

Angel of the 501st

Part II

by  
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Based on the Star Wars characters, situations, and universe originally created by George Lucas. This project was written for fun, not for credits, and is dedicated to the members of the 501st - Vader's Fist!

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ANGEL OF THE 501ST

PART II: THE SHADOW EMPRESS

MONTAGE: SCENES FROM PART I

EXT. GALAXY - PLANET CORUSCANT

The massive Imperial Command Ship Executor hovers above Coruscant surrounded by a fleet of Imperial Star Destroyers.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - MAIN DECK

Captain Piett stands on the command walkway before the main viewport, gazing at the gathered fleet above Imperial Center. He turns and heads towards the security foyer.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - SECURITY FOYER

Lt. Shekel looks over the communications console from behind Officer Durn who is seated with another officer at the controls. An MSE-6 droid scurries by as Piett approaches them. Durn rises from his chair.

SHEKEL:

Admiral Ozzel is on his way to the bridge, Captain.

PIETT:

Very good. Is my shuttle ready?

SHEKEL:

Yes, sir, and, before you go, may I wish you a pleasant leave.

DURN:

Same here, sir.

PIETT:

Thank you. With a ball tonight, a hunt tomorrow...and an opera the following evening, my wife and I shall be well entertained.

SHEKEL:

You and the Lady Janel will be in excellent company, sir...what with the Fleet Captains and three Grand Admirals in attendance.

PIETT:

(Smiling)

One doesn't say no to an invitation  
from the Countess Motti.

SHEKEL:

Pity Admiral Ozzel used up his  
leave recuperating from his fall.

PIETT:

Yes, pity...

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - DUSK

It is dusk. An aircar flies in and hovers over the lighted mosaic landing pad next to Villa Motti. The manservant Karuk waits near by as Cerise Plath, a pretty girl who is around the age of sixteen and wearing an evening wrap over a formal gown, disembarks from the car, excitedly waving a gloved hand in good-bye to the driver. Karuk escorts her to the villa.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MEENA'S BEDCHAMBER - MOMENTS LATER

A pair of velvet cloaks, one silver gray, the other a deep blue, are neatly spread out on the bed. Two evening bags and a pair of long white gloves lay by the garments.

"Nibs", the newly-adopted MSE-6 unit, rolls about the room, squeaking excitedly. Nibs pauses by the bedside and scoops up the evening bags and gloves with one of its retractable claws, placing them on top of itself.

Meena's lush hair is swept up into a sparkling silver diadem. She stands patiently before the dressing area mirror while MS-2 finishes fastening the back of her ice blue, high-waisted, off-the-shoulder ball gown, made from an exquisite Sindarian satina.

Near-by, Alyce, clad in a royal blue gown of Koolach silk, and adorned with an opalescent brooch passed down through the centuries from a distant House of Motti ancestor, adjusts her dyed-to-match, elbow length gloves. She gazes in approval at her niece, then goes to a side table, opening a jewel box from which a teardrop-shaped opalescent pendant hangs from a delicate platinum chain.

MS-2:

There, that's done, your ladyship.  
All you need now are your gloves,  
and then it's off to the ball!

MS-2 turns around to look for the items.

Nibs zooms over to Meena with a squeak. Using its retractable claw, the little mouse droid grabs the gloves from a top itself, and offers them to his new mistress. Meena accepts the gloves.

MEENA:

Thank you, Nibs.

MS-2 turns back to see what has transpired and makes a mechanical clucking sound.

MS-2:

Why that boxy little thief!

MEENA:

Nibs isn't a thief...he's just being helpful.

Nibs rolls in a half circle to face MS-2 and squeaks what could be interpreted as a "that's right!"

MEENA: (CONT'D)

MS-2, please take the cloaks out to the front hall...Nibs can deliver our bags.

MS-2:

Yes, your ladyship.

Alyce moves over to Meena with the opalescent pendant while in the background MS-2 gathers up the cloaks, then exits with Nibs rolling behind.

Alyce's expression becomes bittersweet as she places the necklace around her niece's neck and works the fastener. The two women are reflected in the mirror.

ALYCE:

I'm so glad you were able to keep your mother's opalescent.

MEENA:

That was the one piece of jewelry I refused to sell...

ALYCE:

These past two years must have been dreadful...it's amazing Max found you considering the circumstances.

Alyce stands back while Meena gazes contemplatively in the mirror, fingering her late mother's pendant.

MEENA:

I know the General is attracted to me, yet I sense this holding back.

ALYCE:

How so?

MEENA:

He's never gotten over the death of his wife...I've felt it more than once.

Alyce carefully observes her niece, suddenly realizing the extent of Meena's intuitive statements.

ALYCE:

I'm surprised I didn't recognize your Force-sensitivity until now.

MEENA:

Lord Vader said it was very weak ...that I would never be much more than a healer.

ALYCE:

Did he? Well, count yourself fortunate, since a stronger, more seductive ability runs through our family...

Soft chimes sound. Alyce goes to the wall comlink, as she finishes talking to Meena.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

Your late Uncle Quintus thought it was nonsense...I knew better.

Karuk's voice comes over the comlink.

KARUK: (V.O.)

Mistress Motti, Lady Cerise has arrived.

Meena puts on her gloves while Alyce speaks into the comlink.

ALYCE:

(speaking into comlink)  
Have her wait in the study,  
Karuk...we'll be right down.

Alyce returns to Meena, giving her niece an affectionate hug.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)  
 Keep your sensitivities hidden,  
 dear. No sense in alarming others  
 who might not understand.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - OFFICERS HOUSING - EARLY  
 EVENING

Traffic is at a stand still in and around the enclave of  
 skyscrapers as two black cloudcars escort a royal  
 airlimousine onto a high landing platform of one of the  
 structures.

INT. OFFICERS HOUSING - VEER'S LIVING QUARTERS - EARLY  
 EVENING

Within the main living area, Major Martyn Veers, clothed in a  
 dark blue formal suit, helps his grandson Zevulon adjust a  
 silver gray shoulder braid over the cadet's dress tunic.

Captain Dav enters from a hallway, carrying two evening  
 capes.

DAV:  
 The General will be out presently.

Martyn takes the garments from Dav and hands one to his  
 grandson.

MARTYN:  
 Thank you, Captain Dav, we can  
 handle it from here.

DAV:  
 (nodding)  
 Major.

Dav turns and heads back to the hallway. Martyn and Zev put  
 on their capes during their conversation.

ZEV:  
 This is a first...father's running  
 late.

MARTYN:  
 He's got a lot on his mind.

ZEV:  
 Do you think he's serious about  
 Lady Meena?

MARTYN:

He could be...what are your thoughts on the subject?

ZEV:

I have no objections. Captain Dav speaks highly of her...and said she'd be good for father.

MARTYN:

We'll soon find out.

ZEV:

If they do marry, there might be another son...which would enable me to forgo my Academy appointment.

MARTYN:

(alarmed)

What sort of talk is that?

ZEV:

Grandfather, I'm not cut out to carry on the family tradition...

Off camera, General Veers' voice is heard.

VEERS: (O.C.)

...and I want the hunting gear packed separately...

MARTYN:

You've picked one hell of a time to bring this up.

ZEV:

We're going to be busy the next few days...it's as good a time as any.

Veers and Captain Dav, holding a dark green military cape, enter the living area. Veers wears an Imperial dress uniform similar in style to the service uniform, but with additions of an embroidered collar and cuffs, his numerous medals hung under the rank bar, no hat, plus a more formal black belt, boots, and gloves. The cape is slung over Veers' shoulders by Captain Dav, while the general addresses his father and son.

VEERS:

A royal transport is waiting to take us to Villa Motti, then onto the palace...

Veers' nervousness is apparent as he uncharacteristically fumbles with the cape ties. Dav tries to help, but he is impatiently brushed off by the General.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

(to Zev)

...You'll be escorting the Lady Cerise...she's the daughter of Colonel and Madame Plath.

ZEV:

I know, sir.

Veers finally gains control of the ties...and his nerves.

VEERS:

Ready?

Martyn and Zev affirm their readiness.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Let's be off.

They nod to Captain Dav who watches as three generations of the Veers family exit through the quarter's main entry and out into the hall of the officers housing complex.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - EARLY EVENING

The towering pyramidal structure and grounds of the Imperial Palace are dramatically lit and decorated for the evening's festivities.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - LANDING PLATFORMS - EARLY EVENING

Lines of shuttles and airlimousines hover then coast onto a series of tiered landing platforms on the western side of the palace. Vehicle passengers in formal capes and cloaks disembark, heading towards the palace entry ways.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - STAIRCASE

Elegantly-attired guests enter from either side of an open hallway and descend the steep Alderaanian marble staircase located in the center of the vast Grand Ballroom, which is tastefully decorated in the traditional New Years Fete colors of blue and silver.

Glittering crystal chandeliers suspended at various heights from the soaring ceiling cast their light over one of the most exclusive social galas of the season.

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Numerous guests meander across the floor to meet with friends and associates who cluster together around the orchestra area. Royal stewards clad in gray robes weave in and out, serving stems of chilled T'ill-t'ill, trays of exotic finger foods, and seeing to the various needs of the assemblage.

Facing the ballroom's elaborately inlaid marble dance floor, an arched lighted alcove houses members of the Grand Imperial Symphonic Orchestra. The orchestra is entirely comprised of human musicians and is led by royal conductor Rahn Kleff in a quiet piece conducive to conversation.

Captain Piett and his beautiful wife Lady Janel stand to the side of the alcove with several naval officers and their female companions. They are approached by Grand General Brashin and Lady Livia.

LIVIA:

(to Piett and Janel)

Alyce wants us to join in as soon as the dancing begins.

BRASHIN:

We're to give Lady Meena cover from the News Net reporters.

JANEL:

Any word about the leave extension?

LIVIA:

Alyce said we should open our gifts early on New Year's Eve.

Lady Janel is a tad disappointed.

PIETT:

That's two days more than the Fleet expected, darling...

The orchestra abruptly stops playing. A short fanfare sounds

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - GRAND STAIRCASE

All eyes turn towards the top of the emptied staircase where Chief Royal Steward Castor Vost, carrying a long scepter and flanked by two crimson robed royal guards, stands ready to announce the arrival of the guests of honor. Vost moves to the edge of the landing as the royal guards take their place on either side of a closed entry centered off the hallway before the staircase.

The entry door opens to reveal Alyce on the arm of Martyn, as they make their way to the top of the stairs. Behind them is an awestruck Lady Cerise with Zev, followed by a more self-assured Lady Meena and General Veers.

Royal Steward Vost knocks his scepter on the hallway floor.

VOST:

Major Martyn Veers, Retired, and  
the Countess Alyce Motti...

Martyn and Alyce descend down the stairs to the applause of the assembled guests.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

From an upper balcony overlooking the ballroom staircase stands Imperial Grand Admiral Nial Declann: a dark, enigmatic individual who carries a lightsaber and is rumored to possess an ancient Sith amulet.

Clad in a crisp white uniform with gold epaulets befitting his high rank, Declann observes Alyce and Martin Veers make their way down to the floor. He turns to his companion Arik Ganner, whose tailored black suit, sheathed lightsaber, and urbane manner blends in perfectly with the posh surroundings.

DECLANN:

(under the applause)  
Have you met our Shadow Empress?

GANNER:

(amused)  
Ah, is that what they call the  
Countess?

Declann gives a slight smile in reply. The royal steward's voice is heard over the clapping.

VOST: (V.O.)

Junior Cadet Zevulon Veers, and the  
Lady Cerise Plath...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - GRAND STAIRCASE

Zev and a wide-eyed Cerise nervously make their descent to the continued applause of the assembled guests.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

Declann and Ganner continue to view the preliminaries from the balcony.

GANNER:

At our introduction, she tried to enter my mind.

DECLANN:

Easily deflected...unlike us, the Countesses' Force-sensitivity has never been fully developed.

VOST: (V.O.)

Major General Maximilian Veers, and the Honored Imperial Citizen, Lady Meena Valorian...

Ganner gazes intently at the staircase.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - GRAND STAIRCASE

The applause swells as Meena, escorted by Veers, gracefully descends the stairs to where Martyn, Alyce, Zev, and Cerise stand in the middle of the ballroom floor, their hands clasped together in a beginning dance pose.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

Declann turns his attention away from the dance floor below and glances briefly behind him.

DECLANN:

(quietly to Ganner)

Admiral Zaarin...an ardent admirer of the Countess...is on his way to greet us.

Declann and Ganner are approached by the charismatic Grand Admiral Demetrius Zaarin: an intensely ambitious and intelligent naval officer in charge of several covert military projects. Zaarin offers his hand to Declann in greeting.

ZAARIN:

Admiral Declann...a Prosperous New Year to you.

DECLANN:

Same to you, Admiral Zaarin. (motioning to Ganner.) My guest, Lord Ganner...special agent to His Excellency, the Emperor.

Lord Ganner gives a slight bow to an intrigued Zaarin.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

Surrounded by on-lookers that include Captain Piett and his party, Veers and Meena move to the middle of the dance floor. Veers places his right hand firmly on Meena's waist, gently clasping her right hand in his left. A close-up of their faces reveals far more than just a warm regard for one another.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA ALCOVE

From the podium, conductor Rahn Kleff raises his baton and signals his orchestra to begin playing the lilting strains of the Imperial Whirl - a popular opening ballroom number given the stamp of approval by the Imperial Board of Culture.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

While the orchestra plays, Imperial News Net reporters scramble to record Veers and Meena as they begin their dance. Piett, Janel, Brashin, Livia, and other guests join in until the floor is covered with swirling, revolving couples.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

Declann, Ganner, and Zaarin eye the dance floor from above.

ZAARIN:

Alyce looks pleased tonight. Rumor is, she intends to hand her niece off to General Veers.

DECLANN:

A worthy man.

ZAARIN:

There are many here who would disagree.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Ball guests mill about the fringes of the dance floor as the Imperial Whirl continues.

Among those watching the dancers are the dour-faced court COMPNOR representatives Lord Gale and Lady Aniva Suba. They are joined by their son, the equally dour-faced Lt. Suba, on leave from his position as chief political and security officer aboard the Imperial Command Ship, the Executor.

ANIVA:  
 (to Lt. Suba)  
 Make sure you get on Lady Meena's  
 dancechip.

LT. SUBA:  
 I'm certain she'd rather dance with  
 her escort, mother.

ANIVA:  
 Nonsense! The General is too old  
 for her...and socially unsuitable.

Aniva and Gale exchange disdainful looks while their son gazes sulkily at the blissfully dancing couple in question.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

A beaming Lady Cerise and Zev whirl about the ballroom floor catching glimpses of Lady Meena and General Veers from among the many dancers.

CERISE:  
 It's so romantic...your father  
 rescuing Lady Meena from her  
 misfortunes!

Zev looks over at his father who appears uncharacteristically relaxed and is openly enjoying himself.

ZEV:  
 One could say it was a mutual  
 rescue.

Cerise gushes at Zev's observation. The camera moves in on Veers and Meena who are oblivious to the attention they are receiving from those around them. Veers' relaxed expression becomes unsettled as he gazes down at Meena's upturned face.

MEENA:  
 What's the matter?

VEERS:  
 You wouldn't think me a gentleman  
 if I told you.

MEENA:  
 I've always known you to be a  
 gentleman. You'll note, however,  
 I didn't preface the title with  
*perfect*.

Meena smiles teasingly. Veers returns her smile, at ease once again.

VEERS:

At the risk of bad manners, I'm tempted to keep you by my side for the entire evening.

MEENA:

Would you think me less than perfect if I said I'd like that very much?

In answer, Veers adroitly pulls Meena closer to him, turning her mischievous visage into a full-fledged blush.

Martin and Alyce whirl past Veers and Meena. Alyce looks over and likes what she sees.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET PAXILLIA

The Blue Nebula, a Corellian C-21 cargo ship, zooms past an orbital space station, heading downward towards the Imperial-controlled outer rim world of Paxillia.

INT. BLUE NEBULA - COCKPIT

Seated within the cockpit, Rebel pilots Dyn Mawr and Arie Nugeen work the controls. From the main viewport, Arie looks up to see the surface of the planet break through the cloud-covered atmosphere. A hailing channel sounds. Arie hits a switch and listens as an Paxillian controller's voice comes over the comm-link.

CONTROLLER:(V.O.)

Attention. This is Paxillia Spaceport Control. Maintain your present course and proceed to landing pad A-89 for inspection.

ARIE:

(into comlink)  
Cargo ship CT-2143 to spaceport control, copy, over.

Arie shuts off the switch and turns to Dyn.

ARIE: (CONT'D)

If our luck holds up, we'll leave with enough ammo before the New Year.

Dyn pulls a lever and looks over a monitor read-out.

DYN:

Losing that munitions convoy on Derra IV makes this run more crucial than before.

ARIE:

What about that message for Vorra's grandfather?

DYN:

I'll see him before we secure our shipment...Vorra said he works at the central library.

ARIE:

Better be careful...Imp Intel is into family connections.

DYN:

From what I understand, the grandfather's a passivist.

ARIE:

Yeah, but his relatives aren't.

The viewport shows a modest city scape north of the oncoming Paxillian spaceport.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - EVENING

Shot of the Imperial Palace and grounds.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY - LATER

Declann and Zaarin have been joined by another Grand Admiral: Rufaan Tigillinus, an aristocratic-looking man known to be a major player within the Imperial court. The three of them are engaged in a debate regarding the merits of Rebel versus Imperial starfighter capabilities.

Lord Ganner is off to the side, his arms folded in front of him, meditatively observing the activity below.

Tigillinus looks over at Ganner with momentary curiosity, then gazes out onto the ballroom floor. Another dance has begun. Seen from above, Meena is now partners with General Brashin, while Veers dances with Lady Livia. Something catches Tigillinus' eye. He turns to Zaarin.

TIGILLINUS:

How interesting...Countess Motti and the disgraced Admiral Thrawn.

Zaarin immediately looks over the balcony rail in the direction of Tigillinus' gaze.

Ganner notes Grand Admiral Zaarin's jealous expression from Tigillinus' obvious goading. He and Declann briefly exchange knowing glances.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR AREA

On the outskirts of the dance floor, Alyce and Martyn are seen conversing with Captain Niriz of the ISD Admonitor and his superior, Vice-Admiral Thrawn: a tall, black-haired, blue skinned humanoid with glowing red eyes who stands out from the rest of the predominantly human crowd.

ALYCE:

(to Thrawn)

You and Captain Niriz came to court so mysteriously, Admiral Thrawn.

THRAWN:

Yet somehow you were able to locate, then invite us here on short notice.

ALYCE:

I only did it to solve the mystery. One of you is bound to talk.

Thrawn and Niriz exchange grins.

THRAWN:

I fear we'll have to disappoint you, Countess.

ALYCE:

(to Martyn)

Admiral Thrawn is such a challenge. Over the years, I've fed him juicy bits of gossip...in the vain hope that he would return the favor.

Alyce throws an amused Thrawn an affected sigh.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

Of course, I never give up on a man who can keep a secret.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

Zaarin is visibly upset by Alyce's attentions towards Thrawn.

ZAARIN:

I thought Thrawn was banished from court.

TIGILLINUS:

As did I. For some unknown reason, he has returned.

DECLANN:

Lord Ganner once served under Thrawn.

Tigillinus and Zaarin's attention turns towards Ganner, who unfolds his arms and addresses them.

