suitable for his needs—no grenades, no rocket launchers, and no jetpacks, anywhere.

"Fierfek!" Gladus was not cursing about the approaching 'threat'—it was the fact that there was no way out that bothered him.

While still halfway pondering what to do next, he swiftly leaned right and brought his sword up, at the very moment the rabid Whiphid—who had been sprinting to him on all fours—jumped up, his teeth-heavy jaw aimed at the Mandalorian's head. It was not Gladus's head that was hurt, though—the sword sliced off half of the enraged alien's face.

Not even wasting another thought on the yowling and bleeding Whiphid, Gladus readied for the next attack. Three knife-wielding, scar-loaded Nikto were already about to throw some of their knives at Gladus, but they never came any further.

They, just as everybody else in the cave, were thrown off-feet by an immense earth tremor which forced part of the cave's ceiling to collapse, rocks and shrapnel of all sizes falling low, eliminating most of the defenseless combatants. Gladus was one of the few lucky ones who weren't hit by one of the big chunks of ceiling, only by smaller stones and shrapnel. The Mandalorian, however, was even luckier than the others, for his full-body armor held off most of the impact. He only had to cover his unprotected head with his arms and crouched down.

After he was certain it was safe to, Gladus stood up and took a view of the situation. Fortunately, the ceiling was still intact overall, and it didn't appear to break down very soon. Also, much to the convicted Mandalorian's liking, there were two breaches in the walls, one to the east and one to the west, through which Gladus was sure he could escape.

But as he was just about to grab his sword and start a run towards the new 'exits', he paused for a beat to give it a second thought. The breaches could not have come to pass by the mere force of nature—there must have been some sort of outer influence involved, namely in terms of demolitions or bombardment.

Reconsidering what to do, he just stayed put and sat down on a piece of rock. Gladus got a bad feeling as it dawned on him that either someone had just attempted to kill everyone in the pit, or was about to rescue or capture one of the convicts. All too often, the bounty on a thug's head didn't drop when he was convicted, and some bounty hunters went lengths to give a target a second go, if it was more profitable at the second time.

But maybe, there was another reason completely behind the blasting. And that thought was only confirmed as all of a sudden, several dozens of tall, broad-shouldered men in odd-looking, spiked armors entered from both holes in the walls.

*Definitely something completely different, Gladus thought. That's gotta be those Yuuzhan Vong. But, what the kark are they doing here?! Rattatak is of no importance, has no resources and doesn't pose a good stronghold. Perhaps, they are here to win over as many of the convicts as possible; just for a little money. But, anyway, nothing of my concern—I just wanna get out of here.*

The Yuuzhan Vong had now formed two ranks, one each in front and behind the surviving combatants. The leading Yuuzhan Vong warrior of the east wing was trenchantly arguing with the leader of the west wing in their inaudible language, probably about who was to get the first strike at their victims.

Gladus was slowly standing up and picked up his sword, seizing the hilt. He was holding the weapon in a loose stance, watching the Vongs' conversation and biding his time.

The Yuuzhan Vong groups were yelling and barking now, threatening each other and raising their amphistaffs high, ready for attack. And eventually, both groups were so far that they started to race on each other, Yuuzhan Vong slashing Yuuzhan Vong, amphistaff hitting amphistaff.

Gladus just burst into laughter. *So that's the scarheads and their so-called 'honor'. Unique.*

In their wrath, the Yuuzhan Vong somehow oversaw the convicts, who were trying to get away from the battle, this time not slaying each other but each with the single goal of leaving this odd place. Gladus, though, didn't want to get away any longer. He knew he had the possibility to escape, now, but he had just fun watching the spectacle, and he also knew that the surviving Vong would be easy to finish off, later. He wanted to fight the extragalactic invaders, wanted to get his own impression of them, for he had only heard reports from others about them, yet.

One after another, the number of Yuuzhan Vong warriors—formerly counting at least five dozens—fleetingly decreased, leaving only the most skilled of them alive, what was exactly what Gladus wanted. And they turned out to be not even a dozen, once their skirmish was over; a number Gladus could well deal with.

The surviving Vong were looking around and eventually took notice of the calm Mandalorian outlaw, who still had his sword loose at the side.

*"Do-ro'ik vong pratte!"* the Yuuzhan Vong warrior with the most scars, tattoos and deformations cried out. Then he stormed towards Gladus, together with eight other warriors, their amphistaffs straightened like staffs.

