

Angel of the 501st

Part III

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 III: THE HERO OF HOTH

MONTAGE: SCENES FROM PART II

EXT. GALAXY - HOTH SYSTEM

The massive Imperial Command Ship Executor exits from hyperspace into the Hoth system, surrounded by a fleet of Star Destroyers and smaller support vessels.

INT. EXECUTOR - CORRIDOR OFF TURBOLIFT DOORS

Within a corridor of the Executor, Imperial officers, pilots, and technicians, all of whom bear the look of urgency, move quickly by a turbolift. An announcement is heard over the ship's communications system.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)

Attention...the Fleet has exited
light-speed into enemy territory.
All personnel to their posts.

The turbolift doors open as a stone-faced General Veers and Major Covell exit into the area, narrowly avoiding a detail of stormtroopers marching past. The two army officers walk swiftly down the crowded corridor while they converse.

COVELL:

Com-Scan reports an energy field on
planet six of the Hoth system...The
Rebels know we're here.

VEERS:

(irately)
Admiral Ozzel dropped the Fleet in
too close, tripping their early
warning sensors...

COVELL:

Ruling out an orbital bombardment.

VEERS:

Precisely. The Admiral deemed this
action would be a *surprise*...Good
men will die due to his assessment.

COVELL:

With the army bearing the brunt of
it!

TIE fighter ace Baron Soontir Fel, along with his 181st squadron wearing black pilot suits, jog by. Fel gives Veers a brief military nod in passing. Veers returns Fel's gesture.

VEERS:

I've ordered Colonel Starck and Commander Hiebert to get Operation Blizzard Force underway...I must go and inform Lord Vader.

COVELL:

(nervously)
In person?

VEERS:

We need his authorization to deploy the infantry...Get your gear...I'll see you in the staging bay.

COVELL:

Yes, sir.

EXT. SPACE - HOTH SYSTEM

Against a sea of stars, the Imperial Fleet moves towards the sixth planet of the Hoth system.

EXT. HOTH - ECHO BASE ENTRANCE - DAWN

Two X-wings fly out of the Echo Base entrance, making an arc to head north over the snow-covered mountains.

INT. ECHO BASE - MAIN HANGER DECK

Alarms sound within the main hanger deck of the base as droids, Rebel soldiers, pilots, and technicians scramble about the area in preparation for an attack.

Near the open entrance looking out onto the frozen plains of Hoth, two X-wing fighter ships are being fueled in front of a line of T-47, modified snowspeeders that are being readied and moved into place by a frenzied team of technicians.

Rebel pilots Dyn Mawr and Arie Nugeen, dressed in orange flight suits, their helmets in hand, move quickly through the commotion towards the X-wings. Dyn turns to Arie.

DYN:

An Imp Fleet is heading our way.
We'll have to run the transports through a blockade.

ARIE:

Our ion canon better work or this will be one short evacuation.

A Rebel officer joins them, addressing Dyn.

REBEL OFFICER:

Commander Mawr, you and Lt. Nugeen are to fly and land these X-wings near the North Ridge.

DYN:

Are these fighters for the T-47 crews?

REBEL OFFICER:

(nodding)

Groups Seven and Ten...If a pair doesn't make it back, you two will take over and proceed to the rendezvous point.

ARIE:

We're that short of pilots?

REBEL OFFICER:

Rogue Group moved a whole new crop in...some are unseasoned.

DYN:

Why aren't we fighting? One of the new recruits could do a fly over.

REBEL OFFICER:

Those are your orders.

The Rebel officer turns and leaves a disappointed Dyn and Arie to their non-combatant job. The two rebel pilots move to board the X-wings.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAIN NEAR POWER GENERATORS - DAWN

Dawn breaks as Rebel soldiers erect saucer shaped DF.9 anti-infantry turrets, batteries, and fortify lines of snow trenches dug into the ice plains. Over to the mountain side, a series of immense power generators hum and hiss, shielding the skies above Echo Base from an orbital bombardment.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

The Imperial Fleet moves into place above the dark side of the planet Hoth. Seven Star Destroyers and the smaller vessels break off from the Executor to form a blockade.

INT. EXECUTOR - VEERS' QUARTERS

In the orderly living area of Veers' shipboard quarters, Captain Dav is seen through an open door of a small sleep chamber. He pulls out an armored vest from a locker, placing it next to a goggled helmet on the bed.

The main entry zaps open. General Veers, now clad in a dark gray snowsuit and heavy boots, enters as Dav comes out of the chamber to greet him.

DAV:

I've laid out your armor, General.

VEERS:

Very good, Captain.

Veers heads into the sleep chamber and grabs the breastplate off of the bed, securing it over his clothing while Captain Dav addresses him from the living area.

DAV:

A message from Lady Meena arrived, sir...it's waiting on the desk pad.

VEERS:

I'm pressed for time...Lord Vader was displeased with Admiral Ozzel's change in the battle plan...We're launching a full ground assault.

DAV:

Word is Admiral Ozzel has just been relieved of his command...Admiral *Piett* is now in charge.

VEERS:

A long fall promotion, I take it?

DAV:

The very kind, sir.

VEERS:

Failure is not an option with Lord Vader.

Veers, now wearing his armored breastplate, grabs his helmet before he steps out into the living area.

DAV:

Will that be all, General?

Veers hesitates, glancing over at the desk where Meena's message cube rests.

VEERS:

Head down to the staging area and see to the conference room...I'll be by presently.

DAV:

Yes sir.

Dav exits the quarters.

Veers puts on his helmet as he moves over to the desk. He twists the message cube onto a small circular pad, then opens a desk drawer, pulling out his blaster and holster. The cube lights up, emitting a miniature recorded image of Lady Meena that flickers before him. Meena speaks.

MEENA:

We've only been apart a week, yet it seems like forever...I have terrible news from Nati IV...You remember Prefect Omus...His wife Rheese sent word to me he was killed by Rebel assassins on New Years Day...

Veers' expression momentarily hardens at the thought of the much respected law officer's death.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

Colonel Gatz from the garrison is looking after her family...The very thought of you fighting in this wretched war is hard to bear, but being a General's daughter..and soon to be a General's wife...I shall hold up knowing you're doing your duty...Stars willing, this conflict shall be settled in the near future...Until we meet again, I love and miss you so...

Meena's image delicately touches her left shoulder with two intertwined fingers silently conveying a message in the old custom of Coruscant charm signing that they will meet anew.

Veers' tender expression from watching Meena's message fades along with the holo which dematerializes from his view. The General's face takes on its battle-ready visage...cold and implacable. Grabbing his blaster holster, Veers exits the room to ready his troops for the upcoming battle.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - DAY

The Manarai Mountain range and Lake Azure are seen in the distance as the ever present Coruscanti air traffic weaves in and out of spacescraper enclaves covering the ground of the Imperial capital world.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - DAY

Overhead shot of Villa Motti, moving in on the main house and front porch steps where the android manservant Karuk is seen, retrieving a long florist box from a hovering delivery droid. The droid zooms off in the direction of the landing pad. Karuk turns, heading into the villa with the item.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY - MOMENTS LATER

Seated on two upholstered armchairs within the sumptuous two-story library and study, Alyce and Meena, both dressed in simple day gowns, face one another, each bearing a look of intense concentration. Alyce finally relaxes her stance while Meena continues to stare calmly into space.

ALYCE:

That's enough for now...You're an excellent pupil.

Meena takes a deep breath and eases up.

MEENA:

Mind shielding is similar to a method Lord Vader taught me... Aunt Alyce, who was your teacher?

ALYCE:

(pensively)

A distant cousin of mine...who had differing views of Force usage from those of Lord Vader.

MEENA:

Has something upset you this past week? I sense an underlying fear in our lessons.

ALYCE:

(uncomfortably)

We must be strong at the Emperor's banquet this evening...

A soft dinging sound is heard.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

Come in.

The study doors open. Karuk enters with the florist box carefully balanced on top of Nibs. The mouse droid rolls over to Meena.

KARUK:

Flowers for you, Lady Meena.

MEENA:

(taking the box)

Thank you, Karuk...and you too,
Nibs.

Nibs emits a "you're welcome" squeak, and wheels over next to Meena's chair. The android manservant Karuk bows and leaves the study. The doors close behind him. Alyce watches as Meena opens the container which is filled with a dozen rare Serenno blood roses. Meena picks out an attached card, reading the enclosed message with chagrin.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

These were sent by Lord Ganner,
who is looking forward to being
my dinner partner tonight.

ALYCE:

I had a feeling this might happen.
You could excuse yourself.

Meena places the flower box on a side table and rises from her chair with a look of resolve.

MEENA:

No. Lord Ganner needs to be shown
he can't provoke me as easily as
before.

Alyce stares at Meena with guarded optimism, sensing her niece's determination to withstand the company of the Imperial Inquisitor.

ALYCE:

Be mindful...After this event, we
may need to find better ways of
shielding you from his scrutiny.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - AFTERNOON

The camera pans down from the towering buildings and traffic-laden skies above Imperial City to a ground level section, focusing on a tunnel entrance from which pedestrians enter and exit. A tall, black cloaked male with a cowl drawn about his head moves into the tunnel.

INT. IMPERIAL CITY - UNDERLEVEL - LATER

A harsh artificial light casts shadows over commercial structures that thrive in a squalid underground level of Imperial City. Seedy-looking denizens, plus a few nattily attired Coruscanti thrill seekers, move along filth-ridden pathways in search of unsavory entertainments and criminal activities that are known to be had here.

The tall, black cloaked figure, his face still obscured in the shadows of a hood, strides easily through the crowded area, stopping before a run-down cantina known to locals as the Armored Rat. He enters.

INT. ARMORED RAT CANTINA - MOMENTS LATER

Wall globes bathe the smoky cantina's interior with a dingy yellow glow. Loud, dissonant music blares from an alien stage band surrounded by tables filled with a motley mix of patrons being served by garishly dressed cantina girls, both alien and human.

The hooded figure appears, speaks briefly with one of the more exotic bar girls, then walks over to a far corner booth where Tran Hozun, an Imperial Intelligence agent in his late-twenties, wearing a gray cape with the hood down about his shoulders, sits, nursing a Sullustan gin and tonic.

INT. ARMORED RAT CANTINA - BOOTH

Hozun nods in greeting to the hooded figure who takes a seat across from him. The figure pulls his cowl back slightly to reveal the face of Lord Arik Ganner. Hozun looks about the cantina.

HOZUN:

Reminds me of the Outer Rim dives
we used to haunt, searching for
stray Jedi.

GANNER:

Like old times, Agent Hozun...How
are things at Imperial Intel under
Madame Director Isard?

HOZUN:

Isard has her moments, although it's not nearly as stimulating as when you and I served under Lord Jerec.

GANNER:

I'll be dining with her at the Emperor's banquet this evening.

HOZUN:

She once referred to you as a consummate interrogation artist.

GANNER:

How flattering...Did you obtain the data on Zevulon Veers I requested?

HOZUN:

Right here.

Hozun hands Ganner a small cylinder.

GANNER:

Anything of interest?

HOZUN:

Demerits from his Political Reliability Observer and two disciplinary infractions were missing from the Carida files.

GANNER:

Ah, just as I suspected...Who is Cadet Veers' CompForce commander?

HOZUN:

A married ISB chief named Ivo Laibach...who enjoys weekly visits to the alien sector, ostensibly for a manicure from a charming Twi'lek female.

GANNER:

I'm sure his wife wouldn't approve of *that* grooming habit...Getting Laibach to go along with my plans won't be difficult.

HOZUN:

Using the son to disgrace the father...You really have it in for Iron Max.

GANNER:

Family members can be surprisingly
useful in these endeavors.

Ganner settles back into the booth, savoring the shadowy atmosphere. The cantina girl he spoke with earlier arrives, setting an iced blue gin before him. Tran raises his drink to Ganner who returns the gesture. Ice swirls as the glasses clink together in homage to their past...and future.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

The Executor maintains its presence above Hoth as the camera moves around the ice-covered world, showing a ring of Star Destroyers and smaller spacecraft that comprise the Imperial blockade.

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR

TIE fighters zoom by the open v-shaped underbelly of the Imperial command ship as the camera moves up and into...

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY

...the cavernous main staging bay where three Y-85 Titan dropships rise from the hanger floor, each opening their bottom drop-down hatches to show the undersides of four AT-AT walkers suspended by cranes in a battle ready position.

Below the dropships, tech crews roll expanding boarding stairs and quickly attach them to the open walker scuttles for rapid deployment.

Off to the side, armored snowtroopers, in twelve groups of forty men, march in. The platoons form precise rows, then stand at attention, awaiting their orders to board the walkers.

INT. EXECUTOR - OBSERVATION DECK

The camera pans up to a far wall of the staging area where an observation deck holds several officers overseeing the convoy preparations. Seen through a window behind them is General Veers, who briefs his assembled team commanders within a conference room.

INT. EXECUTOR - CONFERENCE ROOM

In the conference room, Captain Dav moves off to the side of General Veers and Major Covell, who stand before a miniature holo projection of the Hoth power generators.

They are joined in their observations by a gray snowsuited, battle armored and helmeted Commander Ian Hiebert, a cold weather veteran in his mid-thirties known to his men as Iceman.

Beside Hiebert is Commander Andru Camp, a native of Zaloriis, whose call sign is Sandman, clad in the same officer's gear, along with Commander Igar, and six other Platoon Leaders who are encased in snowtrooper armor, holding their gleaming white plasteel helmets in hand.

VEERS:

...Walkers, designated Blizzard One through Nine, will advance past the enemy trenches, destroy their power generators, and zip line troops to storm the Rebel base.

A holo of the ice plains leading to Echo Base's main cavern entry appears. He looks up to address Hiebert.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Commander Hiebert, I want your best snowtroopers in Blizzards Three and Five.

HIEBERT:

My men are ready, General.

VEERS:

Good. Those units will dismount before reaching our primary target ...the power generators...clearing any pockets of resistance.

Veers glances at his wrist chronometer.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Gentlemen, Operation Blizzard Force will commence at approximately 1600 CST...Let's get moving.

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - MINUTES LATER

Dressed in a dark gray snowsuit, battle armor and helmet, Brigadier General Nevar, a solid-looking man around the age of fifty, supervises the growing ranks of snowtroopers, walker drivers, and officers that have assembled before and under the hovering Titan dropships.

Off to Nevar's side is Colonel Starck and Sgt. Narthax, both attired in the same gear as the Brigadier General.

Starck points upwards to the observation deck on the far wall of the staging bay.

INT. EXECUTOR - OBSERVATION DECK - SAME TIME

The conference room window located behind the observation deck is now dark. General Maximilian Veers stands imposingly before a curved guard rail, flanked on either side by Dav, Covell, Igar, Hiebert, Camp, and the Platoon Leaders.

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - MOMENTS LATER

The Blizzard Force snowtroopers, AT-AT, AT-ST, AT-AR, AT-PT drivers, officers, and tech crews have finally assembled. Sgt. Narthax steps forward.

NARTHAX:

Atten Hut!

The military contingent stands at attention. All is suddenly quiet within the staging bay save for the hum and creaking of machinery as droids continue to load equipment onto the Y-85 transports.

In the background, an Imperial News Net crew clad in snow gear records the operation as staff and soldiers look upward and expectantly towards the observation deck...

INT. EXECUTOR - OBSERVATION DECK - MOMENTS LATER

...where General Veers gazes loftily down over the immense staging bay area. His booming voice rings out as he speaks to the gathered troops.

VEERS:

The Rebels know we are coming for them...

Short pan of Hiebert, Camp, Igar, and the snowtrooper captain's expressions as they listen to Veers.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Their defensive posture indicates they are buying time to cover an off-planet retreat...

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - SAME TIME

Long shot of the assembled force and transports as Veers' words are heard off-camera.

VEERS: (O.C.)
 (coldly)
 We will cut short their time...and
 show them how costly such tactics
 can be.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - SECURITY FOYER

The newly promoted Admiral Piett, Lord Vader, Grand General Brashin, and Lt. Shekel observe a live action holo feed of Veers' speech from the security foyer's holopad.

VEERS: (CONT'D)
 Our forces will conduct a forward
 assault, pushing the enemy back as
 they try to make their escape...

INT. EXECUTOR - FLIGHT DECK HANGER - SAME TIME

Baron Fel and several suited TIE fighter pilots of the 181st clutch their helmets while watching a holo feed of Veers' battle speech.

VEERS:
 Then, as befits honorable soldiers,
 we can afford to be generous...to
 the navy...who can blow up what
 little is left to flee.

Fel raises an eyebrow, giving a wry smile to his fellow naval aces, as he hears...

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - SAME TIME

...the roar of approval through the army ranks at Veers' last statement.

INT. EXECUTOR - OBSERVATION DECK - SAME TIME

The roar from the soldiers dies down as Covell and Hiebert exchange brief grins. Shot of Veers' back as he returns to address his men in a more serious manner.

VEERS:
 The Rebels believe the individual
 is superior to a collective...They
 are wrong.

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - SAME TIME

The camera pans slowly over the military contingent listening to Veers' voice.

VEERS: (O.C.)
Team effort wins a battle...in war
and in peace time...If we remember
our training...and think and act as
one in the hard fought tradition of
the Fighting 501st...

INT. EXECUTOR - OBSERVATION DECK - SAME TIME

Full frontal shot of Veers.

VEERS:
...the odds of ultimate victory
over those who sow chaos and
lawlessness increases.

Face shot as Veers pauses.

VEERS: (CONT'D)
Men, our enemies await...Let us
fight for order...for honor...
(passionately)...for the Empire!

INT. EXECUTOR - MAIN STAGING BAY - SECONDS LATER

The entire assemblage immediately returns Veers' salute with
a unified shout "For the Empire!"

Officers give orders to the snowtrooper units who begin to
methodically ascend the boarding stairs under the Y-85
dropships into the hanging AT-AT walkers in readiness for a
rapid surface deployment.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

Above Hoth, TIE fighters dart to and fro before the Imperial
Command Ship Executor.

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR

A Y-85 Titan dropship exits from the underbelly of the
Imperial command ship, moving swiftly towards Hoth. It is
followed by two more dropships in close formation.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - MAIN CONTROL DECK

Admiral Piett, Grand General Brashin, and Darth Vader stand
before the bridge view port watching the Y-85 convoy head
downwards to the ice world of Hoth.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH - STAR DESTROYER TYRANT

The ISD Tyrant, part of an Imperial blockade of vessels ringing Hoth, awaits the enemy.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE - MORNING

Roaring winds whip through a line of X-wings that are parked on a lower part of a ridge overlooking the ice plains. Rebel soldiers and pilots move about the fighter ships, while behind them in the distance massive pod-shaped transports are being readied for take-off. One heavy transport lifts and departs upward, escorted by two X-wing fighters.

Dyn Mawr, still dressed in his orange pilot suit and helmet, stands on the far ridge gazing through his electrobinoculars towards the ice plain below. Arie Nugeen, also in pilot gear, trudges up a snow bank to join him.

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - ECHO STATION THREE-T-EIGHT

The lens shows a close up of Echo Station Three-T-Eight...the first line of defense before the main power generators. Rebel soldiers holding heavy blaster rifles run along fortified snow trenches dug on either side of DF.9 anti-infantry turrets that are pointed at the barren ice plain.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE - MORNING - MOMENTS LATER

Arie reaches Dyn just as he lowers his electrobinoculars. She speaks loudly above the howling winds.