GANNER:

Yes...aboard the Vengeance. A brilliant mind. Unorthodox at times, but effective...Lord Vader thinks highly of him and took his advice to promote General Veers.

TIGILLINUS:

Vader, Thrawn, and Veers you say? That would explain a great many things.

Ganner suddenly looks away as if aware of something.

GANNER:

Excuse me for a moment, gentlemen, I have business to attend to.

The officers nod as Ganner leaves their company and moves down the hallway.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - HALLWAY OFF UPPER BALCONY - MOMENTS LATER

A small group of ball guests are rudely brushed aside by a harsh-looking young man named Sedriss, whose formal attire does little to polish the rough edges of his personality. An unsheathed lightsaber dangles noticeably at his side as he heads towards Lord Ganner who stands behind a hall pillar, awaiting the arrival with thinly-veiled displeasure.

GANNER:

You're late, Sedriss.

SEDRISS:

(boastfully)

I was training with Lord Vader. He says I'm making progress.

GANNER:

You'll need more than lightsaber lessons to advance...The Emperor desires that you also learn some deportment.

Sedriss snorts in derision. Ganner's eyes narrow at his ill-mannered companion.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

(quietly, with menace)

Would you express that same opinion to our master, the Emperor?

Sedriss straightens up in reply.

SEDRISS:

No...I swore an oath to serve him.

GANNER:

And who brought you before the Emperor when you were a petty mercenary scheduled for execution?

SEDRISS:

(sullenly)

You, Lord Ganner.

GANNER:

Obedience to me is an extension of our master's will.

SEDRISS:

Yes, Lord Ganner.

Ganner points at Sedrisses' unsheathed lightsaber.

GANNER:

Now...I want that weapon properly sheathed. You will then return here for further instruction.

Sedriss balks for an instant, unhappy at the thought of having his prized lightsaber covered. He thinks the better of it, bows rigidly to Lord Ganner, turns, and heads back down the hallway.

Ganner watches Sedrisses' departure with annoyance. He moves back towards the balcony where Grand Admirals' Declann, Zaarin, and Tigillinus congregate.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - OBSERVATION TOWER -  
EVENING

Framed against the night sky of Coruscant, the camera shows the Imperial Palace, then zooms in on a spired, octagonally shaped observation tower that lies near the top of the massive pyramidal structure.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - OBSERVATION TOWER WINDOW -  
EVENING

Gazing out of one of the many windows surrounding the tower pinnacle, a dark-cowled figure comes into focus. It is the Emperor Palpatine, whose sallow, wizened visage looks out onto Imperial City with a self-satisfied expression.

Behind the Emperor, grasping lethal forcepikes, two crimson robed Imperial Sovereign Protectors stand guard on either side of a closed turbolift entrance.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - OBSERVATION TOWER ROOM - EVENING

His back to the royal guardsmen, the Emperor's hooded reflection is seen in the window glass.

The turbolift opens to reveal the Imperial Emissary Darth Vader. The royal guardsmen quickly cross their forcepikes before the Dark Lord to bar his entrance into the tower room.

EMPEROR:

Lord Vader may enter.

The royal guardsmen uncross their weapons. Vader takes a few steps into the room, then goes down on one knee, his black helmet genuflecting in respect to his master. The Emperor turns around to face his emissary.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

(to the Guards)

Leave us.

The guards exit via the turbolift.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Rise and join me, my friend.

Vader does so.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

How goes the conditioning of young Sedriss?

VADER:

I just came from a session with him, my master. His lightsaber skills are improving.

EMPEROR:

Excellent. I have charged Lord Ganner to continue his training.

VADER:

Sedriss was to be my pupil!

EMPEROR:

An adept must be taught by example.

VADER:

I can accomplish that goal, my master.

EMPEROR:

This particular case requires Lord Ganner's attentions...He uncovered Sedrisses' gift...and has served me well in similar matters.

VADER:

I sense he is holding something back, my master.

The Emperor gives a sly smile and turns back to the window, looking at the outside through his own reflection.

EMPEROR:

Yes...yes, I have felt that, too.

Vader stands in silent frustration, suspecting the intrigue-loving Emperor has presented yet another court rival for him to best.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - AREA OFF DANCE FLOOR

The orchestra plays while Lady Meena, surrounded by male admirers who are taking turns speaking into a dancechip on her wrist, smiles regretfully over at Veers who stands close-by with Martyn and Zev.

Under the watchful eye of his mother Lady Aniva, Lt. Suba joins the line of Meena's hopeful partners.

Baron Ulric Tagge and Chief Aron Bast approach Veers. Veers greets their arrival and introduces them to his father and son.

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - CONSERVATORY DOORS

At the far end of the Grand Ballroom, a series of arched glass doors open onto an enormous garden conservatory. Marble pathways within lead to flowering trees overhanging secluded benches set before an indoor stream, spanned by an arched bridge, that spills over a low waterfall into an artificial pond. Repulsor cages house sweetly trilling Chandrillian love birds that float above strolling ball guests who wander in and out of the romantic setting.

Off to the side of one entrance is a small clique, consisting of a fussy-looking older male and three females in their mid-to-late twenties who are overdressed and overloud. They are joined by a notorious courtesan of the Imperial court named Lunell, whose pouting countenance subdues the boisterous mood of their party.

LUNELL:

A steward just informed me we are to remove ourselves at once.

There are a few gasps, a weak "she wouldn't dare", and looks of embarrassment and indignation from the group.

MALE GUEST:

I told you Alyce might have us thrown out...after all, we weren't officially invited.

FEMALE GUEST:

Oh, who cares? It's a bore so far. Roganda's New Years Masquerade will be much more exciting.

LUNELL:

I agree. Besides, the Countess is on her way out of favor with the Emperor.

This bit of gossip brightens the party crashers considerably.

LUNELL: (CONT'D)

As if her flirtation with Admiral Zaarin wasn't scandalous enough, she's now cavorting with that red-eyed alien vice-admiral.

Lunell gives a smug smile in response to her companion's glee at the thought of Countess Alyce Motti's downfall.

LUNELL: (CONT'D)  
(gloating)  
Practically the entire room is  
talking about it.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - MAIN STAIRCASE AREA

Music and dancing have resumed. Alyce, on the arm of Vice-Admiral Thrawn, moves toward the main staircase, pointedly ignoring the stares and guarded whispers from some guests regarding her alien escort in Imperial uniform.

ALYCE:  
I heard about your unsung success  
on Derra IV.

Thrawn gives Alyce an inquisitive look as they arrive at the bottom of the staircase.

AYLCE:  
An officer's wife told me...it  
seems I'm not the only one appalled  
by what little credit you received.

They begin to climb the stairs. Alyce nods her head in silent greeting to an elaborately-garbed Ambassador and his female companion descending the stairs past them.

THRAWN:  
Lord Vader commanded the operation.

ALYCE:  
But it was your strategy that came  
into play.

THRAWN:  
Your source overstated the outcome.  
Please inform Baron Fel's wife to  
be more discreet.

ALYCE:  
Surely, Lord Vader...

THRAWN:  
(interrupting)  
Has nothing but respect for Baron  
Fel's piloting skills...At present,  
it wouldn't be in the Fel family's  
interest to champion my cause.

Thrawn's statement and tone of voice signals to Alyce that this subject is now closed.

With their backs to the dance floor, Alyce and Vice-Admiral Thrawn continue up the staircase while the camera pans down to the over-flowing dance floor.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - AREA OFF DANCE FLOOR

Seen from an area just off the crowded floor, Lady Meena now dances with a young naval commander. Zev and Cerise are also seen dancing with different partners.

Off to the sidelines, Martyn is engaged with two older army officers, while Veers, Chief Bast, and Baron Tagge converse.

TAGGE:

...Then we'll meet tomorrow morning, before the hunt begins.

BAST:

(to Veers)

Any ideas as to our opponent Zaarin's strategy?

VEERS:

Other than he'll try to cheat  
...no.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - HALLWAY OFF UPPER BALCONY

Thrawn and Alyce make their way down the hall in view of Grand Admirals' Declann, Zaarin, Tigillinus, and Lord Ganner, conversing on an overhanging balcony.

ALYCE:

(mockingly)

Rufaan Tigillinus...your former mentor. Won't he be delighted to see you?

Thrawn doesn't register any emotion as he and Alyce move closer to the balcony.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER BALCONY

Ganner is the first to notice Alyce and Thrawn's arrival. He gives them a courtly bow.

GANNER:

Admiral Thrawn, how good to see you again...and Countess Motti, a pleasure, once more.

The three admirals turn towards the couple. Both Zaarin and Tigillinus look warily at Thrawn - but for differing reasons.

THRAWN:  
 Congratulations on your recent  
 promotion, Lord Ganner.

This is the first Alyce has heard of Ganner's new title.

ALYCE:  
*Lord Ganner? My, that must have  
 been quite an audience you had with  
 His Excellency the other day.*

Ganner gives Alyce a cryptic smile, offering no details of  
 the meeting...or his promotion. Declaan quickly chimes in.

DECLANN:  
 What's this, Alyce? Not so much as  
 a Happy New Year from you to us?

Ganner takes Declaan's convenient interruption as his cue to  
 surreptitiously move back from the interaction.

ALYCE:  
 Of course, I wish you all a Happy  
 New Year...although what I'm really  
 wishing for is that those splendid  
 white uniforms you're wearing be  
 spread a bit more evenly about the  
 ballroom.

ZAARIN:  
 (to Alyce)  
 Do me the honor of the next dance,  
 and I'll grant your wish.

Alyce smiles charmingly at Zaarin.

ALYCE:  
 I'd love to, Demetrius, but  
 officials of the Order of the  
 Canted Circle are *very* interested  
 in meeting Admiral Thrawn.

This information startles Tigillinus who is a part of the  
 ancient and exclusive Coruscanti club. He quickly recovers.

TIGILLINUS:  
 Allow me to free you up, Alyce. I'd  
 be glad to introduce Admiral Thrawn  
 to my fellow members of the Order.

THRAWN:  
 I'd be honored by your company. I'm  
 sure the Countess won't mind.

Alyce does mind, but gives sway to Thrawn. Admiral Zaarin offers his arm to her.

ZAARIN:

Shall we?

Alyce disengages from Thrawn and goes to Zaarin. After a brief exchange of courtly farewells, the pairing of Alyce with Zaarin and Thrawn with Tigillinus take off in opposite directions, leaving a highly amused Declaan and Ganner alone on the balcony overlooking the Grand Ballroom.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET PAXILLIA

An orbital space station hovers over the planet Paxillia.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - DAY

The modest city scape of Paxillia's capitol is seen from its spaceport.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - DAY

Over view of the Paxillia City core and central library building.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - CENTRAL LIBRARY - DAY

Disguised as a businessman, the Rebel pilot Dyn Mawr walks alongside human and alien civilians who traverse the steps leading up to Paxillia's central library. Paxillian bureaucrats and a few Imperial officers pass by as Dyn enters the public building.

INT. PAXILLIA CENTRAL LIBRARY - SECURITY CHECKPOINT

Dyn stands in line behind several library patrons who swipe their identichips over a turnstile stand located before tall sliding glass doors leading into the library lobby.

A soft, older female voice is heard giving instructions.

FEMALE VOICE: (V.O.)

You are now entering the Central Library of Paxillia. Please lower all sound levels and refrain from consuming food and beverages...

Dyn swipes his identity card and moves through the turnstile into the main library.

## INT. PAXILLIA CENTRAL LIBRARY - INFORMATION DESK

Surrounded on either side by rows of towering shelves lined with thousands of recorded materials, Dyn waits near an information desk on the building's main floor. Dyn is approached by Paato Kyrr, an elderly librarian, dressed in the simple scholarly robes of his profession.

DYN:  
(quietly)  
Paato Kyrr?

PAATO:  
Yes...how may I help you?

Dyn looks around and lowers his voice even more.

DYN:  
I have a message from your  
granddaughter Vorra...

Paato's placid demeanor changes to one of surprise and concern. He signals for silence, then motions Dyn to follow him.

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

Alyce and General Veers are now dancing.

ALYCE:  
I don't know how you managed to pry  
me away from Admiral Zaarin.

VEERS:  
Thank my father and Baron Tagge.  
They introduced the Admiral to a  
military contractor...

ALYCE:  
That should keep him occupied.

Alyce glances over at Meena who is looking fatigued as she dances with her partner, a snobbish Tapani nobleman from the House of Cadriaan.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)  
Meena looks tired. Why don't you  
take her over to the conservatory  
for a rest?

Veers looks longingly at a weary Meena dancing with the Tapani nobleman.

VEERS:

As the guest of honor's escort, I'm  
only allowed the first and last  
dance...

Alyce looks over Veers' shoulder in mild vexation, realizing this romance might take a bit more prodding of the outwardly proper Maximilian Veers. She tries a more direct maneuver.

ALYCE:

You've precious little time for  
protocol...Go for it, Max...Think  
of it as a rapid engagement.

VEERS:

Is your niece willing?

Alyce smiles in relief, sensing Veers' growing resolve.

ALYCE:

Very.

Veers' gaze takes on a more determined edge...as does the  
tone of his voice.

VEERS:

Good. Then you won't mind if I tell  
any would-be suitors in this room  
to go to hell?

Alyce's smile becomes broader, secure in the knowledge that  
Veers is the perfect man for her niece.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

The hum of a thousand conversations is heard while the  
orchestra takes a brief break.

From a distance, Alyce observes Veers who stands next to  
Meena and her Tapani nobleman dance partner who...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

...bows to Meena and takes his leave, but not before throwing  
Veers a haughty look. Veers ignores the supercilious gesture,  
places his hands on Meena's shoulders, and mouths a question.

Meena smiles and mouths the word "yes", then briefly looks  
back at an approaching Lt. Suba. She ruefully gives Veers a  
"one more" finger signal. Veers removes his hands from her  
shoulders and returns her signal with a firmer motion. He  
quickly ends the encounter with a possessive hand clasp/kiss  
that nearly takes Meena's breath away.

Lt. Suba's normally dour expression becomes more so as he catches the tail end of the couple's romantic exchange.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - UPPER HALLWAY OFF MAIN STAIRCASE - MOMENTS LATER

Martyn Veers is seen walking away from Baron Tagge, Admiral Zaarin, and an overly ambitious military contractor named Barkus Knott, whose animated gestures denote his trying to wing yet another lucrative deal with an important naval representative. Martyn spies his grandson Zev coming in the opposite direction.

ZEV:  
(embarrassed)  
I've lost sight of Lady Cerise.

MARTYN:  
She's probably wandering about with the officers wives...we'll find her.

Martyn and Zev move down the hall in search of Cerise.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Veers rejoins Alyce who is near the orchestra alcove. Behind them, royal conductor Rahn Kleff has returned from his break. Kleff goes to his podium while the orchestra musicians begin tuning their instruments.

VEERS:  
She said yes...after her dance with Lt. Suba.

Alyce and Veers gaze out onto the area where an exhausted Meena is politely conversing with Lt. Suba and his parents.

ALYCE:  
Well, no sense in brushing him off...outright, at least. Meena's being diplomatic.

VEERS:  
(confidently)  
I can handle him...and his family.

ALYCE:  
No doubt you can...I'll speak with the conductor and request that this next dance be a short one.

Alyce goes over to speak with Conductor Kleff.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

Lord Ganner stands amidst a bevy of female guests who flirt and make small talk with the mysterious newcomer to court. Outwardly, Ganner returns their attentions, but his real interest lies in the near-by form of Lady Meena.

Ganner's covert concentration in Meena's direction does not escape the mental notice of the young woman who instinctively turns slightly from conversing with the Suba family to search for the cause of her unease.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Veers is joined by Thrawn. Veers gives the vice-admiral a military nod in greeting.

VEERS:

Admiral.

THRAWN:

How goes your recent appointment,  
General?

Alyce has finished her request with the conductor. She heads back to Veers and Thrawn, overhearing their conversation.

VEERS:

Very rewarding, thank you...Your  
recommending me to Lord Vader has  
revitalized my career.

THRAWN:

Given his exacting performance  
standards, I knew you were the  
right man for the job.

Alyce is now by their side.

ALYCE:

Like you, Admiral, Max is one of  
the few officers in the Empire who  
understands Lord Vader's aims...if  
not his style.

Before Thrawn and Veers can respond to Alyce, a royal steward approaches the trio.

STEWARD:

(to Veers)

Your father requests your presence  
immediately, General.

VEERS:  
 (nodding)  
 Countess...Admiral. (to Alyce) Tell  
 Lady Meena, I'll return.

Alyce and Thrawn nod their heads, watching as Veers and the Steward leave the area. Thrawn then turns to Alyce with a bemused expression.

THRAWN:  
 The Empire could use more men like  
 Veers in its ranks.

ALYCE:  
 If things go as planned, there may  
 be more little Max's...and Meena's  
 running about.

THRAWN:  
 May your efforts along those lines  
 be successful.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET PAXILLIA

Shot of the space station orbiting the planet Paxillia.

EXT: PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - CENTRAL LIBRARY - DAY

Outside shot of the central library zooming in on the upper floors of the building.

INT. CENTRAL LIBRARY - STORAGE ROOM

Dyn Mawr leans against a locker in a windowless, dimly-lit storage room while an obviously distraught Paato Kyrr fingers a small message disk from his granddaughter.

PAATO:  
 (horrified)  
 Vorra's barely sixteen...how could  
 someone in authority be allowed to  
 do that to her?

DYN:  
 Imp Intel doesn't operate under any  
 ethical law...or sense of decency.

PAATO:  
 I deplore violence, but if I ever  
 came across the monster who abused  
 her...regardless of my beliefs...  
 I'd have a hard time justifying his  
 existence.

DYN:

Vorra's not his first or last  
victim...When this war is over,  
we'll bring him to trial.

PAATO:

(with revulsion)  
Arik Ganner...I won't soon forget  
that name.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR AREA

The orchestra sounds as partners begin to fill the dance floor.

On the sidelines, still surrounded by a coterie of fawning females, is Lord Arik Ganner. Ganner bows slightly to his admirers, ignoring their disappointed entreaties to stay, and takes his leave, heading towards Lady Meena who is being escorted away from Lord Gale and Lady Aniva by Lt. Suba.

Ganner deftly intercepts the couple before they can reach the dance floor.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Alyce and Admiral Thrawn view the activity from the orchestra alcove area. Alyce's eyes narrow in concern as she looks out onto the dance floor. Thrawn notices her reaction and follows her gaze to...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR AREA

...Lord Ganner with Meena and Lt. Suba. Ganner says something to Suba. The young naval lieutenant nods his head slowly in agreement, then hands Meena off to Ganner and lethargically walks away, passing his dumbfounded parents towards the conservatory. Lord and Lady Suba go after their son while Ganner leads a baffled Meena out onto the dance floor.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - ORCHESTRA AREA

Thrawn and Alyce observe Ganner and Meena begin to dance.

ALYCE:

How is it that you know Lord  
Ganner?

THRAWN:

He worked with Inquisitor Jerec  
when I commanded the Vengeance  
five years ago.

ALYCE:  
As a Sith artifact and Jedi hunter?

THRAWN:  
Yes...along with other, more  
unpleasant duties.

ALYCE:  
I can imagine.

THRAWN:  
(darkly)  
No...unless you were a witness to  
his methods, you could not possibly  
imagine.

