

CHAPTER 1

SHIGAR KONSHI FOLLOWED the sound of blasterfire through Coruscant's old districts. He never stumbled, never slipped, never lost his way, even through lanes that were narrow and crowded with years of detritus that had settled slowly from the levels above. Cables and signs swayed overhead, hanging so low in places that Shigar was forced to duck beneath them. Tall and slender, with one blue chevron on each cheek, the Jedi apprentice moved with grace and surety surprising for his eighteen years.

At the core of his being, however, he seethed. Master Nikil Nobil's decision had cut no less deeply for being delivered by hologram from the other side of the galaxy.

"The High Council finds Shigar Konshi unready for Jedi trials."

The decision had shocked him, but Shigar knew better than to speak. The last thing he wanted to do was convey the shame and resentment he felt in front of the Council.

"Tell him why," said Grand Master Satele Shan, standing at his side with hands folded firmly before her. She was a full head shorter than Shigar but radiated an indomitable sense of self. Even via holoprojector, she made Master Nobil, an immense Thisspasian with full ceremonial beard, shift uncomfortably on his tail.

“We—that is, the Council—regard your Padawan’s training as incomplete.”

Shigar flushed. “In what way, Master Nobil?”

His Master silenced him with a gentle but irresistible telepathic nudge. “He is close to attaining full mastery,” she assured the Council. “I am certain that it is only a matter of time.”

“A Jedi Knight is a Jedi Knight in all respects,” said the distant Master. “There are no exceptions, even for you.”

Master Satele nodded her acceptance of the decision. Shigar bit his tongue. She said she believed in him, so why did she not overrule the decision? She didn’t have to submit to the Council. If he weren’t her Padawan, would she have spoken up for him then?

His unsettled feelings were not hidden as well as he would have liked.

“Your lack of self-control reveals itself in many ways,” said Master Nobil to him in a stern tone. “Take your recent comments to Senator Vuub regarding the policies of the Resource Management Council. We may all agree that the Republic’s handling of the current crisis is less than perfect, but anything short of the utmost political discipline is unforgivable at this time. Do you understand?”

Shigar bowed his head. He should’ve known that the slippery Neimoidian was after more than just his opinion when she’d sidled up to him and flattered him with praise. When the Empire had invaded Coruscant, it had only handed the world back to the Republic in exchange for a large number of territorial concessions elsewhere. Ever since then, supply lines had been strained. That Shigar was right, and the RMC a hopelessly corrupt mess, putting the lives of billions at risk from something much worse than war—starvation, disease, disillusionment—simply didn’t count in some circles.

Master Nobil’s forbidding visage softened. “You are naturally disappointed. I understand. Know that the Grand Master has spoken strongly in favor of you for a long time. In all respects but this one do we defer to her judgment. She cannot sway our combined decision, but she has drawn our attention. We will be watching your progress closely, with high expectations.”

The holoconference had ended there, and Shigar felt the same conflicted emptiness in the depths of Coruscant as he had then. *Unready?*

High expectations? The Council was playing a game with him—or so it felt—batting him backward and forward like a felinx in a cage. Would he ever be free to follow his own path?

Master Satele understood his feelings better than he did. “Go for a walk,” she had told him, putting a hand on each shoulder and holding his gaze long enough to make sure he understood her intentions. She was giving him an opportunity to cool down, not dismissing him. “I need to talk to Supreme Commander Stantorrs anyway. Let’s meet later in Union Cloisters.”

“Yes, Master.”

And so he was walking and stewing. Somewhere inside him, he knew, had to be the strength to rise above this temporary setback, the discipline to bring the last threads of his talent into a unified design. But on this occasion, his instincts were leading him away from stillness, not toward it.

The sound of blasterfire grew louder ahead of him.

Shigar stopped in an alley that stank like a woodoo’s leavings. A swinging light flashed fitfully on and off in the level above, casting rubbish and rot in unwanted relief. An ancient droid watched with blinking red eyes from a filthy niche, rusted fingers protectively gathering wires and servos back into its gaping chest plate. The cold war with the Empire was being conducted far away from this alley and its unhappy resident, but its effects were keenly felt. If he wanted to be angry at the state of the Republic, he couldn’t have chosen a better place for it.