ARIE:

The first transport took off.

DYN:

(looking back)

Vorra's aboard that ship.

Dyn turns, raising the electrobinoculars to his eyes towards the fleeing heavy transport.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH - SAME TIME

Above Hoth, a squadron of TIE fighters zoom past the ICS Executor.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - COMMAND WALKWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Lt. Venka, an efficient-looking naval officer in his late thirties, supervises technicians working the panels within the crew pits on either side of the command walkway.

Venka calls out to Admiral Piett who is standing near the weapons alcove conferring with a controller.

VENKA:

Admiral, the enemy blast shield is open...ISD Tyrant reports a Rebel ship headed their way.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH - SAME TIME

Escorted by two X-wing fighter ships, the Rebel transport breaks free of the planet's atmosphere, moving into the ISD Tyrant's blockade sector.

EXT. HOTH - REBEL BASE - SOUTH ENTRANCE - MORNING

Embedded into the rebel base mountainside, a giant ball-shaped ion cannon fires two crimson energy bolts skyward.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE - MORNING - SECONDS LATER

Bracing herself against the winds, Arie shivers next to Dyn who gazes into his tilted electrobinoculars while the ion cannon beams shoot upwards. Dyn adjusts his electrobinoculars to get a better view of the escape attempt.

Below, on either side of Dyn and Arie, Rebel soldiers look upward and await the first transport's fate.

INT. ELECTROBINOCULARS - SECONDS LATER

The lens adjust to view the ion cannon fire overtake the fleeing Rebel transport and X-wings, hitting the ISD Tyrant's conning tower which explodes, disabling the Imperial ship.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

The Rebel transport and its fighter escorts rush past the incapacitated Star Destroyer, making a successful jump into hyperspace.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE - MORNING - MOMENTS LATER

Dyn lowers his electrobinoculars, smiling in relief.

DYN:

Looks like they made it through!

Arie motions triumphantly down to the Rebels who are gathered near the parked fighter ships and then to the entrenched soldiers of Echo Station Three-T-Eight. A loud cheer erupts through the wind whipped ice plains.

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR - SAME TIME

Above the planet Hoth, TIE Fighters dart back and forth before the ICS Executor.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - WEAPONS ALCOVE - SECONDS LATER

Grand General Brashin joins Admiral Piett who is looking over the shoulders of a controller in the weapons alcove.

CONTROLLER:

(looking at a screen read out)

Com-Scan reports enemy V-150 fire.

PIETT:

(surprised)

An ion cannon? Lock onto its coordinates.

CONTROLLER:

(working some controls)

Too late, sir...their blast shields are back up!

Lt. Venka calls out to Piett from the crew pits.

VENKA:

Admiral, the Tyrant has been disabled...requesting immediate assistance.

PIETT:

Order the Fleet to move back from the cannon's trajectory. We'll intercept the Rebels deep...

Piett turns back to Grand General Brashin.

PIETT: (CONT'D)

(under his breath)

...and hope Max levels their power supply before any more slip by us.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW PLAIN - MID-MORNING

Y-85 Titan dropships hover over a snow plain, lowering nine standing All Terrain Armored Transport (AT-AT) walkers, a dozen AT-ST and AT-AA cold weather scout vehicles, medic droids, probe droids, and supply runners.

Five of the released AT-ATs begin to march out from under the dropships towards the open ice plains, their colossal metal limbs rise and fall with a thud, shaking the ground beneath them. Six AT-ST scout walkers scurry alongside the walkers, while several military probe droids float in the foreground.

The remaining four AT-ATs and other support vehicles and equipment remain stationary, ready to follow the five lead walkers for backup after the initial assault.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - MID-MORNING - MOMENTS LATER

Fierce winds howl as the five giant AT-ATs lumber across the barren ice plains accompanied by the smaller, more nimble AT-ST scout walkers. The camera focuses on the lead Imperial walker, its creature-like head bobbing up and down slightly from the tunneled neck as it moves towards the rebel base.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER ONE - COCKPIT

General Veers stands behind two walker pilots, staring out the window over the ice plains at the oncoming snow-covered mountain range. A hazy blue theater shield is now visible in the mid-morning sun.

VEERS:

All units, this is Blizzard One,
report, over.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - MID-MORNING - SECONDS LATER

Above shot of the AT-AT group making steady progress over the ice plains.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER TWO - COCKPIT

Brigadier General Nevar stands before two walker pilots. Part of Blizzard One can be seen to the left of the wide window.

NEVAR:

Blizzard One, this is Blizzard Two,
all systems go, over.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER THREE - COCKPIT

Major Freja Covell moves quickly into the cockpit from the neck tunnel, bracing himself as he grabs hold to the back of one of his walker pilot seats.

COVELL:

(into comlink)
Blizzard One from Blizzard Three,
ready to kick Rebel butt, over.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER FOUR - COCKPIT

Colonel Starck and a snowtrooper captain gaze out through the cockpit window over the heads of the walker pilots who work the controls. Starck answers into his comlink

STARCK:

Blizzard One, to Blizzard Four,
copy Major Covell's credo, over.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY

Within the cramped troop carrier bay of the walker, Commander Hiebert stands before a closed bottom hatch while forty of his snowtroopers secure their rappeling gear for a ground descent. Hiebert speaks into his helmet comlink.

HIEBERT:

Blizzard One from Blizzard Five,
awaiting your signal, over.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER THREE - COCKPIT

Major Covell speaks into his helmet comlink to Hiebert.

COVELL:

Cold enough for you and your men,
Commander?

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY

Commander Hiebert leans next a lever mechanism, looking over his snowtroopers while he answers Covell.

HIEBERT:

(into comlink)
This isn't cold, Major...I'm from
Rhen Var...whenever I gave my old
man trouble, he'd throw me out in a
snow storm...

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER THREE - COCKPIT - SAME TIME

Covell listens to Hiebert through his helmet comlink.

HIEBERT:

(over comlink)
...with out any cushy, heated
gear...

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER FOUR - COCKPIT - SAME TIME

Colonel Starck grins, listening to the conversation.

COVELL:
 (over comlink)
 How'd you survive?

HIEBERT:
 (over comlink)
 I thought about girls.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER TWO - COCKPIT - SAME TIME

A more stern visaged General Nevar gazes out the cockpit window as Covell and Hiebert continue to chat.

COVELL:
 (over comlink)
 That kept you warm?

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER THREE - COCKPIT - SAME TIME

Covell adjusts his armor while Hiebert's voice is heard.

HIEBERT:
 (over comlink)
 No...but it gave me a reason to
 live...Ever been to Rhen Var?

COVELL:
 (into comlink)
 Can't say as I have.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY

While he speaks to Covell, Hiebert points to a snowtrooper's cable winch hook. The trooper makes an equipment adjustment. Hiebert nods.

HIEBERT:
 (into comlink)
 Blizzards and grey skies are the
 norm...

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - MID-MORNING - SAME TIME

With the mid-morning sun behind them, the AT-AT assault group trudges onward over the Hoth ice plains towards the western mountain range.

HIEBERT: (V.O.)
 ...at least this planet's got some
 sunshine.

Camera shot of the AT-AT walker's legs pounding the ground, focusing on a long trail of deep footprints left in the snow as they continue to move forward at a steady gait.

INT. IMPERIAL WALKER ONE - COCKPIT

The tail end of Covell and Hiebert's conversation is heard by Veers as he pulls the walker rangefinder down and peers into it.

COVELL:
 (over comlink)
 Yeah, and a windchill factor to freeze the choobies off a snow worg...Now, I know why they call you Iceman.

VEERS:
 (into comlink)
 All units, this is Blizzard One... Cut the chat...we're nearing enemy lines, over.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE - SAME TIME

Snow gusts swirl as the wind picks up near the north ridge overlooking the battle trenches. Dyn continues to scan the area with his electrobinoculars. He turns towards the plains when something catches his attention. Arie shivers next to Dyn, noting his interest. He turns to Arie, lowering his electrobinoculars.

ARIE:
 What's up?

DYN:
 Imp walkers...about two klicks away, moving northwest.

ARIE:
 Contact the command center.

Dyn points down to the battle trenches.

DYN:
 They're already on alert.

EXT. HOTH - STATION THREE-T-EIGHT - MOMENTS LATER

Rebel officers yell orders to soldiers who quickly man trench posts, their blaster rifles pointed to the horizon.

An Alliance SpecForce team, wearing heavy backpacks and specially designed armor, race by the soldiers to a trench clearing where a row of snow speeder bikes sit. The SpecForce members hop aboard the bikes, lift, and zoom off over the snow fields to set up defensive positions.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET CORUSCANT

The glittering world of Coruscant is seen from space.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - DUSK

The sun sets over the grounds of Villa Motti. Two black cloud cars escort a royal airlimousine to the mosaic landing pad. The android manservant Karuk approaches the limo.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI

Shot of the main villa, focusing on a softly lit second story window.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MEENA'S BEDCHAMBER

Alyce, wearing a blue velvet dress offset by the star sapphire collar given to her by the Emperor, stands before a window in Meena's lavishly appointed bedchamber, gazing out onto the grounds of her estate. She nervously fingers the necklace, turning abruptly as Meena, hair down about her shoulders and dressed in a pearl gray Sindarian silk gown accented by her late mother's opalescent pendant, enters from a dressing chamber, followed by MS-2.

ALYCE:

Lord Ganner has arrived to escort
us to the banquet.

Meena tries to contain her irritation as she moves over to the dressing table and sits down, letting MS-2 gather the long strands of her luxuriant hair. A softly squeaking Nibs rolls over from under the bed, stops, and rests at her feet.

MS-2:

How would you like your hair
styled, your ladyship?

MEENA:

Up...as simply and quickly...no,
not too quickly...as possible.

MS-2 begins to gently twist Meena's hair into an upswept bun while Alyce approaches.

ALYCE:
 Remember what I told you about
 strong emotions...He feeds off
 them...and will wear you down to
 make himself stronger.

Alyce is visibly upset by the impending confrontation.

MEENA:
 I can handle Lord Ganner until the
 General returns.

Alyce's sharp stab of pain at Meena's confident statement
 does not go unnoticed.

MEENA: (CONT'D)
 (concerned)
 Aunt Alyce, please tell me what's
 wrong?

Alyce looks away, gathering her strength as she attempts to
 hide the whole truth from her niece.

ALYCE:
 (fearfully)
 Lord Ganner is a powerful man. He
 and Max must never come to blows...

Meena rises, causing a startled MS-2 to lose the beginnings
 of her hairstyle. MS-2 sounds a mechanical clucking noise.

MEENA:
 (resolutely)
 I won't allow that to happen.

ALYCE:
 Of course not...a duel between them
 would be disastrous...Here, you
 finish up...

Meena sits back down. MS-2 resumes dressing her mistresses'
 hair. Alyce wills herself to become more calm.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)
 ...while I go and attend to our
 loathsome guest.

Alyce kisses Meena's cheek and leaves the bedchamber.

Meena gazes reflectively into the dressing room mirror, fully
 aware that her aunt has not told her all there is to know.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY

Within the library of Villa Motti, a relaxed Lord Ganner, attired in his formal, impeccably tailored black suit and sheathed lightsaber, peruses an ancient hand written volume set upon a carved wooden stand. Ganner looks up from his reading just as the double doors to the room silently open. Countess Alyce Motti enters. The doors close behind her.

GANNER:
(bowing)
Countess Motti, a...

ALYCE:
Yes, I know...a pleasure.

GANNER:
Ah, but the pleasure is all mine.

ALYCE:
Well, seeing as you managed to convince His Excellency to place my niece at your side this evening... it's no wonder you are pleased.

GANNER:
I assure you, my interest in Lady Meena is pure.

Alyce moves closer to Ganner, physically and mentally challenging his presence. He does not move, gazing back at the Countess with equal intensity.

ALYCE:
Pure? As in passion? You Sith adepts are all alike in thinking you alone won't suffer defeat playing our master's games.

GANNER:
A true Sith bows to his destiny... which is dictated by the will of the Force.

ALYCE:
(sarcastically)
Yes, wear the cowl...brandish your lightsaber...and frighten the weak among us with your hypnotic spells.

Alyce's voice and demeanor becoming softer as she realizes her emotions are getting out of hand.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

In the end, the Force is merely a tool...There's nothing mystical or fatalistic about it.

GANNER:

I've heard those same words from a captured Jedi.

ALYCE:

How heartening...I've always felt most Jedi beliefs were far too convoluted.

GANNER:

The Jedi who held such convictions is dead.

ALYCE:

Perhaps your destiny is to destroy me.

GANNER:

That's not my aim, Countess...nor do I wish to harm your niece.

ALYCE:

(becoming agitated again)
Liar! I know what you are...and so does Meena...

At that moment, the doors to the library open, revealing a calm and beautiful Lady Meena, whose expert use of mind shielding has taken both occupants by surprise. The doors remain open as she enters the room.

Ganner smiles in appreciation of Meena's loveliness and moves towards the young woman who does not flinch...or betray her emotions.

Alyce watches the couple with guarded anticipation.

GANNER:

Lady Meena, your entrance took us by surprise.

MEENA:

Indeed? Surely, you must have felt my presence, Lord Ganner.

Meena moves past him with ease to stand by her aunt.

Ganner is now intrigued...and somewhat frustrated...by his sudden lack of ability to sense Meena's feelings. He sends out a subtle mind probe of his own...only to be met with a calm and collected stare from Meena as she smooths out her gown.

Karuk suddenly enters holding two velvet cloaks. Nibs rolls behind, carrying two evening bags atop its boxed form. The mouse droid Nibs squeaks, extending its mechanical hand to grab, then proffer the bags to their respective owners.

KARUK:

Your wraps, Mistress Motti...Lady Meena.

Ganner deftly takes a cloak from Karuk and places it about Meena, his hands lingering momentarily on her shoulders. Meena does not react to his touch, exciting his curiosity.

Karuk helps Alyce into her outer garment.

Ganner reaches down to take the bags from Nibs. The mouse droid lets out a mechanical growl, pulling the items back from Ganner's reach. Ganner is more amused than annoyed at the droid's reaction.

Karuk successfully retrieves the bags from Nibs, handing them to Alyce and Meena. The android manservant turns to Ganner.

KARUK: (CONT'D)

May I bring you your cape, Lord Ganner?

Ganner smiles sardonically at Alyce and Meena's cool bearing.

GANNER:

By all means...it's getting rather chilly in here.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

Caught in the grasp of the Imperial blockade, a fleeing Rebel transport takes a direct hit, exploding in a blaze of fire.

TIE fighters scream in to engage the surviving X-Wing escort as battles wage above and below the ice world of Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - POWER GENERATORS - DAY

Loud buzzing sounds emanate from the rebel base power generators commingling with bitter gusts of wind that whip through the snowy plains and over the trench defenses.

EXT. HOTH - ECHO STATION THREE-T-EIGHT - TRENCH - SAME TIME

From a front line defensive pocket, Rebel soldiers grip their weapons, anxiously awaiting the cause of a steady, rhythmic pounding that shakes the snow-covered ground around them. A Rebel officer peers out onto the frozen tundra to view...

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - SAME TIME

...a line of Imperial walkers becoming visible without the aid of electrobinoculars. The mechanical behemoths have spilt apart into a elongated V formation, becoming larger by the moment, spewing forth bursts of yellow and red beams as they come within firing range of the front lines.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCH - MOMENTS LATER

A laser bolt from the nearing Imperial walkers hits a DF.9 anti-infantry turret that instantly erupts into flames as more fire and explosions detonate along the trench lines, scattering any surviving Rebel troops.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - MOMENTS LATER

Veers' Blizzard One walker is at the forefront, followed slightly behind on either side by Blizzard's Two and Three on the right, and Blizzard's Four and Five on the left.

Several AT-STs are seen darting past the five walkers along with more than a dozen spidery black probe droids that hover and swoop over the area, searching for snow mines, enemy soldiers, and other obstacles. The camera zooms in on the cockpit window of Blizzard One.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

Veers gazes stonily out the viewport at the approaching enemy snow trenches being pummeled by laser fire from the walkers. Veers adjusts his helmet comlink.

VEERS:
 (into comlink)
 Commanders Hiebert and Camp...
 prepare to zipline troops.

INT. BLIZZARD FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY - A SECOND LATER

Commander Hiebert stands near the side hatch, next to an extensible cable deployment rack.

HIEBERT:
 Blizzard Five to...ID 1721,
 Sandman, do you copy, over?

INT. BLIZZARD THREE - TROOP CARRIER BAY - A SECOND LATER

In the troop carrier bay of Blizzard Three, Commander Camp stands next to an identical cable rack.

CAMP:

Blizzard Three, to ID 1559...ready
to roll, Iceman, over.

INT. BLIZZARD FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY - A SECOND LATER

Hiebert looks downward while the walker's bottom hatch drops before his assembled snowtroopers, showing the snow covered ground moving beneath them as the massive walker legs lumber forward, then come to a complete stop.

The trooper commander eyes a small readout screen set beside a extensible deployment cable rack near the hatch opening. He pulls a lever, quickly unfurling a harpoon hooked cable line on a slant through the opened hatch of the walker's underbelly towards the white surface of Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - BLIZZARD FIVE - WALKER DROP HATCH - DAY

An angled harpoon cable shoots downward from the opened hatch of the stopped walker, anchoring itself into the icy ground.

INT. BLIZZARD FIVE - TROOP CARRIER BAY

Hiebert...aka Iceman...urges the first snowtrooper on.

HIEBERT:

Go!

A snowtrooper hooks his hand winch over the taunt cable and glides down from the drop hatch as the next soldier in line waits for Hiebert's signal and does the same.

EXT. HOTH - BLIZZARD FIVE - UNDERBELLY - DAY

Snowtroopers, their arms extended and clutching winches, are seen gliding smoothly along the anchored zipline to the surface, as soldier after soldier hits the icy ground in a practiced roll and stand, ready to do battle on the snow covered plains of Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - DAY

Hoth's pervasive winds stir up gusts of ice and snow, while the ground shakes from the oncoming Imperial walkers in an area located only one klick before the front line trenches.

Parked snow speeder bikes hover nearby while a Rebel Special Forces team hurriedly works against time and the elements to set up mines and defensive positions to stall the Imperial forces headed their way.

INT. - BLIZZARD THREE - TROOP CARRIER BAY - MINUTES LATER

Commander Camp...aka Sandman...oversees the last of his snowtroopers zipline through the hatch. He follows, expertly hooking his hand winch over the cable, then gliding down to the snow-covered ground to join his men.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - BLIZZARD FIVE - DAY

Explosions are seen and heard in the distance as Blizzards One, Two, and Four march towards the power generators, while behind them, the stationary Blizzards' Three and Five finish depositing equipment crates on cable harnesses to the waiting snowtroopers.

From Blizzard Five, troopers detach the last crate, along with the harpoon hook, as the zipline is pulled back into the closing walker side hatch. Snowtroopers hurry out from under the AT-ATs.

HIEBERT:

(motioning to his troops)
Move out!