An increasingly anxious Alyce heads to the dance floor where she can keep a closer eye on her niece and the man she now suspects is *Inquisitor* Ganner. Thrawn follows her.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR

Their hands crisscrossed together in a line with the other dance partners, Lord Ganner and Lady Meena glide side by side across the floor to the strains of the Imperial Promenade.

The music and dance steps change as Meena automatically goes through the motions of being spun around and then held uncomfortably in Ganner's arms as they and the rest of the dancers now move freely about the ballroom floor.

Meena looks off in the direction of the conservatory.

GANNER:  
You needn't feign concern over my  
suggestion to Lt. Suba...I sensed  
early on you were looking for a way  
to be rid of him.

MEENA:  
Telling him to go jump into a lake  
was uncalled for.

GANNER:  
Note how he didn't object. Despite  
his rank and social standing, Lt.  
Suba is weak-minded and easily led.

MEENA:  
That's a very smug assertion on  
your part.

Ganner finds Meena's chilly posture towards him diverting.

GANNER:  
 Perhaps you wouldn't think so  
 poorly of me if your senses were  
 suitably trained.

Ganner moves his gloved hand from Meena's waist to the bare  
 expanse of skin exposed by the low back of her satina gown,  
 eliciting an automatic pleasurable sensation from the young  
 woman. Meena lets out a low gasp.

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
 (smoothly)  
 I'd enjoy being your teacher.

Disconcerted by her physical response and an urgent sense of  
 foreboding, Meena attempts to push away from Lord Ganner's  
 confining hold. He is having none of it. Meena begins to  
 tremble.

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
 Do you know why you're afraid of  
 me, Lady Meena? You misinterpret my  
 calling out to you through the  
 Force as a feeling of unease.

MEENA:  
 Please...

GANNER:  
 Please, what?

Meena gazes dizzily at the surrounding dancers swirling about  
 them.

MEENA:  
 (breathlessly)  
 I need to leave...the dance floor.

From experience, Ganner recognizes the physical and mental  
 signs of an impending collapse. Eyeing Meena's condition with  
 frustrated disappointment, he abruptly ends their dancing.

GANNER:  
 As you wish.

Under the curious stares of the other dancers, Lord Ganner  
 guides an unsteady Lady Meena off of the dance floor towards  
 Alyce and Vice-Admiral Thrawn.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - DANCE FLOOR AREA

Ganner hands Meena off to Alyce who views the Inquisitor with  
 well-founded suspicion.

GANNER:  
Lady Meena is not *feeling* well.

ALYCE:  
(to Meena)  
Would you like to go someplace  
quiet and rest?

Chief Steward Castor Vost approaches the group.

MEENA:  
(looking around)  
Yes...but...where is the General?

Alyce notes Vost's arrival. The royal steward's worried expression is not for Lady Meena.

VOST:  
(to Alyce)  
Countess, we have a disturbance in  
the conservatory. It involves your  
guest Lady Cerise and a person who  
calls himself...Sedriss.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - CONSERVATORY DOORS

Gawking guests crowd before the series of arched glass doors opening onto the conservatory, craning their necks to try and get a better look at some sort of disruption going on within the garden.

Led by two crimson robed royal guards, Lord Ganner, Vice-Admiral Thrawn, and the royal steward Vost quickly enter the area, making their way through one packed entry to see...

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND BALLROOM - CONSERVATORY GARDEN

...two more royal guards, their forcepikes upraised in attack mode, looming over a furious, barely-contained Sedriss who is on his knees before them near a garden bench.

Sedriss glares hatefully in the direction of a stern-faced Veers, who stands next to his father Martyn, while he carefully sheaths Sedrisses' lightsaber. Near-by, Zev holds a clinging Lady Cerise who watches the scene with a heady mixture of fear, embarrassment...and some excitement.

GANNER:  
(commandingly)  
What went on here?

Veers is surprised to see Ganner act as if he were in charge of the situation. Veers points to Sedriss.

VEERS:

This person insulted Lady Cerise  
and assaulted my son...he then  
tried to challenge me with this  
weapon.

Ganner looks incredulously at Sedriss, then back at Veers.

GANNER:

(to Veers)  
You disarmed him?

SEDRISS:

Like hell, he did...I couldn't get  
the damn sheath off in time!

VEERS:

If the guards hadn't ordered him to  
cease in the name of the Emperor...  
the situation might have turned  
ugly.

SEDRISS:

Only for you, mudfoot!

GANNER:

Silence!

Sedriss backs down. Veers remains unimpressed by Sedrisses' blustering. Thrawn watches the dynamic with interest.

VEERS:

Do you know this person, Agent  
Ganner?

SEDRISS:

It's *Lord* Ganner to you!

GANNER:

Enough!

An angry Ganner swiftly turns on Sedriss who begins to gasp, reaching for his throat. Just as swiftly, Sedriss is then released, his hands hitting the ground while he catches his breath.

Alyce enters in time to catch the end of the Force-choke as Ganner refocuses his attention back to Veers...who is now viewing the former agent with guarded respect.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

Sedriss is my guest...therefore my  
responsibility.

(MORE)

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
I apologize for his unseemly  
conduct. (to Vost) You will release  
the prisoner to me.

VOST:  
I will release the prisoner to you

The guards lower their upraised forcepikes and stand down.  
Sedriss gets up while Ganner stretches his hand out to Veers.

GANNER:  
His lightsaber, if you please.

Veers reluctantly hands Ganner the weapon, glancing at  
Sedriss with contempt. Sedriss returns Veers' glance, along  
with another look that reads the challenge is not over with.

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
By your leave.

Ganner and Sedriss coolly exit the conservatory, passing by  
Alyce who views the departing duo with extreme pique. She  
goes over to Lady Cerise who disengages from Zev.

ALYCE:  
What happened, my dear?

CERISE:  
I'm not sure. One moment, I was  
dancing...and the next, I found  
myself here, trying to fend off  
that boorish young man.

Splashing sounds are heard from across the conservatory.  
Alyce and the others turn to view a frantic Lord Gale and  
Lady Aniva Suba leaning over a bridge, watching in horror as  
a soaking wet Lt. Suba readies himself for another fully-  
clothed dive from the shoreline into the pond. Lady Aniva  
signals to anyone within earshot.

ANIVA:  
Over here...someone...help!

Lt. Suba dives in once more. Veers has seen enough madness.

VEERS:  
Where is Lady Meena?

ALYCE:  
Resting with Lady Janel.

VEERS:  
I suggest we leave this circus and  
join her.

Alyce takes one more look back at the swimming Lt. Suba, then puts her arm protectively around Cerise, leading her out of the area, past the curious onlookers, with Veers, Martyn and Zev close behind.

Vice-Admiral Thrawn and some of the guests remain in the conservatory, viewing the odd antics of Lt. Suba, who is being fished out of the pond by Steward Vost and the royal guards, with amused fascination.

EXT. SPACE - CORUSCANT

Surrounded by a fleet of Imperial Star Destroyers, the Command Ship Executor hovers above Imperial Center.

Several Lambda-class shuttles exit the Star Destroyers, making their way down to the planet's surface.

EXT. CORUSCANT - MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - EARLY MORNING

The early morning sun brightens the snow-capped Manarai Mountains that lie south of Imperial City. Aircars and shuttles are seen flying towards the mountain range.

EXT. CORUSCANT - MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - EARLY MORNING

The camera zooms in to show the magnificent Manarai Mountain Lodge, a stupendous wood and stone residential structure that juts out from the mid-section of one of the mountains.

Owned by the Emperor, and controlled by the Royal Manarai Rangers, the lodge is used for entertaining important military, civilian, and political guests. The property encompasses a hunting range, fishing stream, small lake, hiking trails, and a private airsleigh run located at the top of the mountain's snow-covered peak.

EXT. CORUSCANT - MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - LANDING AREA - EARLY MORNING

A military aircar hovers over a large landing area, along with various other transports that are seen coming and going. Veers, dressed in hunting clothes and cap, disembarks from the vehicle. He is followed by Martyn and Zev, wearing casual attire, and Captain Dav, who is in his gray-green service uniform.

Dav heads over to the aircar's open side compartment, disengaging a small clothing trunk and satchel, and placing them on the ground. He signals to the aircar driver who zooms up and away from the area.

Dav picks up the satchel and hands it to Veers.

DAV:

Your hunting gear, General...I'll see to our rooms and rejoin you.

VEERS:

Very good, Captain.

Dav activates the trunk's repulsorlift mechanism and heads towards the lodge. Veers takes his hunting rifle out of the case while he addresses Martyn and Zev who are taking in the park-like surroundings. Veers points to the main building.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Manarai Mountain Lodge...The Emperor hosts overnight retreats, hunts, and social events here.

MARTYN:

Hard to believe a place like this exists on Coruscant...I thought I was through being impressed.

Veers grins, proud that his father and son are part of his growing prestige at gatherings like this. He slings the rifle over his shoulder and grabs the hunting satchel and empty case. The trio begin their walk towards the lodge.

ZEV:

Countess Motti said there was an airsleigh run.

VEERS:

(pointing to the Mt.)  
It's at the top of that peak.  
Sleigh rides are scheduled for this evening...

ZEV:

(excitedly)  
I'm on!

VEERS:

Until then, you and the Major can find something interesting to do while I hunt with Baron Tagge.

EXT. CORUSCANT - MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - EARLY MORNING

Before the stone steps leading up to the main lodge, Baron Tagge, Chief Bast, and their aides are seen readying their equipment for the hunting competition. Baron Tagge waves to the oncoming Veers family.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - EARLY MORNING

Male and female guests, some casually dressed, others in military uniforms, stand or lounge about the Manarai Lodge's sweeping wrap-around porch, chatting, drinking hot tea, and taking in the spectacular mountain and forest views.

Tagge, Bast, Veers, Martyn, and Zev arrive on the porch and enter the building's sliding wood-paneled doors that lead into...

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GREAT HALL - MOMENTS LATER

...the Great Hall of the Manarai Lodge.

A towering cathedral ceiling, buttressed by Manarai pine tree trunks specially grown and shaped to serve as pillars, enfolds a large multi-purpose room that is currently being used as a dining and refreshment center.

Guests move alongside lengthy buffet tables artistically strewn with woodland theme decorations and laden with hearty foodstuffs. Steaming silandars of coffee, tea, and exotic chocolate are dispensed by gray-robed royal stewards.

From the wide open hearth of a massive stone fireplace at the end of the hall, a roaring fire burns, warming the entire area with a moving, luminescent glow.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - UPPER HALLWAY

Alyce and Meena, both dressed in a casual mid-calf woven skirt/shoulder wrap combination and walking boots, stroll down an upper hall of the lodge, passing by colorful wall tapestries depicting nature and hunt scenes. The mouse droid Nibs rolls happily behind them.

They pause before one of the hall's cozy window seats overlooking the lodge grounds to take in the view.

ALYCE:

I see Admiral Zaarin's hunt team  
has arrived.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - EARLY MORNING

Zaarin, in hunt attire, confers with two similarly dressed men who sport big game rifles.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - UPPER HALLWAY

Meena moves closer to the window. On the floor, Nibs gently nudges Meena's boot and lets out a mechanical squeak.

Meena picks up the little droid, placing him on the window seat so his sensors can better evaluate the outside activity.

MEENA:

He seemed quite taken with you at the ball.

ALYCE:

At this point, it's entirely one-sided...although I did lead him on a bit during the Army/Navy game last week.

Meena looks out the window in dismay to see...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - EARLY MORNING

...a white-uniformed Grand Admiral Nial Declann, accompanied by a black-clad Lord Ganner, upon whose leather gauntlet covered fist perches a Manarai Falcon: a vicious predator bird, considered difficult to tame, and used only at select sporting events by the Coruscanti elite.

Declann and Ganner join Admiral Zaarin and his men.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - UPPER HALLWAY

Alyce also takes note of Lord Ganner's presence and is not pleased.

MEENA:

There's something about Lord Ganner that frightens me.

ALYCE:

The Inquisitorious feeds off fear.

MEENA:

Inquisitorious?

ALYCE:

An Intel division, run by Force-sensitives. Lord Ganner is one of its Inquisitors.

MEENA:

I have this feeling he wants to harm me. We start a conversation and by the end...I'm a trembling mess.

An alarmed Alyce places her hand on Meena's shoulder and guides her away from the window. Meena takes Nibs with her and places the mouse droid back on the floor.

ALYCE:

I can teach you how to shield your mind from him...For now, avoid his company...and stay close to me or someone you trust.

An older Imperial officer and his wife make their way down the hall. Alyce notices the couple and reigns in her own feelings of trepidation, calming herself as an example to her niece.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

We'd better run along...Max and your Uncle Spence are waiting for us in the Great Hall.

They resume their stroll, with Nibs trailing behind.

MEENA:

Will Uncle Spence be spending New Years with us?

ALYCE:

Yes. Thankfully, he left the rest of his detestable family back on Phelarion...

They reach an iron leaf-motif circular staircase that winds around a Manarai pine pillar like a vine.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

...I only put up with him due to the fact that he is the House of Motti Head...and my last surviving brother.

Nibs rolls to the edge of the steep circular staircase, and moves back and forth, emitting a series of frustrated squeaks. An exasperated Meena picks up the little droid.

MEENA:

(to Nibs)

You could use the turbolift.

Nibs squeaks in protest. Meena sighs and tucks Nibs under her arm.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

You're getting spoiled, Nibs.

Nibs lets out a self-satisfied squeak as Meena and Alyce descend the stairs.

## EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - MID MORNING

It is mid-morning. The lodge grounds are full of guests wandering to and from several sporting equipment kiosks set up before the pathway entrance to the Manarai Forest, a wooded tract composed mostly of scrub pine trees and red berried bushes.

At one station, Martyn and Zev are being outfitted with fishing poles, pail, and a container of bait by a red and gray uniformed Royal Manarai Ranger, part of a combined security and caretaker force for the vast Imperial property.

RANGER:

These mapsensors must be on your person at all times.

The ranger hands Martyn and Zev each a small round mapsensor.

RANGER: (CONT'D)

If you need help, press this button and one of the Manarai rangers will respond. Other than that...enjoy your day.

MARTYN:

Thank you, Ranger.

Martyn and Zev pick up their fishing gear and head out towards the Manarai Forest entrance. Captain Piett, dressed in his service uniform, and three other naval officers pass by the two, making their way to the fishing station.

MARTYN: (CONT'D)

(to Zev)

Not as exciting as a hunt or an airsleigh ride...I seem to recall how much you enjoyed fishing with your father.

ZEV:

That was a long time ago...before mother died. He and I haven't had a real vacation since then.

MARTYN:

He's been busy building up his career...successfully, I might add. Few officers can boast that they and their family were guests of the Emperor at an outing like this.

ZEV:

You don't have to convince me about father's importance. I'm reminded of it daily at the Academy.

MARTYN:

Try to be more understanding. Your father really does care about you.

ZEV:

So, I've been told...by everyone, but him.

Martyn gazes thoughtfully at his grandson as they make their way up the Manarai Forest path.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - MID-MORNING

More guests linger on the sweeping front porch of the lodge, chatting, drinking tea, and enjoying the mountain view. Some persons lean over the wooden railings to observe the hunt-related activity going on at the bottom of the stone steps.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - MID-MORNING

Baron Tagge, Bast, and Veers are gathered together. Captain Dav, along with two other military aides, are placing some extra gear into backpacks. Meena is near-by watching the team with some apprehension. Veers notices her disquiet and moves over to her side, taking her hand in his. She smiles up at him.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - MID-MORNING

An anxious Nibs is seen, peeking out from the bottom of the railing amidst the feet of several hunt observers. The little mouse droid lets out a forlorn sound, signifying it doesn't like being left on the porch away from its Mistress Meena.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GREAT HALL - MOMENTS LATER

Most of the guests have gone and the breakfast buffet is over as royal stewards and cleaning droids clear the tables and room of clutter.

Across the hall, Alyce stands before the stone fireplace, quietly arguing with her older brother Lord Spence Motti: a tall, elegant man in his mid-fifties, dressed in a dark gold tailored suit with the House of Motti crest embroidered on the left breast pocket.

SPENCE:

...He seems like a suitable man, Alyce, however, as head of the Motti family, I think our niece could do much better.

ALYCE:

(annoyed)

Oh, stars above, Spence...Max is magnificent...and if you haven't noticed, she's in love with him.

SPENCE:

I don't think you realize how unpopular this match would be, especially among the military houses.

ALYCE:

(suspiciously)

Have you been making overtures regarding Meena to the other heads?

Spence looks down. Alyce senses his duplicity.

SPENCE:

They believe Veers won't survive Lord Vader...and should he pull through, I believe their resentment against him would be complete.

ALYCE:

Those fools hate Max because he's a natural born winner...it's not just because of our niece that they're jealous of him.

SPENCE:

(sighing)

I should know better than to try and stop you from seeing this marriage through.

ALYCE:

Quite...You're here to give your blessing to this union before the week is out.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - ANIMAL PEN - MID-MORNING

Behind the main lodge building, Lord Ganner, still holding a Manarai falcon on his black gauntlet covered fist, enters a small structure that leads down to an underground animal pen.

## INT. ANIMAL PEN - MOMENTS LATER

Within the underground facility, high-pitched shrieks mixed with low growls are heard coming from fixed stalls and cages filled with exotic and ferocious-looking animals used for the many lodge hunts held during the year.

A smirking Sedriss, dressed in a camouflage jumpsuit and backpack, stands by a large cage containing a grunting boarast: an ill-tempered, gray-furred, muscular creature, native to the Manarai Mountain range and weighing in at over 60 kilos, whose pitch-black eyes, bared sharp teeth, and tusks are leveled menacingly towards the former mercenary.

Sedriss is joined by Lord Ganner who places his Manarai falcon on a hanging perch.

GANNER:

Where is Captain Gist?

SEDRISS:

He said everything was ready, then went back to the hunt teams.

GANNER:

You understand the assignment?

SEDRISS:

Yes, Lord Ganner...I just don't get why we were asked to do the job.

GANNER:

It's not for us to question our master's bidding...By doing so, we are less apt to fail.

SEDRISS:

I guess I flunked out in deportment last night.

Ganner glares at his unapologetic pupil.

SEDRISS: (CONT'D)

(defensively)

Nobody grabs me by the scruff of my neck and gets away with it!

GANNER:

Better rethink that. General Veers is fast becoming Lord Vader's golden boy.

A jealous Sedriss is not pleased with this disclosure.

SEDRISS:  
 Veers? He doesn't have the gift!  
 What does Lord Vader see in him?

GANNER:  
 Competency...and the ability to  
 lead without letting his emotions  
 get in the way of his duty...skills  
 you have yet to learn.

SEDRISS:  
 Lord Vader says the way of the Dark  
 Side is through passion.

GANNER:  
 To some extent, even passion must  
 be controlled if we wish to control  
 others.

Sedriss is not convinced...a fact noted by the manipulative  
 Lord Ganner.

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
 Slicing someone in two over a young  
 woman at an Imperial Ball may be  
 passionate...but it doesn't exhibit  
 patience and stealth...attainments  
 which our master wants to see more  
 of in you.

Ganner turns and gazes at the boarast who has been growling  
 on and off during the conversation. The Inquisitor produces a  
 vial which he uncaps and wafts towards the snarling creature.  
 The boarast becomes more agitated, then enraged by the smell.

GANNER: (CONT'D)  
 Ah, the boarast doesn't seem to  
 care for the scent of Admiral  
 Zaarin...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - MID-MORNING

The wooden entry doors of the Manarai lodge slide open to  
 reveal MS-2 who moves out onto the porch area. MS-2 spots  
 Nibs by the railing and goes over to the mouse droid. Nibs  
 lets out an annoyed squeak.