The shooting intensified. His hand reached for the grip of his lightsaber.

There is no emotion, he told himself. There is only peace.

But how could there be peace without justice? What did the Jedi Council, sitting comfortably in their new Temple on Tython, know about *that*?

The sound of screams broke him out of his contemplative trance. Between one heartbeat and the next he was gone, the emerald fire of his lightsaber lingering a split instant behind him, brilliant in the gloom.

LARIN MOXLA PAUSED to tighten the belly strap on her armor. The wretched thing kept coming loose, and she didn’t want to take any

chances. Until the justicars got there, she was the only thing standing between the Black Sun gangsters and the relatively innocent residents of Gnawer's Roost. It sounded like half of it had been shot to pieces already.

Satisfied that nothing too vulnerable was exposed, she peered out from cover and hefted her modified snub rifle. Illegal on Coruscant except for elite special forces commandos, it featured a powerful sniper sight, which she trained on the Black Sun safehouse. The main entrance was deserted, and there was no sign of the roof guard. That was unexpected. Still the blasterfire came from within the fortified building. Could it be a trap of some kind?

Wishing as always that she had backup, she lowered the rifle and lifted her helmeted head into full view. No one took a potshot at her. No one even noticed her. The only people she could see were locals running for cover. But for the commotion coming from within, the street could have been completely deserted.

Trap or no trap, she decided to get closer. Rattling slightly, and ignoring the places where her secondhand armor chafed, Larin hustled low and fast from cover to cover until she was just meters from the front entrance. The weapons-fire was deafening now, and screaming came with it. She tried to identify the weapons. Blaster pistols and rifles of several different makes; at least one floor-mounted cannon; two or three vibrosaws; and beneath all that, a different sound. A roaring, as of superheated gases jetting violently through a nozzle.

A flamethrower.

No gang she'd heard of used fire. The risk of a blaze spreading everywhere was too high. Only someone from outside would employ a weapon like that. Only someone who didn't care what damage he left in his wake.

Something exploded in an upper room, sending a shower of bricks and dust into the street. Larin ducked instinctively, but the wall held. If it had collapsed, she would have been buried under meters of rubble.

Her left hand wanted to count down, and she let it. It felt wrong otherwise. Moving in—in *three . . . two . . . one . . .*

Silence fell.

She froze. It was as though someone had pulled a switch. One minute, nine kinds of chaos had been unfolding inside the building. Now there was nothing.

She pulled her hand in, countdown forgotten. She wasn't going *anywhere* until she knew what had just happened and who was involved.

Something collapsed inside the building. Larin gripped her rifle more tightly. Footsteps crunched toward the entrance. One set of feet: that was all.

She stood up in full view of the entrance, placed herself side-on to reduce the target she made, and trained her rifle on the darkened doorway.

The footsteps came closer—unhurried, confident, heavy. Very heavy.

The moment she saw movement in the doorway, she cried out in a firm voice, "Hold it right there."

Booted feet assumed a standing position. Armored shins in metallic gray and green.

"Move slowly forward, into the light."

The owner of the legs took one step, then two, revealing a Mandalorian so tall his helmeted head brushed the top of the doorway.

"That's far enough."

"For what?"

Larin maintained her cool in the face of that harsh, inhuman voice, although it was difficult. She'd seen Mandalorians in action before, and she knew how woefully equipped she was to deal with one now. "For you to tell me what you were doing in there."

The domed head inclined slightly. "I was seeking information."

"So you're a bounty hunter?"

"Does it matter what I am?"

"It does when you're messing up my people."

"You do not look like a member of the Black Sun syndicate."

"I never said I was."

"You haven't said you aren't, either." The massive figure shifted slightly, finding a new balance. "I'm seeking information concerning a woman called Lema Xandret."

“Never heard of her.”

“Are you certain of that?”

“I thought I was the one asking questions here.”