The massive legs of the walkers begin to rise and fall as both behemoths lurch forward to rejoin the other three walkers, leaving behind the infantry platoons and their officers, who move out against the icy winds onto the frozen battlefield of Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCHES - DAY

Deadly fire from the approaching Imperial walkers rips through the trenches. A group of Rebel soldiers dragging a wounded comrade to safety, momentarily duck for cover as a dozen snowspeeders zoom overhead.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - DAY

Rebel snowspeeders soar towards the five AT-ATs that spew laser bolts from the two chin mounted guns located on the walker heads.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT - SAME TIME

Within the walker cockpit, General Veers raises the walker rangefinder, then grasps the back of his left copilot's seat, steadying himself slightly as he gazes out the window at the oncoming Rebel snowspeeders.

The 1st pilot looks down at a screen showing a dozen moving images accompanied by a visual readout.

1ST PILOT:
T-47s...incoming.

VEERS:
Increase speed. (confidently) They
won't damage this armor.

The pilots work the controls. Veers glances briefly at one of the firing T-47s as it zooms by the right viewport.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - DAY

Escorted by several AT-STs and AT-AAs, the combined snowtrooper units of Commanders Hiebert and Camp march northeastward at a rapid clip over the frozen tundra.

To the right of the snowtroopers, the five walkers are seen lumbering off to the west towards the power generators. More explosions from the Rebel trenches are seen and heard in the near distance. A gun turret erupts into a ball of fire...

CUT TO:

EXT. IMPERIAL PALACE - BANQUET HALL RECEPTION AREA

...emulating a flame that bursts forth then dissipates from a hovering grill surrounded by elegantly attired banquet guests who watch a royal steward extract skewered appetizers with a flourish, placing the roasted edibles onto a serving tray.

Off to the side, a string quartet plays a soft, lilting melody as persons mingle with one another within a lavish column lined reception area while crimson robed royal guards silently line the walls before a closed entrance leading into the Imperial banquet hall.

Lady Meena, on the arm of Lord Ganner, enters. Several of the guests are glimpsed observing the couple's movements. Among them is Sarcev Quest, Tigillinus, and the courtesan Lunelle.

GANNER:
(to Meena)
I'm delighted you accept my company
with such calm...especially after
your words to me at the hunt.

MEENA:
My absence from the banquet would
be an insult to His Excellency.

Ganner gives a half-smile as Madame Director Ysanne Isard, a striking woman in her mid-thirties, whose shoulder length black hair is shot through with a single white streak, approaches the couple. Isard is dressed in a scarlet gown that plays up her eyes, one of which is red, the other ice blue. She acknowledges Ganner with a curt nod.

ISARD:
Good evening, Lord Ganner.

GANNER:
Ah, Madame Director Ysanne Isard,
allow me to introduce Lady Meena
Valorian.

Isard proffers her hand to Meena who accepts it.

ISARD:
The Empire is honored by your
service, Lady Meena.

MEENA:
You're very kind.

ISARD:
Not kindness...truth.

GANNER:
(to Meena)
Director Isard is head of Imperial
Intelligence. She and the Countess
Motti are old friends.

ISARD:
That is correct. I've admired your
aunt's candor since I was a child.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE - ABOVE HOTH - SAME TIME

The Imperial blockade has moved back from orbiting Hoth. Another Rebel transport races from the planet's surface in a desperate attempt to outrun the blockade. Hit by a barrage of fire from the ICS Executor, the transport is decimated.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - COMMAND WALKWAY

Lt. Venka supervises the pit crews, some of whom let out cheers and cries of "got it." Venka looks up to see Admiral Piett leave a group of officers observing the transport's destruction from the main viewport. Piett heads across the walkway to the security foyer. Venka calls out from the pit.

VENKA:
That makes twelve enemy ships,
Admiral.

PIETT:
(nodding)
Carry on, Lt. Venka.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - SECURITY FOYER - HOLOPAD

Piett joins Grand General Brashin and Lt. Shekel who stand to the side of Lord Darth Vader in front of a holo projection of Veers speaking from inside an AT-AT cockpit.

VEERS:
...Conduct troops are nearing a
base entrance...with reserves on
the way.

VADER:
Are you within range of your first
objective?

VEERS:
(confidently)
Yes, Lord Vader. I've reached the
main power generator. The shield
will be down in moments. You may
start your landing.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - POWER GENERATORS

Rebel snowspeeders zoom over, under, and around four walkers as the Imperial war machines lurch menacingly towards the power generator, obliterating everything in their path.

Behind the activity, Blizzard Two has been brought down and exploded, leaving its burning hulk on the ice plains of Hoth.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

Veers checks the main viewport and read outs on the control panel while his pilots carefully maneuver the lumbering walker forward.

CO-PILOT:
Blizzard Two is down, sir...no word
from General Nevar.

VEERS:
Direct auxiliary fire towards the T-
47's.

A snowtrooper captain enters the cockpit from the neck tunnel, awaiting his orders. Veers turns to the captain.

VEERS: (CONT'D)
All troops will debark for ground assault. (to pilots) Prepare to target the main generator.

The trooper nods and leaves the cockpit.

VEERS: (CONT'D)
(into comlink)
Blizzard One to Major Covell, do you read me, over?

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - SAME TIME

On the ground behind the four walkers, Major Covell and a small detachment of snowtroopers holding cold weather speeder bikes watch as two of the lumbering AT-ATs hatchways open, dispelling more troopers who expertly rappel downward onto the ice plains, narrowly missing the massive legs of the walkers that rise and fall with a resounding thud.

Rebel T-47s zoom overhead, ignoring the ground troops, as they turn and circle, heading back to take on the Imperial walkers.

COVELL:
(into comlink)
Loud and clear, General. Looks like we lost a walker, over.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

VEERS:
(into comlink)
Concentrate on taking out those enemy mine positions. Blizzards Six through Nine are in transit, over.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS

Three Imperial probe droids hover before the snowtroopers who hop onto cold weather speeder bikes. Covell lowers his helmet goggles over his eyes, talking into his comlink over the wind and battle noise as he moves towards a speeder bike.

COVELL:
(into comlink)
Right...we'll meet at the base
entrance, over and out.

Covell passes an Imperial News Net duo on a speeder bike with sidecar. The reporter in the sidecar records the activity via a handheld machine. Covell looks straight at the two.

COVELL: (CONT'D)
You reporter embeds know the ground
rules...This is a battle zone...not
a holodrama shoot!

The INN reporters nod. Covell pulls his jumpsuit neck roll up and over his mouth and nose and hops onto his bike, revving the engines. At his signal, the unit moves out and away from the battlefield towards an open plain, with the spidery probe droids in the lead.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - BATTLEFIELD

The walkers make their slow, steady progress towards the power generator, shooting lasers into the oncoming Rebel trenches.

Snowtroopers, accompanied by firing AT-ST's, probe droids, and other battle ware, are seen jogging over the plains towards the Rebel base.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCHES - NORTH ENTRANCE

The Rebel soldiers fight valiantly, but the Imperial onslaught has destroyed most of their heavy weaponry, with more wounded than able soldiers reduced to firing a handful of bazooka like guns and laser rifles from the trenches. An officer assesses the situation and gives the signal.

REBEL OFFICER:
Fall back!

The Rebels begin to retreat towards the North Entrance. As they make their way to safety, they are hit by a barrage of laser fire. Dozens of Imperial snowtroopers, covered by battle probe droids and AT-STs, have cut through the lines, beginning an assault to gain entry into the base.

EXT. HOTH - NORTH RIDGE

Rebel pilots Dyn Mawr and Arie Nugeen continue to monitor the battle from a top the North Ridge. An officer's voice is heard over Dyn's comlink.

REBEL OFFICER: (V.O.)
 Commander Mawr...Lt. Nugeen. Report
 to the South Slope immediately for
 escort duty.

Dyn and Arie exchange looks, then hurry towards the X-wings.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - BANQUET HALL

Reflected within the high mirrored walls of the Imperial State Dining Room, Countess Alyce Motti stands at the head of a long, lavishly appointed banquet table, surveying the scene before the dinner guests are called in.

Stewards busy themselves up and down the chamber, stopping suddenly to bow at the entrance of several crimson royal guards heralding the arrival of the Emperor Palpatine, dressed in his simple black hooded robe.

Alyce gracefully goes down on one knee and bows her head to the Emperor as he approaches, clutching his obsidian cane.

EMPEROR:
 (to the stewards)
 Leave us.

The stewards file out silently into discreet service entry ways. The royal guards move to the background.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)
 (to Alyce)
 Rise.

Alyce does so.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)
 I trust the dinner seating meets
 with your approval?

ALYCE:
 As you will it, my master.

EMPEROR:
 Lord Ganner is quite taken with his
 partner. Given time, and the right
 direction, I'm certain Lady Meena
 will feel the same about him.

ALYCE:
 (pleading)
 She doesn't deserve this.

EMPEROR:
You object?

ALYCE:
(slightly on edge)
He's a torturer...a mind
controller!

EMPEROR:
(dismissive)
We all have our duties...They don't
have to interfere with our personal
lives.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCHES - BUNKER ENTRANCE

Deep within the snow trenches, a tight battle wages between retreating Rebel soldiers and Commander Hiebert/Iceman's snowtrooper unit who exchange bursts of laser fire before one of the round bunker entrances leading into Echo Base.

Under intense fire, the Rebels hastily enter the bunker. The metal entry shuts after them.

INT. ECHO BASE - BUNKER STAIRWAY

The last of the surviving Rebels move quickly down a winding staircase into a wide tunnel chamber carved out of ice.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCHES - BUNKER ENTRANCE

Hiebert and his men pick their way over the dead and wounded towards the closed entrance. At his direction, one of the snowtroopers pulls an explosives charge from a backpack and attaches it to the doorway.

The trooper hurries back to the other Imperials who have taken cover. A large explosion sounds, blasting the entry open.

INT. ECHO BASE - TUNNEL CHAMBER

An explosion is heard in a tunnel chamber off the stairwell. Ice chunks fall from the ceiling as some of the Rebels take up defensive positions behind equipment crates and a small communications console.

EXT. HOTH - SNOW TRENCHES - BUNKER ENTRANCE

Hiebert and the snowtroopers rush towards the large hole blown into the bunker door. One of the troopers activates, then throws a gas grenade into the opening and waits.

INT. ECHO BASE - BUNKER STAIRWAY

The grenade tumbles down the staircase, followed by another, and settles on the floor of the tunnel chamber, emitting a blue-tinged knock-out gas.

INT. ECHO BASE - TUNNEL CHAMBER

Rebel soldiers begin to hack and cough, moving back into the tunnel recesses to avoid the vapors. A few succumb to the fumes, while others are able to find and don masks just as several snowtroopers appear out of the now smoke-filled stairwell firing away at the Rebel soldiers.

Behind the communications console, a young Rebel rises, yelling over the battle noise into an announcement speaker.

YOUNG REBEL:
Imperial troops have entered the
base...I repeat, Imperial troops...

The young Rebel's warning is cut short by a blast to the chest from a laser rifle. He slumps down over the console as Commander Hiebert and his Imperial forces swarm into the area, overpowering the Rebel defenders, most of whom back away, firing, into the tunnel.

EXT. SPACE ABOVE HOTH - EXECUTOR

A TIE Fighter squadron zooms out of the ICS's underbelly.

INT. EXECUTOR - SHUTTLE HANGER BAY

Within a hanger bay, several Lambda-class shuttles are being readied for take-off. Lord Vader enters, along with Admiral Piett and Grand General Brashin, who are dressed in their gray, cold weather overcoats and caps, and doing their best to keep up with the Dark Lord's determined stride.

The trio stops before Vader's shuttle ramp, guarded on either side by a line of snowtroopers. Vader turns to Piett.

VADER:
A 501st contingent will accompany
me to the surface. You and General
Brashin will follow at my command.

PIETT:
Yes, Lord Vader.

VADER:
(pointedly to Brashin)
I want the Rebel Skywalker brought
to me!

BRASHIN:
We'll capture him, my lord...if he
survives the battle.

VADER:
Skywalker is alive, General. I
sense his presence on Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD ONE

While the ground battle rages on, Blizzard One moves near a crashed snowspeeder, crushing the vehicle underfoot. An orange-suited Rebel pilot named Luke Skywalker is seen jumping away from the walker leg, barely escaping the moment of thunderous impact.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD FOUR - SECONDS LATER

Skywalker dashes beneath Blizzard Four, looks upward, then shoots his harpoon gun, making a direct hit with a magnetic head and cable to the underside of the monstrous machine.

Running with the walker while stray laser bolts shoot around him, Skywalker attaches the cable to his belt and rises upward, dangling precariously while cutting a hole into the walker's transit bay with his lightsaber. He activates, then throws a landmine from around his neck into the opening and detaches from the cable, falling onto the icy ground below.

INT. BLIZZARD FOUR - COCKPIT

Colonel Starck stands before the seated walker pilots as a loud boom reverberates outside the cockpit. Starck turns, his scream cut off as he and the crew are immolated by a wall of fire and debris rushing in from the open AT-ATs accordion walkway entry.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD FOUR

The AT-AT halts as a series of muffled explosions sound from within the main body, blasting open the side hatches and head. The now flaming walker is stopped dead in its tracks.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

Veers looks around his lowered electrorangefinder to the cockpit viewport showing the oncoming power generators.

PILOT:
Blizzard Four is down.

CO-PILOT:
Good thing it was nearly empty.

Veers ignores the status report, focusing on his objective.

VEERS:
Distance to power generators?

PILOT
One-seven, decimal two-eight.

Veers looks into the electrorangefinder, carefully lining up the Rebel generators.

VEERS
Target. Maximum fire power.

EXT. HOTH - BLIZZARD ONE

A concerted blast of laser power from the lead walker annihilates the Rebel generators in a catastrophic inferno.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS

Harsh winds swirl around the outskirts of the battlefield as the thunderous explosion from the main power generator's destruction is seen, heard and felt in the distance.

On the ground nearby, Major Covell and his snowtrooper unit chase a Rebel SpecForces team heading towards the base entrance on speeder bikes. A shot fired from one of the Rebels strikes Covell's shoulder. In obvious pain, Covell ignores the wound, clutching tightly onto the speeder bike bars, intent on the pursuit.

Behind the Imperials, hovering droids discharge land mines while Blizzards Six through Nine, carrying fresh troop reinforcements, slowly approach the area.

EXT. HOTH - ICE PLAINS - SNOW TRENCHES

The Rebel defensive fortification has been abandoned to the near victorious Imperial troops who move with increasing ease through the trenches searching for signs of life and identification among the bloodied bodies of the enemy.

A small group of snowtroopers man an E-Web Cannon gun, firing away and successfully hitting the back end of a lone T-47 snowspeeder that zooms overhead.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD ONE

In the air above the trenches, the T-47 tail spews flames from the hit by the E-Web Cannon, zig-zagging erratically over the battlefield towards Blizzard One.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

Veers and his crew members gaze out of the viewport to see...

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD

...a full shot of the T-47 snowspeeder as it races over camera right at the head of the oncoming walker.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT

Veers looks over the shoulders of his crew as the lead Rebel pilot ejects, leaving the fiery snowspeeder on a direct course into the viewport.

PILOT

Look out!

Veers instinctively jumps backwards into the accordion neck walkway, stumbles, and falls just as the oncoming snowspeeder tilts slightly upward.

PILOT:

He's going to...

Part of the underside of the T-47 crashes into the window with a shattering impact, instantly killing the two pilots and causing what is left of the walker head to tilt downward.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD ONE

Close shot of what is left of the Rebel T-47 snowspeeder and the dangling walker head.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - WALKWAY

Seen from the walkway, a blast of cold air whips through an open space where once the viewport, control panel, and crew members were.

On his back, halfway into the accordion walkway linking the cockpit to the holding bay, Veers desperately attempts to raise himself up, but the angle becomes more pronounced. His body begins to slide downward. He grasps onto a floor bar.

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD NEAR BLIZZARD ONE

To the left of a now stationary Blizzard One, another Imperial walker's legs are being cabled by the remaining snowspeeders, one of which explodes in mid air as it is hit by laser fire from the oncoming Blizzards Six through Nine.

EXT. HOTH - BLIZZARD ONE

With the loss of controls, Blizzard One lurches forward, front legs buckling under, as the machine plummets to the ground, it's shattered head and neck resting flat on the icy plains of Hoth.

INT. BLIZZARD ONE - WALKWAY

Still on his back clutching the bar, Veers braces himself to the sudden impact of the walker collapse just as a heavy overhead beam located between the cockpit and walkway descends, crushing his outstretched lower limbs. A brief look of shock falls over Veers before he blacks out from the pain.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - BANQUET HALL

Within the glittering banquet hall, royal stewards serve the salad course to the assembled guests while Emperor Palpatine sits at the head of the table with Alyce to his right as official hostess. To the Emperor's left is Lady Meena whose calm demeanor is shattered by a sudden sense of foreboding.

Meena's emotional display is keenly felt by her dinner companion, Lord Ganner, who adroitly clasps her left hand in his, noting the engagement ring given to her by General Veers. Meena pulls her hand away from him, a look of worry mixed with disdain marring her normally placid features.

Palpatine is amused. Alyce is concerned. More than a few dinner guests, among them Sarcev Quest, who recognizes what game is afoot, note the couple's exchange.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - MID-AFTERNOON

The 181st Squadron, led by TIE Ace Baron Fel, zooms over the devastation wrought by the battle as the now victorious Imperials stage scattered mop up operations and rescue/med missions across the mostly quieted ice plains of Hoth.

EXT. HOTH - AREA OUTSIDE ECHO BASE ENTRANCE

Blizzards Six through Nine are stationed on the plains near Echo Base. A Lambda-class shuttle flies over the walkers, landing next to two other parked shuttles that are guarded by a contingent of snowtroopers located directly outside the base entrance.

EXT. HOTH - ECHO BASE MAIN ENTRANCE

An Imperial flag and a 501st banner flap in the wind near the cavernous opening leading into the captured Rebel fortress.

INT. ECHO BASE - HANGER DECK NEAR MAIN ENTRANCE

Against an ice wall, Commander Andru Camp stands next to a wounded Major Covell who is being attended to by a medic officer. A small medbot hovers in the background.

Commander Hiebert, along with two of his troopers, approaches Camp and Covell, passing a group of INN reporters who are recording the scene.

CAMP:
 (to Hiebert)
 What's up with the interior?

HIEBERT:
 Aside from some flyaways on the south end, the base is ours.

COVELL:
 Let the navy deal with the blast off, we've got a victory party to attend.

HIEBERT:
 Lord Vader won't be celebrating. The Millennium Falcon got away...

CAMP:
 Again?

HIEBERT:
 (nodding)
 He thinks Skywalker is aboard.

INT. ECHO BASE - ICE CORRIDOR

Lord Vader, his towering black form sharply defined by the snow white walls, strides quickly down a corridor of the ruined Rebel base. He is followed by his troops who are hard pressed to match their dark commander's purposeful gait.

INT. ECHO BASE - HANGER DECK NEAR MAIN ENTRANCE

Vader and his men jog out from the corridor into the main hanger deck near the base entrance, which is now filled with Imperial personnel and a line of Rebel prisoners.

Vader passes by Admiral Piett, Captain Dav, Lt. Shekel, and other officers. Dav moves towards Covell and Hiebert.

Piett breaks away from his group and rushes up to the side of Vader, who continues to move towards the entrance, forcing Piett to keep up while the newly promoted Admiral gives his report.

PIETT:
Seventeen ships destroyed...We
don't know how many got away.

Vader stops, turning to Piett, his black gloved hand clenched into a massive fist.

VADER:
(snarling)
The Millennium Falcon?

PIETT:
Our tracking scanners are on it.