MS-2:  
 (huffily)  
 There you are! Back to Mistress  
 Meena's room with you...you're not  
 equipped to follow her ladyship  
 about the grounds...

Nibs lets out a series of objecting squeaks.

MS-2: (CONT'D)  
 ...you'll track in mud with those  
 primitive wheels of yours!

MS-2 stoops and picks up Nibs who squeaks loudly enough to garner unwanted attention from the porch guests. MS-2 takes the protesting mouse droid back towards the entry doors.

MS-2: (CONT'D)  
 Stop that squeaking! I don't care  
 if you can clean up after yourself,  
 your kind doesn't belong outside.

The entry doors swoosh open, allowing Alyce and her brother Spence to exit onto the porch where MS-2 and Nibs are.

ALYCE:  
 MS-2, you and Nibs will help serve  
 tea on the porch this afternoon.

The mouse droid's squeaks are silenced by the request.

MS-2:  
 Yes, Mistress Motti.

Nibs squeaks a "Hah, hah" to MS-2 as they enter the lodge. The Motti siblings make their way off of the porch and down the stone steps to where the hunt teams are gathering.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - MOMENTS  
 LATER

Two mountain hover crafts, driven by royal rangers, idle near the stone steps. Alyce, Spence, Meena, General Brashin, his wife Livia, and some other guests mingle together, observing the two hunt teams make their final preparations.

Veers, Tagge, and Bast are being outfitted with backpacks by Dav, and two military aides. Zaarin and his men are ready on the right, listening to the Manarai ranger's captain, Deter Gist, give last minute instructions to the hunters.

GIST:  
 Several Boarast have been sighted  
 at the designated hot spots. It is  
 up to each team to track, locate,  
 and shoot one of the animals...

Dav hands Veers his rifle. Veers slings the weapon over his shoulder and heads back to Meena, putting his arm around her.

GIST: (CONT'D)

Rules forbid any sensory equipment other than your mapsensors...The Manarai rangers will monitor the hunt's progress...When the first kill is made, the contest is over. ...Good hunting, gentlemen.

Veers bends down for a quick peck on the cheek from Meena. Zaarin notes their exchange, points to his own cheek, and calls over to the couple.

ZAARIN:

Unfair! The navy demands an equal exchange of good luck.

MEENA:

Not this time, Admiral. I'm a loyal army brat...through and through!

Her remark elicits laughter and a few "Go Army" cheers from the crowd and porch guests. A self-assured Veers gives Meena an embrace and kiss on the lips which elicits a blush from the surprised young woman and more hearty hoorahs from the delighted onlookers.

ZAARIN:

Alyce, it's up to you to make amends!

ALYCE:

I prefer to remain neutral.

Before Zaarin can respond, General Brashin interjects.

BRASHIN:

Raithal had its win over Carida last week...it's army's turn today. Go Army!

Over the cheers and cries of "Go Army" and "Go Navy", the two teams headed by Tagge and Zaarin head over to the idling hovercrafts to begin their hunt.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET PAXILLIA

An orbital space station hovers over the world of Paxillia.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - WAREHOUSE DISTRICT - DAY

The camera pans over the Paxillia City scape, zooming in on the warehouse district.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - WAREHOUSE BUILDING - DAY

Disguised as a beggar, a lone Rebel soldier guards a dilapidated warehouse building entrance on the edge of Paxillia City.

INT. WAREHOUSE BUILDING - OFFICE

Seated within a small office, Dyn Mawr and Arie Nugeen confer with Paxillian Rebel leader Remma Kyrr, a middle-aged woman with a commanding air. Near-by, heavily armed Rebels stand on either side of the doorway, listening to the proceedings.

REMMA:

...a bribe should get your shipment through inspections. We have people in customs who keep us informed.

ARIE:

When will the transfer take place?

REMMA:

Crates, marked Tryax Beer, will be delivered late tomorrow night.

ARIE:

The official beer of the 501st  
...nice touch.

DYN:

Thanks, Remma. If things work out, we'll be back for another haul.

REMMA:

(to Dyn)

One more thing. You spoke with a librarian named Paato Kyrr.

DYN:

Is there a problem?

REMMA:

Paato Kyrr is my father. We believe the Empire may be watching him to get to me...or to my niece Vorra.

DYN:

Vorra was insistent that he get a message disk...she had it rough on Nati IV...I couldn't say no to her.

REMMA:

Our people will see to it that the message is erased.

DYN:

Sorry...

REMMA:

At least my father knows she's alive. The same can't be said for me...He's unaware that I'm here.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET CORUSCANT

A fleet of Imperial Star Destroyers are dwarfed by the immense command ship Executor as it hovers over Imperial Center.

EXT. MANAIRI MOUNTAIN RANGE - MEADOW - EARLY AFTERNOON

The early afternoon sun shines down over a meadow, partly covered with melting snow.

Baron Tagge, Bast, and Veers are seen walking towards a mountain ridge. Bast kneels, checking out some animal tracks.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - EARLY AFTERNOON

A tea luncheon is being held on the sweeping front porch of the Manarai Mountain Lodge. The droid MS-2, bearing plates of triangular tidbits, and Nibs, covered by a tray piled high with sweet biscuits, move in and out, serving the mostly female guests who stand, sit, and sip, whiling away the time gossiping and exchanging family anecdotes.

Noisy children, dressed in play clothes, are seen running up and down the porch or bounding down the stone steps.

Alyce, Meena, and Spence are up against the porch railing, enjoying the afternoon. Behind them, a Lambda-Class shuttle comes in for a landing. Alyce looks over at the transport.

ALYCE:

That would be Admiral Thrawn's shuttle.

SPENCE:

Thrawn? I met him the other day. I can't quite place his species...

ALYCE:

Chiss.

SPENCE:

Never heard of them...However, he had two of the most ghastly-looking creatures shadowing his every move.

ALYCE:

His Noghri bodyguards...a fairly recent acquisition.

MEENA:

Why would Admiral Thrawn need bodyguards?

ALYCE:

His success has made some officers envious, dear. Of course, it's only a precautionary measure since the Navy frowns on assassinations.

SPENCE:

May it stay precautionary...at least while we're in the range of fire...I think it's a good time for a walk. (To Meena) Care to join your Uncle Spence?

MEENA:

I'd love to.

Alyce is about to protest.

SPENCE:

Don't interfere, Alyce. I've just as much right to her company as you do.

Spence offers his arm to Meena.

SPENCE: (CONT'D)

Your aunt can be very possessive ...and a bully to boot.

ALYCE:

I'm not stopping the two of you...

SPENCE:

Hah! And did I mention, she always has to get the last word in?

Alyce is about to say something, but remains silent, not wanting to prove her brother's point. Meena stifles a smile as she and Spence leave the tea luncheon for an afternoon stroll.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RIDGE - CAVE OPENING - EARLY AFTERNOON

A small cave opening, partially concealed by brush, is seen at the bottom of a mountain ridge.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RIDGE - CAVE OPENING - SAME TIME

Sedriss, holding a metal wand, along with the Manarai ranger, Captain Deter Gist, stand behind a large cage containing the agitated boarast that has been transported via a tunnel from the underground animal pens.

A light blinks on Gist's wrist band. The captain activates a mechanism and the cage door opens. Sedriss presses a button on his metal wand and the snarling boarast lurches forward, bounding out of the cave.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - CAVE OPENING - MOMENTS LATER

The boarast is seen running past the ridge bottom, then making its way upward onto the mountain range.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN FOREST - STREAM - EARLY AFTERNOON

Manarai scrub pines line the shore of a mountain stream that rushes over rocks and fallen tree trunks into more tranquil pools of water.

Wearing waders, Captain Piett and an old navy pilot buddy from his Raithal Academy days, Commander Andre Chiraneau, cast their fishing lines into one of the calmer spots along the stream.

Piett's line tugs as he hauls in a struggling, silvery fish.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN FOREST - DOWN STREAM - MOMENTS LATER

Down stream from Piett and Chiraneau, Martyn Veers and his grandson Zev sit on a mat by the rivulet's edge, holding their fishing poles over the water. Next to them is a pail filled almost to capacity with their catch.

MARTYN:

...You want to teach philosophy?

ZEV:

It was always the most interesting subject for me...I had a tutor who taught alien and high human ethics.

MARTYN:

That Mon Calamari servant...what was his name?

ZEV:  
Dunbar. Father dismissed him  
because he thought his lessons  
were subversive.

MARTYN:  
Were they?

ZEV:  
Only to those with unswerving  
loyalty to the New Order.

Martyn looks up stream, unsure if they should continue this  
line of conversation.

MARTYN:  
You're being disrespectful to your  
father.

ZEV:  
Maybe so, but father won't respect  
me...or the truth...if it sullies  
his image of the Empire.

Martyn puts his fishing pole over to the side.

ZEV: (CONT'D)  
Grandfather, I've heard things...  
about Alderaan...and stories from  
officers who said they were ordered  
to commit atrocities.

MARTYN:  
All governments have their fair  
share of corruption and injustice,  
especially during wartime...the  
galaxy is far from perfect.

ZEV:  
(angrily)  
Then why can't I say the Empire is  
far from perfect...without father  
tearing into me?

Zev throws his fishing pole down in frustration. He gazes out  
at the stream, trying to control his pent-up emotions.

MARTYN:  
(calmly)  
Would you humor your grandfather  
by not turning this holiday into  
an ideological debate?

ZEV:

I'm sorry...it's just...I know  
father would disown me if I don't  
live my life according to his plan.

Martyn puts his arm around Zev's shoulders.

MARTYN:

Listen to me, Zev...my love for you  
and your father is unconditional...  
I agree with the General on many  
levels, but should he shut you  
out...for whatever reason...I'll  
not turn you away.

A relieved Zev embraces his grandfather, grateful for the  
expression of love...and a chance to be heard.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - EARLY AFTERNOON

Lodge guests are seen shooting laser skeet. Over to their  
right, Alyce greets Vice-Admiral Thrawn and Captain Niriz on  
the grounds of the Manarai Mountain Lodge. Thrawn's furtive  
Noghri bodyguards are seen fleetingly in the background.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RIDGE - EAST SIDE - EARLY AFTERNOON

Grand Admiral Zaarin and his team make their way down the  
mountain in search of a boarast.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RIDGE - WEST SIDE - EARLY AFTERNOON

Holding their rifles in position, Tagge and Veers move along  
a ridge with Bast leading the way. Bast stops and points to  
some tracks.

BAST:

So many tracks...and we haven't  
spotted a single boarast...strange.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - EARLY AFTERNOON

Lord Spence Motti and Lady Meena walk alongside the edge of a  
cliff near the Manarai Lodge grounds. They pause, gazing out  
onto the snow-capped mountains that surround a long ravine  
far below. Spence points down and then outward.

SPENCE:

That ravine and headwall is where  
the hunt teams travel.

With a contemplative expression, Meena stares out into the  
distance.

MEENA:

I'm not a big fan of hunting...I  
always feel sorry for the animals.

SPENCE:

A boarast won't get any sympathy  
from me. Nasty creatures...barely  
edible unless doused in a sauce.

A Manarai falcon is seen in the near distance, flying  
furiously towards them.

SPENCE: (CONT'D)

A Manarai falcon. Now, that's an  
exciting sport!

Meena and Spence watch as the screeching black raptor soars  
overhead, clutching a plump mountain partridge in its talons.

They spin around to see the bird drop its wounded prey and  
land gracefully on the leather gauntlet-covered fist of Lord  
Arik Ganner who has come up from behind them. Several men and  
one woman - the raven-haired Lady Ursa Mercetti - follow Lord  
Ganner, each sporting a black or dark gray feathered falcon.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MID AFTERNOON

Crouched behind a large boulder, Sedriss looks down on the  
Mountain side with a pair of electrobinoculars to see...

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - RAVINE

...Zaarin's hunt team making their way down the steep and  
rocky headwall of the ravine. The sights move up and over to  
a wide cluster of rocks and boulders poised above the ravine.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - MID AFTERNOON

Admiral Zaarin and his team pause before a small dark opening  
in the side of the ravine. Tracks lead into a low cave. The  
three raise their rifles and wait.

Zaarin covertly pulls a tiny life-form sensor from his right  
sleeve, aiming it at the cave. He quickly takes in the sensor  
reading, then conceals the against-the-rules implement back  
under his garment.

ZAARIN:

A boarast would have charged us by  
now...that cave is empty.

The team heads down the ravine, following more tracks.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Sedriss lowers his electrobinoculars and looks down at what appears to be a sleeping boarast. He gives the still creature a smack and smirks. The boarast's eyes suddenly open. Sedriss grabs the metal wand from his belt, presses a button, and the animal's eyes close.

EXT. MANAIRI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - MID AFTERNOON

Lord Spence and the falconers stand near the edge of the cliff observing one of the predator birds soar and dive in the distance, then fly back with its catch: a young hare.

Lady Meena has moved away from the others. So has Lord Ganner who stands near by, sending his falcon off into the sky.

The Imperial Inquisitor silently observes Meena's futile attempts to isolate her mental and physical being from his scrutiny. Ganner smiles charmingly and goes over to the young woman. She moves away. He moves with her.

GANNER:

You needn't play the prissy miss, with me, Lady Meena...I'm aware of your maidenly game to ensnare the object of your desire...a soldier who, sadly, is still in love with his wife's ghost.

MEENA:

(shocked)

How dare you make such an intimate assertion.

GANNER:

With the right training, a gifted person can dare many things...and by doing so...uncover the truth of why we exist.

Meena has had quite enough. No longer shocked or fearful, she gazes straight at Lord Ganner, ready to confront him.

MEENA:

I believe we exist to help others ...and to love and be loved.

GANNER:

(sardonically)

What a pretty way of saying you will serve the wants and needs of others.

MEENA:

Lord Ganner, why do you mock me...  
why do you want to cause me pain?

Slightly taken aback, Ganner gazes keenly at Meena, seriously considering his answer to her blunt questioning.

GANNER:

Given or received...pain can be  
strengthening. It's a natural part  
of our being...only the weak fear  
its transformable power.

MEENA:

Do you consider me weak?

Ganner takes Meena's hand, raising it to his lips.

GANNER:

I prefer to think of you as...soft.

Meena looks back at Spence and the others who are absorbed in the falconry. She finds herself momentarily weakening to the Inquisitor's seductive tone and physical contact.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

Remember what I said on Nati IV?  
How alike and yet different we are.  
Our Force-sensitive blood calls out  
to one another...

Sensing Ganner's intentions, Meena pulls her hand away from his. Ganner is not fazed by her renewed frigidity.

MEENA:

(coldly)  
This is indecent.

GANNER:

Would you be so indignant if your  
General expressed these sentiments?

Meena flushes, gazing at him again in shocked surprise.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

Sweet Meena, I've looked into both  
your hearts. I know that you desire  
love...while your General desires  
glory.

MEENA:

You don't really know him...and  
you'll never know me.

GANNER:  
 Search your feelings...search his  
 ...you *will* discover the truth.

MEENA:  
 (chafing)  
 This conversation is over. I'll not  
 willingly consent to your company  
 again!

Meena turns on her heel and heads towards the others.

Ganner smiles at the departing young woman, pleased with her angry reaction...and the bitter seeds he has sown.

EXT. MANAIRI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - MID AFTERNOON

Zaarin and his team head down the ravine. Zaarin looks up to see a black falcon circling above them. A rumble sounds. The ground shakes violently beneath the hunters as boulders are seen rolling and bouncing down from the headwall side. The men run for what little cover is available to them.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WEST HEADWALL ABOVE RAVINE -  
 SAME TIME

Tagge, Veers, and Bast hear and feel the near-by rumble.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Sedriss stares into his electrobinoculars in the direction of the ravine...

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - RAVINE

...and focuses on one of the men who is being crushed by a boulder. Zaarin and his remaining team member are being pummeled by the falling debris from the rock slide.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Sedriss lowers his electrobinoculars, and with his free hand points the metal wand at the boarast.

The creature awakens, stands, and bounds forward down the mountainside towards the ravine.

EXT. MANAIRI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - SAME TIME

A still bristling Meena stands close to her Uncle Spence who is engrossed in the falconry with the others. Lord Ganner has moved back near the cliff area, more interested in observing the view, than continuing his mind play with Meena.

A far off rumble is heard.

SPENCE:

Sounds like a rock slide...they happen from time to time.

MEENA:

I've got a bad feeling about this.

SPENCE:

What? Oh, yes, the hunt teams. One of the rangers can give us an update on their status.

Spence and Meena hurry towards the main building. Ganner barely acknowledges their leaving. His attention is fixated on the distant ravine.

EXT. MANAIRI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - MID AFTERNOON

The rockfall has subsided. One hunt team member lies dead, half-buried beneath the rubble. The other hunter is wounded, barely able to move before he slips into unconsciousness.

Battered and bloodied, Zaarin is able to stand. He picks up his rifle and cautiously makes his way over the rocks and debris to the side of the injured man. Pulling a mapsensor from his pocket, he presses the top button to summon the Manarai rangers.

A triangular shadow passes over Zaarin. He looks up to see a black Manarai falcon diving down on him. Throwing his rifle to the ground, Zaarin instinctively covers his lowered head with both his hands as the predator bird swoops down past him, neatly lifting the rifle in its talons, and arcing upward through the air to fly away, dropping the hunt gun some distance from the ravine.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Shot of Sedriss looking into his electrobinoculars to see...

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - RAVINE - SAME TIME

...an unarmed Zaarin, looking down the ravine to where his gun has plummeted.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

Thrawn and Captain Niriz watch the laser skeet shoot with numerous onlookers.

Among the participants is the galaxy's latest actionholo sensation: Alanna Nova, a curvaceous brunette whose current male companion is TIE ace Maarek Stele. Next to Nova and Stele, the more famous Imperial fighter pilot Baron Soontir Fel and his beautiful actress wife Wynssa Starflare are also on hand, observing the activities.

Away from the spectators, Alyce quietly confers with Meena's maidservant droid MS-2.

ALYCE:  
Anything of interest?

MS-2:  
No, Mistress Motti...the female guests stop chattering whenever I approach.

ALYCE:  
Someone tattled about your taping capabilities...See what you can glean from the male guests.

Alyce waves MS-2 on and heads back to Vice-Admiral Thrawn and Captain Niriz.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - MOMENTS LATER

His arms folded across his chest, Lord Ganner stands away from the other falconers, meditatively surveying the valley and mountain range beyond.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - SIDE PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

From the side porch, Grand Admiral Tigillinus, in his white uniform, and Lord Bal Jaset, a visiting Tapani nobleman from the pro-Imperial military House of Melantha, watch the laser skeet competition. Jaset, clad in fashionable hunt attire, turns to Tigillinus who is sipping a bottle of Aquilie water.

JASET:  
Thrawn's bodyguards seem to have vanished.

TIGILLINUS:  
They're just out of sight...as they were at the ball last evening.

Tigillinus looks over at the laser skeet shoot to see...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - SAME TIME

...Thrawn and Alyce engaged in a conversation.

Alanna Nova expertly hits a fast series of targets being shot into the air by a skeet droid. The spectators clap and cheer.

Thrawn and Alyce barely notice the activity as they converse.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - SIDE PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Lord Jaset observes Thrawn from the side porch.

JASET:

(quietly)

Something's got to be done about that blue freak...He needs a better understanding of the word defeat.

