

Star Wars

Star Wars Gamer

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The Starfighter Trap

by Steve Miller

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Part One

The palace always seemed to fall into a slumber when Queen Ami-dala was away. Most of the government officials and administrators stayed tucked away in their offices, hoping to get as much datawork off their desks as possible during these quiet times.

The Royal Naboo Security Force administrative offices were almost completely deserted, the Security Officers using the Queen's absence to work on overdue offworld projects or tend to personal business and family responsibilities. Only Essara Till, flight instructor and member of Naboo's elite Bravo Flight, was working at her desk.

For Essara, times like this provided the perfect opportunity to review applications to join Naboo's Starfighter Corps, review maintenance logs and expense reports, and to clear even less agreeable datawork off her desk and the desk of her immediate superior, Bravo Flight's leader and Queen Amidala's personal pilot, Ric Olie.

The only sound coming from beyond her office all morning was the distant buzz of the young on-call pilots of Echo Flight conversing in their ready room, so the echo of approaching footfalls broke her concentration. When she realized the sounds were approaching her office, she straightened up and realized how sore her neck was. A glance at the chronometer on the wall told her she'd been hunched over her desk for three solid hours.

The lanky frame of Essara's wingman, Dren Melne, appeared in the office doorway. "Hi, sweetheart." he said.

"That's Flight Leader Sweetheart," she replied with a grin. "With Olie offworld, I'm top veermok. Don't you forget it."

"A top veermok who spends most of her time doing secretarial duties or playing nursemaid," Dren said as he approached her desk.

"We all serve Naboo in different ways," Essara told him, leaning back in her chair and stretching. "How are the troops?"

"Echo Elight is eagerly studying up on their fighters, hoping that we'll lead them to glory and a chance to fly the N-is." He looked down at her with a slight frown. "Ric really shouldn't waste your talents like this. It's foolish to make his best pilot handle datawork and babysit. Don't tell me you aren't bored stiff."

"If it weren't me doing the expense reports, it would be Ric," she replied.

"Better him than you. You're one of the best pilots in Bravo Flight."

"Y@ur bias is showing." She reached up and gently touched his cheek, smiling as she looked into his eyes. Like her, Dren had spent several years away from Naboo working as a fighter pilot. The two of them had never crossed paths offworld, but when they met after his return to Naboo a little over a year ago, their common experience had fostered an unexpected friendship. In recent months, that friendship had become something more. "Like I told you, Ric doesn't make me do this. I asked to do this. Plus, this way, you and I get to spend some quiet time together."

He took her hand and kissed it. "Maybe. On the other hand, there's a way we can have both."

"Why don't I finish this report, and then we can rent a couple of aircars and head into the mountains for a picnic?"

"I was thinking of something more permanent," he replied. "Remember the governor of the Agamar system and the fighter contingent he's trying to assemble?"

Essara's smile faded. She drew her hand back. "Yes. I told you, I'm not interested."

Dren rolled his eyes and reached for the silver starfighter model on her desk. "Essara, come on! You're wasted here! On Agamar..."

"I'm not interested in mercenary work." she interrupted. "Not any more. I'm on Naboo to stay, and if that means datawork and leading Echo training missions, I can live with that. I've retired from that life, and I like it this way."

"Don't get mad." He put the model down and reached for her hand, but she withdrew it and picked up a datapad. He sighed softly. "Promise me you'll give it some thought?"

Essara leaned back in her chair and threw an exasperated look at the ceiling. "What is it with you and Agamar?]" she exclaimed, fixing her eyes on his again. "It's not like you have fr..."

An alarm blared, filling the office. "All pilots to the briefing room. This is a Class One Emergency." a voice echoed. "I repeat, all pilots to the briefing room."

Essara snapped to her feet. "Get your gear. I'll see you in the briefing room."

"Think about Agamar." Dren said as he turned and ran from the room.

Essara shook her head, scowling with irritation at Dren, the pain in her neck, and the interruption. She opened the locker in the far corner of the office. Her orange flight jacket hung below her helmet and her holstered sidearm with the belt curled around it. She grabbed her gear, pausing briefly to look at the empty hook with Olie's name above it. "I'm happy doing the datawork." she muttered, putting on her helmet.

As Essara and Dren entered the pilots' briefing room, a Royal Security Officer activated the holopod at the front of the chamber. To Essara's surprise, Sio Bibble, the Governor of Naboo and the head of the Royal Advisory Council, was standing a few paces behind the Security Officer, looking impatient.

"Governor Bibble." Essara said, saluting. "This is not a drill, then?"

"No." Bibble replied. His brow furrowed. "This could be a grave situation indeed."

Echo Flight's pilots began to pour into the room with a din of excited conversation and a clatter of equipment. "Echo Flight present and accounted for," Dren said, bringing up the rear.

"The remains of Bravo Flight reporting for duty," Essara said, offering the governor another salute. "Lieutenant Melne and I will command Echo Flight today."

"Fourteen minutes ago, we received a distress call from Station TFP-9," the Security Officer said. The holopod projected a flickering three-dimensional image of the space station at the edge of the Naboo system. It was roughly egg-shaped with a series of docking arrays and refueling ports along its wider extremis.

A Corellian freighter was docked at each of two of the refueling ports. As the image rotated, Essara could see the elongated profile of a Sullustan-designed capital ship. "The station is under attack by a Hornet-class carrier and a squadron of Z-95 Headhunters."

A buzz of conversation erupted among the Echo pilots. Their voices held a mixture of excitement and fear.

"Quiet!" Essara said. The voices fell silent, and all eyes fixed on the image of the station.

"TFP-9, is almost defenseless," the Security Officer continued, offering Essara a slight nod. "Station engineers are still upgrading their point defense weapons systems, so its only defenses are its shields and a pair of stock YT-1250 freighters. I'm sure you can see these are no match for Headhunters. Echo Flight will launch immediately and defend the station. Bravo Flight will lead the mission. Once the raiders have been chased off, a

portion of Echo Flight chosen by Flight Leader Till will remain at TFP-o, until their defenses are back online. Questions?"

"Yes, sir," said Echo Five, a young man named Rhys who had just recently joined the team. 'A TaggeCo Purchasing Agent in Keren once bragged he could buy the whole Naboo system with his personal expense account. Why don't we just get him to pay off these pirates?"

"Stow it, soldier!" Essara snapped. She noticed Dren give the Echo Five a wink and a nudge with his elbow.

"Sir, I have a question.' Echo Eight said in a soft voice. She was a young girl, about sixteen years old, who barely filled her uniform.

The Security Officer nodded at her.

"What kind of Headhunters are those? Standard Z-a,5s or AF-series?"

The Security Officer looked momentarily perplexed and glanced at Bravo Flight leader, who was standing next to him.

"The sensors on the TFP refueling platform aren't fine enough to distinguish between the different types of Headhunters," Essara said. "Pirates are more likely to have Mark Is, though."

'Yes, of course." The Security Officer tried to sound authoritative, but his cheeks were turning red. "That's all the data we have."

"May the Force protect you and the good people of TFP-9" Governor Bibble stated.