VADER:
I want that ship!

PIETT:
Understood, my lord.

Accompanied by his troops, Vader stalks off in the direction of his shuttle seen through the base entrance.

Piett is immediately joined by an anxious Captain Dav, Major Covell, and Commander Hiebert.

DAV:
(to Piett)
Admiral, there's been no word from
General Veers since the shield was
brought down. Permission to launch
a search party?

An uneasy Piett looks out of the base entrance towards the ice plains.

PIETT:
Granted. We'll use my shuttle.

COVELL:
(yelling to the medic)
You, there...Medic...come with us!

The medic nods, gathering up his supplies. The hovering medbot follows.

EXT. HOTH - SOUTH SLOPE

The final transport, escorted by a more than a dozen X-wings, A-wings, and smaller ships, takes off, just as two AT-STs and a snowtrooper unit armed with heavy weaponry appear on the slope, firing a barrage of laser beams at the fleeing Rebels.

The smaller ships begin to break off in different directions, hoping to draw the oncoming fire away from the transport.

EXT. HOTH - AIR ABOVE SOUTH SLOPE

A squadron of TIE fighters screams over the mountain top, engaging some of the trailing Rebel fighters in aerial dogfights.

EXT. SKY ABOVE HOTH - DYN'S X-WING COCKPIT

One of the X-wings piloted by Dyn Mawr flies beside the giant transport as it races away from the planet Hoth.

INT. DYN'S X-WING COCKPIT

Dyn works his controls, glancing back at the shrinking ice world.

DYN:
(into comlink)
Blue Leader, this is Blue Five...
Request permission to engage enemy
below.

INT. BLUE LEADER'S X-WING COCKPIT

BLUE LEADER:
(into comlink)
No go, Blue Five. Unless there's an
eyeball on your tail, stick with
the mission at hand.

EXT. SKY ABOVE HOTH - ARIE'S X-WING COCKPIT

Arie Nugeen's X-wing flies next to Dyn's fighter.

INT. ARIE'S X-WING COCKPIT

Arie can see Dyn's X-wing outside her window.

ARIE:
(into comlink)
Hold your fire, Dyn, we've got a
fleet of Star Destroyers waiting
for us.

INT. BLUE LEADER'S X-WING COCKPIT

Blue Leader studies a message readout on his screen.

BLUE LEADER:
(with surprise)
Negative. The ones in our sector
have pulled away...they're moving
towards the asteroid belt.

EXT. SKY ABOVE HOTH

The Rebel transport and it's fighter escort breaks through
the atmosphere of Hoth...

EXT. SPACE - PLANET HOTH

...into space. In the distance, two Imperial Star Destroyers,
accompanied by TIE fighters are seen inexplicably racing away
from the oncoming Rebel transport towards an asteroid belt.

INT. ARIE'S X-WING COCKPIT

ARIE:
(into comlink)
Is it some kind of trap?

INT. BLUE LEADER'S X-WING COCKPIT

BLUE LEADER:
(into comlink)
Could be they're after The
Millennium Falcon. If so, I'm
not complaining.

INT. DYN'S X-WING COCKPIT

DYN:
 (into comlink)
 Me neither at this point.

EXT. DEEP SPACE

Blue Leader's voice is heard as the last transport and escort move farther out into space.

BLUE LEADER: (V.O.)
 Get ready to jump. Force willing,
 we'll meet at the rendezvous point.

The massive transport breaks away from the fighter escorts, disappearing into hyperspace. One by one, the X-wings and A-wings follow, until the space surrounding the planet Hoth is empty of Rebel activity.

CUT TO:

EXT. HOTH - BATTLEFIELD - BLIZZARD ONE - LATE AFTERNOON

The bitter winds of Hoth gain in intensity as the sun begins its descent over the ice plains, casting shadows over the wreckage and human devastation of the battle's aftermath.

A Lambda-class shuttle is seen parked next to the downed Blizzard One which is half covered by the drifting snow.

Standing before the AT-AT remains, a grim-faced Admiral Piett, Captain Dav, Lt. Shekel, and the medic officer wait in the cold, watching as a snowtrooper team headed by Covell and Hiebert begin their search for General Veers.

The snowtroopers enter the open transit bay hatch, while Covell and Hiebert move around the walker head.

EXT. HOTH - BLIZZARD ONE - COCKPIT HEAD

Covell crouches before what is left of the walker's head, peering in. He grabs a flashlight from his belt and shines it into the cockpit. Hiebert glances down at a small pad that lights up, emitting a small beep.

HIEBERT:
 I've got a lifeform reading...and
 positive ID...it's the General.

Covell rises in alarm, wincing from pain as he absently clutches his momentarily forgotten shoulder wound. His voice cracks as he roars out orders over the howling winds.

COVELL:

Get me a crane! Get me a medbot!
Now!!!

Admiral Piett and the others rush forward...

FADE TO:

EXT. SPACE - CORUSCANT - FIVE DAYS LATER

The glittering world of Coruscant comes into focus.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - IMPERIAL PALACE - MID-DAY

The mid-day sun shines over the Emperor's pyramidal palace and royal gardens, causing the main structure's smooth durasteel walls and obsidian towers to glisten.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND CORRIDOR

Monumental tiers of cut-glass windows soar upwards to the vaulted ceiling of the Grand Corridor within the Imperial Palace. Double rows of towering, greenish-purple Ch'hala trees, tended by floating MN-2E droids, line the vast hallway packed with visitors, diplomats, military, and civilian personnel.

Surrounded by a cluster of Ch'ala trees is a seating area and large holo pad from which an INN holo vid appears, displaying aurebesh wording and symbols denoting it as breaking news announcement.

Most of the persons in the vicinity automatically stop to observe the giant double-sided feed of an attractive female newscaster, wearing the dark gray INN tunic with insignia, seated behind a desk, speaking directly to the viewers.

INN NEWSCASTER:

Attention, citizens, this is an
Imperial News Net special report.
Five standard days ago, soldiers of
the 501st...under the command of
General Maximillian Veers...located
and captured a major terrorist base
of operations.

The newscaster fades from view. In her place is a carefully edited and rousing montage of visual recordings from the Hoth battle zone. A deep-voiced male announcer dramatically narrates the footage.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)

Responding swiftly to reports of criminal activity, the Fighting 501st, led by General "Iron Max" Veers, annihilated a strategic Rebel installation on the snow-covered planet of Hoth...

Battling both the enemy and the elements, Veers and his men fought their way through the bitter winds and across treacherous ice plains, taking down the Rebel's main power generator shielding weapons of mass destruction...

..Weapons which will never again be used to sow death and chaos amongst the peaceful, orderly worlds of the Galactic Empire...

CUT TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY - SAME TIME

Clad in elegant tea gowns, Meena and Alyce watch a smaller scale version of the INN special report continue on a holopad located within the study of Villa Motti.

Overlapping visuals of Major Covell routing the Rebel SpecForces, getting wounded, then ignoring his injuries to bravely lead a charge of snowtroopers before the entrance of Echo Base, and Commander Camp and his men moving through an ice corridor, are shown under the narrative voice over.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)

While the Imperial Navy patrolled the space above, it was the Army mudfoot...or snowfoot as was the case...who lay claim to victory on the battlefield...

Soldiers like Major Covell who, brushing aside his wounds, rallied the troops to successfully charge a heavily fortified area...or Commander Camp, who led his unit deep inside the Rebel's secretive lair.

A holo close-up of Commander Camp making a comment appears.

CAMP:

Some of the CO's claim Operation Blizzard Force may be our finest hour. As for me and my men, we were just doing our job...

The holo of Camp dissolves, replaced by Blizzards Six through Nine moving across the ice plains of Hoth, superimposed over a fluttering 501st banner and Imperial flag. Patriotic music swells over the Announcer's closing words.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)

Pleased with yet another win over a faction bent on the destabilization of the New Order, His Excellency, Emperor Palpatine has recalled General Veers and the 501st back to Imperial Center for a well deserved victory celebration.

Stay tuned as we bring you more developments...This has been an Imperial News Net holo report.

The holo fades from view. Meena's relieved expression turns to joy. Alyce knows time is no longer on her side.

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR

Floating amidst a sea of stars, a Lambda-class shuttle exits from the Imperial Command Ship Executor, flying towards the Star Destroyer Accuser.

INT. EXECUTOR - MEDICAL CENTER - OPERATING ROOM

A stone-faced Veers, clad only in a surgical loincloth, lies on an operating table while Chief Medical Officer Dr. Arnen Taask, assisted by a 2-1B droid and a human medic, puts the finishing touches on a pair of synthflesh covered cybernetic limbs attached to the General at about mid-thigh.

With an electronic surgical tool, Taask opens a compartment located under the faint attachment lines of the left leg, exposing some of the mechanical inner workings. Taask points the tool at a spot within the opening. Veers' left foot jerks.

TAASK:

Flex your toes.

At this point, Veers does not try to mask his revulsion of the process, but successfully complies with the request.

Pleased with Veers' physical reaction, Taask closes the compartment.

TAASK: (CONT'D)
Everything appears to be working.
You may get up now, General.

Veers sits up...slowly at first. He carefully swings his artificial limbs over the operating table's edge and onto the floor. The medic hands Veers a gray robe, which Veers puts on while Dr. Taask gives instruction.

TAASK: (CONT'D)
My staff did all they could to save
your lower limbs...the damage was
beyond repair.

VEERS:
I know...I thanked them for their
efforts.

TAASK:
In time, the attachment lines will
fade...and the prosthetics will
become a part of you...very much
like your natural appendages.

Veers knots the ties of his robe together, looking straight at the chief medical officer, obviously not convinced.

TAASK: (CONT'D)
Most officers refuse cybernetic
implantation, however...

VEERS:
(with finality)
Lord Vader ordered it done.

Veers gazes down in disgust at his artificial legs, then tentatively takes a few steps forward.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LATE AFTERNOON

A military transport leaves the landing pad of Villa Motti.

Lady Janel Piett, clad in a semi-formal dress, is seen heading towards the villa.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - COURTYARD GARDEN - MOMENTS LATER

Alyce and two of her trusted friends, Inna, and Livia, both attired in tea gowns, are seated at an outdoor table in a magnificent walled garden area, preparing to play Twist, a Coruscanti card game popular with high society ladies. Four sets of the colorful cards have already been dealt lying face down on the table.

MS-2 is off to the side before a cart laden with plates of tiny pastries and sandwiches, filling teacups from a steaming silandar. Karuk enters with Lady Janel Piett. Janel moves to Alyce, giving the Countess a peck on the cheek. Karuk goes to where MS-2 is preparing tea.

JANEL:

Sorry, I'm late. A message came as I was about to leave...My husband has been promoted to Admiral.

A murmur of congratulations arise from the ladies as Janel takes an empty seat at the table.

ALYCE:

Did he replace that toady Ozzel?

JANEL:

I'm not sure. Firmus said he left the Executor to take command of the Accuser.

Karuk silently serves individual teacups to the guests and Alyce during their conversation.

LIVIA:

I heard dependents of Ozzel and Captain Needa were expelled from the officer's complex.

INNA:

Lorth Needa? Lady Keia's spouse? Whatever for?

LIVIA:

My source said he and Ozzel ran a foul of Lord Vader. (hushed) Long fall executions, so it's rumored.

INNA:

Captain Needa was a fine officer.

ALYCE:

Quite...and Admiral Ozzel was the opposite...Lord Vader's temper interferes with his discernment.

JANEL:

(worriedly)

Have you any idea why Lord Vader promoted my husband, then ordered him aboard another Star Destroyer?

ALYCE:

No, but I have a feeling Admiral Pielt is better off away from the Executor...in view of the fact that Lord Vader hasn't been mentioned in any of the Hoth victory reports.

CUT TO:

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR

Floating in a sea of stars, the Imperial Command Ship Executor readies itself for a jump into hyperspace.

INT. EXECUTOR - VADER'S MEDITATION CHAMBER - CUBICLE

Seated within a closed, dimly-lit meditation cubicle, the black form of Darth Vader broods, his artificial breathing mechanism deep and sustained as he reflects over the events of the past few days. The emotional conversation on Bespin between Vader and his son Luke Skywalker replays in the Dark Lord's mind.

VADER: (V.O.)

...I am your father.

LUKE: (V.O.)

(anguished)

No. That's not true! That's impossible!

FADE IN:

INT. BESPIN DREAM SEQUENCE - CLOUD CITY - REACTOR SHAFT

Winds swirl around a narrow walkway of the Cloud City reactor shaft as Vader, waving his red tipped lightsaber, backs a wounded, near-broken Skywalker to the edge of a gantry platform looming over a seemingly bottomless central core.

VADER:

Luke. You can destroy the Emperor. He has foreseen this. It is your destiny...Join me, and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son. Come with me. It is the only way.

Vader deactivates and puts his lightsaber aside, holding out his black-gloved hand to his son. Luke waits for an instant, then makes his decision, calmly stepping off the gantry platform into space. Vader looks over the platform and sees Luke falling far below. The Dark Lord's cape flutters in an upsurge of wind, forcing him to back away from the precipice. A rushing noise turns into...

FADE OUT:

INT. EXECUTOR - VADER'S MEDITATION CHAMBER

...the sound of doors hissing open. Vader presses a control button on his chair, causing him to swivel as the meditation chamber's jagged tooth metal seal opens up, revealing the sight of General Veers in his gray service uniform entering the chamber and walking slowly towards the cubicle.

Veers stops, standing at attention before the seated Vader.

VADER:

Are you getting used to the mechanics, General?

VEERS:

(uncomfortably)
Somewhat, Lord Vader.

VADER:

I sense your distaste for such devices...It could be worse.

Veers shifts ever so slightly, ill at ease thinking of Vader's condition compared to his.

VADER: (CONT'D)

The Emperor commands that you wear prosthetics for the upcoming Hoth victory celebrations.

VEERS:

As the Emperor wills it.

VADER:
(mockingly)
So will it be done.

Veers starts at the snide tone coming from Vader, not sure of what he is actually hearing. A short rasping noise, akin to a sigh, escapes from Vader's voice amplifier.

VADER: (CONT'D)
Your son is being brought to
Imperial Center. He will be at
your side during the events.

VEERS:
(proudly)
Thank you, my lord.

VADER:
Tell me about your son.

VEERS:
Zevulon is about to enter the
Senior Academy on Carida. He will
become an Army officer, per the
Veers family tradition.

VADER:
No. Tell me what your son is like?

Veers hesitates, unaccustomed to such a personal question coming from Vader. There is a lull while the disconcerted General silently realizes that he does not have an adequate answer.

VADER: (CONT'D)
I detect disappointment with your
son...

Veers knows it is wise to be honest in the presence of Vader.

VEERS:
My lord, my son has questioned the
Empire's authority. Only recently
has he begun to accept his heritage
and the cost of maintaining order.

Veers suddenly stops, mortified that by telling the truth he has exposed his son's rebellious nature. Vader waves a black-gloved hand in a dismissive manner.

VADER:

You needn't go on, General. I understand...more than you might know. There are no certainties in life...from our sons or from those we serve.

The Dark Lord bows his head. An astonished Veers does not know what to make of Vader's familiarity. There is another silence between the two. Vader raises his head and speaks.

VADER: (CONT'D)

Regarding your officer's request for permission to marry Lady Meena...

Veers brightens at the thought of the military formality.

VADER: (CONT'D)

The petition is denied. You are here by ordered not to have any further contact with her.

VEERS:

(stunned)
My lord, why?

Vader rises from his seat, balling his fists in frustration.

VADER:

The Emperor wills it. So will it be done...

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - COURTYARD GARDEN - LATE AFTERNOON

Alyce, Inna, Livia, and Janel play a final round of twist, holding decorative fan card holders in front of them whilst they converse.

ALYCE:

...No excuses, ladies! We're going to attend the Imperial Angels of Mercy League induction ceremony.

Livia glances at her cards, tossing one down onto a card pile in exasperation.

LIVIA:

Malcor has forbidden our daughters from ever joining. He says it's a marriage trap...Your turn, Inna.

Inna takes her time carefully assessing the game situation and exchanges one card for another.

JANEL:

An officer needs to get married at some point.

LIVIA:

Given it's the right officer...who isn't part of a laser gun wedding.

JANEL:

(to Alyce)

Speaking of weddings, when are you going to announce Max and Meena's betrothal?

Alyce is momentarily saved from answering by Inna, who places her fan card holder right side up on the table, displaying a perfect set known as a "beautiful break."

INNA:

(triumphantly)

Break!

Cries of "Unbelievable!," "How does she do it?" and "Not again!" issue forth from the players as they throw their card fans onto the table. Inna shrugs her shoulders and smiles.

Janel turns to see a troubled Alyce, who has remained silent during the exchange.

JANEL:

What's wrong, Alyce?

ALYCE:

(resigned)

I might as well tell you since the situation is coming to a head.

The ladies listen with rapt attention to a very subdued Alyce.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

There won't be a wedding.

A collective gasp is heard by the guests. Janel gestures for them to be quiet.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)
 His Excellency forbids it. Meena
 doesn't know...She's in the study,
 glued to the holo reports, waiting
 for word from Max.

INNA:
 She needs to be told.

ALYCE:
 (nodding in agreement)
 For some twisted reason, the
 Emperor wants her and that
 handsome snake of his, Lord
 Ganner, together.

The ladies exchange uncomfortable looks between themselves.
 Alyce picks up on their thoughts.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)
 So, there's talk already being
 spread. By whom?

LIVIA:
 Roganda Ismaren's crowd...Inna
 overheard the courtesan Lunelle
 taking bets on Meena's innocence.

Alyce is livid. She channels her anger into a final action.

ALYCE:
 I'm going to court tomorrow...and
 beg the Emperor's favor. Should he
 refuse...I'll break the news to my
 niece.

INT. EXECUTOR - VEERS' QUARTERS

An open bottle of Corellian whiskey and empty glass rests
 before a haggard-looking General Veers, who sits at his desk
 in the living area of his quarters. Veers pours himself a
 drink just as a soft dinging noise is heard.

VEERS:
 Enter.

The main door zaps open. Captain Dav steps into the room.

DAV:
 You called for me, General?

VEERS:

I have an unpleasant duty for you
to perform...one which will require
the utmost discretion on your part.

A puzzled Dav awaits his orders while Veers raises the drink to his mouth. Veers thinks the better of it, slams the glass down, sloshing most of the contents onto the desk top and on himself.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

(distraught)

It involves Lady Meena.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - EARLY AFTERNOON

Hundreds of colorful flags flutter in the breeze as workers and hovering droids prepare the Imperial Palace and grounds for the upcoming Hoth victory celebrations.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Crimson robed royal guards line the walls, standing silently at attention as elaborately dressed courtiers meander about a pillared hallway of the Imperial Palace.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - SATE PESTAGE'S OFFICE

In the opulent waiting area of Grand Vizier Sate Pestage's office, Countess Alyce Motti, clad in an understated gown of black Sindarian silk, accented with the heirloom House of Motti opalescent brooch, lingers with Lady Inna, who is dressed in her formal court attire of gray silk and pearls.

Alyce and Inna curtsy as Grand Vizier Sate Pestage, wearing his official scarlet robes and high hat, enters the area followed by two royal guards and several aides.

PESTAGE:

Countess, I regret to inform you
that His Excellency, the Emperor
Palpatine is not receiving today.

Alyce inclines her head, hiding her disappointment.