Tigillinus contemplates the situation, then smiles thinly.

TIGILLINUS:

Alyce has been rather reckless lately, don't you think?

Lord Jaset looks over at Alyce and Thrawn with disgust and silently agrees.

On the grounds below the side porch, the droid MS-2 is seen slowly walking past Tigillinus and his nobleman associate.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - MID AFTERNOON

Zaarin kneels by the wounded team member, frantically pressing the button on his mapsensor once again. A high-pitched screech sounds as the Manarai falcon soars high above him, still circling the ravine. The screeching fades. In its place, the echo of a low, threatening growl is heard.

Zaarin turns around in the direction of the growl, looking up to view...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WESTERN HEADWALL EDGE ABOVE RAVINE - SAME TIME

...an agitated boarast crouched on the steep headwall edge, ready to spring.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

Sedriss continues to observe the ravine action through his electrobinoculars.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - SAME TIME

Zaarin watches the snarling boarast make its way down the headwall towards him. He glances desperately around, looking for one of the other team member's rifles.

He spots the end of one gun sticking out from a pile of rubble and makes a dash for it.

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - RAVINE - MOMENTS LATER

His back to the oncoming boarast, Zaarin is seen hastily trying to dig around the gun with his gloved hands, gaining enough end length to grasp and pull at the loosened weapon, which finally comes free. Rifle in hand, Zaarin turns...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - SECONDS LATER

...but not in time, as two quick laz shots from above down the lunging beast in its tracks. The boarast lets out an enraged squeal, then rolls over to one side, shuddering.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WEST HEADWALL EDGE ABOVE RAVINE - SECONDS LATER

On one knee, Veers points his hunting rifle downward at the ravine and fires one more laz shot...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - SECONDS LATER

...into the shuddering boarast, stemming the animal's final contortions.

An ashen Zaarin looks up at the western headwall edge to see...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WEST HEADWALL EDGE - SAME TIME

...Veers on his knee, peering over into the ravine. Veers rises, still holding his rifle.

VEERS:

(calling down to Zaarin)  
Stay where you are, Admiral. The  
Manarai rangers are on their way.

Behind Veers, Tagge and Bast are seen striding towards him in the near distance.

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - WEST HEADWALL EDGE - SECONDS LATER

Focus on Veers standing near the edge of the headwall, looking down.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

An angry Sedriss quickly lowers his electrobinoculars and slams them against the boulder in frustration.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - SAME TIME

Upright and away from the falconers, Lord Ganner's eyes remain fixated on the far ravine. A brief look of disbelief, followed by ire comes over him. Ganner unfolds his arms, clenching his fists, while his expression takes on an intensity fueled by a dark, abiding wrath.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WEST HEADWALL EDGE - SECONDS LATER

Still standing near the edge of the headwall, his gun now slung over his shoulder, Veers turns back to signal the approaching Tagge and Bast. A high-pitched shriek sounds. Veers looks up and spots the Manarai falcon diving down on him. His rifle slips off his shoulder as the raptor attacks.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - MOMENTS LATER

One hand clenched tightly, the other hand holding the banged-up electrobinoculars, Sedriss, too, is awash in anger as he views the vista before him. Focusing his rage, the Dark Side adept's visage tightens, beads of sweat form on his brow, as he glares with hatred in the direction of the ravine.

Enraged, he raises the electrobinoculars to his eyes and sees...

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - WEST HEADWALL EDGE - SECONDS LATER

...Veers covering his head, being attacked by a falcon.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - SAME TIME

Sedriss, still looking into the electrobinoculars, raises his free hand and points to the ravine.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WEST HEADWALL RIDGE - SECONDS LATER

Veers struggles with the attacking falcon, shielding his face from the raptor's sharp talons. The earth beneath him begins to move, then gives way, taking Veers down the steep incline. The falcon's wings flap as the bird rises, then flies upward.

An oncoming Tagge and Bast watch Veers slide off the edge while the falcon takes flight. They break out into a run towards the headwall.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - SAME TIME

Shot of Spence and Meena near the skeet shoot competition, speaking with a Manarai ranger.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - SIDE OF HEADWALL - MOMENTS LATER

Moving swiftly along with the ground loosened beneath him, Veers slides, then tumbles down the steep headwall, his fall broken midway when he hits a cluster of embedded boulders with a bruising thump.

Catching his breath, Veers grabs hold of one of the rocks and reaches down, taking a vibroblade from inside his boot. Sticking the weapon into the ground above him, he uses it for leverage, pulling himself painfully up into a sitting position, as dust, dirt, and smaller rocks descend towards the bottom of the ravine.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - SECONDS LATER

Zaarin watches Veers from the ravine. A beeping sound is heard. Zaarin reaches for his mapsensor which is lit up. He turns to see two mountain hovercrafts speeding towards him from down the ravine.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WESTERN HEADWALL EDGE - MOMENTS LATER

Tagge and Bast cautiously approach the headwall.

TAGGE:

(to Bast)

Watch out, the ground's unstable.

Tagge and Bast stop a few metres from the edge, unwilling to peer down for fear of the ground giving way once more.

TAGGE: (CONT'D)

(calling out)

Veers! Can you hear me?!

Tagge's question reverberates through the ravine. A beeping sounds. Bast pulls out his lit-up mapsensor.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - SIDE OF HEADWALL - SECONDS LATER

His pain numbed by an adrenaline rush, Veers, now holding his knife and seated against the largest of the embedded rocks, looks upward to answer Tagge.

VEERS:

I hear you, Baron...I'm midway...

Veers is interrupted by a shriek from the returning black Manarai falcon, gliding in from the eastern side of the ravine, heading straight for him.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - WESTERN HEADWALL EDGE - SAME TIME

Tagge and Bast note the falcon flying towards the western headwall. Bast aims his hunt rifle at the oncoming bird. The raptor abruptly arcs downward, disappearing from view before Bast can fire on it. Bast steps forward, but Tagge holds him back, pointing to the unstable ground.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - SIDE OF HEADWALL - SECONDS LATER

Black wings outspread, the screeching falcon readies itself for another attack.

Veers stares at the rapidly approaching bird, then activates the vibroblade, neatly throwing it deep into the raptor's breast, instantly silencing another high-pitched shriek.

Its feathered wings fold and go limp, as the downed bird of prey falls to the bottom of the headwall with a soft thud.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - MOMENTS LATER

Close up of Lord Ganner's eyes seething with hatred as he senses the loss of his falcon...and the failure of his adept to complete the assignment.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN RANGE - RAVINE - MOMENTS LATER

A none-too-happy Zaarin watches as two hovercrafts, driven by Manarai rangers, finally come onto the scene.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN SIDE - SAME TIME

His electrobinoculars lowered, a frustrated Sedriss comes to grips with the fact that he has fallen short of his mission and must now suffer the consequences.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CLIFF - MOMENTS LATER

Taking a deep breath, Lord Ganner outwardly contains his rage, turns, and stalks off towards the lodge.

His departure is noted by the falconer, Lady Ursa Mercetti.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - MINUTES LATER

Thrawn and Alyce walk away from the skeet shoot towards Spence and Meena who are conferring with a Manarai ranger.

THRAWN:

...I'll be inducted into the Order at the Skydome Botanical Gardens.

ALYCE:

Followed by a private ceremony for new members at the Imperial palace.

THRAWN:

That is the plan.

ALYCE:

Well, Admiral, congratulations. I know men who have been waiting years to be accepted into the Canted Circle.

THRAWN:

I was never one of them...although it may prove interesting to observe the inner workings of the club.

ALYCE:

The conspiracy theorists love to concoct lurid tales of its power.

Up ahead, Spence, Meena, and the Manarai ranger are joined by Captain Deter Gist. The ranger leaves the three, heading towards a royal steward who stands near the skeet spectators.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

As for me, I suspect the members sit around in black robes playing a round or two of sabacc...instead of the far more juicy rumor involving a sacrificial virgin.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - SIDE PORCH - MOMENTS LATER

Tigillinus and Lord Bal Jaset conclude their conversation just as Lady Janel Piett and her six children, ages two through twelve, clamor up the side steps onto the porch.

TIGILLINUS:

Think about what we've discussed.

The four Piett boys race noisily past the two men.

JASET:

I'll speak to the others before  
tomorrow's meeting...and then get  
back to you.

Lady Janel, holding the tiny hands of her two young  
daughters, ages two and four, saunter by Tigillinus and the  
nobleman, who nod their heads in greeting to the ladies.

Tigillinus looks back out onto the grounds to see...

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - SAME TIME

...Thrawn, Alyce, Spence, and a perturbed Meena speaking with  
Captain Deter Gist.

MEENA:

(to Gist)

...And General Veers, is he all  
right?

GIST:

Just some minor injuries from a  
tumble down the headwall...he  
should be fine, my lady.

The ranger who left earlier returns with a royal steward.

ALYCE:

Thank you for your report, Captain.  
A steward and I will round up the  
hunter's families.

MEENA:

(to Alyce)

Would you like some help?

ALYCE:

No, dear, you stay here with your  
uncle and wait for Max. (To Gist)  
When will General Veers and the  
others arrive?

GIST:

Apart from Admiral Zaarin, they'll  
be here within the hour.

ALYCE:

I assume Admiral Zaarin is with his  
injured team members?

GIST:

No, Countess. He ordered a shuttle  
to take him back aboard his ship.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - SIDE PORCH - SECONDS LATER

Tigillinus observes the scene between Gist, Alyce and the  
others. He turns to Lord Jaset.

TIGILLINUS:

Something's up...The ranger captain  
is talking with Alyce...and she  
doesn't look too happy.

JASET:

She'll be more unhappy if things go  
as you suggest.

Tigillinus smiles thinly, looking forward to the future.

The camera pans down to the area below the porch where a  
stationary MS-2 has been all along, recording Tigillinus and  
Lord Jaset's intrigue.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - ANIMAL PEN ENTRANCE - LATER

Captain Deter Gist, holding a game bag, enters a small  
structure that leads down to the underground animal pen.

INT. ANIMAL PEN - MOMENTS LATER

Before the caging area of the animal pen, a furious Lord  
Ganner lashes out at a surly Sedriss.

GANNER:

I suspect your ineptitude may be  
deliberate...This grievance you  
have against Veers jeopardizes my  
ability to train you!

SEDRISS:

(sullenly)  
You sicked your bird on him!

GANNER:

That was meant to be a distraction.  
You should have focused your talent  
on Zaarin.

SEDRISS:

How? The rockfall missed...then  
Veers showed up and shot the  
boarast!

GANNER:

Be creative. Use the Force to drop a rock on the Admiral's head...not send the General rolling down a collapsing hillside.

SEDRISS:

(defensively)

It was a stupid plan from the start!

GIST: (O.C.)

The plan was mine...faking an accident is never foolproof.

Ganner and Sedriss turn to see Captain Deter Gist enter, carrying a game bag.

GIST: (CONT'D)

Our master is aware of the outcome. Sedriss and I must return to the palace at once. (To Ganner) You are to remain here.

Sedriss smirks at Ganner, more as a show of bravado, than a real understanding of his situation.

SEDRISS:

I guess I'm expendable.

Gist hands Ganner the bag.

GIST:

Your falcon, Lord Ganner.

Ganner opens the bag and looks down into it.

GANNER:

Poor Aleema...At least *she* wasn't stabbed in the back.

Ganner glares vexedly at the departing Sedriss.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS NEAR SIDE PORCH - LATER

Lady Meena, Lord Spence Motti, and Captain Dav walk a path towards the side porch of the Manarai Mountain Lodge.

Lord Jaset and Admiral Tiggillinus note their presence. Jaset beckons to Spence.

Spence waves back to Jaset, then turns to Meena and Dav.

SPENCE:

That's Lord Jaset, Head of House  
Melantha...I must speak with him.  
(To Dav) You and Meena can go fetch  
Major Veers and Zevulon...We'll  
meet back at the stone steps.

DAV:

Yes, Lord Motti.

Spence moves to the side porch steps to join Lord Jaset and Tigillinus, while Dav and Meena resume walking the path.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN FOREST - ENTRANCE - MOMENTS LATER

Martyn Veers and his grandson Zev exit the Manarai Mountain Forest entrance, depositing their fishing equipment and catch with a waiting Manarai ranger. They then head out onto the path back to the lodge.

Up ahead, a knot of naval officers converse. One of the officers, a distinguished older man by the name of Gilad Pellaeon, looks up to see the two Veers family members approach. Pellaeon instantly recognizes Martyn from their Clone War days together and calls out to the retired major.

PELLAEON:

Martyn Veers...after all this time!

Martyn pauses, then places the aged, but familiar face.

MARTYN:

Pelly, is that you?! Stars, how long has it been?

PELLAEON:

Since the Clone Wars ended.

MARTYN:

Seems like yesterday...come over here and meet my grandson.

Pellaeon leaves the other officers and goes over to join his old comrade.

MARTYN: (CONT'D)

Gilad Pellaeon, this is Zevulon, my son Maximilian's boy.

Pellaeon offers his hand to Zev who accepts it.

PELLAEON:

How do you do, young man?

ZEV:

Fine, sir.

MARTYN:

(to Zev)

Pelly and I served aboard the Republic Cruiser Invincible, twenty five years ago...He's not half-bad for a navy scrub. (To Pelly) Why aren't you retired?

PELLAEON:

We navy scrubs have a longer shelf life than you army mudfoots...I'm First Officer aboard the Chimaera.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

Captain Dav and Lady Meena walk the path towards the Manarai Forest.

DAV:

...Very decent of Admiral Thrawn to offer his shuttle to the families.

MEENA:

He asked Captain Niriz to accompany them to the med center. I pray both hunters recover.

DAV:

I'll second that prayer.

MEENA:

Earlier, I had this awful feeling that the General was in some sort of danger.

DAV:

The General is a fortunate man to have someone like you concerned about him.

Dav gazes wistfully for an instant at Meena who is too wrapped up in her feelings for Veers to note his guarded feelings towards her.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - LANDING AREA - SAME TIME

Vice-Admiral Thrawn and Alyce watch as a Lambda-class shuttle lifts and takes off. They turn and head back to the lodge. The droid MS-2 is seen coming towards them.

ALYCE:

It's a pity those families will be spending their holiday in a med center.

THRAWN:

Odd that Admiral Zaarin wasn't here to send them off. Captain Gist said he was well enough.

ALYCE:

Demetrius is a sore loser. Loyalty to his men and good sportsmanship are not two of his strengths.

An agitated MS-2 interrupts their walk.

MS-2:

Mistress Motti, I have something of interest...

ALYCE:

Not now, MS-2.

MS-2:

But, Mistress Motti, it involves...

ALYCE:

(dismissive)

Later, MS-2. You can tell me all about it when I dress for dinner. Now, run along.

Thrawn and Alyce continue on, leaving a flustered MS-2 behind.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - LATE AFTERNOON

Alyce, Thrawn, and two Manarai rangers are by the stone steps, awaiting the arrival of an approaching mountain hovercraft. They are joined by Meena, Zev, Dav, Martyn and Gilad Pellaeon.

The hovercraft, carrying Veers, Tagge, Bast, and the dead boarast...strapped neatly to the front end...slows as it comes nearer to the assembled onlookers. Alyce looks around.

ALYCE:

Where's Spence?

MEENA:

He went to speak with Lord Jaset.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - ABOUT 10 MINUTES LATER

Veers, Tagge, and Bast finish posing for a holophotographer at the side of the boarast which now hangs from its hoofs on a pole supported at each end by a Manarai ranger. The three hunters relax as the holophotographer departs and the rangers haul the beast off for meal preparation.

Dav and two military aides gather up the team's hunting gear. Bast says something to Tagge, then he follows Dav and the two aides up the wide steps to the lodge.

Meena goes over to Veers for a short embrace. She is followed by Zev, Martyn, and Pellaeon. Martyn introduces "Pelly" to Veers.

Barely missing an oncoming Chief Bast, a tardy Spence Motti comes bounding down the stone steps to join Thrawn and Alyce. Spence recoils momentarily when he notices Thrawn's Noghri bodyguards lurking in the background.

ALYCE:

What were you and Lord Jaset up to?

SPENCE:

Really, Alyce, he and Admiral Tigillinus were being sociable.

Alyce and Thrawn exchange looks at the mention of Tigillinus. Baron Tagge approaches.

ALYCE:

Those two don't socialize...they scheme.

TAGGE:

Countess, I need to speak with you...alone.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

Alyce and Tagge stand away from Thrawn and Spence who are now seen in the near distance speaking with Veers, Meena, Zev and Martyn. Martyn introduces Pellaeon to Thrawn and Spence.

ALYCE:

This speaking alone business better not become a habit with us, Baron. People will talk.

Tagge glances around the area, making sure they are not within earshot of anyone else.

TAGGE:

Don't be flippant, Alyce. There's going to be plenty of talk once word gets out about the deaths of those hunters.

ALYCE:

What deaths? I was told they were injured.

TAGGE:

They were dead by the time we got to them...Zaarin believed *he* was the target.

Alyce senses the meaning behind his words and begins to shake.

ALYCE:

You must know...there was nothing going on between Zaarin and myself.

TAGGE:

That distinction never stopped an accident of this sort in the past.

ALYCE:

I'm such a fool...I'd forgotten how possessive the Emperor can be.

TAGGE:

You need to be more circumspect. Your behavior affects others...and their loved ones.

ALYCE:

It's as if I killed those hunters myself.

The normally gruff Tagge looks at a visibly upset Alyce with some sympathy.

TAGGE:

Pull yourself together, Alyce...for the sake of your niece and General Veers.

Alyce nods her head in agreement with Tagge, looking over at Max and Meena who, arm in arm, are seen walking up the stone steps to the Manarai Mountain Lodge.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - EARLY EVENING

Night falls over the softly-lit Manarai Mountain Lodge. Floating heaters warm the few guests dressed in evening attire who wander the length of the sweeping front porch.

The sliding wood doors open as the four Piett boys rush out, followed by their parents, Captain Piett, who lovingly holds his four-year-old daughter; and Piett's wife Lady Janel, carrying their sleepy, two-year-old girl in her arms.

The Piett family make their way down the stone steps.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GREAT HALL - EARLY EVENING

A fire roars within the hearth of the massive stone fireplace in the Great Hall that overlooks one hundred round tables, draped in forest green linens, candle-lit centerpieces, and set with the Manarai Lodge's crested service for twelve. Royal stewards busy themselves seating guests at designated tables and serving pre-dinner drinks to the swelling crowd.

Lady Meena, wearing a stunning blue-green Lupani velvet off-the-shoulder gown, and Alyce, attired in a midnight blue dress of the same material, stand near the fireplace in front of the head table, conversing with Veers and Pellaeon, who are dressed in their service uniforms. They are joined by Martyn, clad in a gray suit, Zev, in his cadet uniform, and Lady Cerise, wearing a pale green embroidered gown.

Alyce looks off in the distance and spots an approaching Vice-Admiral Thrawn, making his way through the tight table spaces and wandering guests. She excuses herself and heads towards him, passing by her brother Spence who is chatting with Lord Jaset and Admiral Tigillinus at another table.

In the background, Alyce sees Lord Ganner, clad in tailored black robes, seating the raven-haired falconer and Tapani noblewoman Lady Ursa Mercetti, who is dressed in a clinging dark maroon gown with plunging decolletage.

Thrawn and Alyce meet in the center of the Great Hall.

THRAWN:

You received my message?

