“Come on, Corwin. Let’s get moving!” Darrin Arkanian dragged his human companion after him as they moved through the shadow-drenched alley. Above them, the city spires of Coruscant stretched impossibly high, still visible despite the fact that it was the middle of the night. Running strobes and traffic beacons, starlight and the glow from an endless procession of garish advertisements and glowlamps bathed the city sprawl of Imperial Center in a dim, gray-white light. The alley itself was unusually dark, however; a number of the glowlamps that generally illuminated this particular walkway appeared to be malfunctioning.

The young human - - Corwin Shelvay - - stumbled, gasping apologies to the elder Sullustan. “I’m sorry, Master Arkanian… I just can’t.” Shelvay’s voice was a hoarse, pathetic croak, and the youngster was gaunt, undernourished and wore the scars of a brutal Imperial interrogation.

“Calm yourself, Corwin. Remember your training,” Arkanian encouraged. “If you don’t, we aren’t going to make it out of here.”

Ahead lay a small courtyard, a tiny stretch of ground that was all that separated the pair from a transport station and, ultimately, the freighter that waited to get them away from Coruscant. “Once we meet Captain Rashh, we’re as good as off-planet, lad,” Arkanian said, hoping to coax Corwin to greater speed. “Let’s hope he’s punctual, eh?”

“I shouldn’t worry about that if I were you, Master Arkanian.” The voice that boomed from the courtyard dripped with menace. “I doubt very much that you will keep your appointment with the Rebel pilot.”

The Sullustan Jedi moved toward the sound of the voice, quickly snagging his lightsaber from his belt. At Arkanian’s action, a sardonic smile tugged at the corner of the newcomer’s mouth as he in turn stepped from the shadows into the dimly lit courtyard.

Sketching a mocking salute, the black-garbed figure announced, “I am High Inquisitor Tremayne. I believe your young companion remembers me.” Tremayne met Corwin’s gaze.

Corwin had crumpled to his knees in response to Tremayne’s presence, a low, feeble moan escaping from his cracked and bleeding lips. “No… not again…” he whispered.

“I am most impressed with Shelvay,” Tremayne continued nonchalantly, as if discussing the weather or the results of a recent swoop race. “He withstood the most intensive interview I have ever conducted. I look forward to testing that resolve again.”

Arkanian ignited his lightsaber, the blue-white blade humming as the Sullustan Jedi prepared to defend his student. “Don’t go near him,” he said, with a look of defiance clearly written across his non-human features.

Tremayne ignited his own lightsaber and launched a blindingly swift series of feints and attacks, though his green, shimmering blade was neatly parried by Arkanian’s saber as the twinkling weapons thrummed and sparked in a violent dance of light.

“You’re quite good, Master Arkanian,” Tremayne remarked. “Perhaps even my better with a lightsaber. It is a pity, though, that you won’t join me, alien. “

“My ally is the Force, evil child,” Arkanian shot back. “An ally that is easily capable of ending your reign of terror.”

Shelvay watched in horror, unable to do more than crawl back into the shadows. He didn’t see the armored figures skulking in the alley until they had pointed their Imperial-issue blasters at him and ordered him to remain motionless.

Tremayne had brought reinforcements.

The battle in the courtyard had reached a stalemate as the combatants circled each other warily. “Enough!” Tremayne shouted to the alley. “Troopers, kill the boy if the alien does not drop his weapon.” Turning to face the Sullustan Jedi Master, Tremayne growled, “Your choice, Jedi. Surrender, and the boy lives. Resist, and he dies.”

Reluctantly, Arkanian deactivated his lightsaber. “Let the boy go. He is of no use to you,” Arkanian said quietly. “Free Corwin, and I will come quietly.”

“I’m sure you will,” Tremayne replied. In an almost leisurely movement, the High Inquisitor swung his lightsaber at the defenseless Sullustan. Arkanian fell to the ground, a shocked death gasp escaping from his lips as his deactivated lightsaber rolled away.

At last, Tremayne thought. I have finally defeated a Jedi Master. The High Inquisitor stood over the Sullustan, the human smiling with triumph as life fled from the fallen Jedi. “Well, Master Arkanian,” he taunted, “it appears your journey has ended. And soon, your student will join you. Or perhaps,” he added, a mocking smirk twisting his angular features, “he will join my Master. The Emperor may have use for someone as resilient as Shelvay.”

Tremayne's triumph only lasted a moment. The High Inquisitor turned back toward Shelvay and realized that the haggard Jedi apprentice was no longer immobile. Tremayne felt a brief stirring in the Force - - a stirring tinged with the dark side. Shelvay stretched out his hand and Arkanian's lightsaber flew across the courtyard and into his grasp. With a harsh cry, Shelvay attacked, the blue-white saber blade hammering into Tremayne's hastily readied defense.