ALYCE:

(graciously)

Thank you, Grand Vizier Pestage.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Grand Admiral Tigillinus and Lord Ganner, clad in his fitted black robes and sheathed lightsaber, stride down a hallway, passing royal guards, preening courtiers, and other palace hanger-ons.

They stop to speak with another of the Emperor's current favorites, Prince Xizor, a tall, exotic-looking alien from the planet Falleen, who is rumored to be Overlord of the Black Sun, a powerful galactic criminal organization. An attractive blonde female bodyguard named Guri, in reality a human replica droid, is beside Xizor, keeping watch over their surroundings.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY OFF ALCOVE

One of Palpatine's more ambitious mistresses, Lady Roganda Ismaren, a Force-sensitive beauty in her late-thirties, moves down the hallway towards an alcove containing a coterie of overdressed, simpering courtesans, among them Lunelle, who tease and flirt with the dashing Coruscanti playboy Sarcev Quest.

Roganda glances down the hall and eyes Prince Xizor and his party before she turns into the alcove.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

After a brief exchange, Xizor and his companion move on. Tigillinus and Ganner move off to the side conversing with one another.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ALCOVE OFF HALLWAY

Sarcev Quest gives Roganda Ismaren a courtly bow, while the assembled courtesans, aware of Roganda's prestige...and well-known pride...curtsy at her entrance.

SARCEV:

Lady Roganda, you grace us with
your presence.

Roganda capriciously refuses to reply to her rumored former lover Sarcev's greeting. Giving him a blank stare, she turns to address the courtesans instead.

ROGANDA:

What's all this simpering about?

Some of the courtesans giggle, looking over at Lunelle.

LUNELLE:

Sarcev's a spoilsport. He won't wager on whether or not Countess Motti's niece succumbs to Lord Ganner's charm.

Roganda, a known rival for Alyce's position, is amused by the wicked prospect. Knowing she has pleased one of the Emperor's favorite concubines with her game, Lunelle smiles broadly.

SARCEV:

Never bet against Countess Motti. The odds are stacked in her favor.

ROGANDA:

The bet concerns Lady Meena, not the Countess...although a loss on Alyce's part is overdue.

ALYCE: (O.S.)

Is that so?

Roganda and the others turn towards the voice to see Countess Alyce Motti standing regally in the hallway outside the alcove, accompanied by Lady Inna.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

You're getting lax, Roganda. A woman of your talent should have sensed my presence before now...but then, you were never as powerful as you let others believe.

The startled courtesans watch as Roganda bristles at the insult. Sarcev steps forward to try and diffuse an awkward situation.

SARCEV:

Now, Alyce...

ALYCE:

(angrily)

Stay out of it, Sarcev! This is between me and the whores.

ROGANDA:

(sneering)

Who's calling a black hole black?

Channeling her pent-up frustration, Alyce answers Roganda by summoning a negative burst of Force-drawn power, directing it at her rival...who is thrown violently up against the alcove wall, narrowly missing a shrieking Lunelle and two others.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Sharp cries are heard down the hallway from the alcove as curious courtiers gather, realizing something of import is happening. Tigillinus and Ganner move from their spot to get a better view of the commotion emanating from the area.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ALCOVE OFF HALLWAY

An astonished Inna watches as a dark and terrifying Alyce advances on the dazed Roganda.

ALYCE:

Unlike you and your cohorts, I
never embraced our profession.

There is fear in Roganda's eyes as she senses Alyce's growing might...and unpredictable behavior.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Most of the courtiers, including Tigillinus and Ganner, have moved down the hallway, craning their necks to get a look at the disturbance. Royal guards are seen moving into the area.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ALCOVE OFF HALLWAY

Breathing heavily, Roganda braces herself against the wall, too weak to counter the attack. Alyce ignores Roganda to focus attention on Lunelle who has recovered from the shock; her malice towards Alyce outweighing her affright.

ALYCE:

Lord Ganner is near by...Perhaps
you should ask him his take on the
odds?

LUNELLE:

(scornfully)
You're no better than us...and
neither is your niece! Aghh...

An infuriated Alyce places a Force-choke on Lunelle. The courtesan falls to her knees, gasping for air.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY BY ALCOVE

In view of the alcove, Lord Ganner senses a presence behind him. He softly taps the shoulder of Tigillinus. The two look back, and immediately go down on one knee at the sight of Emperor Palpatine, escorted by a contingent of crimson robed royal guards, treading down the hallway. One by one, the other courtiers react, acquiescing to the galactic ruler.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ALCOVE OFF HALLWAY

Alyce, her back to the hallway, continues to focus dark energy on the now prostrate form of Lunelle, unaware of the male courtiers behind her dropping to their knees. A horrified Lady Inna bravely calls out.

INNA:

Alyce, for Meena's sake, stop!

Alyce pauses in her concentration, just as Inna sees the approaching Emperor, whose expression is filled with sinister delight as he savors the Dark Side being called forth for a deadly purpose. Inna bows her head, curtsying deeply.

EMPEROR:

(goadng Alyce)

Go on...complete what you have started.

Hearing Palpatine's command, Alyce is overcome by a sense of revulsion at the manifestation of evil unfolding within her. She releases Lunelle from the choke-hold, turning slowly to face her master who, flanked by a contingent of royal guards, stands expectantly before the alcove, the look of perverse rapture on his wizened face fading. Perspiration beads on Alyce's forehead. Shaking, she grasps her left arm in a hugging motion to steady herself.

ALYCE:

(with conviction)

I can not.

The assembled onlookers wait with bated breath for the Emperor's reaction to Alyce's refusal; with a shot of Ganner and Tigillinus glancing up from their kneeling positions with keen interest. A traumatized Lunelle remains on the floor, not daring to move.

The Emperor finally lets out a disappointed tutting sound and gestures to Alyce.

EMPEROR:

Come with us.

Alyce, still trembling from the dark exertions, moves to her master's side. Palpatine glances over at one of his royal guards and points to the cowering Lunelle.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Finish what the Countess began.

A sweep of crimson cape shields the majority of spectators from view as a force pike instantly rises and falls over the unfortunate courtesan, whose death is quick from brutal efficiency, not mercy.

The Emperor and an ashen-faced Alyce, followed closely by the royal guard contingent, exit the area, leaving the less seasoned courtiers to gawk and whisper excitedly amongst themselves.

A rattled Roganda and her associates make a swift retreat past Lady Inna who stands alone, avoiding the ghoulish spectacle of Lunelle's body being taken away by palace security men. Sarcev Quest joins Inna.

SARCEV:

May I escort you somewhere?

Inna eyes the Coruscanti playboy with suspicion, unsure of what to do next. She gauges his sincerity before making a decision.

INNA:

Take me to Villa Motti.

Sarcev leads Inna down the hall, passing Admiral Tigillinus and Lord Ganner. Ganner turns to Tigillinus with a sardonic gleam in his eye.

GANNER:

Nothing like a Force cat fight to make an afternoon more interesting.

EXT. SPACE - PLANET CORUSCANT

The massive ICS Executor moves smoothly into orbit above Imperial Center.

EXT. SPACE ABOVE CORUSCANT - EXECUTOR

Several Lambda-class shuttles and troop transporters emerge from the Executor's hanger, heading downward to the planet.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - LATE AFTERNOON

The shuttle convoy flies over Imperial City towards the Manarai Mountain range.

EXT. CORUSCANT - MANARAI MOUNTAINS - MONUMENT PLAZA - LATE AFTERNOON

The shuttles land on Monument Plaza, a vast arena located a top one of the Manarai Mountain peaks.

Open to the public, the plaza is the only place where the average citizen or visitor can actually touch the surface rock of the mostly urbanized planet. Surrounded by memorial statuary and a sprawling mall of shops, restaurants, and halls built in classic architectural style, it is the most recognized landmark on Coruscant...and is well known to the many worlds of the Galactic Empire.

Thousands of cheering spectators, mostly military types and their dependants waving small Imperial flags, encircle a raised platform draped with victory wreaths and patriotic banners, awaiting the arrival of the triumphant 501st.

EXT. MOUNUMENT PLAZA - CENTRAL GATHERING HALL - SAME TIME

An attractive female INN reporter stands before the entrance to the Central Gathering Hall. The magnificent hall's iconic clock tower is seen and heard striking the 1600 hour as the reporter comments on the proceedings.

REPORTER:

Thousands of military dependents have gathered here on Monument Plaza to welcome soldiers of the 501st, whose great victory at Hoth may be a turning point in a Civil War begun by Rebel terrorists.

EXT. MONUMENT PLAZA - LANDING PAD - SAME TIME

The reporter's commentary is heard over the wildly cheering throng, while a shot of Stormtroopers bearing 501st banners descend a shuttle ramp, followed by Grand General Brashin, the newly promoted Brigadier General Veers and Colonel Covell, plus Commanders Hiebert and Camp.

REPORTER: (V.O.)

Grand General Malcor Brashin and Brigadier General Maximilian Veers have just arrived...met by family and friends who gather 'round the heroes of Hoth!

Grand General Brashin is greeted with a kiss by his wife Lady Livia. Brashin's pretty daughters, Marya and Katya, aged twelve and fourteen, give their father a welcoming embrace.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY - SAME TIME

Lady Meena and Lady Inna are seated comfortably in the study of Villa Motti, watching a live holo feed of the official welcoming ceremony from Monument Plaza. Nibs lies at the feet of his mistress.

A close-up shot of Veers being approached by actionholo star Alanna Nova, clad in a clinging, low cut red gown and holding a small victory wreath, appears.

REPORTER: (V.O.)
 Holo star Alanna Nova, honorary
 spokesperson for the Military
 Entertainment Organization, greets
 General Veers with a ceremonial
 victory wreath.

CUT TO:

EXT. MONUMENT PLAZA - LANDING PAD - SAME TIME

Veers reacts rigidly to Alanna Nova's unexpected kiss and hug. She waves to the crowd, raising the victory wreath to cover her mouth as she speaks softly to the General.

ALANNA:
 (apologetically)
 Sorry, darling, but the Propaganda
 Ministry put me up to this...I'm
 not trying to rekindle the past!

Alanna blows a kiss to the crowd and hands the wreath to Veers, who stiffly accepts the token from the holostar whom he once had a brief affair with.

CUT TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY - SAME TIME

Meena's hands grip the chair arms as she watches the sexy actress disengage from Veers via the holo feed.

MEENA:
 (to Inna)
 The General doesn't look very
 comfortable, does he?

The holo feed cuts from Veers and Nova to...

EXT. MONUMENT PLAZA - LANDING PAD

...a heart warming scene of Commander Hiebert getting a double hug from his wife and three-year-old daughter Katee.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - LATE AFTERNOON

Giant red and black flags hang from the Imperial Palace and flutter over the festooned grounds as preparations for more victory celebrations are nearing completion.

The camera moves upward to the highest tower of the pyramidal structure.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - OBSERVATION TOWER - LATE AFTERNOON

Within the palace tower, an overwrought Alyce Motti walks around the circular chamber, occasionally glancing out the curved windows to the traffic-laden skies of Imperial City and Manarai Mountain range beyond. She starts at the sound of elevator doors opening.

Emperor Palpatine, clad in his black hooded robe, steps out into the room, leaving his two crimson robed sovereign protectors behind in the elevator. The doors hiss shut on the royal guards as Alyce goes down on one knee to her master.

EMPEROR:

(moving to Alyce)

Your refusal to obey disappoints me, Countess...I dispatched Lord Vader to rectify the matter between General Veers and Lady Meena.

The Emperor stops, leaning on his obsidian cane to hover malevolently over Alyce, whose fear mixed with despair is evident as she bows her head to avoid his gaze. He reaches out a gnarled hand to cup the Countesses' chin, lifting her frightened face to his. The contact makes her skin crawl.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

How you despise my touch...Still, I forgive your disobedience...Rise.

The Emperor removes his hand. Alyce rises to her feet, gathering what little courage she possesses in his presence.

ALYCE:

Master, if you throw my niece to Lord Ganner, I'll have nothing to live for!

EMPEROR:

(dismissive)

Spare me your dramatics...She isn't under a death sentence.

The Emperor moves to a window, staring out at the panoramic view of Imperial City.

ALYCE:

(anguished)

Why do you allow him to toy with her?

EMPEROR:

(turning)

Lord Ganner is strong in the Force
...as was his father...Count Dooku.

ALYCE:

Dooku? Does Lord Ganner know you
had the Count put to death?

EMPEROR:

He believes Lord Vader killed his
father to become my apprentice.

ALYCE:

And Meena's part in all of this?

EMPEROR:

She and Lord Ganner will breed,
giving rise to a Sith Empire...a
chosen generation...raised from
infancy to serve me in the Final
Order.

ALYCE:

(in horror)

Not Meena...not her children!

EMPEROR:

(moving back to Alyce)

My vision demands Force-sensitive
bloodlines.

Alyce falls to her knees in supplication before Palpatine,
her dignity gone as her eyes implore him to reconsider.

EMPEROR: (CONT'D)

Enough! I didn't come here to
listen to your entreaties.

Leveling his concentration on Alyce, Palpatine stretches out
his hand, drawing out some of the precious life energy from
her being. Alyce strains, visibly becoming more debilitated
while her master continues the leeching process.

ALYCE:

(weakly)

No...please.

EMPEROR:

Impudent as ever...Were it not for
the pleasure your life force gives
me, I would have dealt you a
harsher punishment by now.

Alyce's strength quickly diminishes. She falls in a faint to the floor. The reenergized Emperor looks down on his mistress with immense satisfaction.

FADE TO:

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - DUSK

Dusk descends over Villa Motti. A small military transport is parked on the landing pad.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIVING AREA

Within the luxurious living area, Captain Dav stands before the carved, stone fireplace, nervously fingering a small message cube he holds in his right hand.

Lady Meena enters, her expression elated, then quizzical, as she senses Dav's discomfort.

MEENA:

Captain Dav, how good to see you again...Are you sure you won't join me and Lady Inna in the study?

DAV:

I must decline...I'm here at the General's behest...to relay a private message from him to you.

MEENA:

(pointing to a divan)
Won't you please sit down?

DAV:

It might be best if you had a seat.

A perplexed Meena moves to a divan, seating herself before an unhappy Captain Dav. Soft squeaking noises are heard. The mousedroid Nibs appears, rolling in from the entry to halt at Meena's feet. Dav shifts uneasily, clearing his throat.

DAV: (CONT'D)

Lord Vader has ordered General Veers to sever all contact with you.

MEENA:

(distressed)
What ever for?

DAV:

The General wasn't given a full explanation...Believe me, Lady Meena...he is devastated by the command.

Dav moves over to Meena, who is in shock from the news. He goes down on one knee before her to grasp her trembling hand in his.

DAV: (CONT'D)

The General felt you should have this.

He places the message cube in her palm, then rises. An incredulous Meena gazes down at the object. Dav turns to leave the room.

DAV: (CONT'D)

(softly)
I'll be outside.

MEENA:

Please...don't go.

Dav reluctantly takes a seat beside Meena who leans forward, twisting the message cube onto a low table before the divan. The cube spins, emitting a small, 3-D recorded image of a distraught General Veers. Veers speaks, his voice cracking.

VEERS:

Lady Meena, by now Captain Dav has informed you of Lord Vader's order. I deeply regret that I can't be with you in person...This is very difficult...for me...for us...

The message cube breaks up for a moment, losing the image. A cut image returns, with a more composed Veers in a different position addressing Meena whose eyes are beginning to tear.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

A reason was not given as to why we must remain apart...As a general's daughter, you must understand the importance of my following orders without question...

Meena reaches for Captain Dav's hand. She can barely watch the image. Dav, constrained by having to witness so personal a scene, overcomes his embarrassment and gently clasps her hand in his.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Despite what you may see or hear in the days ahead, there is still a war to be won...As befits a good soldier, I will do my duty...May you go on with your life, doing good for others...remembering (his voice cracks again)...how much I love you...

The image of General Veers fades into nothingness. There is a brief silence broken by the sound of a single sob escaping Meena. She buries her head on the young captain's shoulder. Dav comforts her in his arms; his expression wracked by his loyalty to the Empire, sympathy for the General, and his own feelings of tenderness towards Meena.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - LATER THAT EVENING

The moons of Coruscant shine over Villa Motti as a royal transport glides onto the well-lit landing pad.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN HALLWAY

A tense Lady Inna moves quickly down the main hallway towards the entry where Karuk is taking a cloak off a weary Alyce. Karuk exits the area while the two friends embrace. Exhausted from her encounter with the Emperor, Alyce leans on Inna.

ALYCE:

Karuk told me Captain Dav was here.

INNA:

She knows.

Alyce looks down the hall, gathering what little is left of her strength to go her niece.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL CITY - OFFICERS HOUSING - EVENING

Late evening traffic weaves in and out of an officers complex. The camera zooms in on the main building, focusing on an upper level housing unit.

INT. OFFICERS HOUSING - VEERS' LIVING QUARTERS - EVENING

Captain Dav clears an empty glass and bottle of Corellian whiskey from a chair stand. He sets them back down again at the sound of the main entry doors opening.

Zevulon Veers, clad in his junior cadet uniform, with a gear bag slung over his shoulder, steps into the living area.

ZEV:

Hello, Dav. My leave got held up by a day. Too bad I missed the opening ceremony. (looks around) Where's father?

DAV:

Asleep.

ZEV:

(surprised)
Has the victory hoopla worn him out already?

Zevulon puts his bag down, oblivious to Dav's unease.

DAV:

I'm afraid it's more serious than that.

ZEV:

What do you mean?

DAV:

There are things you should know about your father's injuries...and his relationship with Lady Meena.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - AFTERNOON - A WEEK LATER

Festooned with fluttering banners and flags celebrating the victory at Hoth, the towering pyramidal structure of the Imperial Palace dominates the Coruscanti skyline.

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - LANDING PLATFORMS

Shuttles and transports are seen flying onto the palace landing platforms.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND CORRIDOR

The Grand Corridor of the palace is more crowded than usual as royal stewards and palace security guards direct people to special programs being held simultaneously in the Royal Hall and Royal Conference Chamber.

Lady Aniva Suba and two other matrons bearing tall banners are seen traveling down the corridor with a double line of young ladies, each identically dressed in white gowns and gray sashes embroidered with the aurebesh wording and symbol of the Imperial Angels of Mercy League.

From out of the crowd, an older couple approach a steward.

MAN:

Where can we purchase tickets to
General Veers' speech?

STEWARD:

I'm sorry, sir, but that event is
sold out.

WOMAN:

(disappointed)

I knew we should have bought some
sooner.

STEWARD:

Seats are available for the Angels
of Mercy Induction Ceremony...

The steward gestures in the direction of Aniva Suba and her
troupe who continue marching towards the Royal Hall.

STEWARD: (CONT'D)

Lady Meena Valorian is scheduled
to speak.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER DOORS

Royal guards stand before the entrance to the Emperor's
private audience chamber.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER

Lord Arik Ganner, dressed in his black service uniform and
sheathed lightsaber, stands respectfully before Emperor
Palpatine, who is seated on his throne, flanked by his
crimson robed sovereign protectors.

EMPEROR:

(chuckling)

So, Tigillinus and Prince Xixor are
plotting to defeat Admiral Thrawn
and Lord Vader.

GANNER:

Yes, my master. Xixor claims his
Black Sun enterprise has suffered
from their interference.

EMPEROR:

I sense there is more to this
scheme.