ALYCE:

Regarding Captain Niriz, yes. I've arranged for Officer Pellaeon to take his place at our table.

Thrawn nods his head, looking across the room to Pellaeon talking with Martyn and the others by the stone fireplace.

THRAWN:

I thought it best that Niriz return to the Adominator...that way fewer questions would be asked about the hunters.

ALYCE:

I can't thank you enough for your help in this matter...

An anxious Alyce looks about the room as she and Thrawn begin to move towards the fireplace at the far end of the hall.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

(quietly)

At some point tonight, we need to speak in private...It concerns your charming adversaries.

Lord Ganner is seated, speaking to an entranced Lady Ursa Mercetti. Ganner notes Thrawn and Alyce pass by, then returns his attentions to the evening's most promising amusement.

FADE OUT

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GREAT HALL - 2 HOURS LATER

FADE IN

Dessert dishes are being cleared from the tables by gray-robed royal stewards as the dinner comes to a close.

Meena, Veers, Martyn, Alyce, Spence, Inna, Zev, Cerise, Thrawn, Pellaeon, Brashin, and Livia are seated around the head table. Alyce rises, ringing a musical bell that signifies the meal is over.

Many of the guests get up and move about, greeting other diners at different tables. Martyn and Pellaeon leave to talk over old times by the fireplace. General Brashin and Livia rise from the table as Alyce returns to her chair.

BRASHIN:

Wonderful dinner, Alyce...The roast boarast was especially good, thanks to Team Army.

LIVIA:

We're going over to see Captain Piett and Lady Janel.

ALYCE:

Tell those two what I said earlier.

BRASHIN:

About putting them up in separate rooms?

ALYCE:

Yes. They've sent their brood home so they can spend the night here. Six children...with another one conceivably on the way is shocking.

LIVIA:

Oh, but you throw such lovely baby showers, Alyce.

BRASHIN:

We'll be back to hear Lady Meena play her metaharp.

Livia and Brashin take off for the Pielt table.

CERISE:

You play the metaharp, Lady Meena?

VEERS:

She plays it beautifully.

Meena smiles at his compliment.

MEENA:

The instrument has been in my family for generations...passed down from mother to daughter.

SPENCE:

One of our ancestors married a healer woman from the House of Pelagia...so goes the family history.

CERISE:

How exciting! Like the story of Nariah...the opera we're going to see tomorrow night.

A puzzled Meena shakes her head...Alyce chimes in.

ALYCE:

Meena's been away for awhile, so she wouldn't know about the Nariah find. (To Meena) Some archeologists uncovered the preserved remains of a young woman...holding a metaharp.

CERISE:

Her name was Nariah...and according to the translations, she was a Jedi healer and bound concubine to the Sith warlord Exar Kun...over 4,000 years ago!

ZEV:

Wasn't she put on display at the Galactic Museum last year?

CERISE:

Yes...in the Sith Hall. Mother and I stood in a long line to see the exhibit. It was quite a sensation!

MEENA:

(uncomfortably)

I seem to recall a similar story told to me...

Meena glances over in the direction of Lord Ganner, who is nearby, wandering the tables with Grand Admiral Declaan.

INNA:

I read the novel *Nariah*...it was very dark...and romantic.

ALYCE:

Well, the archeologists know very little about the *real* Nariah, save what was written on her casket... and that supposedly came from the man who enslaved the poor girl...so take it for what it's worth.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - LOUNGE ENTRY - LATER

Thrawn's Noghri bodyguards watch over the closed entry of a small lounge located in the Manarai Mountain Lodge.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - LOUNGE - SAME TIME

The lounge is empty save for Vice-Admiral Thrawn, who leans up against the edge of a heavy wooden game table, holding a mug of Forvish ale. Alyce sits in one of the leather chairs poised in front of him, nursing a snifter of Luranian brandy, while a fire burns within a small stone hearth, casting its flickering light over a room decorated with memorabilia of past hunting excursions and holophoto scenes of Manarai Mountain wildlife.

Thrawn looks down at Alyce who is noticeably on edge, despite the privacy of their comfortable surroundings.

THRAWN:

Tigillinuses' plan is unremarkable  
...and ineffective in the long run.

ALYCE:

Still, it's a good thing you won't  
be spending the night.

THRAWN:

Even if I did, the one who matters  
most would know the truth...the  
rumors spread about us might even  
amuse him.

ALYCE:

I don't know what amuses His  
Excellency any more...He can be  
capricious at times...and his  
vanity is easily provoked.

THRAWN:

You once told me he could sense  
emotions and come to an accurate  
conclusion of someone's state of  
mind.

ALYCE:

It's difficult to hide anything  
from him.

THRAWN:

Then we have nothing to fear.

Alyce becomes more nervous, moving a finger around the rim of her glass, carefully contemplating her next words.

ALYCE:

After the events of today, I think  
we should no longer meet...or be  
seen together.

Thrawn begins to understand the meaning behind Alyce's anxiety.

THRAWN:

The reasoning behind Zaarin's  
departure may be political, not  
personal...He's an ambitious man.

ALYCE:

Any speculation would involve me no matter what the cause...I won't risk putting you in that situation.

Alyce sets her brandy on a side table and begins to rise from her chair. Thrawn puts his ale down and offers Alyce his hand, helping her up to a standing position.

THRAWN:

Your insight into the court has proven valuable over the years, Countess...I consider you a friend.

ALYCE:

I am your friend, Admiral...I've always admired your intellect and courage...especially when used in your dealings with His Excellency.

Alyce turns away, gazing over at the fireplace.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

There are other things I can't say outright, without making a complete fool of myself.

A brief silence ensues. Thrawn remains impassive as Alyce, giving a wry smile and slight shrug, finally looks back at him. Thrawn offers his arm to her. Alyce accepts. They move across the room towards the exit.

THRAWN:

Time for us to return, so I can bid farewell to Tigillinus...who will, no doubt, politely offer to escort me back to my shuttle.

ALYCE:

All the while gnashing his teeth, trying to formulate a new scheme to defeat you with.

THRAWN:

He already has a contingency plan. ...I intend to use it against him.

ALYCE:

Do tell?

THRAWN:

It's a secret.

ALYCE:

Avoiding your company is going to be extremely daunting, Admiral... You know I have trouble resisting a man who can keep a secret.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - GREAT HALL - 15 MINUTES LATER

Some of the dining tables have been removed from the Great Hall, allowing the remaining guests to move more freely about the room. Other guests remain seated, chatting with friends.

Near the center of the hall, Spence and Alyce watch as Thrawn leaves with Tigillinus and Lord Jaset. The Noghri bodyguards appear seemingly out of nowhere to follow the departing trio.

Spence and Alyce move towards the massive stone fireplace where Martyn and Pelleaon are still conversing. They come to Lord Ganner and Lady Ursa Mercetti who stand close to one another, drinking glasses of ruby red Tallian wine. Ganner bows slightly to Alyce and Spence.

GANNER:

Countess Motti...and Lord Motti.

SPENCE:

Lady Ursa...and Lord Ganner.

GANNER:

I so enjoyed your niece's metaharp recital...her performance was exquisite.

SPENCE:

We're very proud of Meena...she's quite talented.

GANNER:

She is indeed gifted.

ALYCE:

Meena's music is rather peaceful for a cowl brigader, I would think.

GANNER:

Ah, but it was played with passion.

Alyce doesn't like the sound or feel of Ganner's words. She curtly nods her head and moves on. Her bewildered brother follows, leaving behind a smiling Lord Ganner and Lady Ursa.

SPENCE:

What was *that* all about?

ALYCE:  
Trouble...which I'll have to deal  
with soon enough.

Spence shakes his head, nonplused by his sister's moodiness.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - LANDING AREA - EVENING - 15  
MINUTES LATER

Tigillinus and Lord Jaset watch as Vice-Admiral Thrawn's  
Lambda-class shuttle lifts and takes off into the night sky.

JASET:  
(to Tigillinus)  
What now?

TIGILLINUS:  
The Countess could still be used in  
conjunction with our other plan...  
she's ripe for a scandal.

JASET:  
That upstart Veers needs to be  
dealt with next.

TIGILLINUS:  
He'll fall, along with the rest.  
Vader's the key in all of this.

JASET:  
(nervously)  
You want to take on Lord Vader?  
Many have tried...and failed.

TIGILLINUS:  
I've secured a powerful ally...one  
who can help us destroy both Vader  
...and General Veers.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Arm in arm, Veers and Meena wander down a deserted corridor  
on the upper-most level of the Manarai Lodge, followed by  
Nibs. Veers glances behind at the rolling mouse droid.

VEERS:  
We have a chaperone.

MEENA:

That's Nibs. It followed me home from aboard the Executor...Aunt Alyce asked Admiral Ozzel if we could keep the droid...He sort of sputtered in reply and she took that for a yes.

They come to an open entry containing a narrow stairwell. Veers points at the opening.

VEERS:

These stairs lead up to the Manarai moon window.

Nibs lets out a frustrated squeak.

MEENA:

Nibs doesn't do stairs.

VEERS:

Then your droid can stay here...and guard the entry.

Nibs is not happy with this arrangement and squeaks out what sounds like: "no way."

MEENA:

(Firmly)

Better do as the General orders, Nibs.

Nibs sounds a soft squeak in acquiescence. Meena gives Veers a mischievous smile.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

Love me...love my droid.

Veers looks down at Nibs and then at Meena.

VEERS:

I can easily do the former...the latter may take some getting used to.

Veers grins, guiding Meena up the stairwell while the little mouse droid Nibs dutifully rolls back and forth, barring the entry to the stairs and beyond from any prying eyes.

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - MANARAI MOON WINDOW - EVENING -  
MOMENTS LATER

Hand in hand, Veers and Meena enter a small, softly-lit chamber containing an upholstered bench set-in before an enormous picture window that frames a breathtaking view of two of Coruscant's four moons rising above Umati, the Manarai Mountain's highest peak. The couple move to the window. Veers looks down at Meena, putting his arm around her waist while she rests her head on his shoulder.

VEERS:

The Manarai Lodge is one of the few places on Imperial Center where you can star gaze.

MEENA:

Until my family moved to Carida, I never noticed the evening skies. ...Having been born here, what you mostly see are bright lights and air traffic.

VEERS:

Officers who serve under Lord Vader are based in Imperial City...along with their families.

Meena looks up at Veers, realizing where he is taking the conversation.

MEENA:

My parents and I lived happily where ever the Empire sent us.

VEERS:

This Rebellion may go on for some time. I'll be gone for months...a year, even...A soldier's wife must endure loneliness and boredom.

MEENA:

When father was away on tours of duty, mother and I always found things to do...one gets used to the waiting.

Veers turns to face Meena, placing his hands on her shoulders.

VEERS:

You would want children?

MEENA:

Yes...a family of my own.

VEERS:

My son Zev and I have grown apart.  
...Conflicting views about duty  
take hold of our conversations...

Veers' expression becomes pained.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

I've told him my career isn't only  
for myself...it's done for those  
with families who can't fight...and  
in memory of his mother (His voice  
cracks)...my late wife.

The couple are only inches apart. Recollections of Veers' former marriage and distress over his son's resentment makes the distance between them seem farther. Veers removes his hands from Meena's shoulders, upset by what he has just said.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Those weren't the words I wanted to  
say...

MEENA:

(softly)

They needed to be said.

Meena instinctively raises her palms to gently cradle each side of the General's face. Her calm manner and voice are soothing as she attempts to absorb Veers' buried pain.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

I can't supplant the memory of  
someone you cared for in the past.  
...I can help you release the pain.

Veers relaxes visibly at the touch of Meena's tender ministrations and unseen restorative powers.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

My love allows me to submit to any  
decision you may make concerning  
our relationship.

Never letting their eyes off of one another, Veers takes Meena's hands from his face, kissing each of her upraised palms. He presses her hands together, holding them to his chest. His emotions swell, overriding the tranquil moment.

VEERS:

I'm through arguing with myself as  
to why we shouldn't be together...

Veers places his hands back on Meena's waist, pulling her to him. The responsive young woman returns his embrace.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

(passionately)

The thought of you marrying one of  
those simpering aristocrats who are  
unable...and unwilling...to defend  
and protect women such as yourself  
...would infuriate me.

Meena shivers slightly at Veers' possessiveness, but is too swept up by his honesty and her own longing to heed any inner warnings. Veers slowly bends his head to her upturned face.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

(with conviction)

I want you for *my* wife...in our  
home...waiting for *me*.

Meena willingly yields to him as Veers leans over, giving her an ardent, lingering kiss. He moves his lips down her throat to the inviting bare expanse of flesh the velvet off-the-shoulder gown presents. Gathering the folds of the gown's drape in one hand, Veers scoops Meena up into his arms, carrying her over to the bench. Whirling around, Veers sits with his back to the window's side frame, still holding the breathless young woman in his arms. He loosens her hair, letting it fall over Meena's shoulders as she settles into his lap, sensing his love and guarded desire through her own fevered emotions. They kiss once more...

FADE OUT

INT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - CORRIDOR - SAME TIME

The little mouse droid Nibs continues to guard the stairwell entry to the Manarai moon window.

Nibs pauses between the back and forth rolls, unsuccessfully trying to raise itself up with a retractable claw near the first step. The droid lets out a plaintive squeak, then resumes its sentry duties.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - EVENING -  
LATER

Two of Coruscant's four moons are seen in the night sky, shining down on the stone step area where a growing crowd of warmly-dressed guests watch as Manarai rangers prepare a long line of sleek airsleighs for a fast-paced scenic ride up into the snowy mountain range.

An excited Zev, clad in a long, gray military-style overcoat and hat with ear flaps, helps a dark green cloaked Lady Cerise into the front seat of the lead airsleigh. Another giddy and similarly dressed young couple climb into the back seat. Cerise pulls the cloak hood over her head and tucks her gloved hands inside a plump, satina-lined muff.

A ranger secures Zev, Cerise, and the backseat couple with a lap blanket and safety bars. He pulls a lever, and the sleigh moves forward to allow another group of passengers to enter the next vehicle.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - FRONT PORCH - EVENING - A FEW  
MINUTES LATER

Several guests tarry on the front porch. Among them is Lord Ganner and Lady Ursa who watch the airsleigh activity below.

The wooden front doors swoosh open. Countess Alyce Motti, covered by a fashionable Dolmarri fur-trimmed blue cloak and carrying an over-sized muff made of the same fur, exits the lodge, moving across the porch with Martyn Veers and Officer Pellaeon, clad in long, military-style overcoats and hats, walking on either side of her to the stone steps.

The trio is followed by Meena, whose blissful countenance gazes out from the fur-trimmed hood of her sweeping teal velvet cloak. In one gloved hand, she clutches a matching fur-trimmed muff. Her other gloved hand rests on the arm of a proud General Veers, who wears a long, tailored, gray-green military-issue overcoat and hat.

Ganner's eyes darken at the sight of the retreating couple. He is gently nudged by Lady Ursa and turns his attentions... and charm...back to the company at hand.

EXT. MANARAI MOUNTAIN LODGE - STONE STEP AREA - EVENING - A  
FEW MINUTES LATER

The next to last airsleigh is being loaded with Captain Piett, Lady Janel, Piett's friend Commander Chiraneau, and Chiraneau's lovely companion, Lady Marissa, as passengers.

Veers and Meena are seen off to the side with Martyn and Alyce who are speaking with Officer Pellaeon.

ALYCE:  
 (to Pellaeon)  
 You must join us for New Years Eve.

PELLAEON:  
 I don't wish to intrude...family  
 and all.

ALYCE:  
 Well, the Veers' are invited and  
 they're not family...at least, not  
 yet...and you said you have none,  
 so I won't take no for an answer.

The last airsleigh arrives. A ranger approaches Alyce.

RANGER:  
 Your airsleigh is ready, Countess.

ALYCE:  
 Thank you, ranger. (to Pellaeon) No  
 more excuses...Let's climb aboard!

Pellaeon silently accepts Alyce's dinner invitation, knowing it would be better than spending his New Year's leave alone.

The First Officer of the Chimaera is not so accepting about the upcoming airsleigh ride as he slides stiffly into the front, followed by Alyce who is guided into the sleigh by Martyn. Behind them, Meena is helped into the backseat by Veers.

PELLAEON:  
 (to Martyn)  
 I can't believe you talked me into  
 this.

A ranger secures the safety bar across the passenger's laps. The airsleigh headlights turn on as the engines sound.

MARTYN:  
 (over the engines)  
 Wanted to see just how much of a  
 stomach you navy scrubs have!

Pellaeon shakes his head, wondering the same thing. Alyce gives the go-ahead signal to a ranger who works the remote master control.

To the delighted cries of the majority of passengers, the entire line of airsleighs zoom forward, then lift upward, circling the grounds above the lodge, heading towards the Manarai Mountain range.

EXT. AIRSLEIGH IN SKY - EVENING - MOMENTS LATER

In the back of the last vehicle, Meena tucks her hands deeper into her muff, snuggling up to Veers. They kiss deeply, while the moons and starlit sky of Coruscant sparkles above them.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET PAXILLIA

An orbital space station hovers above the planet Paxillia.

EXT. PAXILLIA - PAXILLIA CITY - LATE AFTERNOON

The modest city scape of Paxillia's capitol is seen from its spaceport.

EXT. PAXILLIA - SPACEPORT - COMMERCIAL AREA - LATE AFTERNOON

Bars, restaurants, and storefronts line a commercial district just off the Paxillia Spaceport. Spacers, merchants, and local workers move in and out of the establishments.

EXT. PAXILLIA - BISCUIT BARON RESTAURANT - LATE AFTERNOON

The Biscuit Baron, a galactic fast food chain owned by the Tagge Company, and featuring the smiling visage of Baron Tagge chowing down on a protein biscuit, is one of the more palatable, clean, and cheap eateries near the spaceport.

INT. BISCUIT BARON RESTAURANT

Bright blues, reds, and yellows dominate the overly-cheery decor of the Biscuit Baron restaurant. Human and alien patrons line up before an ordering counter staffed by employees in brightly-colored uniforms and wearing conical hats with the Biscuit Baron mascot emblazoned on them.

At an end booth, Arie Nugeen and Dyn Mawr sit, finishing their fast food meal. The two rebels look up and over as a public service announcement appears on the restaurant's centrally-located holopad.

Holiday music ushers in a holo featuring a seated Meena Valorian with the six Piett children holding gaily wrapped New Year's gifts and unwrapped toys at her feet. Surrounding Meena and the children are Commander Ian Hiebert, dressed in his black service uniform, plus two stormtroopers from the 501st Legion guarding each side of an empty barrel.

MEENA:

The New Year is almost upon us, and if you're like most citizens, it's easy to get caught up in the New Year Fete excitement, forgetting one of the most meaningful parts of the holiday...that of sharing with those less fortunate children who live outside the Empire's borders.

Arie rolls her eyes at the holo while Dyn watches in rapt attention.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

The Biscuit Baron, along with the 501st Legion, are sponsoring a New Year's toy drive to let these tots know the Empire cares. Do your part for the New Order by dropping a new toy, wrapped or unwrapped, into the barrels located at a Biscuit Baron eatery or at any Imperial garrison.

During Meena's speech, the Piett children, one by one, drop the gifts and toys into the barrel held by the stormtroopers while Commander Hiebert pats each child on his or her head.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

Together, we can bring joy to a child on New Year's morning...I'm Meena Valorian wishing you and your families a Prosperous New Year... full of hope, caring, and sharing.