"Echo Flight, to your fighters," Dren called. "Prepare to launch!"

"Yes, sir!" The pilots rushed from the room.

Essara followed her pilots down the dimly lit tunnel to the palace hangar, reminding herself to make sure every Security Officer was supplied with the latest technical data on the current generation of Headhunters.

Essara understood why Dren and other "professionals" who had returned home sometimes got frustrated with the Royal Naboo Security Force. Everyone in the Royal Naboo Defense Force was dedicated to Naboo, but most of them lacked the combat experience and mercenary connections that Essara and a handful of others possessed. It was not uncommon for the ignorant to lead the inexperienced in the Naboo's volunteer defense force, but that situation would only change if more seasoned soldiers would impart their experience to the rest. They were living in dangerous times, yet few on Naboo bothered to take notice. Had she ever voiced that sentiment to Dren? Maybe that was the argument that would make him see things her way. Of late, their conversations turned into arguments over whether it was worthwhile for dedicated soldiers to serve in the Royal Naboo Security Force. Dren was clearly unhappy on Naboo, and in darker, quieter moments, Essara wondered if she would have to choose between him and the world she loved.

We'll go on that picnic when this mission's over, she promised herself as she entered the hangar. I'll explain how vital we are to Naboo, how much she needs us. I won't lose my temper, I swear.

Most of Echo Flight were already in their fighters, and the astromech droids were moving the ships into take-off positions. Dren's and Essara's fighters stood out among them, the gleaming chromium and yellow hull plating contrasting the blue Echo Flight fighters. Essara vaulted into the cockpit of her fighter. She plugged her helmet into the comm system. The Rz unit slid the canopy shut and issued the familiar "all systems go" series of beeps and whistles. She double-checked the status indicators. The R2 model was a vast improvement over other astromech droids she had worked with, but she still felt compelled to make sure the droid wasn't overlooking something. All flight systems appeared ready, so she surrendered control of her fighter to Launch Control and double-checked the power allocations of her weapons systems and shields.

I know what I'm doing, Flight Leader, scrolled across the astromech droid interface screen.

"I know, I know," Essara replied on the internal comlink. She checked the droid's identity. They had given her R2-L1 again, a droid she'd nicknamed "Ell-one." There was a

persistent glitch in its personality subroutines that made the unit atypically arrogant and self-assured. "It's a habit."

Understandable. It's a habit you should break. It makes you less efficient

"Bravo Seven to Echo Flight," Essara said into her comlink, ignoring the rest of the droid's comments. "You know the drill. Launch Control will guide you to the combat zone and relinquish control to you when we're within sensor range of the enemy. Make sure your astromech droids have loaded your first proton torpedoes by the time we arrive, and double-check the power allotment to your shields and laser cannons. We're going to need firepower and shields more than speed against those Headhunters. Assume Attack Pattern Zeta-Gamma One as soon as control is surrendered. Sound off, Echo and Bravo Flights."

As Launch Control taxied the fighters to the broad opening of the hangar bay, the pilots checked in one by one. Essara heard Dren's voice first, followed by the pilots of Echo Flight, some of whom sounded too young to drive a speeder, let alone fly a starfighter.

"This is going to be like sailing on Lake Paonga in midsummer, Flight Leader." Echo Five declared over the comlink. "Even if the raiders have Headhunters AF-3S, our ships can take them in a one-to-one match any day!"

"You think?" asked Echo One.

"I studied up on Headhunters after Essara told us the basics," Echo Five said confidently. "They're really far better suited as atmospheric defense craft, no matter what SubPro's marketing claims. We've got better shields, greater range on our weapons due to the superior stabilizing fields in our laser arrays, and better maneuverability and speed because our Nubian drives. This should be over quick."

"Don't be too confident," Essara broke in. "The starfighter is less than half of the equation. I spent one year in a Z-95 AF-3 prototype and two years in the real thing. If those pilots are any good, you pups are going to need everything your ships can give you."

"Maybe so, Flight Leader," Echo Five replied. "But wouldn't you say..."

"You're too chatty, Echo Five." Dren interjected. "Let's not give the bad guys any more warning than we have to. Maintain communications silence until Launch Control disengages the auto pilot."

"Sharp kid that Echo Five," Dren's voice came. A blinking light on Essara's instrument panel indicated he was using the short-range, tight-beam channel reserved for broadcasts between members of a starfighter element. "If he can fly as well as he talks, he'll have your job eventually."

She switched to the same channel. "Good. That way I can retire to a cottage in the mountains."

Dren laughed. "I can't see you there for long. You're like the rest of us pros. You've got rocket fuel in your blood."

You've got rocket fuel in your blood. That was a favorite cliché among starfighter pilots, a neat shorthand to explain their love for speed and danger beyond anything else in life. All of the trappings of a so-called normal life—family, money, and even love—were secondary or absent in the cockpit.

In her late teens, Essara had found Naboo's educational focus on the arts and philosophy tiresome. She had felt her talent for tactics and excellent reflexes were being wasted and even stifled. She had started refusing to take part in the weekly choral performances she'd been involved with since age nine, and eventually turned her back on Naboo entirely. On the eve of her nineteenth birthday, she had said goodbye to her parents and set out for the great unknown beyond her homeworld.

The first several years were a series of tremendous adventures, the entire galaxy seeming to unfold before her. Later, she discovered, with some dismay, that the stars she had tracked in the skies over her home hid chaos and ruthlessness unknown to the Naboo.

She strove to keep herself clean of the infectious sickness of self-centered greed that seemed to motivate most of the beings she dealt with off of Naboo, but in doing so, she must have thinned that rocket fuel in her veins.

Two years ago, she had been working under contract with the Garqi Agricultural Combine. She was protecting yet another convoy from raiders when she realized she was homesick and bored. As the battered pirate fighters scattered before her and her wingman, she felt the first sudden twinge of longing for Naboo's rolling hills, and she realized that starfighting had become routine-like afternoon meals. When did she begin to lose the thrill? She couldn't say, but it had vanished completely in that battle.

Essara worked out her contract and returned home to Naboo.

All the things that had caused her flee Naboo were suddenly more desirable. She was still amazed at how much pleasure she derived from riding a tusk-cat through the lowlands and camping under the stars on the shores of a brilliant blue lake. When old friends asked her to sing with them, she jumped at the chance. Granted, her voice was no longer a finely tuned instrument, but she had not felt as much a part of something in over a decade.

When Ric Olie asked her to join Naboo's volunteer starfighter defense force, she jumped at the chance. She was quickly inducted into the elite Bravo Flight and used her vast offworld experience to provide better training for the young pilots of Echo and Delta Flight, the entry points into the Royal Space Fighter Corps. In her thirteen years as a fighter pilot for hire, she had never felt so vital and significant. Her homeworld needed her.