“You thought wrong.”

The Mandalorian raised one arm to point at her. A hatch in his sleeve opened, revealing the flamethrower she’d heard in action earlier. She steadied her grip and tried desperately to remember where the weak points on Mandalorian armor were—if there were any . . .

“Don’t,” said a commanding voice to her left.

Larin glanced automatically and saw a young man in robes standing with one hand raised in the universal *stop* signal.

The sight of him dropped her guard momentarily.

A sheet of powerful flame roared at her. She ducked, and it seared the air bare millimeters over her head.

She let off a round that ricocheted harmlessly from the Mandalorian’s chest plate and rolled for cover. It was hard to say what surprised her more: a Jedi down deep in the bowels of Coruscant, or the fact that he had the facial tattoos of a Kiffu native, just like she did.

SHIGAR TOOK IN THE confrontation with a glance. He’d never fought a Mandalorian before, but he had been carefully instructed in the art by his Master. They were dangerous, very dangerous, and he almost had second thoughts about taking this one on. Even together, he and a single battered-looking soldier would hardly be sufficient.

Then flame arced across the head of the soldier, and his instincts took over. The soldier ducked for cover with admirable speed. Shigar lunged forward, lightsaber raised to slash at the net that inevitably headed his way. The whine of the suit’s jetpack drowned out the angry sizzling of Shigar’s blade as he cut himself free. Before the Mandalorian had gained barely a meter of altitude, Shigar Force-pushed him sideways into the building beside him, thereby crushing off the jet’s exhaust vent.

With a snarl, the Mandalorian landed heavily on both feet and fired two darts in quick succession, both aimed at Shigar’s face. Shigar deflected them and moved closer, dancing lightly on his feet. From a distance, he was at a disadvantage. Mandalorians were masters of ranged

weaponry, and would do anything to avoid hand-to-hand combat except in one of their infamous gladiatorial pits. If he could get near enough to strike—with the soldier maintaining a distracting cover fire—he might just get lucky . . .

A rocket exploded above his head, then another. They weren't aimed at him, but at the city's upper levels. Rubble rained down on him, forcing him to protect his head. The Mandalorian took advantage of that slight distraction to dive under his guard and grip him tight about the throat. Shigar's confusion was complete—but Mandalorians weren't *supposed* to fight at close quarters! Then he was literally flying through the air, hurled by his assailant's vast physical strength into a wall.

He landed on both feet, stunned but recovering quickly, and readied himself for another attack.

The Mandalorian ran three long steps to his right, leaping one-two-three onto piles of rubbish and from there onto a roof. More rockets arced upward, tearing through the ferrocrete columns of a monorail. Slender spears of metal warped and fell toward Shigar and the soldier. Only with the greatest exertion of the Force that Shigar could summon was he able to deflect them into the ground around them, where they stuck fast, quivering.

"He's getting away!"

The soldier's cry was followed by another explosion. A grenade hurled behind the escaping Mandalorian destroyed much of the roof in front of him and sent a huge black mushroom rising into the air. Shigar dived cautiously through it, expecting an ambush, but found the area clear on the far side. He turned in a full circle, banishing the smoke with one out-thrust push.

The Mandalorian was gone. Up, down, sideways—there was no way to tell which direction he had chosen to flee. Shigar reached out through the Force. His heart still hammered, but his breathing was steady and shallow. He felt nothing.

The soldier became visible through the smoke just steps away, moving forward in a cautious crouch. She straightened and planted her feet wide apart. The snout of her rifle targeted him, and for a moment Shigar thought she might actually fire.

"I lost him," he said, unhappily acknowledging their failure.

"Not your fault," she said, lowering the rifle. "We did our best."

"Where did he come from?" he asked.

"I thought it was just the usual Black Sun bust-up," she said, indicating the destroyed building. "Then he walked out."

"Why did he attack you?"

"Beats me. Maybe he assumed I was a justicar."

"You're not one?"

"No. I don't like their methods. And they'll be here soon, so you should get out of here before they decide you're responsible for all this."

