

Part One

The palace always seemed to fall into a slumber when Queen Amidala 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 Olié.

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 Olié 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 Flight is eagerly studying up on their fighters, hoping that we'll lead them to glory and a chance to fly the N-1s." 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."

"Your 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 Olié'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-9 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-95s 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.

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 Olié 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-95s. Her scanner confirmed only that the enemy flew either basic Headhunters or Mark IIs, neither of which was as maneuverable or fast as the N-1 or the Police Cruiser. The Z-95s 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-95s 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-1s. 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-95s' 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.

"You 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-95s' 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-95s. 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-95s. 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.