*"Come and get me, scarbutts."*

Although the leader was the first one to reach him, Gladus didn't attack him—he wanted to save the best opponent for the end. Jumping and rushing around the former leader of the eastern group, Gladus got right into the middle of four Yuuzhan Vong warriors, swiftly killing the nearest with a clean stab into his armpit. One of the others, however, managed to swing his whip-like amphistaff around a leg of the Mandalorian, throwing him off feet. Performing a jerky roll backwards and thus bringing the Vong to ground, Gladus got back up, sliced the amphistaff in two halves as it fell with its wielder and stabbed his wristblades into his opponent's throat.

Behind him, he could hear the leader crying something like 'Get away', followed by the sound of a body hitting the ground—the Yuuzhan Vong subaltern had just killed one of his inferiors, only to get to the honor to battle against Gladus himself.

Meanwhile, the convict had taken out another Vong, before he turned around to face the leader. He still didn't want to deal with him, yet, but he couldn't leave him alive, either—otherwise, the Vong would kill all his warriors to get to him. So he took two vibroknives, which he had picked up from the dead Nikto earlier, from his belt and hauled one into each of the subaltern's legs. The leading Vong fell to the ground, desperately trying to get up again. He failed.

*"Just to keep you busy, buddy,"* Gladus said to the Yuuzhan Vong. *"Don't take it personal."*

The five remaining Yuuzhan Vong were far too close for Gladus's liking, so he decided to gather some distance. While running, he searched the ground for any usable weapons, and picked up a heavy blaster pistol and an odd-looking grenade. The blaster's energy cell was halfway empty, so he fired the few shots over his back into the handful of Vong, none of the blasts really hitting; he had never been too much of a good shot, in over-the-shoulder-shooting-while-running, anyway. He decided to spare the grenade for later—he had something special in mind for it.

Finding nothing more of use, Gladus abruptly stopped dead, his back to the chasing Vong. His opponents carried on running and seemed to attempt to ram Gladus. As one of them had come close enough, Gladus stepped to the right and brought his sword to where his body had just been milliseconds ago. The Yuuzhan Vong warrior dashed right into it and the blade pierced his whole torso, coming out on his back. Quickly yanking his broadsword out of the body, Gladus just about turned to the left to avoid a thrown amphistaff, which he grabbed with his armored hand and pulled it away from its owner. The disarmed Yuuzhan Vong warrior stood around, perplexed, and just long enough that the Mandalorian could stab another one of his vibroknives into the Vong's weak-point, his unarmored armpit.

In the meantime, the three remaining warriors had closed in on him, their straightened amphistaffs in aggressive stances. Realizing his low odds, Gladus decided against attacking them

directly—last time, the others had not attacked while he was fighting one of them, but he figured that this time, all of them would attack simultaneously. Thus, he took the grenade, pushed the trigger and let it fall to the ground. The Vong were just staring at him and the weapon, before they couldn't see anything more—and nor could Gladus. The grenade sucked all light into it, spreading bleak darkness.

"Light's out," he said, before silently walking around the Yuuzhan Vong, who were cursing and lashing about. The outlaw could locate one due to his loud noise, so he cautiously grabbed the Vong's head and crushed his neck with a quick, powerful jerk.

Against all sanity, the two remaining Vong even increased their noise as they heard their comrade's corpse hitting the ground.

"Hehehe... stupid Vong..." Gladus murmured.

The Yuuzhan Vong were vainly lashing about, not able to see anything at all in the pitch blackness, and thus not able to hit the Mandalorian, either. Annoyingly for them, Gladus was circling them, stabbing into their crab-shell armor every now and then, but not causing really threatening wounds—at least before a few minutes playing around with the enraged Vong, when he finally went over to lethal strikes that finished both of them off.

It was totally silent, now that the two Vong had been taken out—nearly totally silent, that was, because Gladus could still hear the lament of the Yuuzhan Vong subaltern he had immobilized earlier. With as little noise as possible, Gladus slowly headed to the wounded warrior from behind, while groping for the right way in the darkness.

"The dark... are you afraid?" he asked the subaltern after he had silently kneeled down behind him. "I'm not. The dark is afraid of me."

