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The Emperor's Trophy

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Darth Vader calms himself. The Imperial shuttle slows for the approach to the Emperor's fortress at Mount Tantiss. The Dark Lord does not fear the impending audience with his master. He knows that failure never casts a favorable light on anyone. Vader himself has ruthlessly punished the failings of his subordinates. But the Emperor is more concerned with news of Luke Skywalker, not with berating his minions. No, Vader is not afraid to account for his actions. He fears what it is that he's delivering to Palpatine.

It has only been a few days since the young Jedi escaped his carefully planned trap in Cloud City. Vader knows the Emperor is aware of his inability to seduce Skywalker to the dark side. His master seems to be satisfied knowing Vader has taught the impatient Jedi a lesson in anger and fear. The Dark Lord has been summoned to Wayland - - far from the prying eyes of the Core Worlds - - to present the trophy of his battle with young Skywalker.

The shuttle wings fold upward as the vessel eases into a docking bay carved in the mountain. The transport box next to Vader is not large, yet he can already feel its weight. His master waits to take possession of what is inside. The shadows behind Vader stir, betraying the two Noghri hiding there. Kohvrekhar and his clan-brother Ghazhak had located the trophy and helped Vader recover it. While the Dark Lord rushed back to his Super Star Destroyer to await the young Jedi's capture, the Noghri combed the depths of Cloud City for what had once belonged to Skywalker. After Luke evaded Imperial forces with the help of his friends, Vader returned to Bespin to personally retrieve the Emperor's prize. His Noghri honor guard discovered it with a horde of Ugnaughts in one of the mining facility's deeper smelting cores. The crude beasts were going to discard the flesh and melt the shaft of metal into scrap. Vader had "discouraged" them from doing so and took possession of the items himself. The Emperor commanded him to bring them immediately to the Mount Tantiss stronghold on Wayland. To return these items to the Emperor will be a display of loyalty. His master seems to regard them as his own possessions which had long ago been stolen.

The boarding ramp lowers with a hiss and Darth Vader strides down. The transport box is neatly cradled in one arm. To anyone else the case would be light, but to Vader it is weighted down with fear, memory and regret.

Although he does not see them, Vader knows his Noghri honor guard are nearby. They have slipped through the shuttle's venting steam, then merged with the docking bay shadows. Several staff members had been waiting for the shuttle's arrival. They had showered him with pleasantries and respectful words tinged with fear. The paltry reception party of low-ranking officers does not concern him - - Vader walks past them, ignoring the leader's message that the Emperor wishes to see him immediately. He marches into the waiting turbolift, his Noghri escort fading into the darkness behind him.

The box grows heavier as the turbolift rises toward the Emperor's throne room complex. No honor guard can protect him from the feelings the box's contents stir within him.

The turbolift door slides open, revealing a vast holographic display of the galaxy. The Dark Lord pauses to gaze at the map. For a moment he wonders where Skywalker is now hiding in that swirling mass of star systems.

Vader steps out along the walkway and approaches his master. Guards attend to matters at two platform control consoles flanking a stairway. The steps lead up to the throne from the wide balcony, offering the Emperor a grand vista of his holographic domain.

The Emperor's voice is a weak sneer cackling across the room. "Leave your servants behind, Lord Vader. This business does not concern them." Two Royal Guards hover menacingly on each side of the Emperor's throne. For a split second, the Dark Lord secretly wonders if they would be any match for his alien escorts. Just as quickly, he brushes the thought from his mind - - he could never betray his master. Vader raises a hand, and the Noghri retreat, leaving their liege alone with the Emperor.

Vader ascends the stairs, then kneels before his master. "Rise, my friend," the Emperor croaks. "Tell me of your contest with young Skywalker." Vader explains his intricate plan to lure Skywalker to Cloud City by tormenting his friends. It had not been a successful encounter for either of them. Finally, with the help of his Rebel companions, Skywalker had managed to escape. Still, Luke had suffered a great defeat - - the loss of his right hand.

"I have already reviewed Admiral Piett's report of your activities on Bespin," the Emperor says. "It is unfortunate you did not snare the young Jedi. His powers have grown, indeed. Perhaps he might someday match your abilities, my friend. Still, you managed to wound him and infect him with fear. This can only be to our advantage during your next confrontation."

The Emperor watches Vader for a moment, his eyes lingering on the box. His whispering voice sounds distant, almost dreamy with anticipation. "I see you have brought me what Skywalker lost..."

Vader hands the box to a royal guard, who passes it to the Emperor's waiting grasp. Palpatine opens it, revealing a hand and a Jedi's lightsaber. The lightsaber is the blue-bladed weapon Luke had wielded in his confrontation with Vader on Bespin. The hand is Luke's, the one Vader had severed in anger after Skywalker's lightsaber had cleaved into his own shoulder.

The items, while welcomed by the Emperor, are far more significant to Vader. For the weapon had once belonged to another Jedi, Skywalker's father. And the hand... was it of the same flesh and blood that once ran through the father's veins? Was Anakin Skywalker truly dead?

Vader senses a familiar twinge as he looks at the weapon again. The sight of the hand, too, elicits an eerie recognition. Vader almost feels as if he is surrendering his own hand. Electricity twitches within the Dark Lord's right gauntlet. He suppresses an urge to flex it. Instead, he masks his emotions and does not make any gesture that might reveal his true feelings.

The contents of the box may have once been part of him. Now they are the Emperor's.

"These will have a place of honor in my personal collection," the Emperor muses, entranced by the intricacies of the dead flesh and the well-worn lightsaber.

"The young Jedi is weak and beaten," Vader replies, trying to turn the conversation. "He will be vulnerable to attack."

"Yes, I sense that you wish to continue your hunt for Skywalker. But do not worry about him for now. I have foreseen his fate... the time is not yet come for him to join us. For now, you are to return to Imperial Center. We have other concerns to attend to...."

Vader takes the Emperor's cue, and subdues his feelings by thinking of his impending duties and schemes. In addition to overseeing the Emperor's new construction project, Vader has pressing matters to take up with a powerful - - and potentially dangerous Falleen prince named Xizor.

There will be plenty of time later to deal with Luke Skywalker.