However, she longed for the day when Naboo wouldn't need her. Although her parents were respected and famous leaders on-world, Essara no longer felt she had anything to prove. She had already led a successful life apart from them. Even though she was just thirty-five, she felt ready to retire to a peaceful life in the mountains. But first she had to make sure the wide-eyed Naboo patriots that would be protecting her knew how dangerous the galaxy was outside their home system. She wouldn't be able to sleep at night knowing the skies were being guarded by some kid who might think he could reason with pirates and shipjackers. Dren chuckled at her when she mentioned retreating to a mountain cottage, but settling down seemed right. Maybe she was getting old. Maybe she had just finally grown up. Whatever the case, she was going to discuss it with him earnestly after this mission.

Essara's headset filled with beeps and whistles.

Enemy within sensor range , scrolled across her screen.

Essara made a quick check of the tactical display. Her control panel showed that enemy craft were turning from TFP-9, to engage her team. A single Corellian freighter floated immobile between the station and the enemy carrier, but there was no sign of the second freighter. Either the crew had successfully escaped or had already been killed by the raiders.

Echo Flight was more than capable of handling this engagement, and Essara was certain that the Naboo Police Cruisers would humble the Z-95's. Her scanner confirmed only that the enemy flew either basic Headhunters or Mark Us, neither of which was as maneuverable or fast as the N-1 or the Police Cruiser. The Z-a,5s lacked shields strong enough to deflect the yield of the Naboo proton torpedoes, although the AF-3 model's heavily reinforced canopy would probably protect the enemy pilot. Conversely, it would take some very well placed shots or several Z-95's firing on a single Naboo starfighter to penetrate its shields.

The Naboo government and its shipyards invested as much time and money in the construction of a single starfighter as many other planetary governments invested in entire fighter squadrons. Both the Police Cruiser and the N-1s were dream fighters as far as Essara was concerned. Pilots who lacked experience were supported by astromech droids and superior sensor and targeting systems, while veterans such as she could avail themselves of the enhanced maneuverability provided by the finely calibrated engines.

With some annoyance, Essara found her thoughts drifting back to Dren. Not even the excitement generated by the N-1 was enough to keep him from looking to the stars and dreaming about mercenary life. Dren kept bringing up Agamar. What was Dren's obsession with that backwater corner of the Outer Rim? He had no family or friends there. The Agamar starfighters were flying scrap-heaps that couldn't match force with the slowest Headhunters, let alone the N-1's. Did he need money? Could it be that he was finding it hard to make ends meet? If so, Essara had seen no evidence of this.

Whenever Essara daydreamed about her cottage, Dren was right there with her. She also dreamed of a little girl-their child-playing with toy starfighters. If money was really at the root of his restlessness, that problem was easily solved. She had more than enough money for both of them, and she wasn't going to let something as silly as credits get between them. But she'd have to be careful about how she made that point. Fighter pilots, herself included, were stubborn and brimming with pride.

A message from her astromech scrolled across the translation interface readout.

Theed Flight Control is deactivating the autopilot in five... four... three... two... one. You now have complete control of your starfighter, Bravo Seven.

Essara rechecked the status indicators. All systems were green, and the astromech droid had already allocated power in the way she preferred-shields at 95%, laser cannons at 101%, and sublight propulsion at 104%.

"Glad you decided to do things my way, Ell-one," Essara said after muting her comlink. She and the droid had argued over power allocation before, during a particularly routine encounter that Essara could hardly remember.

It is ultimately your decision, Flight Leader.

Essara switched her comlink to wide broadcast. "Z-95 Headhunters, this is Flight Leader Essara Till of the Naboo Royal Space Fighter Corps. Deactivate your shields and return to your carrier, or you will be fired upon."

The station's shields are gone. The enemy fighters received your broadcast, but they aren't responding.

The astromech droid wasn't completely accurate in its estimation. The Z-95S1 response was silent, if not subtle: Turning away from the battered space station, they rolled, fell into formation, and accelerated toward the approaching Naboo starfighters. They weren't going to let this happen the easy way.

Essara switched her frequency back to the tight-beam channel she shared with Dren. "I want to take some of these low-lives alive. Try to disable rather than destroy a couple, and I'll do the same."

"What about Echo Flight?" he asked.

"Y@u and I can go at this with some finesse. I'm not sure they can pick their shots as well."

"I copy."

"Bravo Seven out." She switched to the frequency shared by all the Naboo starfighters and verified the Z-o^s1 approach vector. "Echo Flight, this is Bravo Seven. Shields at full power. Go to attack speed. Engage targets at will. Let your astromechs worry about any damage to your starfighters and focus on flying and gunnery. Whatever happens, stay with your wingman, and keep the bad guys off each other's tails."

"Copy," replied Echo Five. The rest of Essara's pilots checked in as she watched the fourteen green blips that represented her team converge with the eighteen red blips that represented the Z-a,5s. She drew a slow deep breath as she eased her fighter's throttle forward. Switching to the frequency she shared with Dren, she said, "Ell-one, lock on the fighter closest to me."

Target acquired. He's returning the favor.

Dren matched her acceleration. Essara used her command readout to cycle through the telemetry on Echo Flight. They were all locking onto enemy fighters as well. So far, they were maintaining formation. Not bad for a bunch of rookies, she thought.

Quickly, she found herself staring down the boldest of the Z- 95's. It was heading straight for her. The enemy starfighter opened fire, and the N-1 rocked slightly as the laser bolts impacted harmlessly on its shields.

Shields at 91 percent and recharging , Ell-one reported as Essara and her enemy streaked past one another. Essara put her fighter into a wingover barrel roll and put herself on

her foe's tail with such ease that she found herself shaking her head. "Too simple," she said. "We've got slow-witted pilots in basic Headhunters, Dren. They aren't even armed with missiles. Echo Flight could do this without us."

Her tactical display was a kaleidoscope of green and red blips, and flashes of cannon fire ignited the black, starry sky.

Part Two

The Z-95 pilot weaved side to side in a frantic but futile attempt to get Essara off his tail. She carefully targeted the cowling that protected the Headhunter's primary power generator and squeezed the cannon's trigger. The Headhunter's shields survived the first volley, so she fired again. The other pilot started whipping back and forth, trying to shake her. "Sorry, friend. You're outgunned and outclassed."

Essara fired again. This time, her lasers sliced into the cowling, cracking it open. Sparks trailed from the power generator within as the Head-hunter's pilot threw his craft into a spinning dive in one final attempt to shake his pursuer. Essara fired again, and the exposed generator burst into shrapnel that spun away from the fighter. The now-disabled Z-95 entered a wild tumble.

"That one's going to be fun for the Space Rescue Corps." Dren commented with a chuckle.

Essara reduced her speed slightly to take a close look at the Head-hunter as she flew past it. The fighter was a solid orange color with no heraldry or other visible identification marks.

The pilot's alive but unconscious, Ell-one informed her.

"Hey, Dren, any idea who these guys might be?"

"Echo Five to Flight Leader." Essara heard before Dren responded. She switched comm frequencies.

"Bravo Seven here. Go ahead Echo Five."

"We've got the bad guys on the run, Flight Leader. Seven kills with only Echo Three, Echo Eight, and Echo Eleven taking damage. The rest of the Headhunters are retreating toward the carrier. Should we pursue?"