The holo ends as Biscuit Baron employees roll out a toy drive barrel. Arie has had enough of Dyn's pining for Lady Meena.

ARIE:

Come on, lover boy...you've got a hot date with the Tryax Beer Girl.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET CORUSCANT

TIE fighters zoom in and around the Imperial Command Ship Executor and as it hovers above Imperial Center.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - MID-DAY

Through clouds and the ever present steady stream of air traffic, the Coruscanti sun shines down on the towering pyramidal structure of the Imperial Palace.

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - RESIDENTIAL WING - CORRIDOR

Two crimson robed guards stand at attention while a gray robed royal steward, carrying a covered meal tray, moves down a corridor of the residential wing of the palace.

One of the private apartment doors zaps open. A slightly disheveled Lady Ursa Mercetti, wearing a long cloak, exits from the opening out into the hall. Lady Ursa moves past the oncoming steward to see Sedriss, dressed in a black travel jumpsuit and hooded cape, striding down the corridor. Sedriss gives Ursa a once over, smirks, and moves to the entry from which she came, pressing a buzzer pad. The door opens and Sedriss enters the apartment to see...

## INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - APARTMENT - SECONDS LATER

...Lord Ganner, clad in a black, loosely-tied silk robe, standing amidst a luxuriously appointed living area, feeding liquefied meat from a dropper to a blind-folded baby falcon cradled in his gloved hand.

SEDRISS:

Thought I'd say good-bye. I'm being sent to Byss in the deep core.

Ganner looks up from his falcon feeding.

GANNER:

Ah, Byss...it's clear our master doesn't consider you expendable.

Ganner places the falcon within a large hanging cage near a balcony entrance. The raptor weakly shrieks for more food. Ganner ignores the bird's cries, removing its blindfold.

SEDRISS:

Can't say the same for Captain Gist ...I got to vent my rage on him.

GANNER:

Your first Force-choke kill...You must be very proud of yourself.

SEDRISS:

(nodding in agreement)  
Felt good...

Ganner finally gives the hungry young falcon some food.

SEDRISS: (CONT'D)

You might want to do the same to Veers.

GANNER:

His death would complicate matters.

SEDRISS:

Not if you want his woman...Slay  
the competition, I always say.

GANNER:

(deadpan)

I'm going to miss you, Sedriss.

EXT. CORUSCANT - GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - EVENING

Festive search lights sweep through the traffic-laden skies above the Galaxies Opera House as luxury air vehicles chauffeur the wealthy and elite to the much anticipated galactic premiere of the opera "Nariah."

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - GRAND FOYER

Beneath an enormous multi-colored chandelier, thousands of elegantly dressed opera lovers mingle and move about the red-carpeted floor of the Grand Foyer.

In the center of the foyer, a large holo of the opera stars portraying the Sith warlord Exar Kun, with the beautiful Jedi Nariah on her knees at his feet, flashes on and off between aurebesh and symbolic holos that explain house rules, safety information, and offer discreet advertising of local shops and restaurants that cater to the sophisticated crowd.

In the background, usher droids hand out souvenir programs and direct patrons to stairways and a series of turbolifts, bedecked with tasteful New Year's silver decorative garlands, that will take them to their seats.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - CORRIDOR OUTSIDE ROYAL BOX

Looking every inch her nickname of Shadow Empress, Countess Alyce Motti, her hair swept up in a starfire jeweled tiara, and wearing a deep purple, off the shoulder gown of Rodian flame silk, moves down the corridor on the arm of Martyn Veers towards a pair of crimson robed Imperial guards who stand on either side of the royal box entry.

Alyce and Martyn are followed by Veers in his dress military uniform, escorting Lady Meena, who is wearing a white organdy chiffon, one shoulder gown on which an exquisite lavender and silver shoulder sculpt rests. Behind Max and Meena, Zev, in his cadet uniform, escorts Lady Cerise, who is attired in a periwinkle blue chiffon, one shoulder gown, with a delicate shoulder sculpt made from star crystals. Two royal guards accompany them as they enter the royal box.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ROYAL BOX - MOMENTS LATER

Seated in the royal box are Alyce's friend Lady Inna, wearing a dress of amethyst-colored shimmersilk, accented by a rare Sularian black pearl choker, and Inna's escort, Moff Jerjerrod, clad in military dress garb, who is secretly heading the second Death Star construction. Jerjerrod rises as Alyce and the others make their way into the box.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ORCHESTRA LEVEL - SAME TIME

The plush opera house is nearly full as the orchestra tunes and the remaining patrons make their way into seating that surrounds a vast semi-circular staging area. Private boxes, filled with the galaxy's wealthy elite, rise eight stories on either side of the stage and orchestra pit, with the more prominent and spacious royal box being located on the far wall facing the stage on the fourth floor, centered above two tiered balconies below it.

Camera shot of Alyce and her group seen from the orchestra, entering the royal box and making formal introductions to a standing Moff Jerjerrod, then taking their seats. Two crimson robed guards stand at attention behind them.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ROYAL BOX - MOMENTS LATER

Moff Jerjerrod is now seated next to a smiling Inna who is gazing at her program. He turns to speak with Alyce.

JERJERROD:

It was kind of you to invite me, Countess. My job keeps me away from Imperial Center...and doesn't allow for much socializing.

ALYCE:

Lady Inna thought you might enjoy tonight's performance. (To Meena) ...Moff Jerjerrod is Director of Imperial Energy Systems...They develop portable power stations for disaster relief efforts.

MEENA:

What a rewarding line of work.

JERJERROD:

Yes, we hope to have the power station...ah, stations...up and running within a year or so.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - MERCETTI BOX - MOMENTS LATER

Four stories up and to the right of the royal box, the House of Mercetti box holds Lord Ganner, dressed in his tailored black formal suit with sheathed lightsaber. He sits next to Lady Ursa Mercetti, wearing a low-necked black velvet gown, augmented by a blood ruby necklace. Also in attendance are Lady Ursa's cousin, Lady Nyssa Hejaren, wearing a crimson, elaborately embroidered gown, and her dashing escort, Sarcev Quest: a well-known Coruscanti playboy who is secretly an Emperor's Hand, a Force-sensitive agent/assassin.

Through elegant opera electroglasses, Lady Nyssa looks about the house, then up at the royal box.

NYSSA:

I've heard rumors that the Countess Motti was out of favor.

INT. OPERA ELECTROGLASSES - ROYAL OPERA BOX - SAME TIME

View of Alyce's head turning as a Captain Piett and his wife Lady Janel, attired in a chic Burgundy, two-piece ensemble, enter the royal box, along with Grand General Brashin and Lady Livia, wearing a deep plum-colored vynsilk sheath.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - MERCETTI BOX - SECONDS LATER

SARCEV:

Seeing as our Shadow Empress is sitting in the royal box on opening night, I'd say that talk is wishful thinking on someone's part.

URSA:

If I had her power, I'd surround myself with better company.

SARCEV:

She prefers military companions, not courtiers...the kind who would support her niece's engagement.

NYSSA:

I thought *that* was just a rumor.

SARCEV:

Alyce brought General Veers and her niece here for a reason. She wants the court to know of...and accept their impending betrothal.

The orchestra stops tuning as the house lights begin to dim.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ROYAL OPERA BOX

The camera focuses on Meena and Veers who look lovingly at one another, while a proud Alyce looks out onto the elite assemblage, daring anyone to challenge their happiness.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ORCHESTRA LEVEL - SAME TIME

Save for a few scattered coughs, all is quiet as patrons wait expectantly for the performance to begin. The lights dim to near darkness as the powerful, sweeping music of the opera's overture fills the air.

FADE OUT

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - MAIN STAGE - LATER

FADE IN

House lights are up and shouts of "wonder" and "excellence" are heard over the thunderous applause as the attractive opera singers who portray the roles of Exar Kun, Nariah, fallen Jedi Ulic Qel-Droma, and his lover Aleema Keto are center stage, taking their bows after the end of the opera's stirring second act.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ROYAL OPERA BOX - MOMENTS LATER

The applause fades as Alyce and her party rise from their box seats. She looks out onto the house, then back at the others.

ALYCE:

Well, the story is contrived, but the music is magnificent...With one more act to follow, I think we all know how it ends.

CERISE:

That two-faced Jedi Ulic Qel-Dromo betrays his lover Aleema and tries to poison Exar Kun...so he can have Nariah for himself.

ALYCE:

Shhh! No more spoilers, dear. The plot is painfully obvious as it is.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - CORRIDOR - 5 MINUTES LATER

Fourth floor patrons linger in a corridor outside the box entrances, chatting with one another or partaking of what the floor's concession stand and bar has to offer during the intermission.

Sarcev Quest is by himself, sipping a glass of T'ill-t'ill when he spots Alyce moving towards him. Their eyes meet and Sarcev smiles, nodding his head in greeting.

ALYCE:

Sarcev Quest...we hardly ever run into one another these days.

SARCEV:

Perhaps it's because you rarely attend the theater.

ALYCE:

I find the stage empty since Adalric Brandl left.

SARCEV:

Alas, poor Adalric...he certainly went out with a bang.

ALYCE:

Blowing up a Star Destroyer bay with thermal detonators will do that...I don't know which upset His Excellency more that year...Adalric Brandl or the Death Star exploding.

SARCEV:

Adalric fled and died in a moment of weakness...The theater lost a great actor. Our master lost an ungrateful servant.

ALYCE:

I rather admired Adalric's final exit...although I disapproved of his killing others in the process.

Sarcev notices Lord Ganner, Lady Ursa, and Lady Nyssa moving up the corridor towards them and changes the subject.

SARCEV:

What do you think of the opera?

ALYCE:

Oh, it's the usual historically inaccurate, romanticized version of a ruthless warlord...However, in terms of Sith propaganda and public relations...the show's a definite hit.

Sarcev is amused by Alyce's cynical comments. Lord Ganner arrives on the scene with Lady Ursa and Lady Nyssa.

GANNER:  
Ah, Countess Motti.

ALYCE:  
A word with you, Lord Ganner. (to Sarcev) Sarcev, stay here with the ladies.

A curious Sarcev takes the equally curious Ursa and Nyssa in hand, while he watches Alyce march Ganner through the Mercetti Box entry.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - MERCETTI BOX - MOMENTS LATER

Alyce is seated, swiveling the chair to the side facing Lord Ganner who stands before her. Alyce motions to a seat.

ALYCE:  
Sit down, Lord Ganner.

He does so, turning his chair towards Alyce who looks around and then down onto the orchestra seating area, observing the comings and goings of the opera patrons. She returns her gaze to Ganner who remains impassive, waiting for her to speak.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)  
Like you, I belong to the Emperor  
...for what purpose and how much  
longer is any one's guess...The  
favor given to me at court is not  
without risk...there are many women  
who would usurp my position...Some  
day, one of them may succeed.

Alyce glances over at the royal box. Ganner's eyes follow her gaze.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - ROYAL OPERA BOX - SAME TIME

Brief shot of Veers seating Lady Meena who looks up adoringly at him. Behind the couple, Lady Inna, Moff Jerjerrod, General Brashin, and Lady Livia are seen coming into the box.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - MERCETTI BOX - SECONDS LATER

ALYCE:  
Until that happens, I will use my  
position to protect my niece from  
your cruel and seductive games.

There is a moment of silence before Ganner speaks.

GANNER:  
 Forgive me for being a hopeless  
 romantic.

ALYCE:  
 (contemptuously)  
 Spare me from Sith romantics...I've  
 had my fill of them over the years!

GANNER:  
 The master knows what is his.

Alyce is taken aback by Ganner's boldness, but recovers.

ALYCE:  
 Yes, I am his...but Meena is not  
 yours...not while I have breath in  
 my body...and only our master can  
 take that from me if he so chooses.

The house lights flash on and off, signifying the end of the intermission. Alyce rises as does Lord Ganner who gives the departing Countess a courtly bow. She exits while he gazes up at the royal box with dark longing. The house lights dim.

INT. GALAXIES OPERA HOUSE - GRAND FOYER - LATER

The opera is over as capped and cloaked patrons mingle or make their way out of the grand foyer of the Galaxies Opera House.

Off to the side, and watched over by two crimson robed royal guards, Alyce is seen kissing the cheek of Janel and Livia, while the rest of her party lingers near-by. Veers has his arm around Meena while he speaks with Piett and Brashin. Lady Inna and her escort Moff Jerjerrod are chatting with a Commander Chiraneau and his companion Lady Marissa. Martyn, Zev, and Lady Cerise are seen in the background purchasing additional souvenir programs from an usher droid.

ALYCE:  
 (to Janel and Livia)  
 You all have a Happy New Year and  
 don't forget, the Old Trader drops  
 off presents early on the eve.

Captain Piett, Brashin, Chiraneau, and Marissa join them, saying their "good-byes" and "Prosperous New Years." They exit the foyer while Inna, Jerjerrod, Martyn, Zev, and Cerise, who clutches a half-dozen programs, gather by Alyce, Veers, and Meena. Cerise excitedly shows Meena her purchase.

CERISE:

I promised my friends, I'd buy each of them a souvenir program...Wasn't the performance wonderful?

MEENA:

The production was beautiful...I found the story rather depressing.

ZEV:

Why didn't Nariah just warn Exar Kun about the poison...instead of downing it herself?

MARTYN:

It wouldn't be an opera if there wasn't a least one character who died from a poisoning.

His remark elicits a chuckle from some of the group. He offers his arm to Alyce who accepts it.

MARTYN: (CONT'D)

Where to, now, Countess?

ALYCE:

We've reservations at the Manarai.

CERISE:

The Manarai! Why, that's *the* most exclusive restaurant on Coruscant!

ALYCE:

Well, it was either that or the Biscuit Baron.

Alyce and the others head towards an exit.

On the arm of Veers, Lady Meena sees a smiling Lord Ganner with Grand Admiral Tigillinus. She instinctively draws closer to Veers, feeling a sudden chill. Ganner and Tigillinus watch as Countess Alyce Motti's party departs from the Grand Foyer.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - DUSK - NEW YEAR'S EVE

It is New Year's Eve as the Coruscanti sun sets over Villa Motti. The camera zooms in on the pillared front porch and front door bedecked with shiny garlands of silver and blue stars, bells, and miniature gifts...traditional symbols of the most important and beloved Imperial holiday.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIVING AND DINING ROOMS - MOMENTS LATER

Household droids finish setting the linen covered dining table for seven with a sparkling array of cobalt blue crystal goblets, House of Motti antique dishes, and gleaming silver serving ware.

The android manservant Karuk, holding a tasteful floral and candle arrangement that matches the dining table centerpiece, enters and places the decoration on a sideboard. Through an open entry leading down into the living area, Karuk turns to view Meena who is busy festooning a round gift table near the lit fireplace with blue and silver lighted garlands.

A cheerful Alyce and MS-2 enter the living area, bearing festively-wrapped presents. Nibs rolls behind them, with several smaller gifts perched a top its boxed form.

ALYCE:

Looks like New Year's Eve in here!

Alyce continues to talk while she and MS-2 place the packages on the gift table in an attractive heap. MS-2 exits the room.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

Your Uncle Spence spoke with Max today. The betrothal officially begins at midnight...you'll have to wait a bit longer for the wedding.

MEENA:

I hope it's not too long.

Meena retrieves Nibs' offerings and tucks them into the pile. Karuk is seen walking down the hall towards the entry.

ALYCE:

(confidently)

Well, I have some pull in certain circles...You and Max won't have to hold out indefinitely.

The mouse droid Nibs rolls over to his mistress, squeaking while Meena gazes at the gift-laden table and lavishly-decorated living area.

MEENA:

Aunt Alyce, how were you able to carry on amidst that hunting accident?

ALYCE:

Did Max tell you about the hunters?

MEENA:

Yes...He and I went to visit the families after the 501st Toy Drive this morning...I can't get their grieving out of my head.

ALYCE:

Along with mind shielding, I'll show you a technique that might ease the pain absorption you're experiencing.

Alyce looks up, sensing something. Off camera, Spence Motti's booming voice is heard.

SPENCE: (O.C.)

Happy New Year to one and all!

Lord Spence Motti, wearing the iconic bright blue cap with tinkling silver bell worn by the Old Trader...a legendary galactic folk hero who delivers toys to good girls and boys on New Years Day...enters carrying several elegantly-wrapped gifts. He is followed by the android Karuk who holds more presents which are placed on the gift table.

SPENCE: (CONT'D)

Like the Old Trader, I come bearing gifts.

Karuk takes Spence's gifts, putting them with the others. A smiling Meena goes over and gives Spence an affectionate hug.

ALYCE:

Take that ridiculous hat off! This is a New Year's gathering...not a costume party!

SPENCE:

I think it's rather dashing.

ALYCE:

Suit yourself. Meena and I need to dress before our guests arrive for dinner. (to Karuk) See to the meal preparations, Karuk.

KARUK:

Yes, Mistress Motti.

Karuk departs. Meena moves to Alyce. Nibs follows. The two women begin to head towards the hall while Spence goes over to the gift table, rummaging through the presents.

Alyce stops and whirls around, startling Spence, who quickly moves away and lifts his hands...like a thief caught in the act.

ALYCE:

No peeking, Spence! (to Meena) Your uncle is a champion present peeker.

SPENCE:

And your aunt is a bossy spoil sport used to having her own way!

ALYCE:

(looking at Nibs)  
Nibs, you stand guard over by the gift table.

Nibs squeaks an affirmative, rolling dutifully over to place itself between the table and a frustrated Spence as Alyce and Meena leave to ready themselves for the evening.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - OFFICERS HOUSING - DUSK

Air traffic weaves in and out of an enclave of skyscrapers set aside for officers housing that rises amidst the dazzling lights and towering buildings of Imperial City.

INT. OFFICERS HOUSING - VEERS' LIVING QUARTERS - DUSK

Within the living area of General Veers' quarters, Martyn Veers, dressed in his formal blue suit and holding a small box, stands before the window with Officer Pellaeon, clad in his service uniform, observing busier than usual traffic in the darkening skies of Imperial City.

MARTYN:

Max and Zev should be here soon.  
...Which reminds me...

Martyn opens the small box he carries to reveal a simple starfire engagement ring and wedding band.

MARTYN: (CONT'D)

This ring set belonged to my late wife. Max had it re-sized to fit Lady Meena's finger. He's going to present it to her tonight.

PELLAEON:

Your son is one of the luckiest men in the Fleet.

MARTYN:

Fortune seems to follow Max as of late...and my grandson approves of the union...I believe she'll be a good influence for both of them.

Pellaeon smiles, nodding in agreement as a soft dinging sound is heard. The entry doors zap open. Veers and Zev, dressed in civvies, each carrying a bag full of wrapped gifts, enter in a hurry, setting their purchases down near the entry. Captain Dav comes briskly out of the hallway to greet them.

VEERS:

(to Dav)

We should have made allowances for the New Year's Eve traffic...

DAV:

Your uniforms are laid out, sir. A royal transport is waiting on the deck level...you should arrive at Villa Motti on time.

INT. VEERS' QUARTERS - ZEV'S BEDROOM - 10 MINUTES LATER

Adjusting his gray-blue cadet tunic collar, Zev stands before a mirror next to a neatly-made single bed in his sparsely furnished bedroom. The area contains few personal items, save for some grooming implements and a family vacation holophoto taken shortly before his mother's tragic death placed prominently on the bureau.

The bedroom door zaps open. Martyn Veers enters.

MARTYN:

How did it go, today?