That was good advice, he acknowledged to himself. The blood-thirsty militia controlling the lower levels was a law unto itself, one that didn't take kindly to incursions on their territory.

"Let's see what happened here, first," he said, moving toward the smoke-blackened doorway with lightsaber at the ready.

"Why? It's not your problem."

Shigar didn't answer that. Whatever was going on here, neither of them could just walk away from it. He sensed that she would be relieved not to be heading into the building alone.

Together they explored the smoking, shattered ruins. Weapons and bodies lay next to one another in equal proportions. Clearly, the inhabitants had taken up arms against the interloper, and in turn every one of them had died. That was grisly, but not surprising. Mandalorians didn't disapprove of illegals per se, but they did take poorly to being shot at.

On the upper floor, Shigar stopped, sensing something living among the carnage. He raised a hand, cautioning the soldier to proceed more slowly, just in case someone thought they were coming to finish the job. She glided smoothly ahead of him, heedless of danger and with her weapon at the ready. He followed soundlessly in her wake, senses tingling.

They found a single survivor huddled behind a shattered crate, a Nautolan with blaster burns down much of one side and a dart wound to his neck, lying in a pool of his own blood. The blood was spreading fast. He looked up as Shigar bent over him to check his

wounds. What Shigar couldn't tourniquet he could cauterize, but he would have to move fast to have any chance at all.

"Dao Stryver." The Nautolan's voice was a guttural growl, not helped by the damage to his throat. "Came out of nowhere."

"The Mandalorian?" said the soldier. "Is that who you're talking about?"

The Nautolan nodded. "Dao Stryver. Wanted what we had. Wouldn't give it to him."

The soldier took off her helmet. She was surprisingly young, with short dark hair, a strong jaw, and eyes as green as Shigar's lightsaber. Most startling were the distinctive black markings of Clan Moxla tattooed across her dirty cheeks.

"What did you have, exactly?" she pressed the Nautolan.

The Nautolan's eyes rolled up into his head. "*Cinzia*," he coughed, spraying dark blood across the front of her armor. "*Cinzia*."

"And that is. . .?" she asked, leaning close as his breathing failed. "Hold on—help's coming—just hold on!"

Shigar leaned back. There was nothing he could do, not without a proper medpac. The Nautolan had said his last.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You've no reason to be," she said, staring down at her hands. "He was a member of the Black Sun, probably a murderer himself."

"Does that make him evil? Lack of food might have done that, or medicine for his family, or a thousand other things."

"Bad choices don't make bad people. Right. But what else do we have to go on down here? Sometimes you have to make a stand, even if you can't tell who the bad guys are anymore."

A desperately fatigued look crossed her face, then, and Shigar thought that he understood her a little better. Justice was important, and so was the way people defended it, even if that meant fighting alone sometimes.

"My name is Shigar," he said in a calming voice.

"Nice to meet you, Shigar," she said, brightening. "And thanks. You probably saved my life back there."

"I can't take any credit for that. I'm sure he didn't consider either of us worthy opponents."

“Or maybe he worked out that we didn’t know anything about what he was looking for in the safehouse. Lema Xandret: that was the name he used on me. Ever heard of it?”

“No. Not *Cinzia*, either.”

She rose to her feet in one movement and cocked her rifle onto her back. “Larin, by the way.”

Her grip was surprisingly strong. “Our clans were enemies, once,” Shigar said.

“Ancient history is the least of our troubles. We’d better move out before the justicars get here.”

He looked around him, at the Nautolan, the other bodies, and the wrecked building. Dao Stryver. Lema Xandret. *Cinzia*.

“I’m going to talk to my Master,” he said. “She should know there’s a Mandalorian making trouble on Coruscant.”

“All right,” she said, hefting her helmet. “Lead the way.”

“You’re coming with me?”

“Never trust a Konshi. That’s what my mother always said. And if we’re going to stop a war between Dao Stryver and the Black Sun, we have to do it right. Right?”

He barely caught her smile before it disappeared behind her helmet.

“Right,” he said.