"Hey!" replied Echo One, who had the shrill voice of a teenaged girl. "I'm supposed to give the status report]"

"They teamed up on me!" Echo Eight said. "How was I supposed to take three at once when Kammie couldn't hit even one?"

"I just got another one." Echo Seven broke in. "You were right, Rhys! This is a piece of cake! Let's get them!"

Essara scowled. "Echo One and Echo Two, fall into formation with Bravo Seven. I want the rest of you to prevent the other Z-a,5s from reaching that carrier. Stay out of range of its weapons, though. If any of them get away, so be it."

"What about us?" Echo One asked.

"We're going after the carrier. Ready proton torpedoes."

"Yahoo!" Echo Two cried. "A cap ship! This is great!"

Dren's N-i Starfighter dropped into formation next to hers. "Looks like Echo Five is going to have competition for your job." Dren said.

Essara nodded, smiling to herself. "This is not going to be easy, Echo One and Echo Two. Set your shields to maximum recharge, even if it means you have to reduce the recharge rate of your lasers. We're going to suffer heavy fire as we're going in. But keep your cool. Assume Attack Formation Zeta Nine."

Echo One and Echo Two joined her and Dren in formation. Together they swung toward the slim profile of the carrier. "We're going in at a 65-degree vector," she said. "That

should limit the number of cannons they can to bring to bear. Stay in formation."

Torpedoes ready.

Suddenly, another wave of blips appeared on Essara's tactical display: Sixteen additional Headhunters were coming in behind them, from the direction of Naboo.

"Flight Leader," Echo One said, "my tactical computer is malfunctioning. A new bunch of Headhunters just appeared out of nowhere."

"Mine too," Echo Two said.

"That's no malfunction," Echo Nine commented. "We've got more incoming fighters."

"I see them," said Echo Five. "Where did they come from? Headhunters don't have hyperdrives, do they?"

"Let them come to you, Echo Flight," Essara said. Then another ship appeared on her tactical readout. To her surprise, it was another Hornet-class carrier. Well, at least the mystery of the Headhunters was solved, she thought. She asked the astromech, "Where did that second carrier come from?"

It must be using baffled sublight drives and dampened power systems. Sensors didn't detect it until it raised its shields.

"What sort of petty space pirates have access to baffled drives?" Essara muttered, surprised by the astromech's analysis but realizing it was the only one that made sense.

Petty space pirates who aren't petty space pirates.

A gravelly voice rose from the dark silence of space. "Naboo fighters, this is Captain Sorran of the carrier Velumina. Power down your ships and permit yourselves to be tractorbeamed onto one of our carriers. No harm will come to you. All we want are your starfighters."

On the tight-beam link to Dren, Essara asked, "Who are they?"

"The Naboo don't take direction from â€œthieves and terrorists!" said Echo Five angrily.

"Captain Sorran, this is Bravo Eight Leader Essara Till. I suggest you recover your fighters and leave our territory at once. We will not be threatened."

More hostile vessels appeared on Essara's tactical readout: fifty small craft not even half the length of an N-1, launched by the first carrier. Her onboard computer did not recognize their configuration. "What did they just drop?"

Uncertain. The design does not match any configuration in my databanks.

Essara gasped as she watched the tiny ships accelerate. Within three seconds, they were traveling so fast that her scanners could not keep up with them. They blinked in and out of existence. To Dren, she said, "Have you ever seen anything so fast?"

Her droid, however, was the one who responded, "Based on their rapid acceleration, I conclude they're piloted by droids. There isn't room for a biological pilot with such an engine configuration."

"Echo Eight," Essara said. "Those fighters are moving too fast to be effectively tracked. We'll need to rely on good old-fashioned gunnery skill to take them out."

"Surrender, Eight Leader," Sorran commanded. "You and your pilots cannot match skill with our special fighter element. Do you really think a starfighter is worth dying for?"

Essara felt her temper flaring. "Echo One, Echo Two, Bravo Eight. Attack Formation Beta-Zero. We'll take the fast-moving bogies. Echo Three through Echo Six, you deal with the Headhunters. The rest of you focus on those new fighters. Keep them in your sights and off each other's tails. Don't rely on your instrumentation."

Then she heard Dren's voice. "Remember that opportunity on Agamar, I've been pressing you about? I didn't want to make you choose like this, but this is your last chance, because my

term of employment starts now."

"Dren?" Essara looked to her left, just in time to see her wingman break formation, climbing sharply and spraying a barrage of laser fire. "Dren, what are you doing?"

"Flight Leader, we're under attack!" shouted a panicked Echo Two. "I don't know where..."

"It's Dren!" Echo One cried shrilly. "Dren's firing on us! What's happening?"

"He's taken out my shield generator] He...'

"What's happening over there, Flight Leader?" Echo Five asked.

"Focus on the Headhunters, Echo Five!" Essara snapped. "Let us worry about the situation here."

"Oh no!" Echo Eight cried. "Those new Headhunters are firing missiles at us!"

"Those are just concussion missiles," Echo Six said. "We can shoot those down, no problem. Our shields can even take one or two of them."

Essara banked left, watching the fast-moving fighters blipping in and out on her tactical display as her sensors attempted to keep up with them. Ten were heading for her and the two Echo fighters in her vicinity while the others were engaging the rest of Echo Flight. She tried to get a firing angle on Dren as he shot at Echo Two again.

Echo Two's right nacelle burst into a deadly bloom of debris and shrapnel, and the Police Cruiser went spinning out of control. Echo One reacted with admirable speed, cutting sharply down and to the left in an effort to avoid her damaged wingman, but it still wasn't fast enough. Echo Two's pilot shrieked as the dome of his cockpit slammed into the fuselage of Echo One, destroying its astromech droid.

"Kerl?" Echo One cried, swinging up and reentering Essara's field of vision on her right.

Dren arced around the careening Echo Two, swinging fore over aft and turning on his fighter's axis as he set an intercept course for Echo One. Essara maintained her pursuit, still trying to achieve that elusive firing angle.

Echo One continued to call for her wingman. "Kerl?! Kerl, come in! Are you okay?! Kerl?!"

"Dren!" Essara shouted over the tight-beam frequency. "What are you doing?"

"I didnt want to make either of us choose our loyalties like this." he replied. "And I dont want any more of these kids to die if it can be helped. Tell them to power down their starfighters, now."

Essara cycled through her command readouts until the telemetry from Dren's fighter came up. He had armed another pair of torpedoes and was locking his targeting scanner on Echo One. "Dren, please don't..."

"Essara!" Echo One screamed as she started wild evasive maneuvers. "Dren's locked onto me! Help me! Please, help me!"

"Listen to her," Dren said. "We dont belong here, Essara."

"What are you talking about?" Essara watched as Dren's target lock on Echo One was lost, reacquired, then lost again. Great flying, kid, she thought. Keep it up, and I'll commend you when this is all over.

"Can't you see that real soldiers like us shouldnt be wasted on a useless world like this one?"

"Dren, I think there might be something wrong with the atmosphere in your cockpit. You're talking crazy. Stop this before it's too late." Essara banked sharply and locked her lasers onto Dren's ship. Ell-one issued a series of alarmed trills, to which she shouted, "Override the blasted FoF protocols! Havent you been paying attention back there?"

