

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 Headhunter’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 Headhunter 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-95s 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-1 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 tractored 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 petty thieves and terrorists!" said Echo Five angrily.

"Captain Sorran, this is Bravo Flight 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 Flight," 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, Flight 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 didn't want to make either of us choose our loyalties like this," he replied. "And I don't 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 don't 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 shouldn't 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! Haven't 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-95s 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.

"Yeah," 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 overlapping 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 read him so wrong? How could she have been 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 starfighter 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.

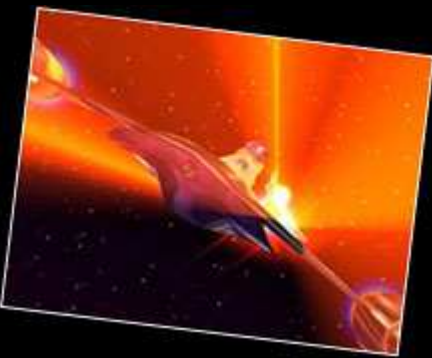
*Nice trick. One destroyed, two damaged. We can outrun them now. Our shields are at 45 percent and recharging.*

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-9 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.

"Kerl!" several pilots cried.

"I'm hurt bad, Flight 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 Five 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, Flight Leader. I don't 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."