GANNER:
Prince Xixor asked if I would be
willing to kill Luke Skywalker.

EMPEROR:
Did he explain why?

GANNER:
No.

EMPEROR:
Do you have any idea?

GANNER:
I felt it had to do with disgracing
Lord Vader...in a personal way.

EMPEROR:
Hmmm. Find out what they have in
store for Thrawn...As for Xixor's
request, I might have you agree to
it.

GANNER:
Such an assignment would be an
honor, my master.

EMPEROR:
You're unafraid of destiny, Lord
Ganner...a fine trait in a Sith.

Ganner bows his head in homage to his master's compliment.

Palpatine stares down at Ganner, mentally sizing up the
Imperial Inquisitor's strength, suitability, and possible
threat to himself, as plans within plans roll into motion.

EXT. SPACE - REBEL RENDEZVOUS POINT

X-wings, Y-wings, and other fighters weave in and out of a
rag-tag assortment of transports, smaller vessels, and a long
medical freighter; all of which carry Rebels who survived
Hoth to meet in this distant corner of the galaxy.

EXT. SPACE - TRANSPORT EMANCIPATOR

The camera moves in on the Rebel transport Emancipator
floating at the edge of the fleet.

INT. TRANSPORT EMANCIPATOR - CORRIDOR

Dyn Mawr and Arie Nugeen, dressed in their Rebel service uniforms, walk down a crowded corridor of the Transport Emancipator.

ARIE:

When do we leave for Paxillia?

DYN:

Tonight. We'll fly the Blue Nebulae...Command wants as much hardware as the ship can hold.

ARIE:

Vorra's coming with us?

DYN:

(nodding)

Along with a good gunner. The Imps tightened security...we might have to make a run for it.

ARIE:

Gone are the days of a well-oiled bribe.

The two turn into an entrance that leads...

INT. TRANSPORT EMANCIPATOR - CAFETERIA

...into a cramped cafeteria. An INN holo showing General Veers being decorated by Darth Vader, a military parade, and other victory events shimmers on a holopad in the area. Cries of "Hey, where's the sound?" and "Fix the sound!" are heard from some of the Rebels.

Vorra Kyrr and Dos Haxx, a young male gunner, are seated at a table in the corner. Vorra waves over Dyn and Arie to her table. Dos Haxx rises.

HAXX:

(shaking Dyn's hand)

Commander Mawr, I'm Dos Haxx...your new gunner.

DYN:

(gesturing to Arie)

This is my second, Lt. Nugeen.

Haxx shakes Arie's hand. The group sits down just as the holo sound of an INN Announcer's voice blasts the area, causing them to jump.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.)
...Accompanying the General is his
son, Cadet Zevulon Veers...

A holo close-up of Zevulon Veers waving from an aircar during the victory parade is shown.

ANNOUNCER: (V.O.) (CONT'D)
...who, like his illustrious father
before him, will attend the Carida
Military Academy this year...as a
proud testament to the youth of our
glorious Empire...

Dyn and his crew try to get down to business over shouts of "Turn it down!" and "No, turn it off!" coming from the assembled Rebels.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ROYAL CONFERENCE CHAMBER - LATER

Spontaneous applause emanates from the standing room only crowd who have come to hear Brigadier General Veers finish his speech in the massive Royal Conference Chamber.

Looking every inch the quintessential war hero, an erect Veers, clad in his dress uniform with noticeably more medals pinned under his rank bar, is stationed behind a podium located on a stage at the end of an impressive chamber.

On the stage behind Veers, various dignitaries, planetary officials, Sector Governors, Colonel Covell, and a sleepy Zevulon are seated. Covell gives Zev a good natured elbowing. Zev straightens up, doing his best to stay awake and look interested in the proceedings as the applause dies down.

Veers continues with his impassioned remarks.

VEERS:
...These are the same insurgents
who, while claiming the Empire is
illegitimate, ally themselves with
smugglers and criminals, while
venerating the fallen Republic, a
government so corrupt that it was
unable to maintain order...This, in
turn, led to the Clone Wars, which
caused death and untold suffering
to innocent civilians across the
galaxy...

Veers pounds his fist on the podium; his voice booming louder with the next paragraph of his speech.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

This so-called Alliance to restore
the Republic is immoral, illegal,
and like its political forbearer,
The Republic, is doomed to defeat!

The audience bursts into more clapping, cheering, and shouts of "Glory to the Empire"...

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ROYAL HALL - SAME TIME

...mimicking the enthusiastic crowd gathered in the stately Royal Hall for the Imperial Angels of Mercy League induction ceremony.

Several hundred young ladies, attired in white gowns and gray embroidered sashes, sit demurely in tiered rows forming a semi-circle behind a raised podium platform on which Lady Meena stands, clad in a gray-blue silk dress and sash, bowing politely to the audience. Lady Aniva Suba arrives, shaking Meena's hand while they exchange words which are left unheard due to the thunderous noise level.

Meena makes her way back to her seat on the platform next to a seated Alyce, Inna, Livia, Janel, and several other women dressed in semi-formal attire. Aniva takes over the podium, waiting for the clapping to cease before she speaks.

ANIVA:

I'm sure all of the young ladies
present were inspired by the words
of Lady Meena...

Aniva looks back briefly at Meena, giving her what purports to be a smile, the effect of which is ghastly.

ANIVA: (CONT'D)

Before we conclude the program, it
has come to our attention that a
few of our graduates have differing
views on what is expected of them.

Quick shots of the "Angels" and audience filled with proud parents, relatives, and friends are shown while Aniva continues, using quotes from the official charter.

ANIVA: (CONT'D)

Be assured that their duties as Imperial Angels of Mercy are to "show compassion" and "dispense care to civilians in need"...with far less emphasis on "giving inspiration to our brave military personnel."

More than a few newly-installed "Angels" giggle and twitter in response. Alyce, Livia, and Janel exchange knowing looks.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ROYAL CONFERENCE CHAMBER ENTRANCE OFF GRAND CORRIDOR - LATER

Veers is surrounded by admirers who shake his hand, ask questions, and bask in the aura of the General's celebrity status. Ivo Laibach, a rotund, middle-aged male, dressed in the quasi-military style of an Imperial Security Bureau battalion chief, approaches Veers.

LAIBACH:

General Veers, I'm Chief Ivo Laibach...your son Zevulon's battalion commander.

Veers recognizes the name...and import of Zev's CO, immediately offering a hand shake.

VEERS:

How do you do.

Off to the side, away from Veers and Laibach, Zevulon and Colonel Covell watch the activity. With some dismay, Zev notices his father and Laibach engaged in conversation.

ZEV:

(groaning)

Oh, no...Laibach's here.

COVELL:

Who's that?

ZEV:

My CompForce commander...More like CompFarce commander.

COVELL:

Easy now...don't cut your CO.

ZEV:
He's an ISB Chief, not a military
officer...He's also an idiot.

CERISE: (O.C.)
Hello, Zev.

Zev turns at the sound of a familiar voice to see Lady Cerise Plath and three other young ladies, attired in white gowns and gray sashes of the Imperial Angel of Mercy League, all smiling coyly on the son of the Empire's latest hero.

ZEV:
Lady Cerise, what brings you here?

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - GRAND CORRIDOR OFF ROYAL HALL ENTRANCE
- LATER

Under one of the Ch'lala trees lining the Grand Corridor, Zevulon Veers waits, watching the Royal Hall entrance while giddy Angels of Mercy graduates, along with their family and friends, enter, leave, or mill about the area.

Lady Meena appears exiting the Royal Hall. Zev waves his hand to signal her. She nods in acknowledgement, but is stopped briefly by several well-wishers before she makes her way to Zevulon's side.

MEENA:
I apologize for having kept you
waiting, Zev...Lady Cerise said
you wanted to speak with me.

ZEV:
(looking around)
Let's find someplace more private.

The two are seen leaving the area by one of Aniva Suba's banner matrons who led the earlier march along the Grand Corridor. With a look of disapproval, the matron reenters the Royal Hall.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - UPPER HALLWAY OVERLOOKING GRAND
CORRIDOR

Lord Ganner, in his black service uniform, and Lady Ursa Mercetti, attired in a red gown encrusted with sparkling jewels, move down an open upper hallway overlooking the Grand Corridor.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - BALCONY OVERLOOKING GRAND CORRIDOR

Zev and Meena are together on one of a series of viewing balconies that jut out over the corridor below. The tops of towering Ch'lala trees are seen behind the couple, rising to the lofty ceiling above as musical vibrations shoot up their trunks in time to a shimmering tonal color change from the greenish-purple leaves.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - UPPER HALLWAY OVERLOOKING GRAND CORRIDOR

Further down the hallway, Lord Ganner spots Meena and Zev conversing on the balcony. He halts, steering Lady Ursa over behind a pillar.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - BALCONY OVERLOOKING GRAND CORRIDOR

Meena listens patiently while an exasperated Zev finishes his train of thought.

ZEV:

...If I were father, I'd refuse to appear at any of these functions...

MEENA:

He can't avoid his duty.

ZEV:

Duty? Orders? Without a decent explanation as to why two people in love are kept apart?

MEENA:

To disobey would risk losing more than his commission...

ZEV:

That's what Dav said...

Zev looks over the balcony railing at the crowd wandering the Grand Corridor below; then upwards at a giant Imperial flag hanging from the rafters. He shakes his head.

ZEV: (CONT'D)

I don't see how the two of you can carry on...speaking in front of people...as if nothing were wrong!

MEENA:

What would you have us do, Zev?

ZEV:

I don't know...it's just so unfair.

Meena moves to Zev, putting her hand on his shoulder, more concerned by his upset than her own inner feelings of pain. Both she and Zev barely notice Lady Ursa stepping onto the balcony.

URSA:

Excuse me for intruding, Lady Meena.

MEENA:

Lady Ursa, isn't it? May I introduce...

URSA:

(smiling at Zev)
We've met.

Zevulon gives Lady Ursa a gentlemanly bow.

ZEV:

Yes, at the Manarai Mountain Lodge.

URSA:

My nephew is attending a military school next season, Cadet Veers...I thought you might offer him some advice.

ZEV:

Well, I...

URSA:

Wonderful! He's just down the hall.
(to Meena) You don't mind, do you?

Before Meena can answer, Ursa hustles Zevulon off the balcony and down the hallway. Meena suddenly senses the unwelcome presence of Lord Arik Ganner who slithers in next to her. Meena glances back in the direction of Ursa and Zev, then turns to confront the Inquisitor.

MEENA:

(coldly)
Was that your doing?

GANNER:

(shrugging his shoulders)
Not very clever, but I had to improvise to get you alone.

MEENA:

I want nothing to do with you.

An indignant Meena attempts to leave. She is deftly blocked by Ganner.

GANNER:

You and your aunt chasing me off the doorstep won't stay the inevitable.

MEENA:

We have powerful friends...who won't hesitate to protect us.

GANNER:

Really? Scratch General Veers off your list...the Hero of Hoth is too busy licking his wounds while he is bathed in glory to be of any help.

MEENA:

(outraged)

You've no right to excoriate him!

She makes another attempt at getting away. Ganner grabs Meena by the shoulders, forcing her to look him in the face.

GANNER:

Face the truth...Your General chose his career over you, fulfilling his destiny...Now, you must accept your fate...which is beside me...as my wife.

Ganner realizes his words are rushed. He releases Meena, who is too shocked by his arrogant proposal to respond. Taking a new tact, the Inquisitor begins to focus his powers on her fears...and deep-seated need for love.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

You think you can shield your mind from me forever? Sweet Meena, there are ways to rend a soul into tiny bits...Resist, and you will suffer more pain...more terror...until the very end...when you finally submit.

His black-gloved hand reaches up, gently caressing the nape of her neck. Meena eyes register horror, but her body refuses to move, as her entire being is overcome by a sensation of complete and utter helplessness.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

(softly)

And you will submit...to love and
worship me...serving my wants...my
needs.

Meena reacts, trembling with a primitive desire, her mind reeling from the effect of Ganner's practiced methods of persuasion. He smiles, recognizing the signs of a female coming under his hypnotic spell.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

In return, you will be rewarded
with exquisite pleasure...and the
honor of bearing my children.

The moment is instantly broken by the sound of Zevulon's voice.

ZEV: (O.S.)

If you come across your nephew,
tell him to drop me a line...

An irritated Zev, followed by Lady Ursa, appears outside the balcony entry. Zev registers suspicion as he views Ganner looming over a now recovering Meena. Meena gazes at Ganner with disgust, finally finding her voice.

MEENA:

Your conceit knows no bounds, Lord
Ganner.(to Zev) Take me away from
here.

The young cadet nods, brushing past a frustrated Ganner to take Meena's arm before escorting her away.

Ursa throws Ganner an "I told you so" look. Lord Ganner's eyes narrow as he focuses his pent-up rage on the Mercetti noblewoman, causing her to back away from him in fear.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Meena and Zev move quickly down the hallway. Meena stops at the sight of Castor Vost, the chief royal steward, giving final directions to a palace guest who is sent on his way.

MEENA:

Zev, I've decided to do something
which you shouldn't be a part of.

A puzzled Zev watches as Meena hails Vost. The royal steward smiles and moves towards her, anxious to be of service to Countess Motti's lovely niece.

VOST:
How may I be of service, Lady
Meena?

MEENA:
I need to get in touch with Lord
Vader.

EXT. SPACE - REBEL FLEET RENDEZVOUS POINT

X-wings, Y-wings, and other fighters weave in and out of Rebel transports, smaller vessels, and a long medical freighter.

EXT. SPACE - REBEL MEDICAL FREIGHTER - DOCKING PLATFORM

The Blue Nebulae backs out of a docking platform on the Rebel Medical Freighter. The cargo ship disengages, heading through the assembled fleet.

EXT. SPACE - BLUE NEBULAE

Close-up of the Blue Nebulae cargo ship and its gunport as the vessel flies towards deep space.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - COCKPIT

A sea of stars is seen from the viewport as Dyn and Arie work the controls within the cockpit. Dyn switches on a comlink.

DYN:
(into comlink)
How's the gunport look, Dos?

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - GUNPORT

Gunner Dos Haxx sits in a swivel chair of the domed glass gunport, looking over some read outs from an old targeting computer monitor.

HAXX:
(into comlink)
I'm not so sure about this
targeting computer...or the
shift mechanism.

Haxx switches off the monitor. Dyn's voice comes over the comlink.

DYN:
(over comlink)
Can you make do until we reach
Paxillia?

Vorra climbs up from a ladder into the gunport. Haxx nods his head in thanks, taking a small toolbox from the young Rebel female. Vorra moves back down the ladder into the cabin.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - COCKPIT

Haxx's voice comes over the comlink speaker. Arie and Dyn make the final calculations before the hyperspace jump.

HAXX:
(over comlink)
I might make a go of it.

ARIE:
(into comlink)
Fix it later...we've got three
days travel ahead of us.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - GUNPORT

Haxx swings the targeting computer to the side and gets up from his seat.

HAXX:
(into comlink)
Right.

He climbs down the ladder into...

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - CABIN

...a small cabin area. Vorra is seen strapping herself into a seat.

HAXX:
Dyn says your aunt heads a cell on
Paxillia.

Haxx sits down next to her, buckling his seatbelt.

VORRA:
(nodding her head yes)
She sent word my grandfather was
being watched...We're going to
try to get him off planet.

EXT. SPACE - BLUE NEBULAE

The Blue Nebulae zooms into hyperspace.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - ROYAL HALL

A thinned-out crowd of Angels of Mercy graduates and their well-wishers wander the hall, chatting, giggling, and exchanging greetings with one another.

Aniva Suba and her committee matrons speak with a pair of concerned parents and their daughter about joining the League.

ANIVA:

...Chaperones accompany our Angels at all times during their tours of duty.

1ST MATRON:

(chiming in)
It's all very proper.

MOTHER:

What about pirates?

DAUGHTER:

(breathlessly)
Yes, what about pirates?

The mother glares at her daughter, who is obviously excited, not fearful, by such an adventurous possibility.

ANIVA:

They wouldn't dare attack, let alone board, an Imperial Star Destroyer.

2ND MATRON:

Our tours are held exclusively in the Core Sectors.

FATHER:

Good. That means Core world officers...I don't want any daughter of mine surrounded by Outer Rim riff-raff.

Satisfied that their daughter's marriage prospects amongst the Imperial officers are promising, the parents and their daughter thank Lady Aniva and move on.

A worried Alyce approaches, followed by Inna and Livia.

ALYCE:

Lady Aniva, have you seen my niece?

1ST MATRON:

I saw her a while ago...She was with Zevulon Veers...they went down the Grand Corridor together.

Alyce and her friends exchange alarmed looks.

ALYCE:

(tightly)

Thank you.

Aniva and the matrons observe Alyce and her companions sprint across the hall, stopping only to speak with a royal steward.

ANIVA:

Did you see the look on her face? Perhaps the Veers' family is not as popular with the Countess these days.

1ST MATRON:

Lady Meena and the General were inseparable during the New Year fetes.

2ND MATRON:

One hasn't seen them together at all this past week.

1ST MATRON:

But one does see the General with that holoactress Alanna Nova.

Gratified by the matrons' gossip, Aniva Suba watches as Alyce and Inna leave the hall with the steward.

ANIVA:

(smugly)

Well, it's high time the Countess recognized Lady Meena deserves a better class of suitor...she is, after all, part Motti!

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - LORD VADER'S OUTER OFFICE

Lady Meena and Zevulon sit together in a waiting area of Lord Vader's palace office suite. Two black-garbed aides confer before a reception desk. One of the aides enters a doorway, while the other takes a seat behind the desk.

ZEV:

I never should have left you alone.

MEENA:

It's not your fault, Zev...He would have cornered me some other way.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - LORD VADER'S INNER OFFICE

In a dimly-lit inner office, Lord Darth Vader stands before a view screen secretly watching Meena and Zev engaged in their conversation.

ZEV:

Who is this Lord Ganner?

MEENA:

A very powerful man...and you must promise not to tell your father he was bothering me. (in distress) You really shouldn't be here.

ZEV:

Nor should you...but I won't leave until after you've spoken with Lord Vader.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - LORD VADER'S OUTER OFFICE

Meena looks over at Zev, wondering if she is doing the right thing.

MEENA:

Zev, I'm not going to question the order regarding your father and myself...Lord Vader once kept Lord Ganner away from me and I...

Meena's words are cut short by the entrance of an agitated Alyce, followed by Inna, and the royal steward Castor Vost.

Zevulon and the aide behind the desk rise in the presence of the two ladies.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - LORD VADER'S INNER OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

The view screen is blank. The aide who left the outer office now stands before Lord Vader.

VADER:
 Inform Lady Meena that I am
 unavailable.

AIDE:
 Yes, my lord.

The aide exits the room. Vader moves to a large desk, balls his black-gloved hand into a fist, and violently pounds the surface in frustration.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY

Alyce and Inna walk down the crowded hallway with a very subdued Zev and Meena. The four come to a halt at the sight of General Veers and Colonel Covell, who have come from the opposite direction. The two army officers stop.

There is an awkward silence as Veers and Meena's eyes meet. Veers quickly averts his gaze, trying to hide his pain and avoid any communication with her by confronting his son.

VEERS:
 (sternly)
 It's time to go home.

Alyce and Inna steer a numbed Meena away from the scene while Zev goes to join his father and Covell.

