

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 starfighter 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. "Ell-one!"

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 Olié 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 Olié 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 Flight'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 naïve 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. You 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. "You 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 Dallows, Keela Egast, and Evenyl Yob... Echo Five, Echo Eight, and Echo One.