Corwin's blade hissed like an enraged beast as it contacted the High Inquisitor's weapon and relentlessly pushed closer and closer to Tremayne's face. Attempting to maneuver away from the Jedi apprentice, the High Inquisitor prepared to sidestep and swing his own weapon at Shelvay's neck, a classic feint that Tremayne had perfected through months of diligent practice.

Tremayne barely had a moment to register surprise as Shelvay's blade arced in an unpredictable, unorthodox move, one for which Tremayne - - overconfident in his ability to defend himself - - was unprepared. Shelvay's blade severed the High Inquisitor's arm just below the shoulder, and then slashed across his face on its return swing, blinding him and sending him spiraling into pain, fear and darkness…

Tremayne could feel himself floating, a not altogether unpleasant sensation, save for the fact that it was impossible to tell which way was up. Opening his eyes didn't help matters; his left eye only registered a gray-white blur, and his right eye failed to respond at all. A burning sensation covered his face, and a cold, hollow ache engulfed his right shoulder. He felt himself succumb to delirium, as if drowning in an inky black whirlpool, a vortex that seemed to pull him in and spit him back out…

…Into his mother's arms, shortly after his 15th birthday. The quiet, bearded man who had come to visit them had said Tremayne was gifted and could begin his Jedi training. His mother wept with pleasure and pride…

…As he proudly stood among the other Jedi students. He had been studying under Master Kylanu for three years and was pleased with his progress, though Kylanu had indicated some dissatisfaction with Tremayne's vanity. "A Jedi does not care so much about appearances, Tremayne," the Jedi Master admonished. "He cares about truth…"

"…And the truth is," the courier said during the private meeting, "that Palpatine himself is interested in weeding out the corruption that has begun to rot the Jedi ranks. And you, Tremayne, have been chosen to help him. Palpatine is quite convinced of your ability, your integrity and your loyalty. You shall train under his premier agent, Darth Vader…"

…Vader, standing like an obsidian statue in the main entrance chamber to one of his many private fortresses, welcoming Tremayne like a son. "The Jedi order is fading,

Tremayne," Vader had told him, "and they are reluctant to allow newcomers like yourself to reach the full extent of their potential.

"I will teach you, Tremayne," Vader said, gently. "I will teach you all you will need to know to restore the Jedi Knights to their former glory. You will seek out the traitors, and together we will restore the concepts of order and justice to the galaxy…"

…And Tremayne was again pulled down into darkness….

*

Tremayne lay quietly on the medical bed, flexing his new cybernetic arm. He had recently seen his reflection. While the left side of his face was undamaged, the right side was horribly disfigured. The new implants made the grotesque wounds look even more fearsome. The medical droid revealed that Darth Vader himself had demanded the use of such unattractive prosthetics - - as a sign of the Dark Lord's displeasure over his student's failure. Reflecting on the battle, Tremayne knew he had erred, badly. Shelvay - - a mere novice! - - had bested him, despite his years of training, a thought that made the High Inquisitor's anger burn even more brightly by the moment.

The medical bay door hissed open, and Tremayne felt an icy stab of fear deaden his mounting anger as Lord Vader entered the room. With a glance, the armored giant sent the surgeon droids and organic attendants alike scurrying from the room. An angry Dark Lord of the Sith is indeed a thing to be feared.

"My lord," Tremayne whispered, his head bowed, "I beg forgiveness."

"I am most disappointed, student," Vader growled. "You had a Rebel - - a potential Jedi, at that - - in your grasp, and not only did you fail to extract any useful information from him, you allowed his Master to rescue him, from the Emperor's throneworld, no less."

"I cannot understand it, my lord," Tremayne said. "Shelvay withstood a full Intelligence interrogation before I interviewed him. COMPNOR reported that he was physically depleted but mentally able to withstand their strongest probes. Even my most… persuasive methods failed to loosen his tongue," Tremayne paused, his voice dropping to a whisper. "He should have broken."

"Instead, he broke you, Inquisitor," Vader hissed sarcastically. "Broke you quite handily, if the medical reports are to be believed."

"Give me another chance, my lord," Tremayne looked up sharply, his remaining eye radiating shame and anger in equal measure. "I will crush the novice's spirit and bring

his broken body to you as a trophy."

"Indeed?" Vader voice dripped with facetious amusement. "And what of Arkanian? Surely he will protect the boy."

"Arkanian is dead, my Lord," the wounded Inquisitor replied.

"Excellent. Arkanian has been an irritation to the Emperor for far too long. Fortunately for you, Tremayne, I am in a forgiving mood." Vader leaned forward, and the air in the medical bay suddenly seemed to crackle with menace. "Do not fail me again."

Bowing his head, Tremayne spoke, his voice hoarse with a mix of relief, rage and shame. "I will not fail, master."

Without another word, Vader departed, leaving the High Inquisitor to plan his next interview with Corwin Shelvay.