The droid offered a contrite-sounding burble. When Essara fired her laser cannon, the droid did nothing to prevent it. Dren spun his fighter away from her line of fire. The

blasts only grazed his shields, and he managed to keep Essara from dropping into the automatic kill-zone on his tail.

"You've seen the way some of them look at us," Dren said. "They need us to protect them from the perils of the galaxy, but most of them would rather see us far away from Naboo. I've found a place where we will be appreciated for our skill, not looked down on."

"Dren, you're not making any sense," Essara said. "When have the people in the Security Force not been treated as heroes? Stop attacking us. Help us deal with the real enemy."

Essara's astromech beeped urgently. Essara gritted her teeth and fought to gain a target lock on Dren. A pair of well-placed torpedoes should bring down his shields and disable his fighter without killing him.

Dren was playing with Echo One now, anticipating the young pilot's every move. "I realized some time ago that there's no place for me on Naboo. You know how they say you can never go home again? Well, I believe that now."

"Flight Leader, help! I can't keep doing this! I'm not good enough without the droid!"

"Oh no!" Echo Eight suddenly shouted. "Oh no!"

Echo Four let out a panicked cry.

Essara switched to the general frequency. "Echo Three, report.'

"Echo Five! Get him off my tail!"

"Flight Leader," Echo One wailed. The girl was now sobbing. Dren had established a firm lock on her, but Essara had still not managed to maintain one on Dren. Essara knew was not going to save this girl.

The droid beeped again.

"If you're not going to be useful, shut up," she hissed at it. And what about Echo Flight? Based on what she was seeing on her tactical screen, Echo Flight was coping with Headhunters-the number of enemies had been cut in half. So what was causing such panic over there? Was she losing more than just Dren's victims? And where had those two mystery craft gotten to?

Essara's fighter was rocked by a sudden impact. A shower of sparks burst from the control panel as her command screen went black. The cockpit filled with the smell of overheating wires, and all her power system indicators were spiking into their red zones. Her shields were overloading, suggesting that she'd either been hit by an energy torpedo or a turbo-laser blast.

Three of the unclassified fighters have maneuvered behind us. I tried to tell you. Now, please pay attention before we are both damaged beyond repair.

Essara cursed. There were three blips on her tail. She had been so preoccupied with Dren that she hadn't noticed. Her fighter shuddered as it was struck again.

"Adjust the shields before we lose everything!" Essara cried.

"Drop the laser recharge rate to 60 percent. See if you can't get the power grid back to full efficiency."

If someone had been paying attention to me, we wouldn't be in this situation.

"I'm hit! I can't shake him]" Echo One shrieked hysterically.

"Listen to her," Dren said contemptuously. "She isn't cut out for this, not like you and me. Tell them to power down their ships, You do the same, no one will die, and I'll explain everything to you in detail."

"You're asking me to betray Naboo," Essara hissed, trying to shake those mysterious fighters. All she could do was bank left and right, shooting wildly at Dren. He easily evaded her fire.

"There's no winning this one, Essara. Stand down before it's too late." Dren continued to pursue Echo One. Even while dodging Essara's continued barrages of fire, he managed to remain on the less experienced pilot's tail.

Echo One continued to scream and wail. Other voices would occasionally cut in, but Essara couldn't make out what they were saying.

Dren launched his torpedoes and banked right.

"Ell-one, target Bravo Eight's torpedoes!" Essara yelled, letting Dren escape for now. The droid obeyed instantly, and flashing brackets appeared around the triangular icons on her screen that represented the missiles. She steadied her course, briefly letting the droid starfighter pummel her rear shields with its lasers. She pressed the trigger on her cannon and kept it down, holding her breath as the missiles and the brilliant arc of laser blasts crossed paths. One torpedo exploded harmlessly, but then her cannon stopped firing. She glanced at the power gauge. The laser was drained. The 60 percent recharge rate] I forgot about it]

Dren's second torpedo struck the Police Cruiser. The explosion spread across the energy barrier like colored water poured onto a stone. Then, a secondary explosion ripped through the fighter's hull as its shield generator overloaded. The remains of the shattered astromech unit were ejected through the loading hatch as the fighter's secondary systems started to malfunction.

"Cut all power, Echo One," Essara said. "Stop that cascade overload before it gets out of hand]"

Echo One's only response was a ragged sob, but the girl followed Essara's order. The blue glow of her ion engines winked out, and the Police Cruiser's icon turned into an outline on Essara's tactical display.

"Tap your maneuvering thrusters to stop that forward momentum," Essara said, swinging her fighter right to maintain her pursuit of Dren. "We'll get you out of there soon enough."

"Echo Ten to Flight Leader," a harried voice came. "Those tiny fighters are cutting us to ribbons."

"Echo Flight, ignore the rest of the Z-95's for now/" Essara said. "Take out those fast fighters."

"If you pups you want to live, power down like Echo One did/" Dren said.

"Says the guy who killed Echo Two]" Echo Eight's voice had an edge to it that hadn't been there before.

Echo Five chimed in. "What about Bravo Eight, Flight Leader?"

"Dren's mine, You have your orders," Essara replied. Switching to the tight-beam channel, she said, "Tell those droid ships to get off my tail and then you and I can settle this, one on one.'

"I think not." Dren said. "You're a better dogfighter than I am. Surrender, now."

Shields at 100 percent. Resetting laser recharge to full. I've got a pair of torpedoes loaded. Locking onto Bravo Eight.

"All I need is a split second." Essara said.

Target acquired.

Essara pushed the launch button. Two torpedoes streaked toward Dren.

Dren cursed, and his voice was drowned out by a burst of overlap ping signals as Echo Flight's pilots once again began talking over one another. Essara stole a quick glance at her command telemetry display and found that it was still offline. "Ell-one, can you fix my command monitor?"

She looked over her shoulder and, with perverse anticipation, watched the torpedoes streak toward Dren's ship. But then a stream of laser fire poured over her canopy and detonated

both torpedoes. Another burst pelted her shields.

Shields at 69 percent and recharging, the droid said. Reducing laser recharge rate to 90 percent.

"How can such tiny fighters carry so much firepower and be so fast?"

If they are droid starfighters, the power that would normally be allocated to life support can go into weapons, and the space reserved for the pilot can be used for weapons or propulsion.

"Those fighters won't stop until all of Echo Flight is dead or disabled." Dren said once the urgent babble from Echo Flight subsided. Dren had confirmed Essara's worst fear. "Check your telemetry if you don't believe me."

"Just tell me why," Essara said as she threw her fighter into an upward corkscrew, hoping to lose her pursuers. She was in serious trouble if she didn't deal with them somehow. Droids never got tired or distracted. She needed to focus all her wits and dismiss the confused, angry thoughts that tumbled through her mind regarding Dren. The anger that had consumed her was starting to give way to fear.