Zev's disappointed expression reveals all.

ZEV:

I didn't tell him, grandfather. We were busy all afternoon...then he decided to stop by the officer's club.

MARTYN:

Not the best place to inform him you want out of the military.

ZEV:

Right. And father was so happy. I haven't seen him like this...

Zev glances over at the holophoto on the bureau.

ZEV: (CONT'D)  
 ...since before mother died...I  
 didn't want to ruin his day with  
 an argument.

MARTYN:  
 You'll have to tell him before you  
 graduate from the junior academy.  
 Once your senior commission is  
 activated, there's no way out for  
 another seven years.

ZEV:  
 I can't bring myself to do it.

MARTYN:  
 You made your choice today out of  
 honor...not as an excuse?

ZEV:  
 (nodding)  
 Maybe the future won't be so  
 bad...I could tough it out.

Martyn places his hand on Zev's shoulder.

MARTYN:  
 A mature decision...You're young,  
 there's time enough for acceptance  
 and change.

EXT. IMPERIAL CITY - ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT - EARLY EVENING

The colorful entertainment district is packed with New Year's  
 Eve revelers, many of whom wear Old Trader caps, even sillier  
 hats, blow on horns, ring bells, are drinking heavily, and  
 yelling premature "Happy New Year!" to passersby.

EXT. IMPERIAL CITY - STAR TO STAR BAR AND GRILL - EARLY  
 EVENING

Droves of off-duty Imperial officers, technicians, pilots,  
 troopers, plus a few of their civilian dates, are seen going  
 in and out of the famous Star to Star Bar and Grill.

INT. STAR TO STAR BAR AND GRILL - MOMENTS LATER

Although still early in the evening, the Star to Star Bar and  
 Grill's annual New Year's Eve bash is in full swing.

The popular Imperial Fleet hang-out is decorated with tacky silver and blue holiday garlands while loud music blares over the more crowded than usual dance floor and booths packed with cheerful patrons eager to celebrate the upcoming New Year. Military types and their female companions predominate, downing mugs of Tryax beer and letting loose a lot more than Imperial protocol normally would allow.

A live appearance by the familiar, scantily-clad Tryax Beer Girl...one of several hundred clones that travel the galaxy for promotional purposes...is seen floating around the grill proper on a repulsorlift stand, throwing New Years charms, sweets, and Tryax beer gift certificates into the cheering and enthusiastic crowd.

INT. STAR TO STAR BAR AND GRILL - PUBLIC VIDSCREEN AREA -  
SAME TIME

Jauntily wearing an Old Trader cap, Major Freja Covell, clad in his service uniform, and holding two attractive, giggling females on either arm, stands at the front of a long public vidscreen line in the establishment. The face of Captain Dav appears on the monitor. Covell speaks loudly over the noise.

COVELL:

Dav, get on over here...or your  
date is gonna join the navy!

INT. VEERS' LIVING QUARTERS - SAME TIME

Captain Dav is seen from the back, staring into a small wall vidscreen located near the living quarter's entry. Major Covell and his girls are seen staring back at Dav from the vidscreen monitor.

DAV:

I'll be there shortly, the General  
ran into...

INT. STAR TO STAR BAR AND GRILL - PUBLIC VIDSCREEN AREA -  
SAME TIME

On the vidscreen, Dav's face is shown looking off to the left for an instant as Covell excitedly interrupts Dav's sentence.

COVELL:

Hey, has Max bought a ring? Has he  
asked her to marry him yet?

Dav's face on the monitor is quickly replaced by Veers' stern visage, prompting Covell to gulp.

VEERS:

In regards to your first question, the answer is no...The answer to your second question is classified and shall remain so until further notice, Major Covell.

COVELL:

(sheepishly)  
Yes, sir.

INT. VEERS' LIVING QUARTERS - SECONDS LATER

Veers, clad in his service uniform with a gray-green cape slung over his broad shoulders, moves away from the wall vidscreen showing a very abashed Covell. Behind Veers are a grinning Martyn, Zev, and Pellaeon, also wearing capes, near the door, ready to leave for Villa Motti. Veers turns to Dav.

VEERS:

Carry on, Captain Dav...Make sure the Major is wearing a regulation hat when he leaves the premises... and don't let the navy requisition your date.

Dav smiles at a now grinning Veers.

DAV:

Yes, sir. Happy New Year, sir.

Dav looks back at the vidscreen monitor showing the face of Covell.

DAV: (CONT'D)

Got that, Major?

INT. STAR TO STAR BAR AND GRILL - PUBLIC VIDSCREEN AREA -  
SAME TIME

Covell has somewhat recovered as he sees Dav's smiling face gazing back at him from the monitor.

COVELL:

Affirmative...over and out.

The vidscreen goes blank as Covell and his companions wander out into the Star to Star Bar and Grill's boisterous crowd to await Captain Dav's arrival.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LATER THAT EVENING

Night time shot of Villa Motti, its softly-lit windows and garden grounds appear quiet and peaceful.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIVING AND DINING ROOMS - SAME TIME

Recorded metaharp music plays as the android manservant Karuk makes a final inspection of the dining room which has been cleared of dishes, with only the floral arrangements and lowered candles remaining of what was an intimate and deeply satisfying New Year's Eve meal.

MS-2 enters from the open entry of the living area with a tray filled with empty tea cups. The droid moves to a butler's pantry door that zaps open.

The camera looks through the open entry, down into the living area where Spence, still wearing his Old Trader cap, stands by the depleted gift table, placing a fancy gift box onto Nibs. The mouse droid rolls over to Pellaeon who is seated in one of two identical arm chairs facing the roaring fireplace. Martyn occupies the other arm chair, while Zev sits to the side of them on a divan, handling a Blast Tech DL-44 pistol and holster given to him by his father. Near-by, a low tea table lies strewn with gifts, sweets, opened boxes, ribbons, and shiny blue and silver wrapping pouches.

Across from Zev, Veers and Meena, wearing her late mother's opalescent teardrop necklace and dressed in an elegant, high-waisted gown made of silver shimmersilk, are snuggled together on an opposing divan.

Alyce, attired in a simple, but stylish cobalt blue, Lupani velvet dress with her antique opalescent brooch pinned at the shoulder, stands proudly behind the happy couple.

Meena lifts her hand up for a moment so her aunt can admire her engagement ring while Alyce smiles contentedly over the heartwarming holiday scene which she has worked diligently in so short a time to achieve.

Pelleaon has opened his gift box. He holds up an expensive cut glass container filled with an amber-colored liquid.

PELLAEON:

Whyren's Reserve, Corellian  
Whiskey...in a fancy bottle.

VEERS:

Rare spirits...I had it once on  
Corellia...it packs quite a kick.

PELLAEON:

Thank you, Countess...your hospitality and generosity overwhelms me.

ALYCE:

Oh, you're very welcome.

Meena looks over at her Uncle Spence who is eagerly waiting ...along with the delivery droid Nibs...to hand out the remaining presents.

MEENA:

It's your turn now, Uncle Spence.

SPENCE:

Splendid...I've got one more gift I'm dying to open.

Spence rummages about for the gift. A soft series of door bells chime. He looks inquisitively over at Alyce.

SPENCE: (CONT'D)

Are you expecting more guests?

ALYCE:

(shaking her head no)

Do continue...I'll go check with Karuk and see who's here.

Spence tears into his gift as Alyce leaves the living area.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - ENTRY HALL - FRONT DOORS - MOMENTS LATER

Countess Alyce Motti moves down the entry hall to see Karuk standing at the front door with two royal guards. One of the guards nods his head at Alyce and speaks.

ROYAL GUARD:

The Emperor commands your presence.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - EVENING

The towering pyramidal structure of the Imperial Palace dominates the night skies of Imperial City. The camera zooms in on a clock tower of the building that reads twenty after ten.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - CORRIDOR - SAME TIME

Flanked by two crimson robed guards, Countess Alyce Motti, a dark blue velvet cloak covering her dress, is marched down a heavily guarded corridor of the palace towards a turbolift.

The doors of the turbolift swoosh open. The guards enter with Alyce between them. The doors shut as the light panel above the door frame indicates the turbolift is descending.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - PRIVATE SITH MUSEUM - MINUTES LATER

Deep within the bowels of the Imperial Palace is a dimly-lit private museum, whose blood red and silver frescoed black obsidian walls contain a priceless array of encased Sith artifacts, jewelry, weaponry, and sorcerous texts, some dating over 5,000 years old, looted from the haunted tombs of Korriban, stolen from collectors, or unearthed from Dark Side monuments and ancient battlefields for the Emperor's use and viewing pleasure.

A bas-relief depicting Jedi and Sith battling in the Great Hyperspace War hangs on a far obsidian wall, overlooking an elaborate Sith chalice that sits on a carved stand, burning a pungent, fear-inducing incense that permeates the air.

His wizened and deformed face covered in shadow by a black, zeyd-cloth hooded robe, the Emperor Palpatine, clutching an obsidian cane, stands in the middle of the museum, before a raised stone sarcophagus, encrusted with rare Corusca gems, blood red Sith symbols, hieroglyphics, and text.

An ancient post and lintel opening, salvaged from a Sith temple ruin, frames sliding doors that zap open into the museum proper to reveal Alyce, flanked by a pair of royal guards. She moves forward into the room, curtsies, then goes down on one knee, bowing her head to her master. The royal guards turn and exit the room. The doors close behind them. There is a moment of silence before the Emperor...never moving his head or leaving his position...addresses Alyce.

EMPEROR:

I sense that you are annoyed with me, Countess.

ALYCE:

Nothing is hidden from you, my Lord Emperor.

EMPEROR:

What do you think of my private Sith collection?

Alyce looks up and around the chamber with a measure of unconcealed repugnance. Alyce takes a deep breath as she tries to keep her emotions in check. She is deeply annoyed ...and fearful...and was so before entering the room, but has learned over the years to speak her mind...within reason.

ALYCE:

Oppressive...I find the Sith's overuse of sharp curves and the color red questionable in terms of design and good taste.

The Emperor chuckles.

EMPEROR:

Rise, and stand next to me.

Alyce rises and moves slowly to the Emperor's side. Her eyes widen in astonishment and then revulsion as she views what lies within the sarcophagus.

Under a glass-covered, obsidian coffin, the perfectly preserved body of a beautiful young woman, eyes closed in peaceful repose, and clad in an ancient Sith-style, pleated, silver-gray, diaphanous sheath, rests upon a black velvet cushion with her bare arms folded over the stringed neck of a metaharp placed upon her slender form.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Isn't she lovely?

ALYCE:

So, this is Nariah. Are you certain she's dead? It looks like a state of stasis to me.

EMPEROR:

It's not stasis. Nariah's body has been perfectly preserved...by one who was extremely fond of her.

ALYCE:

Somehow, I doubt if Exar Kun was as romantic as the plot of that silly opera made him out to be.

EMPEROR:

I was told the audience adored it.

ALYCE:

Yes...that scene with Dark Lord Kun slaughtering those Old Republic Senators and Jedi was a definite crowd pleaser.

The Emperor chuckles again. He turns to Alyce, the folds of his cowl revealing his sallow, wizened features and piercing yellow eyes that bore into his mistresses' haughty mien.

EMPEROR:

And an exercise in Sith public relations?

ALYCE:

Sarcev Quest has been tattling on me, again.

The Emperor smiles, making his dissipated features even more ghoulish than usual. Alyce cannot help but shiver. He moves away from the sarcophagus towards a table on which a silver jewel box rests. Alyce follows.

EMPEROR:

You are wondering why I took you from your guests...I have a task for you to perform.

The Emperor stops before the table, leaning on his cane. He and Alyce face one another. Alyce bows her head, ready for his bidding, as she speaks the all-too familiar words.

ALYCE:

What is your desire, my master?

EMPEROR:

My desire is that you sever the relationship between your niece Lady Meena and General Veers.

Alyce is stunned by his request. She grasps the table's edge to steady herself.

ALYCE:

(rasping)

Why? I can't possibly...

The Emperor's yellow eyes glitter in growing anger.

EMPEROR:

You must obey my every command, Countess...Are we clear on this?

Alyce releases her hold on the table, desperately trying to think of some way out of her master's odious request. Her eyes begin to tear in humiliation with the realization that no amount of debate or pleading will sway him.

The Emperor watches Alyce, sensing her humbling despair with the greatest joy. He raises his gnarled hand and the silver jewel box rises slightly from the table, floating over before Alyce, whose tears are now flowing freely down her face.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Take it.

Alyce automatically reaches for the box.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Open it.

She lifts the lid to exhibit a stunning star sapphire collar necklace, worth a Grand Moff's fortune.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

A New Year's gift, Countess...You  
always were attracted to the color  
blue...

Slowly closing the box lid, Alyce gazes at her master with a pained expression, knowing that he has uncovered her feelings for Vice-Admiral Thrawn.

At some unknown behest, the post and lintel framed doors suddenly zap open. Two crimson robed guards enter.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Escort the Countess Motti to her  
transport. (to Alyce) Happy New  
Year, my dear.

Still holding the silver jewel box, a broken Alyce gives the Emperor a mechanical curtsy. Quietly, she heads out of the chamber, followed by the royal guards. The doors close behind them.

In a much better mood, the Emperor looks about his museum with relish. He glances over into a darkened corner where a large stone obelisk, engraved with Sith writing, stands.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

You may come out now, Lord Ganner..

Lord Ganner, dressed in his tailored black Sith robes and sheathed lightsaber, moves out from behind the obelisk. The handsome Imperial Inquisitor goes down on one knee before the Emperor, bowing his head in obeisance.

GANNER:

What is thy bidding, my master?

EMPEROR:

Rise...follow me.

Ganner respectfully rises, following the Emperor back over to the sarcophagus containing the beautiful body of Nariah.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

This find on Yavin IV is one of my  
most prized possessions...

The Emperor points to the coffin. A side panel compartment of the sarcophagus opens to reveal a small, shimmering golden globe that pulses and glows. Eerie sounds emanate from within the glowing object...like the pleadings and excruciated cries of a woman in torment.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Your discovery of Nariah's soul  
trapped inside this globe has made  
this artifact complete...

The globe floats from out of the compartment, hovering between the master and adept who both gaze upon it with a wicked, twisted pleasure.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Someday, I may unlock the secrets  
of blending Nariah's spirit back  
into her body...

His yellow eyes become dreamy, full of dark delight.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Up to such a time, I shall enjoy  
listening to her cries...and hear  
her sweet singing.

The Emperor and Ganner exchange evil smiles. The globe floats gently back into the compartment and closes, shutting out Nariah's plaintive pleas for deliverance of her captive soul.

The Emperor turns to Lord Ganner.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

And, now, we shall discuss my plans  
for you and Lady Meena...

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - A FEW MINUTES  
BEFORE MIDNIGHT

Her anguished face partially hidden by the hood of the dark blue velvet cloak, Countess Alyce Motti, still holding the silver jewel box given to her by the Emperor, moves to the side of her waiting android manservant Karuk, while behind them the royal transport takes off into the night sky.

KARUK:

Welcome home, Mistress Motti. Your  
guests await you on the portico.

Alyce lowers the hood from her head, putting on a mask of calm, so as not to spoil her guests evening. She hands Karuk the jewel box as they head towards the villa.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - FRONT PORCH - MINUTES LATER

Before the front porch of Villa Motti, Veers, his gray-green cape slung over his broad shoulders, has his arm protectively about Meena, who is wearing a silver-gray velvet cloak.

Standing on the porch is Zev, his new Blast Tech DL-44 pistol in its holster strapped to his side, conversing with Martyn and Pellaeon. Next to them is Spence, with a rare expression of concern on his normally jocular features, as he spots his sister Alyce and Karuk approaching the villa. Lord Motti excuses himself and moves down the porch steps, past Veers and Meena, to meet Alyce and her android manservant.

SPENCE:

Is everything all right?

ALYCE:

His Excellency wanted to wish me a Happy New Year and gave me a gift.

Spence is relieved. For all of their bickering, the two Motti siblings care deeply for one another. Alyce turns to Karuk.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

Karuk, put the necklace in with my other jewels.

KARUK:

Yes, Mistress Motti.

Karuk walks towards the villa. Alyce turns to Spence.

ALYCE:

(quietly)

I thought we might keep their betrothal quiet for a time...until all this publicity dies down.

SPENCE:

Sounds like an excellent plan...You know, after my talk with Max today, I'm convinced this match will be good for the Motti family line.

Alyce motions for silence as a euphoric Meena, on the strong arm of General Veers, approaches. Meena smiles lovingly at her aunt and uncle...which inwardly breaks what little the evil Emperor has left of Alyce's heart.

MEENA:

You're just in time...the fireworks should start at any moment.

ALYCE:

Is it midnight already?

In answer to her question, booming sounds are heard as the skies above them...and all over the planet of Coruscant... erupt into a clamorous, colorful fireworks display.

Alyce, her mind shields and self-control in full mode, kisses the cheek of her beloved niece and then Veers in celebration of the New Year. Spence gets a peck from Meena and handshake from Veers. The Motti siblings then leave the two lovers to join the others who have come down off of the front porch to watch the night sky entertainment. They all exchange kisses or handshakes with one another.

MS-2 is seen, mechanically gawking on the front porch, while holding a tray of glasses filled with sparkling T'ill-t'ill.

Near the porch steps, a frantic Nibs squeaks in frustration. Spence notices Nibs and picks the droid up, placing it on the paved walkway. The little mouse droid zooms towards Veers and Meena who are embraced in a long and lingering kiss. Meena smiles up at Veers who gazes down at her with tenderness and wonder.

VEERS:

I love you, Meena.

MEENA:

I've always loved you.

A squeaking noise interrupts their words of endearment. They look down at an excited Nibs who rolls in circles about the pavement, happy to be loved, too. They smile at the droid's antics and kiss once more. From a distance, Alyce turns to observe the blissful couple. Her false expression of cheer disguises her true feelings of despair and remorse as she ponders what will become of their happiness.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET CORUSCANT - NEW YEAR'S MORNING

Above Imperial Center, the immense, Command Ship Executor, along with the Star Destroyers Avenger, Devastator, Stalker, Tyrant, Vengeance, Accuser, and Adjudicator, begin to move out of orbit as the Death Squadron forces make ready to hunt for the main Rebel base.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - MAIN CONTROL DECK - MOMENTS LATER

Imperial Emissary Lord Darth Vader stands on the command walkway before the bridge window, gazing out of the main viewport as the command ship and its accompanying fleet move slowly away from the planet. Vader is joined by Admiral Ozzel and General Veers.

INT. EXECUTOR - SECURITY FOYER - SAME TIME

Captain Piett and Grand General Brashin are off to the side watching Ozzel and Veers with Lord Vader. Brashin looks around the area to make sure he is not overheard.

BRASHIN:

(quietly)

Admiral Ozzel has taken Max under his wing...(sarcastically) I'm sure Veers' future with the House of Motti has nothing to do with it.

Piett gives Brashin a wry smile, then walks over to the communications console area.

INT. EXECUTOR - SECURITY FOYER - COMMUNICATIONS CONSOLE - SECONDS LATER

Communications Officer Durn and another officer work the console as Captain Piett approaches and gives the order.

PIETT:

Alert all commands. Deploy the fleet.

EXT. GALAXY

The Imperial Command Ship Executor, flanked by its fleet of smaller Star Destroyers, makes the jump into hyperspace, followed by the other ships, in search of the Rebel's main hidden base.

END OF PART II

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