FADE TO:

EXT. IMPERIAL CITY - OFFICERS HOUSING - EVENING

Air traffic weaves in and out of an officers housing enclave that rises amidst the dazzling lights and towering buildings of Imperial City.

INT. OFFICERS HOUSING - VEERS' LIVING QUARTERS - EVENING

Within the living area, Veers and Zevulon face each other in an ongoing argument.

VEERS:
 (angrily)
 You should never have set foot in
 Lord Vader's office...Our careers
 may be in jeopardy!

ZEV:
 Is that what's worrying you?...Your
 career? At this moment, I could
 give a damn about mine!

VEERS:

You *must* understand...

ZEV:

I don't understand! There are so many things about your glorious Empire I can't comprehend...Like why my old tutor Dunbar was sent away...or should I say sold, since the Empire considered him a slave!

VEERS:

He was an indentured servant...a Mon Calmari...whose race rebelled against the New Order and suffered the consequences.

ZEV:

Dunbar was more intelligent than you and I put together!

VEERS:

He was a subversive...

ZEV:

Like some of your human friends who spoke their minds on Imperial policy...and then disappeared?

VEERS:

What has any of this got to do with your going to see Lord Vader?

Zev stares at his father in disbelief.

ZEV:

Everything. I went because of Lady Meena...to be at her side...where you should have been if you had the courage!

Veers moves to strike Zev, but stays his hand at the sight of his son remaining steadfast, ready to receive the blow. He lowers his arm and swerves away, not wanting Zev to mistake the anguish in his eyes for weakness.

His back to his son, Veers attempts to control his emotions ...and justify his decisions.

VEERS:

You think me a coward because I won't fight for Lady Meena...

Veers turns back to look straight into the eyes of his son.

VEERS: (CONT'D)

Tell me, Zevulon, what good would it do if I disobeyed the order, putting not only myself...but the ones I love...at risk?

ZEV:

What does that say about the Empire, father?

VEERS:

Do not denigrate the Empire!

ZEV:

Why won't you answer my question?

VEERS:

A soldier's honor comes before his own desires.

ZEV:

What if a soldier's orders aren't honorable?

VEERS:

Damn it, Zev, don't talk like that! Tomorrow, you leave for a CompForce Hitch...where your loyalty will be tested. (voice cracking) I don't want to lose you as well.

Veers collapses on a chair, putting his head in his hands, too upset to continue.

Zev calms down in view of his father's rare display of unconditional concern...and the fact that their arguments never resolve their differences.

ZEV:

Lady Meena asked me what you and she should do...I didn't have an answer...I believe she understands ...and accepts your sense of duty.

Veers looks up from his hands to view his son, grateful for a confirmation of Meena's current sentiments. Zev looks back at his father, shamefaced, knowing his father is in great pain.

ZEV: (CONT'D)

I'm sorry that I accused you of cowardice, father.

(MORE)

ZEV: (CONT'D)
 Since I was a boy, you were always
 my ideal when
 it came to bravery.

Zev pauses, not yet done, fearful he will say the wrong thing. He decides to let it rest.

ZEV: (CONT'D)
 May I be excused?

VEERS:
 Yes. We're both tired...it's been a
 long, stressful week.

ZEV:
 Good night, sir.

VEERS:
 Good night, Zevulon.

Zev heads towards the hallway. Veers inwardly sighs. His head falls back into his hands in sadness as he reflects on his honor, lost love, and empty glory.

EXT. CORUSCANT - VILLA MOTTI - EVENING

The Coruscanti moons shine through a thin cloud covering over Villa Motti. Flying security droids buzz and whirr about the softly-lit grounds.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN HALLWAY OUTSIDE LIBRARY/STUDY DOORS

MS-2 ambles down the main hallway of Villa Motti to where a whimpering Nibs is seen up against the closed double doors that lead into the palatial home's library/study.

MS-2:
 Whimpering won't pry those doors
 open...

Nibs backs up, swerves, and sounds a series of squeaks.

MS-2: (CONT'D).
 No, I don't think your limited
 circuitry can help...can't you see
 they don't want to be disturbed?

Nibs makes a high-pitched sigh, then rolls back into place.

MS-2 moves closer to the doors, bending her waist and cupping her head's audio sensors with a hand in a listening posture.

Nibs lets out a sputtering noise.

MS-2: (CONT'D)

(indignant)

You shush! I'm not eavesdropping!
I'm gathering data to better serve
our mistresses.

CUT TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY

Alyce pours herself a glass of Luranian brandy from a crystal decanter, while a despondent Meena sits in one of the study's overstuffed chairs listening to her aunt's advice.

ALYCE:

Lord Vader's influence at court is
tenuous...I believe the Emperor may
be searching for his replacement.

MEENA:

(with trepidation)

You don't think Lord Ganner is...

Alyce carries the brandy back to a seat opposite Meena as she speaks.

ALYCE:

I do...And if not him, there are
others jockeying for the position.

Alyce decides not to sit down. She moves behind Meena, lightly touching her niece's head with her free hand. Meena takes Alyce's hand, pressing it momentarily on her cheek.

MEENA:

Is there anything else you haven't
told me...not that I'm blaming you.

ALYCE:

You should blame me...I'm the one
who got you into this mess by not
sending you to Phelarion with your
Uncle Spence...or refusing Baron
Tagge's offer of marriage to his
son.

MEENA:

Baron Tagge's son?

Alyce moves from Meena to the other chair.

ALYCE:

(sitting down)

In light of your current suitor, a loveless Tagge alliance sounds like an excellent match.

MEENA:

I'll always love Max...but if it kept me from Lord Ganner, I might agree to it.

ALYCE:

You're not serious?

MEENA:

I am...No matter how I shield my mind, Lord Ganner manages to get through...I have nightmares that I'll give in...I don't have the strength to resist him.

ALYCE:

(remorsefully)

If only I'd made such a choice in my life...it might not have come to this.

MEENA:

What do you mean?

ALYCE:

There's quite a bit I haven't told you...mostly about my relationship with the Emperor.

MEENA:

You don't have to explain...I know.

ALYCE:

Do you? Well, I suppose being the most recognizable mistress of His Excellency has its benefits...but it never kept those I loved safe from my master's games.

Alice sets her brandy down and rises, becoming increasingly distraught as she paces the floor, compelled by pent-up guilt to finally reminisce about her troubled past.

FADE TO:

FLASHBACK SEQUENCE: The Countesses' voice narrates a montage of flashback scenes in which a teen-aged Alyce, dressed in an array of elaborate, full-skirted gowns fashionable near the end of the Republic Era, and Chancellor Palpatine, clad in his Senatorial robes, primarily appear in. A young Ulrich Tagge, Baron Orman Tagge, a Phelarion Senator, Lord and Lady Motti, Alyce's siblings, a handsome Republic Army Lieutenant, along with courtiers and shadowy Sith figures, are also featured.

ALYCE: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I was only sixteen when I first garnered the notice of Chancellor Palpatine...

My parents had recently arranged an advantageous marriage between me and Ulric Tagge...the younger brother of the then Baron Orman Tagge. Ulrich was a decent enough fellow...but stiff and boring...

In those days, I craved freedom and excitement. So, for the next two years of our betrothal, I set out to raise enough funds to become financially independent of both my family and future groom...

Using my engagement jewelry for collateral, I established contacts with bankers through a Phelarion Senator...It was the height of the Clone Wars...and money was to be made by knowing the right people who knew the right investment strategies...

I had a knack for entertaining... At numerous parties and charity events, I got others to feed me useful information...not only for myself, but for people I had met in positions of power...

It wasn't long before my portfolio grew to enormous proportions...but by then, money wasn't the object, it was the game that mattered...I reveled in the cold, competitive atmosphere...the gossip...and the political scandals that rocked Coruscant during that period...

(MORE)

ALYCE: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Through it all, I was being watched and groomed by the Chancellor. At the time, I prided myself on our platonic friendship...Of all the men I'd known, only he treated me with respect...not as some silly socialite or a potential fling...

I knew from wandering the Senate halls that Palpatine was rumored to be dangerous...and that people who stood in his way were prone to accidents or disappeared...Still, I discounted such talk. His patronage protected me...and gave me a power that I found intoxicating...

As my wedding date neared, I gave back the engagement jewels to Ulric Tagge...much to the dismay of my parents...and possibly Ulrich, who was too much of a gentleman to make a scene over our break-up...

Soon afterward, I fell in love with a Grand Army Lieutenant...I was so enamored of him, that I let things slip...to the point of ignoring an urgent message to meet with the Chancellor...

When I finally did see Palpatine, he was furious. He told me to end the affair...I refused, telling him that I was a Motti...and he had no right to order me about...

After the meeting, my relationship with the Chancellor was no longer platonic...I fought as hard as I could, but I was no match for his strength...or his evil...

The next day, I received word that my Lieutenant had been killed in a traffic accident...

I fled to my family on Phelarion, telling them what had transpired. My father vowed revenge...He was the House of Motti head, and knew others who were growing tired of Palpatine's arrogance and grab for power...

(MORE)

ALYCE: (V.O.) (CONT'D)

A group of nobles met aboard the space liner H'astania...among them my parents...The holo net reports claimed the ship was blown apart by enemy Separatists.

"Remember the H'astania" was the battle cry! I, too, remember the H'astania...yet I don't believe for one moment that it was brought down by Separatists...

Eventually, I was hauled back to Coruscant...on trumped up charges of insider trading...Of course, I was guilty of such doings in the past, but in this case, I swear, I was completely innocent...

Chancellor Palpatine, came to "my rescue" with a pardon. He was now my master...and our relationship resumed, with most persons under the impression that I was a willing participant...

I made one last attempt to escape. A distant cousin of mine, who was a Jedi Knight, offered to help...It was a disaster. My master knew me too well...and I was weak...

Years passed, and I made the best of my situation...My sister Arwa married a Clone War hero and had you, Meena, whom I love as if you were my own daughter...

If not for the few decent family members and friends I've known, I might have gone mad...due to being privy to the petty, underhanded doings of the court...and far worse...the Dark Side wickedness that the Emperor and his demented Sith adepts engaged in...

I foolishly thought my position could shield you from their evil, but I was wrong...

FADE TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY

ALYCE:
...so terribly wrong.

Alyce stands in the middle of the study, her eyes watering in sorrow and shame. Meena has risen from the chair, and goes over to comfort her aunt. She guides Alyce back to the chair.

MEENA:
Mother and I always thought you led
a glamorous life...if only we knew.

Meena hands the brandy snifter to her aunt who is now seated. Alyce absentmindedly plays with the glass rim.

ALYCE:
Oh, I had my moments...Unlike you,
I wasn't entirely naive...I failed
to heed the warning signs and got
caught in a trap of my own making.

MEENA:
Your Lieutenant...what was he like?

ALYCE:
(smiling sadly)
Handsome...of good character...He
was a Count from some obscure line.

Meena has settled in on the floor, hugging her aunt's knees like she did as a child. Alyce gently strokes the hair on top of Meena's head.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)
When Palpatine was made Emperor, he
gave me the title of Countess, even
though there was never any Count...
It was meant to be a jest...a cruel
reminder of my Lieutenant.

MEENA:
And was it?

Alyce smiles again; this time not from sorrow, but from the proud and enduring memories of a first love.

ALYCE:
No...not in the least.

CUT TO:

EXT. CORUSCANT - IMPERIAL PALACE - EVENING

The cloud shrouded moons of Coruscant loom over the palace, giving it a more sinister appearance as its black durasteel and obsidian towers rise above Imperial City.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - AUDIENCE CHAMBER DOORS

Deep within the Imperial Palace, Lord Darth Vader stands before impressively high chamber doors that are flanked by crimson robed royal guards, awaiting an evening audience with his master, the Emperor Palpatine.

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - HALLWAY BEFORE AUDIENCE CHAMBER DOORS

Lord Arik Ganner, dressed in his black tailored Sith robes, and Sarcev Quest, clad in formal court attire, stride down a quiet hallway near the audience chamber entrance.

SARCEV:

Care to join me and two young things for a midnight supper?

The two near Vader, who pointedly ignores their presence.

GANNER:

(smiling)

Another night, perhaps. I have special plans for this evening.

They pass the Dark Lord, acknowledging him with a courtly nod and polite murmurs of "Lord Vader," but receive no response. Exchanging glances, they continue their conversation down the hallway, within earshot of Vader's amplified sound sensors.

SARCEV:

Who is the lady?

GANNER:

It would be impolite to reveal her name.

SARCEV:

Gentlemanly concern coming from You?...She *must* be special.

Vader turns slightly to view the departing duo, clenching his fists.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY - A WHILE LATER

A brief shot of an emptied crystal brandy snifter on a stand within the library/study of Villa Motti.

Meena is now standing, staring with guarded disapproval mixed with sympathy at the liquor stand, while an inebriated Alyce remains seated, nervously circling a near empty brandy glass with her finger.

MEENA:

We really ought to retire. I'll ring for Karuk.

Meena moves to a comlink, and presses a button.

ALYCE:

(slurring)
One more piece of advice...

The Countess makes a concerted effort to speak coherently.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

My cousin...the Jedi...he said a Sith, with enough knowledge, could manipulate a mind...which controls the body...But a mind...or brain... is separate from one's soul...and the soul can't be corrupted without one's permission...

Meena has come to her aunt's side during the conversation. Alyce grabs tightly on to Meena's arm with her free hand.

ALYCE: (CONT'D)

(desperately)
Do you understand?

Meena comprehends the magnitude of such truth...and the realization that she may soon have to confront such a horrific possibility.

MEENA:

I understand.

Alyce releases her hold on Meena. Taking the brandy glass away from her aunt, Meena places it on the table, helping the tipsy Countess up from her seat, just as the entry doors open to reveal Karuk...with the droids MS-2 and Nibs moving in the background.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

Help me get her to bed, Karuk

Karuk heads towards his mistress, while Meena reflects more on the counsel once given by the mysterious Jedi cousin.

MEENA: (CONT'D)
Aunt Alyce...what happened to your
Jedi cousin?

Meena instantly regrets the question as Alyce freezes, her entire being filled with a haunting remorse.

ALYCE:
(anguished)
I betrayed him...

Karuk and a mortified Meena carefully guide the grief-stricken Countess out of the study.

FADE TO:

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - COCKPIT

Hands clasped behind his head, Dyn Mawr leans back in his cockpit seat staring at the blurred viewport window that denotes the ship is in hyperspace.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - CABIN

Arie Nugeen and the gunner Dos Haxx sit at a table playing a round of sabaac. A beeping sounds. Haxx looks over at a small galley unit that lights up.

HAXX:
(to Arie)
Midnight snack time.

He lays his cards face down on the table and wanders over to the area, passing a closed entry to a bunk chamber.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - BUNK CHAMBER

A sleeping Vorra Kyrr lies on the lower bunk of the cramped chamber, her closed lids showing rapid eye movement as she dreams...

FADE TO:

DREAM SEQUENCE: The smooth, ominous voice of Arik Ganner is heard as a small, brightly-lit room holding a cringing Vorra, disheveled and wearing a torn jumpsuit, comes into focus.

GANNER: (V.O.)
What is it you're afraid of, Vorra Kyrr? Yes...I know your name...you gave it to me willingly at our last encounter...or don't you remember?

Terrified, Vorra backs into a corner, crouching, hugging herself to become as small as possible while the backside of Ganner, clad in his gray undershirt, black jodhpurs and leather boots, comes into the frame, looming over the young girl with a menacing purpose.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

(softly)

I know what you fear most...that you might learn to enjoy what I'm doing to you...

Vorra screams...

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - BUNK CHAMBER

FADE IN:

...and screams again. Vorra sits up in the bunk as the doors to the chamber zap open. Doss Haxx stumbles in, attempting to quiet Vorra's terror, but she is having none of it. The girl struggles violently with the gunner until Dyn appears in the entry with Arie.

ARIE:

Doss, let Dyn take over!

Haxx moves out of the chamber. Dyn enters and goes to Vorra, who continues to thrash about. Sitting on the bunk's edge, the Rebel commander grabs hold of Vorra's arms. Arie and Haxx watch from the doorway.

DYN:

It's all right, Vorra...It's me, Dyn...you're going to be all right.

Vorra still struggles, but less so, as Dyn's voice begins to have a soothing effect on her.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - CABIN

By the open entry into the bunk chamber, Arie Nugeen punches a control that closes the door on Dyn and Vorra. The Rebel pilot guides Doss Haxx away from the area.

ARIE:

(lowering her voice)

She's been having these dreams since Nati IV...Command wants her on extended leave.

HAXX:

Got it.

ARIE:

She and her grandfather are going
off planet...together.

INT. BLUE NEBULAE - BUNK CHAMBER - MOMENTS LATER

Dyn has finally calmed Vorra down. He tenderly tucks her into the lower bunk to rest, then sits back on the edge to keep watch until she falls asleep.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MEENA'S BED CHAMBER - LATE EVENING

Moonlight filters through the windows of a lavishly appointed bed chamber. Lying languorously on her bed fast asleep is Meena, whose silk nightgown-clad figure is half-covered by a luxurious satin quilt.

On the floor, at the foot of the bed, the droid "Nibs" lies resting on a small oval rug. Suddenly, Nibs lights up and cautiously rolls over to the chamber door. The little mouse droid sounds a soft inquisitive squeak...its simple sensors indicate that something is very wrong outside the room.

Nibs rolls over to the bedside, squeaks another warning, and extends a mechanical appendage that gently touches Meena's bare arm. Meena awakens with a start. Nibs retracts his appendage. Meena throws off her covers and looks over the edge of the bed to see an agitated little droid who squeaks another warning and then turns, rolling over to the chamber door.

MEENA:

What's the matter, Nibs?

Nibs sounds a plaintive squeak and continues to guard the chamber door. Meena sits up, looking about the room. Her robe and slippers are missing. She zeroes in on an empty chair that MS-2 normally occupies throughout the night.

MEENA: (CONT'D)

MS-2?

Nibs launches into a series of low-pitched squeaks. Meena quickly gets out of bed and moves to the door. The young woman senses something...she is not yet sure what it is. She waves her hand over a wall unit and the chamber doors open. Nibs squeaks another warning and rolls in front of his mistress as if to block her exit from the room.

A worried Meena steps over the droid and out into the hallway.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - LATE EVENING

Meena, followed by an agitated, rolling Nibs, moves bare-footed down the upstairs hallway, her way guided by a series of sensor-driven floor lights. She stops in front of a pair of double doors that glide open into the stately bed chamber of her Aunt Alyce. She enters the room with Nibs trailing behind her.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - ALYCE'S BED CHAMBER

Meena notes that the bedchamber appears empty. Something is definitely not right. Meena moves quickly to a wall comlink.

MEENA:
(into comlink)
Karuk? MS-2?

There is no answer. Again, Nibs launches into a series of squeaking sounds.

MEENA: (CONT'D)
I don't sense Aunt Alyce at all.

Meena picks up the little droid and exits the chamber.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN HALLWAY - SERVICE TURBOLIFT DOORS

The doors of the service turbolift open as a worried Meena, still holding the mouse droid Nibs in her arms, walks out into the dimly-lit main hallway. She carefully places Nibs back down on the floor.

MEENA:
Nibs, show me where Karuk is.

Nibs rolls around in a circle, sounding yet another series of warning squeaks. A frustrated Meena looks down the hall, noticing the soft glow of a fire-lit hearth coming from the living area's open entry.