"My employer is dedicated to building a strong planetary defense force in the system he governs." Dren said. A cutting edge defense force. The Naboo starfighters are the cutting edge he's looking for. All the governor wants are two or three N-1s and a couple of Police Cruisers in working condition so his engineers can build their own version."

"All this just to steal some fighters?!"

"Not just fighters, N-1 fighters. These ships really are greater than the sum of their parts. I told my employer that even if he could convince the Nubians to trade with him, he still wouldn't be able to build fighters that even came close to the Naboo starfighter... unless he had some working ships to study. He thought I might be exaggerating the N-1's capabilities, so he wanted a demonstration. The second carrier launching its fighters was the sign that he liked what he saw."

"Two carriers to capture a pair of N-1s?"

Dren sighed. "No, but he wanted to have numbers so overwhelming that only an idiot would put up a fight."

"I guess I'm an idiot then." Essara said. The fear of the starfighters on her tail was being burned away by anger at herself and hatred for Dren. How could she have been so wrong? How could she have read him so obtuse? How could she have let him into her dreams? Another barrage struck her shields.

Shields at 75 percent and recharging. Laser cannon recharge rate at 85 percent.

"There's no running from them," Essara said. "Load torpedoes. Reduce laser recharge to 20 percent and redirect all power to the forward shields."

The droid squealed with alarm. Essara pushed her throttle to maximum and threw her fighter into an overhead loop.

The tiny fighters slowed as Essara performed a wing-over and put herself directly in one of their paths. Ell-one established a target lock for her. The tiny enemy fighters started to accelerate again, and the lock was again lost as they reached speeds that were beyond the targeting sensor's ability to track them. Essara had expected this, however.

Torpedoes ready. Unable to reacquire target lock.

"I know."

The droid starfighter element jogged to the right. Essara matched the movement, holding the nose-to-nose approach with her chosen target.

We're going to collide!

"I know."

The droid starfighter fired its lasers. Essara held her course as Ell-one beeped urgently and her fighter rocked. Essara bit her lower lip, struggling to steady her nerves and to stick with her desperate plan. The droid star-fighter changed course again, attempting to avoid collision. She put herself in its path again. A collision alert chimed. She spotted a scratch on the fighter's left fin, and she could see the muzzles on both of its lasers glowing. She fired her torpedoes and banked sharply left. Her gamble paid off-the enemy didn't have time to avoid the torpedoes, and they impacted squarely on its fuselage.

Nice trick. One destroyed, two damaged. We can outrun them now. Our shields are at 45 percent and recharging.

Essara eased the throttle back to standard attack speed as fragments of the blasted droid starfighter scattered into space. She would have to get Ric to authorize a complete download of Ell-one's memory banks and scans so she could analyze the attack pattern of that tiny starfighter. She would hate to think of anyone facing one of them without being adequately prepared. But first, she was going to deal with Dren. "Locate Bravo Eight."

He's engaging the remaining Echo Flight ships.

Until that moment, she hadn't realized that the shouts of Echo Flight had completely died out. They had been calling, but now they were silent. Essara felt another chill, but then realized that her long-range communication system had shorted out. Her tactical display showed her that Echo Flight was still in the fight, but how many and whom she couldn't tell because her telemetry display was still down.

"Start repairing the damaged systems," she told the astromech. "Blast!"

Another trio of droid fighters was coming in fast on her right. Essara threw the throttle forward and sent her fighter sharply into a tailspin. She caught a brief glimpse of TFP-o, and the distant glimmer of Echo Flight and the other tiny starfighters exchanging fire. Then she was spinning into the blackness of space.

Laser volleys streaked harmlessly past her, but her starfighter jerked with the impact of missiles and then shuddered under the impact of another shower of laser fire. Her astromech issued a series of trilling whistles. She didn't catch what the droid said before the translator shorted out, but her systems monitor told her what she needed to know anyway. She had just lost shields.

"Concentrate on getting the shields back online!" she shouted.

Essara twisted the fighter sharply to the right, then threw it into a partial barrel roll before changing directions into another sharp downward dive. Blaster bolts streaked by the cockpit.

The fighter creaked and groaned. Ell-one squealed in a panic.

"I know the engine housing is threatening to tear itself loose! Get those shields back up, and I'll stop testing the ship's tolerance limits!"

Essara continued to whip her fighter back and forth, drawing her breath in sharp intakes whenever she heard its stabilizers groan and whenever another warning light blinked to life on her instrument panel.

Without warning, her long-range communications were restored. "Get him off my tail!" she heard a Echo Four scream.

"Shields!" Essara snapped to the droid. "Get me shields!"

Ell-one beeped and hooted. Essara had no idea what it was saying, but it didn't sound polite.

Echo Four continued his desperate plea. "Someone, please-"

The transmission ended in a burst of static.

"Echo flight," Essara said, her voice clear and commanding. "This is Bravo Leader. Keep it together, people. Cover your wingman. We can win this. Who's still with me?"

"Echo Six here." a voice came. "Battered but still moving."

"Echo Two reporting," came a weak voice.

"Kerll" several pilots cried.

"I'm hurt bad, Elight Leader. And my fighter's in pieces."

"Hang on," Essara said. "We'll get you out of there."

"Echo One here, but my fighter's disabled and my astromech droid was taken out when Bravo Seven attacked us."

"Echo Eive here. I've taken a couple of hits, but the ship's holding together and my astromech's doing repairs. Bravo Eight just disabled Echo Eight and Echo Seven, Elight Leader. I dont know if Keela's still alive or not. Eleven and Twelve were both destroyed by one of those fast fighters, and I'm not sure about anyone else."

Three active fighters left. Echo Four, Nine, Ten, Eleven, and Twelve confirmed dead. The rest disabled, some of the pilots possibly dying. They had neither the numbers nor the skill to deal with the droid starfighters. If those Z-95S decided to rejoin the battle, they would be able to overwhelm the battered remains of Echo Flight.

The battle had turned into butchery. She had to stop it.

"Power down your ships, Echo Flight," she said. "We're surrendering."

Part Three

"What?" Echo Five cried.

"I gave you an order!" Essara gritted her teeth as she barely managed to dodge another volley from the droid Starfighter on her tail. "There's nothing glorious about a pointless death. Power down your ships and surrender."

"Wise call, Essara," Dren said triumphantly.

But I'm taking you down, you treacherous grank, she thought.

Her astromech issues a series of familiar whoops and whistles. It was asking if it should initiate the shutdown sequence.

"No. I'm going to keep fighting until we get Bravo Eight/'

The droid offered an affirmative chirp. Her shields came back online. They were recharging. The power indicator was not as precise as the astromech droid, but she could tell they were at least at 50 percent strength.

She glanced at her tactical display. Her flight from the droid star-fighter had taken her in the direction of the first carrier. A desperate idea popped into her head. She banked sharply to the left.

"Arm torpedoes." she told the astromech droid. "We're taking on the carrier."

The droid issued a panicked flurry of sounds.

"You're going to help me avoid their defensive fire. If we're lucky, maybe a stray shot from the carrier will soften up the droid starfighters for us."

"Essara, what are you doing?" Dren asked.

The translation screen came on just in time for her to see Ell-one say, We can't get Dren if we're dead.