Unexpectedly, the Yuuzhan Vong did reply—not in the way Gladus would have liked him to, though. His 'reply' consisted of an unwelcome pain in his belly, caused by one of Gladus's own knives stabbed into it.

"Pathetic infidel scum," the Vong was growling in a hoarse, grating voice.

As reached down to the wound, Gladus clasped the Vong's hand holding the hilt of the knife, and squeezed forcefully while his own warm blood was running over both hands. He crunched the hand of the Vong until he heard and felt bones shatter. The Yuuzhan Vong did not make a sound, but his voice tensed as Gladus dragged the knife out and released the hold, while standing up again.

He was lifting his sword with the other hand as the Vong continued, "Your element may be the blackness, but soon you will be blinded by the light, *bruk-ka*..."

The warrior's insult was cut off as his head bumped to the ground, shortly followed by his body. "Wrong answer, scarhead."

The darkness was already beginning to fade, slowly as it might, as Gladus slang the sword over his shoulder and turned to leave the Pit. He pondered the armor and the weapons again Hox and his men had supplied him with.

*Better get rid of 'em, he thought. I prefer to be on the safe side, here.*

So, he threw the vibrosword to the ground, took off armor, bodysuit and everything else until he was down to his pants. To test whether he had been right about his armor being booby-trapped, he took one of the gauntlets and went to the hole in the eastern wall—he could find his way quite easily now that it was getting brighter and brighter.

Just as he had arrived in front of the blasted hole in the wall and was lifting his arm to haul the gauntlet outside, he was interrupted by a voice from behind.

"I wouldn't do that."

As he turned around, Gladus could make out a hooded man in a cape, shrouded by the shadows, who was holding a long blaster rifle in his hand, but the barrel pointing to the ground.

"I would", Gladus replied, stepped back and tossed the armored gauntlet outside, high into the sky. But it didn't reach far beyond the wall as it detonated in a huge explosion, shaking the already damaged arena and thrusting the outlaw several meters back into the arena. Gladus didn't notice, however, that not only the gauntlet, but the whole armor had blown up, and that in an even bigger explosion. As he got up again, he gave the calm, hooded figure a quick glance, before looking over the burning place where he had put off his armor.

And in the lightning of the fire and the twilight, he was shocked by a sight that made his usually unemotional features wince as he scowled. Hundreds of Yuuzhan Vong were lining up everywhere in the western part of the arena, only silhouettes in the twilight. There was growling and general ruckus, and battle cries and the dull thuds of marching feet were echoing over to Gladus. The superiors were apparently facing tremendous problems restraining the mob.

"You wanna live?" The shrouded stranger behind him spoke again, but Gladus ignored him, perplexed by the looks of the chaotic, yet intimidating army of extragalactic invaders. "Then come with me."

This time, Gladus didn't ignore him and turned around to face the intrusive man, upset about the man's somewhat ordering tone.

"Who the kriff might you be in the first place? If you wanna play the generous guy, you can do so by bringing in the big guns instead of spreading your *wisdom* around." He nodded to the sniper rifle in the stranger's hands.

"That's not of importance now. No time for questions—you wanna get out, then snap out of your ego and get a move on."

Undetermined and moody, Gladus turned back to the arena, facing the intimidating looks of the scarred and deformed alien warriors. It couldn't get any worse, could it? A single man would—if necessary—be easier to overwhelm than an army of Yuuzhan Vong. A lot easier.

"Fine," said Gladus, deadpan, and headed to the hooded man, following him outside. As soon as they were out, the stranger pulled two concussion mines from beneath his cape and tossed them into the arena.

"Better keep your distance," he said and retreated away from the wall, not looking back.

With a loud '*BOOM*', followed by the sound of debris and more rock coming down, Gladus could see the crushed rock overwhelming the hole, blocking the way for the Vong inside, and thus giving the two men a wider time span to escape.

*Talking about 'escape'...*

"How exactly you planning to get us off this rock, anyway?"

"Wait and see, Gladus."

Gladus grimaced. He should be used to everybody knowing his name by name. "You're not another bounty hunter who wants to earn profit from nicking me, are you? That'd be the last tick of the clock for you."

"Hah! And how're you gonna pull that off?" The stranger appeared to be amused. "You think I'm afraid of a man in panties? You're making quite a fool of yourself, Tite. I'm not a bounty hunter, but from a certain point of view, you could say I'd like to profit from you—not by putting you into jail again, though. I'll tell you more, but for now, just shut up and trust me, will you?"