Meena senses a familiar, but unwelcome presence. She ponders her options for a moment, making the decision to head in the direction of the living area.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN HALLWAY

Nibs follows Meena towards the living area. Nibs quickly accelerates until he passes his mistress, taking a protective lead, suddenly halting when he reaches the open entry. The droid lets out an uncharacteristic low grumbling sound.

Meena arrives and stops before the entry to see...

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIVING AREA

...a sardonically smiling Lord Ganner, dressed in his black tailored Sith robes, leaning next to the stone fireplace with his leather gauntlet-covered arms nonchalantly crossed. He gazes admiringly at Meena, taking in her slightly disheveled beauty and slender figure off-set by the clinging drape of the silken nightgown.

The young woman does not act surprised, nor does she waste time asking him why he is here. She gazes back at Ganner with quiet dignity, waiting for him to speak.

GANNER:

Karuk and your MS-2 droid have been disabled. As for the Countess...she won't be returning for some time.

Ganner unfolds his arms, grabs an iron poker from a stand, and stirs the crackling fire logs. Meena, still standing in the entry with Nibs, maintains her composure.

MEENA:

Where is my aunt?

Ganner turns from the hearth and hangs the iron back onto its hook. He looks at Meena with cool amusement.

GANNER:

She has been summoned to the side of her master...my master...the master of us all.

Nibs lets out another mechanical growl, and rolls bravely at the Sith adept. Ganner waves a black gloved hand at Nibs, who rises, floats for an instant, and is sent crashing into the hallway wall. The little droid's lights are out as it lies motionless on the floor.

Meena becomes indignant, which pleases Ganner immensely.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

At last, an emotional response...
over a machine no less.

Meena glances over at the silenced Nibs, then regains her mental shields, knowing that Ganner feeds off strong emotions.

MEENA:

(calmly)
I won't fight you...you'll get no satisfaction from me.

GANNER:

Ah, but my satisfaction is open to
a great many possibilities.

Ganner moves closer, never taking his eyes...and Dark Side concentration...off her rigid form. Slowly, Meena begins to tremble, her calm demeanor and mental shields cracking under the highly-trained, fear-inducing, hypnotic powers of an Imperial Inquisitor. Ganner's voice takes on a sinister, demanding tone that visibly shakes Meena to her very core.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

Our master has charged me with your
training...You *will* be taught to
obey.

At first, Meena resists, then reluctantly capitulates as Ganner greedily gathers the frightened young woman up in his arms, savoring her intoxicating submissiveness...and growing fear.

Meena's breathing becomes more pronounced. She closes her eyes, and turns her head away, refusing to look Ganner in the face. The Inquisitor smoothly wraps a long strand of her hair in his black gauntlet-covered hand.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

Sweet Meena, do you believe I'd
abandon you for want of a scream
...or a struggle?

Meena finally opens her eyes and looks straight at Ganner, silently pleading as she desperately tries to sense some hidden mercy in his heart.

MEENA:

(breathlessly)
Please...

GANNER:

Please? Please, what?

He answers his own question by roughly yanking Meena's head back by the hair already wrapped in his hand, savagely kissing her. Meena winces, physically unable to ward off his advances. With a sharp pull, Ganner loosens Meena's hair. He finishes bruising her lips, then drags the young woman over next to the fireplace, brutally shoving her up against the wall. Grabbing Meena's bare arms, he deftly pins them both above her head at the wrists with one gloved hand, while his other hand cups her chin.

GANNER: (CONT'D)
 (mockingly)
 Searching are you...for that last
 shred of decency buried deep in my
 dark soul?

Meena's eyes still plead as she tries to remove her hands from Ganner's grasp. She gasps in pain as he applies more pressure to his hold.

GANNER: (CONT'D)
 Your compassion is wasted on me as
 it was on your droid...Not that I
 don't find such angelic concern on
 your part somewhat alluring...

Ganner moves his free gloved hand from her chin, softly tracing a line down her throat, over her silken nightgown, just short of her breast.

GANNER: (CONT'D)
 I might even be persuaded to tell
 you something about myself...where
 I come from...why I am the way I
 am...Interested?

Meena relaxes, taking the opportunity to buy some time, all the while sensing...desperately hoping...there might be something interred in Ganner's being that could be redeemed.

MEENA:
 (whispered)
 Yes.

Ganner eases his grip as he carefully observes the growing hope in Meena's eyes. He lets go of her wrists and Meena's arms fall aching down to her sides.

GANNER:
 (softly)
 Some secrets are best left
 hidden...

Without warning, Ganner pounces mentally and physically on an instantly terrified Meena, who cries out as his body presses up against hers. Ganner's entire person takes on a violent, powerful urgency. His hands roughly grasp her shoulders. His voice becomes husky and filled with dark longing while he bends his head to hers.

GANNER: (CONT'D)
 Sweet, sweet Meena, there's only
 one way you can heal me...

Ganner pushes Meena counter to the wall, smothering her with one demanding kiss after another; his mind violating her own with its depraved intent, wholly focused while he perversely absorbs the fear and despair emanating from the young woman.

Meena begins to hyperventilate, her breaths coming in rapid gasps...that soon become mingled with the familiar sounds of a labored, electrical aspiration.

Ganner's exaltation quickly subsides as he disengages from his psychic feeding frenzy. He swerves about in frustration, glaring with rising anger at the black-armored form of Lord Darth Vader who stands in the entryway.

VADER:

You will leave at once, Lord Ganner.

GANNER:

I am here on our master's business.

VADER:

And I am the master's emissary...
You would do well to remember that.

Regaining her equilibrium, Meena begins to move carefully from the wall away from the confrontation.

GANNER:

(adamantly)
Do not interfere.

VADER:

(contemptuously)
You are an adept under my command.

GANNER:

Then it's time I advanced...

Ganner adroitly activates his red-tipped lightsaber, assuming a warrior's pose of challenge. Vader answers by activating his own saber.

GANNER: (CONT'D)

...to an apprentice.

The ancient weapons hum ominously, while the two Sith sense one another, awaiting the first move. Vader does so with words.

VADER:

So, the whelp of Count Dooku seeks his inheritance.

Ganner starts at the mention of his late father's name, but quickly recovers, vaulting over furnishings in attack mode.

Sabers clash simultaneously as Vader parries the adept's initial stroke.

CUT TO:

INT. IMPERIAL PALACE - EMPEROR'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS

Many levels below the palace core, Alyce, clad in her silken nightgown and slippers, waits on a divan in a sitting area of the Emperor's private chambers. Like the rest of the royal suite, the room is adorned in a stark, but elegant style, using Palpatine's favorite color palette of gray, black, and crimson.

Along the walls, panoramic views of the royal grounds are seen from what appear to be windows...in actuality they are holographic screens, displaying images seen from camera sensors located outside the palace.

Alyce senses an oncoming presence. She rises from the divan just as the Emperor enters, his grotesque features exhibiting an expression of dark amusement.

EMPEROR:

It appears Lady Meena has a champion...

CUT TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - HALLWAY OUTSIDE LIVING AREA ENTRY

The duel has moved to the main hallway as the two Sith continue to clash, their crimson blades swinging furiously with each thrust and parry. Ganner, flush from his energizing encounter with Meena, is slowly gaining the upper hand as he forces Vader to move backwards towards the front door entry.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIVING AREA - SAME TIME

Meena has returned to the living area, anxiously observing the fight in the hall from an arched entry. Behind her, the living area is a shambles, with shattered vases, strewn bric brac, and over-turned, Force-thrown furnishings in ruin from the initial encounter.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN HALLWAY

The battle continues. Low buzzing sounds rise from the lightsaber contact as each weapon seeks to override the other.

Vader swerves to the side, avoiding a hard thrust from Ganner, whose blade slashes into the air, then immediately blocks a riposte from the Dark Lord.

From down the hallway, Meena is seen, still watching the deadly proceedings from a relatively safe distance.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN ENTRY

An arrogant Ganner senses Vader's defeat as he backs the Dark Lord into the main entry area towards the front double doors leading to the outside.

GANNER:

You've become old...(glancing down the hall at Meena)...and weak.

Ganner lunges at the massive, black-armored form...that counters the strike with an agility far beyond its years.

VADER:

No, your father was old and weak.
His legacy can still be yours...

Vader raises his arm, summoning a burst of Force power that throws Ganner violently backwards.

VADER: (CONT'D)

...but not in the way you expect!

The double doors behind Vader slide open, revealing the pilloried front porch and night-lit grounds beyond. Vader steps outside, waiting for the adept to make his next move.

Momentarily blocked, but unfazed by Vader's Force burst, Ganner springs up, hurtling forward through the open entry, ready to best his hated rival.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT PORTICO - NIGHT

The two combatants battle across the porch way. Sizzling flashes of crimson sparks are seen as the sabers clash again and again, igniting the space around them.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - NIGHT

Escorted by black podcars, a royal transport lands next to Ganner's sleek silver speeder and Vader's Lambda-class shuttle parked on the landing pad.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT PORTICO - MOMENTS LATER

From the front porch steps, Lady Meena shivers in the night air, nervously regarding the ongoing duel...now being carried out across the expansive grounds before Villa Motti.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - MINUTES LATER

With the transport and other vehicles behind him, a caped Sarcev Quest, accompanied by several royal guards, is seen walking briskly towards Villa Motti.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

More evenly matched than before, Vader and Ganner are at a stalemate, as neither one appears to have an upper hand over the other.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT PORTICO - SAME TIME

On the porch, Meena leans up against a pillar, watching the scene unfold before her, helpless to intercede, and unsure as to the outcome.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT GROUNDS - MOMENTS LATER

Ganner momentarily notes the arrival of Sarcev and the royal guards. Sarcev halts, observing the duelists with a studied interest.

Vader tries to take advantage of the distraction, bringing his weapon up and over. Ganner deflects the blow, then circles about, using all of his strength to try and cut Vader in two. The Dark Lord narrowly avoids the adept's vicious swipe, stumbling in the process. Vader swiftly regains his balance, his saber humming furiously as he counterattacks.

The two crimson blades lock, holding their position for an sustained period, when the voice of Sarcev Quest rings out.

SARCEV:

The Emperor commands that you cease fighting immediately.

Lord Ganner and Lord Vader stare at one another over locked energy blades that hiss and spark.

Ganner is the first to shut off his weapon. He glares hatefully at his adversary, then casts another look of suspicion in Sarcev's direction. Vader shuts down his lightsaber.

FADE TO:

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - LANDING PAD - DAWN

Dawn is breaking over Villa Motti. Lord Vader's shuttle is the only remaining vehicle left on the pad. A royal transport is seen approaching the area.

EXT. VILLA MOTTI - FRONT PORTICO - DAWN

The reactivated android Karuk escorts a cloaked Alyce up the steps onto the porch of Villa Motti.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MAIN ENTRY - MOMENTS LATER

MS-2, holding an evening robe, stands off to the side of the main entry as Karuk takes the cloak from Alyce who is still clad in her silken nightgown. Karuk exits the area. Helping her mistress into the robe, an excited MS-2 chatters away about the evening's events.

MS-2:

...Oh, Mistress Motti, we were helpless to act...Lord Ganner disabled all of the mechanicals... including the security droids! And poor Nibs...I'm afraid he's done for...

The maidservant droid fastens the robe sash at Alyce's back.

MS-2: (CONT'D)

...How I regret my treatment of him...he was braver than I would have been...And when I think of what might have happened to her ladyship! She and Lord Vader are waiting for you in the study...

CUT TO:

INT. VILLA MOTTI - LIBRARY/STUDY

Within the study, Lady Meena, wearing an evening robe over her nightgown, stands next to Darth Vader, who sits at a desk placing the metal outer shell over the exposed circuitry of Nibs. Vader talks while he seals the mouse droid's shell shut with a small power tool.

VADER:

Your mouse droid is unlike any other...the modular circuit matrix is more complex...and it's missing a territorial restraint.

Vader finishes, putting the tool down. He passes his hand over the starting mechanism. The MSE-6 unit shudders, letting out a series of chirps and squeaks. It then rolls back and forth over the desktop, humming with electrical life.

MEENA:
(reaching for Nibs)
Thank you, Lord Vader...

The doors into the room slide open. Alyce enters, followed by MS-2. Vader rises from the desk.

ALYCE:
Meena, dear, go with MS-2...I'll
meet you in your chamber...Lord
Vader and I need to talk.

Meena nods, then sets Nibs down on the floor. The droid rolls over to a surprised MS-2.

MS-2:
Thank the maker...you're alive!

Nibs squeaks an "Of course, I'm alive" to the MS-2 unit. Meena turns to Vader.

MEENA:
I understand your position, Lord
Vader...and I deeply regret my
putting you in this situation...

A sense of hopelessness overcomes Meena, who finds she can not go on. Her eyes begin to tear...and she all but flees the room, with MS-2 and Nibs scurrying after her. The study doors slide shut.

There is a brief lull as the Dark Lord and Alyce stare at one another. Vader abruptly breaks the silence.

VADER:
We have nothing to discuss. If our
master wishes to see your niece wed
to the Inquisitor, it will be done.

Alyce looks away, knowing full well he can no longer intercede in this matter. Vader begins to exit the room.

ALYCE:
(with quiet desperation)
She's innocent.

Vader halts, just as the study doors open into the hallway. Without looking back, the Dark Lord speaks, his voice tinged with an unmistakable remorse.

VADER:

We were all innocent...once.

The black-armored form strides out of the study, leaving Alyce alone to formulate another plan. Her demeanor changes rapidly as she finally decides to ignore the pain and shake off any sense of defeat.

EXT. IMPERIAL CITY - OFFICERS HOUSING - DAWN

Dawn breaks over the officers housing complex, off-setting the clouds above the towering buildings and traffic-laden skies with a luminous, pastel glow.

INT. OFFICERS HOUSING - VEERS' QUARTERS - KITCHEN

Captain Dav and Zev, both dressed in their respective service uniforms, sit opposite one another at a built in table before a window in the small, efficient kitchen. Dav pours Zev a cup of caffe from a silver pitcher while the young cadet relates his and Meena's last conversation.

ZEV:

...and I told Lady Meena that if she needed to get away, to go see grandfather on Tarsis III.

DAV:

Rather remote for a visit, wouldn't you say?

ZEV:

It might give her some space from that Lord Ganner person.

DAV:

I remember him. He annoyed Lady Meena on Nati IV...an unpleasant fellow.

Zev nods in agreement, then glances out the window, gazing at the air traffic and looming structures of the megalopolis.

Dav slides out from the built-in bench. He grabs his empty caffe cup, taking it over to a sink area, just as a uniformed Veers, looking fatigued, enters the room.

VEERS:

Good morning.

Dav and Zev reply with a simultaneous "Good morning, General" and "Morning, father."

DAV:
Would you care to eat, sir?

VEERS:
(shaking his weary head)
No...I've just received word the
Fleet shoves off at 0900 hours.

DAV:
I'll go ready our gear.

Dav leaves the room. Veers begins to speak, pulling a small box from his pocket as he goes over to sit across from his son.

VEERS:
Before your CompForce Hitch begins,
I want you to have something that
was recently returned to me.

Zev takes the box from his father. He opens it up to reveal the wedding ring set once worn by his mother...and then Lady Meena shortly before she and his father were ordered apart.

ZEV:
I can't accept this, father...these
rings belong to you.

VEERS:
Not anymore. Keep them on you at
all times...as a gift for your
future bride.

ZEV:
But, what if you decide...

VEERS:
(abruptly)
I won't marry...ever again. Your
mother was perfection for me before
she died...and Lady Meena...

ZEV:
(sadly)
...Was perfect for you as well...Is
there anything I can do?

Zev closes the box, cradling it in his palm in acceptance. Veers heaves a sigh, his heart broken, but determined to see the pain through.

He looks at his only son with an unspoken love...and for once, Zev senses its healing presence. Veers reaches out across the table, clasping his hands over his son's palm that holds the ring box.

VEERS:

Do your duty...as your mother...and Lady Meena...would want it.

They look into each other's eyes. Veers is suddenly overcome by pent-up emotion. He breaks down, dropping his head in quiet sobs, while a visibly moved Zev is rendered speechless.

INT. VILLA MOTTI - MEENA'S BEDCHAMBER - SAME TIME

On the edge of her canopied bed, Meena sits quietly sobbing on the shoulder of a more resolute Alyce whose arms are about her niece. MS-2 is seen in the background, placing Meena's night robe and slippers neatly on a chair. The mouse droid Nibs lies at the foot of the bed, rocking back and forth, frustrated by his inability to sooth his mistress.

ALYCE:

...after Lord Vader left, I decided not to give into despair. That emotion comes from fear...which destroys the ability to act...I've been given six weeks to put your wedding together...that's time enough to make other plans.

MEENA:

(sniffling)
What sort of plans?

ALYCE:

I don't know, yet...If this were one of those holomelodramas, you'd be rescued...during the marriage ceremony...which is cutting it too close for our purpose.

MEENA:

What if the villainous groom won't wait until after the ceremony?

ALYCE:

Lord Ganner is going to be kept very busy. I now know the Emperor *is* pitting the two of them against one another...Lord Vader detests court intrigue, but he can hold his own.

Meena straightens up, buoyed somewhat by Alyce's attitude.

MEENA:

You sound so optimistic.

ALYCE:

We can no longer be afraid of the consequences...I'm willing to risk everything to finally be free of my master's control...Are you?

MEENA:

Yes. I love you, Aunt Alyce...and I'll always love Max. Submitting to this marriage without a fight would be a betrayal of that love.

ALYCE:

Then I suppose the loveless House of Tagge match you considered is out?

MEENA:

Was that really an option?

ALYCE:

No...just a thought...and a rather desperate one at that...I'll find a better way out of this mess...just leave all the arrangements to me.

Despite her tears, Meena smiles, giving Alyce a warm, hopeful hug.

EXT. SPACE - ABOVE CORUSCANT

The massive Imperial Command Ship Executor moves slowly out of orbit.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - MAIN VIEWPORT

At the end of the command walkway, Lord Darth Vader and General Veers stand together before the main viewport watching as the ship backs away from Imperial Center.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - SECURITY FOYER

Captain Venka looks over the shoulder of a controller seated at the communications console. He is approached by Admiral Otkins, a near copy of the late Admiral Ozzel, in both looks and temperament, who has been placed aboard the Executor at the Emperor's request. Venka stands at attention.

VENKA:
Admiral Otkins.

Otkins looks down the command walkway at Vader and Veers.

OTKINS:
Has Lord Vader informed us of our
destination?

VENKA:
No, sir. We've been given encrypted
coordinates.

OTKINS:
(annoyed)
I dislike all this secrecy.

INT. EXECUTOR - BRIDGE - MAIN VIEWPORT

Vader speaks to Veers while they observe the glittering world below become smaller, then disappearing from the viewport window as the command ship turns out into deep space.

VADER:
...We will crush the Black Sun
organization...and then what
remains of the Rebel Alliance.

VEERS:
It's time both were brought down
permanently...They tend to recover
after each blow.

VADER:
That will change...And, if things
go as I plan, your own situation
may change as well.

VEERS:
My lord?

VADER:
Patience, General. You and I demand
quickness and efficiency, but great
change requires patience...along
with an element of risk.

Veers is about to question the Dark Lord further, then wisely decides against it. The two warriors remain silent while the crew around them readies the ship for its next mission.

EXT. SPACE - EXECUTOR

The ICS Executor disappears into deep space.

END of PART III

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