"And we're dead if we don't something about those droid starfighters." she snapped back.

The torpedoes loaded. Essara targeted the bump near the center of the carrier's bulk: its primary bridge. She took its captain and gunners by surprise, because their point defense weapons didn't start firing until four seconds after her Torpedoes had launched.

"Help me get as close to the carrier as possible, Ell-one," she said, diving the fighter sharply down toward the hull. She felt the astromech droid adjust the ship's attitude, starting to pull out of the dive a second before she was planning to.

The torpedoes passed through the flak and with the astromech droid's help, Essara wove safely through what seemed like the solid wall of superheated plasma bolts that rose from the carrier.

Once Essara was under the carrier's defensive barrage, the capital ship's matte-gray hull spread out before her like a vast desert. Its weapons spewed death like erupting volcanoes, but she flew too close for most of the weapons to target her.

The torpedoes impacted on the carrier as she started firing wildly across its hull. "Load another couple of torpedoes!"

Two droid starfighters are still pursuing. Another was taken out by friendly fire.

The astromech continued to beep and trill, but Essara didn't dare look at the translation screen long enough to get the rest. Even with Ell-one's assistance, she needed to concentrate on piloting. Flying this close to a capital ship, traveling at the speed she was going, was almost certain suicide even without a mechanized killer in pursuit.

A gun emplacement seemed to materialize directly in her path, its barrels swinging to fire at her. Essara's conscious mind had barely registered its presence, but she was already firing on instinct. The emplacement burst into hundreds of metal shards that ricocheted off her shields.

One droid got knocked out by the explosion. Carrier's shields at 44 percent. Our shields at 34 percent and holding.

The last droid on her tail fired, some of the bolts hitting her, others streaking off into space or impacting against the carrier's shields. The enemy fired again, and Essara's ship rocked from the impact. More stray shots burst against the carrier's shields.

Torpedoes ready for launch. Carrier's shields at 43 percent and recharging. Our shields are at 23 percent and holding. The droid...

"Keep the torps coming," Essara said as she banked right. She cycled her targeting computer. A communications array 200 meters away appeared as a possible target. Without hesitating, she launched the torpedoes.

The astromech droid shrieked as they were enveloped in the resulting explosion. A section of the transceiver dish bounced off Essara's canopy, leaving a groove in the transparasteel as wide as her hand. Essara struggled to keep her starfighter under control, and Ell-one shrieked again as Essara clipped the carrier's energy shield. Her shields threatened to overload again, and panels of system warning lights illuminated her cockpit. "\20511-@~¥!"

Redirecting power. The droid ship was damaged by the explosion, too. It's slowing.

The cockpit once again filled with the acrid smell of melting wires as targeting sensor blinked out. She cursed and hit the panel. It came back on.

Getting violent will not speed the repairs. Carrier's shields at 31 percent and recharging. Ours shields at 12 percent.

The carrier's hull was coming to an end, revealing the black gulf of space. Several guns were already swinging into position to target her as she zoomed away from the capital ship's surface. "Not just yet!" she whispered. "You're not going to get me just yet."

Torpedoes ready.

Her targeting scanner flickered, threatening to cut out along with life support, attitude control, and the astromech translation unit. She would have to trust in the astromech's ability to keep the fighter together.

She plunged over the edge of the carrier, whipping her fighter to the right and skimming along its narrower side. To her surprise, the guns here were firing not in her direction but away from her.

Then she saw the Police Cruiser, just as her collision alert system warned her of its presence. A pair of missiles streaked past her, and her fighter bucked from the resulting explosion as the missiles struck the droid starfighter.

"I couldn't follow that order, Flight Leader." she heard Echo Five say. "Not when you were taking on that monstrosity by yourself."

"Consider yourself reprimanded." Essara replied, targeting one of the carrier's shield generators and firing her torpedoes. They both found their mark.

Carrier's shields at 22 percent and recharging. Ours are at 12 percent and holding.

"I'm with you, Flight Leader," Echo Five said.

Echo Five and Essara fired their torpedoes as if their launchers were synchronized. Both fighters spun away from the carrier as explosions started to spread across its hull. The carrier's power plant overloaded, and the ship was consumed by the explosion. For an instant the carrier burned like a sun, and then as quickly the darkness consumed it.

"Fall in, Echo Five," Essara said. "We're going to take out

Bravo Eight."

"Disable him?"

Essara glanced at her tactical display. In the distance, the few surviving Headhunters were retreating to the remaining carrier. It appeared that Echo Six had also disobeyed her order to power down and was clumsily attempting to dogfight with Dren.

Something tugged at Essara's heart. Was Dren just another greedy monster who would sacrifice his comrades-in-arms for credits? Maybe there was something else going on, something he hadn't dared talk about. If they could take him alive and chase off that second carrier, maybe something could be salvaged out of this.

But then Echo Six vanished from her tactical display.

"Harlaan!" Echo Five exclaimed. "He killed Harlaan!"

Essara growled, all doubt consumed by seething anger. She pressed her fire button as soon as Ell-one established the lock.

Dren's voice came over the tight-beam channel. "How many more pilots are you willing to sacrifice? Believe me, Essara, I didn't want it to happen like this, and I don't want to see you blasted into space."

"The feeling's not mutual." Essara replied. She pressed the fire button again. All she got was an electronic squelch from her instrument panel.

The magazines are empty.

Essara watched as the betrayer throttled up to full power and fled toward the remaining carrier, Essara's torpedoes on his tail.

"Their blood is on both of our hands, Essara." he said. "Believe me, you've made a huge mistake today."

"I made my mistake months ago." she replied. "Now, I can only try to correct it."

"Flight Leader, those torpedoes you fired are catching up with him." Echo Five broke in.

He was right. As Essara watched her tactical readout, she saw Dren alter course to bring his laser cannons to bear against the torpedoes.

"We can cut him off before he reaches the carrier." Echo Five continued eagerly.

"Let's do it. Fall in." Essara closed with Echo Five until they were in a tight formation. Within moments, they were between Dren and the Velumina.

"Mr. Melne, I'm declaring this exercise a failure/' the voice of the Velumina's gravelly voiced captain came. "I'll convey your regrets to the governor."

"What?"

Several small explosions burst across the hull of the distant carrier. A swarm of blips appeared on Essara's flickering tactical display.

"Missiles incoming!" shouted Echo Five. "Hey! Only one is targeted at me."

Essara saw that only one missile was targeting her as well, yet the carrier had launched at least a dozen. "Where are the rest going?"

Dren, the astromech replied.

"We had a deal!" Dren shouted as he targeted and destroyed Essara's torpedoes.

"You promised us a minimum of two fighters. It seems you are unable to deliver even one." The carrier's ion engines flared to life as it started to move away.

"I can jump out of here under my own power!" he cried.

"They might trace you, Melne, or they might stop you before make the jump. It has been pleasure knowing you. Good bye."

Essara realized that she had to save Dren's life. "He's the only one who'll be able to explain what was really going on here."