Gladus only nodded grimly. He didn't have much of a choice. "You're the boss."

"Alright, here we are," the ominous man said, after they had been walking through the rocky landscape for quite a while. They arrived in a boiler-like valley with a huge piece of rock in the middle of it.

"You sure?" Gladus asked, confused. They were standing right in front of the big rock. "Ain't nothing here, fella..."

The convicted Mandalorian was interrupted as the stranger took a small, comlink-sized device out of his cape, aimed it to the rock and pushed a button. Then, the rock suddenly vanished and an unwelcome familiar spaceship replaced it: a *Firespray*-class Attack and Patrol Ship, clad in matte black.

Gladus was just about to open his mouth, as the stranger said, "Not here. Get in, and we can talk."

Ineloquently, the elusive convict followed the man's instruction and walked up the lowering ramp, through the cargo hold and a small corridor right into the cockpit, where he sat down on a passenger's seat, waiting.

"So, what in the nine Corellian hells does ShenCresh Ops want from me?" he exclaimed as the stranger came in and sat on the pilot's seat, hitting a few buttons that apparently concealed the ship again. ShenCresh Ops was short for Shogun Commando Operations, a special unit in the planet's police force whose trademark was matte-black *Firesprays*.

"Nothing," the man replied and took his hood off, so that Gladus could see his face. It was, as expected, familiar, but even more familiar than excepted. The man's distinctive and sharp facial features, especially the high cheekbones and the thrilling blue eyes struck him.

"Ronan Barec," said Gladus, astonished. "What in Force's name has driven you here?"

"You, smart guy. You might've noticed there's a war going on. And you might've noticed that Boba Fett's been rejoining the Mandalorians under one banner again in the last few years. And, fact is, the galaxy needs us, Gladus."

"So this is it? My former arch-enemy comes to rescue me and asks me to fight with him for a greater good? Forget it, Barec. I'm not *that* mad."

"Yes, you are. This is a chance to get rid of your past, *vod*. Sometimes, the galaxy's not flowing as it should. In normal times, evil would be fought by good. But in times like these—in times where good just can't win the fight—it should be fought by another kind of evil. And we, the Mandalorians, are not at all 'good'."

"You don't seriously believe this nonsense—you, of all Mandalorians I know, would *never* talk this way about your race. I know the deal—you just want me to be on your side, 'cause you can't get the job done without me. And don't you ever call me '*vod*'."

"You got it."

"I'm not playing along."

"Face it. You've got no choice. You owe me one—I just saved your ass down there. And believe me, it wasn't easy for me."

"Since when am I a Wookiee? Or does the Mandalorian Code nowadays imply life-debts?"

"What do you want, Gladus? You wanna get back down into the arena, fight to your death? What for, Gladus, what for? There's no honor in dying that way—it's pathetic suicide."

"And your cause isn't? How many men has Fett gathered? A hundred? A thousand? Even a million couldn't stop the scarheads!"

"I ask you again: what do you want, *vod*? You want money? You can get it. You want your penalties to be erased from file? You can get it. We can offer you a new life. You're an outlaw, a pariah." He paused. "You're a *Dar'manda*."

Barec continued after a few moments as the Gladus's reply didn't come. "We can offer you a family. We can make you a true Son of Mandalore again—a true *Mando'ad*. You don't need to live that life."

"And what for?" Gladus was sounding a little desperate now. "I've already lost a family—I don't wanna lose another."

"It won't happen, *ner vod*, it won't happen." Ronan Barec was dead serious now. "I swear to you with my life."

Gladus stood up, leaned down and grabbed Barec's collar. "Listen. Just because we've stopped hunting each other some handful of years ago that doesn't mean we're best pals. I haven't had much to do with you Mandos in my life, but now that I'm getting older, maybe I should consider settling down and returning to my roots."

He released Barec but remained on his feet, taking a few beats pause. "But joining you lot just to fight a war for you doesn't go as 'settle down' for me. I am, however, confident that I'll live to see the end of the war and beyond if I join in. So I'm gladly taking that new life, but only if it's permanent and doesn't return to my old life once you don't need me any longer. And I don't think you want *me* to hunt you for a change, do you?"

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