She threw her fighter into a hard arc, bringing it about and spraying laser fire in front of her. She was now squarely in the path of the oncoming missiles. Four of the missiles exploded in bright flashes of energy.

Not enough, Essara thought. Four is not enough.

One of the missiles struck Essara's fighter hard. The shields failed, and her damaged instrument panel exploded in a shower of sparks and shrapnel. Blood gushed into her left eye from a gash on her forehead.

Dren's scream ended in a burst of static. Essara watched, flinching as Dren's fighter disintegrated under the impact of eight concussion missiles.

"They killed their own man?" Echo Five said, the shock evident in his voice. "Why?"

"That's why I came home," Essara said, feeling sick, both from the fumes in her cockpit and from the tugging in her heart. "I came home because the Naboo barely understand the meaning of the word 'betrayal.'"

"Governor Challep of Agamar is denying his people's involvement in the TFP-9 incident," Sio Bibble said. "We have nonetheless sent a request to our senatorial delegation that an investigation be launched."

Five days had passed since the battle at TFP-9. The grateful technicians on the space station recovered the damaged starfighters and provided medical care for the surviving pilots. Only five of Echo Flight's twelve pilots made it back to Naboo alive. A memorial service and planet-wide day of remembrance in their honor was being planned for those who perished. Although Ric Oli had offered to perform the unpleasant duty of informing their families, Essara felt obligated to do it herself. It had been her mission, so it was her responsibility. She had just spoken to the last set of parents when Bibble summoned her and Ric to his office to update them on the ongoing investigation.

"We have already confirmed that that Agamar has been purchasing new starfighters and other weapons technology..." Bibble continued, "including at least one hundred droid starfighters of Xi Char manufacture."

Ric said, "And according to Royal Starfighter Corps records, there have been at least three requests from Agamar to purchase N-1s or Police Cruisers. The Queen's Advisory Council declined all three times."

"Any links between the government of Agamar and Dren?"

"No sir, nothing that you wouldn't expect. Most mercenaries spend at least a few months in the service of Agamar. Even Essara here."

Bibble cocked his head in her direction.

"Early in my career offworld, sir," Essara said. "I don't know anything about the current state in the system/'

"We traced some credit transfers made from an account Dren had on Ord Mantell to an account he had in Selton," Bibble said. "One hundred thousand credits had recently been deposited in his Ord Mantell account, but we're having a hard time verifying where that money originated."

"And Ord Mantell isn't helping you much, are they?"

"No. The so-called 'authorities' there take pride in allowing 'discrete' transactions."

"What about Dren's relatives?" Ric asked.

"They had nothing useful to offer," Essara replied.

Essara had gone to see Dren's parents yesterday evening. She had met with three sets of devastated parents earlier that day, and as she piloted her aircar away from Theed, her face still stung from being slapped by a woman who would never be a grandmother thanks to Dren's treachery.

From a certain point of view, Dren had been right. Centuries ago, Naboo had been settled by colonists who wanted to preserve their cultured lifestyle. They had envisioned a society free of the barbarism they felt was spreading across the galaxy. Although the Naboo people at large were pacifists, Dren's parents seemed as reactionary and volatile as their early forebears. Essara's brief encounter with them had left her feeling ill.

"We knew he had been corrupted," his mother had said. "I am not surprised that he no longer felt any loyalty to his homeworld. We raised him properly, you can ask anyone here. But he wouldn't listen to us. He wanted to see the rest of the galaxy."

"We told him there was no coming home when he left," Dren's father had said. "We told him that when he returned wearing that hideous black flight suit and carrying a blaster! Can you believe he brought that weapon into our house? Not a hunting rifle, but a pistol. A weapon of war..."

They feared and despised the rest of the galaxy. Anyone who brought the galaxy's problems to Naboo was worse than a plague. Dren's parents didn't bother to hide the contempt they felt for Essara's uniform, eventually telling her that they believed the Royal Security Force invited strife and violence through its very existence. "Before Veruna, it was just a small palace guard. But then he decided he should involve Naboo in the filthy dealings of the rest of the galaxy, so now you people have starfighters and armored landspeeders. It's no wonder you and your pilots were attacked. Weapons don't prevent violence. They cause it!"

When Dren's younger brother—a shaak wrangler—showed up, he ejected Essara from the home. The parents had looked on with pride as he chased her into the street, cursing her as a corrupting influence on their homeworld.

Essara grimaced. "Dren hadn't had much contact with them since he first left Naboo. As far as I could determine, he only visited them once since his return."

"Nothing but dead ends," Bibble said. "The Queen won't be happy to hear that."

"I don't suppose she will," Essara said, sagging slightly in her chair. "None of us want to see our people die for no reason."

"Hopefully, the Senate will choose to investigate," Ric said. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Not at the moment. Thank you both for your assistance and service."

Ric Oli' and Essara Till walked back to their shared office. The administrative wing was

buzzing with activity, something for which Essara was grateful. The silence from Echo Elight's ready room would have been too much for her to bear.

"Essara, are you sure you're all right?" Ric asked, closing the office door behind them.

"I've lost pilots before," she replied taking her seat behind her desk. She gingerly touched the healing wound on her forehead. "And this scratch is nothing, like I told the medics."

"I know, but..."

"No buts, Ric. We've got a lot of work to do." She started reviewing the datapads on her desk, checking one, then another. When she realized that Ric was standing in front of her desk, she looked up. "Yes?"

"We all appreciate your dedication, Essara, but... well, you and Dren were pretty close. No one would think less of you if you took some time for yourself."

"I'm fine," she said, focusing on the datapad. But those words alone weren't enough to discourage Ric. When she looked up, he was gazing at her with a familiar concerned look. "Do you see a dark side to our introspective culture?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When I came home, it was as if I'd never left. I guess I'm lucky to have such supportive friends and family. It wasn't the same for Dren. Our world turned against him. His family reviled him. While I dreamt of a quiet life in the mountains, all he could see was fear and hatred. I thought Naboo was different, but in some ways it's not."

"Naboo is not like the rest of the galaxy." said Ric. "I think most of our differences are preferable to what you'll find offworld, but it's naZve to assume there aren't those among us who are, well, less decent than we'd like. Those people loomed large in Dren's worldview, but they are a minority."

"I just need to keep busy," she said.

He frowned at her, then nodded slowly. From the expression, Essara could tell he had the words "I'm really sorry about Dren" on his tongue. Thankfully, he could read her expression too and knew that it was better for both of them if it remained unspoken.

"Most people on Naboo understand that the Royal Security Force allows them to lead their peaceful lives. Veruna might have drawn Naboo into too many offworld affairs, but we would have had to expand the Security Force regardless. Times are changing, ^ou and I both know that. If we do our jobs right, the people won't have to worry about it, though."

Essara gave Ric's words a moment's thought before changing the subject. "Y@u need to fill a vacancy in Bravo Flight. Here are three pilots that I recommend highly." She took up the datapad and handed it to him. "They are the best Echo has to offer, even if they don't always follow orders."

Ric read the datapad. It contained the service records for Rhys Barrow, Keela Egast, and Evenyl Yob... Echo Five, Echo Eight, and Echo One.