

# The Light in Heavy Basin

by P.E. Rowe

The starfighter appeared on A-Station's passive detective systems a day before it met Denera's atmosphere. Two other deep-space sensors were able to triangulate its position and anticipate its course. There was no question as to its destination. It had dropped out and within minutes set a course to intercept the planet, and though the leaders on Denera had no particular reason to think the ship would be a threat, there was also no reason to think anyone knew they were there. But it was clear the pilot knew something about them. Why else would they be tracking straight for Denera?

Spiro Hanno was the Sheriff of Kalb County, the planet's largest outpost of about two hundred thousand citizens, and security fell to him. The Denerans

were not militaristic people—that was why they were here. But they always had half an eye on the system in the chance that the more militaristic peoples within reach ever discovered their quiet, humble little planet. There'd been the occasional ship. A few had even poked around within a few million miles of the planet, but Denera didn't look all that inviting from that distance, and, by design, it didn't look occupied. Hanno had data coming in through the night from the Farside observation station and the Oceanic. They'd both confirmed: the starfighter was coming, and Spiro Hanno needed to know why.

Within hours of its approach, they'd narrowed down its trajectory to the western hemisphere. The question now was where the ship would head when it arrived. Hanno had six parties out covering the continent. It hadn't leaked to the citizenry yet, and he wanted to keep it that way until they

knew what they were dealing with. Hanno had his best deputy out in the scablands where the craft was most likely to crack the atmosphere. He'd given orders to stay hidden and observe, which is just what Deacon Dawes was doing the morning the starfighter arrived. Dawes had hidden his hopper in a valley and climbed to a useful vantage point on the western cliffs facing the scablands' Heavy Basin.

The starfighter entered the atmosphere and didn't waste any time getting to the ground. The ship was smoking heavily as it descended.

"Looks like this thing got clipped pretty good, sheriff," Dawes said, staring up at the sky through his oculus. "But, damn, looks like a hawk of a starship. Never seen that make before, but definitely Etteran."

Spiro Hanno, on the eastern side of the hemisphere, was watching on his

office's monitor. "Sure looks like it. Keep eyes on it, Deek."

Deacon Dawes saw the starfighter come down, smoking heavily and on a steep descent, hugging the cliffs dangerously when it got down close to ground level. Deacon watched from the rim of the basin as the ship blew right past him, smoke and fire spewing out the back end of the dorsal thruster. The atmosphere was doing that Etteran starfighter no favors. Deek gave it a fifty-fifty chance of quickly evolving into a fiery crater, but somehow at about ten meters above ground level, the thrusters blew back hard and took enough edge off to prevent a severe crash. The starfighter jolted to a stop. A few seconds later, Deek heard the soundwave from the harsh touchdown blast by.

"Best count your teeth, cowboy," Deek said.

He half expected to see the pilot come running out with his hair on fire,

but the rear hatch stayed shut. Deek kept his oculus trained on the starfighter, but no one got out. It was a bit unusual for someone to land like that with the engines aflame and then hang out in the ship while it smoldered. He relayed the update to Hanno.

“Might be injured,” Deacon Dawes said. “Want me to go have a look?”

“No, I do not,” Hanno said. “Intervene as a last resort, Deek. Just let the situation develop.”

“Roger, Kalb City. I’ll let you know.”

The doors stayed shut for so long Deacon Dawes figured the pilot had to be dead or unconscious. The engine smoked for hours and then began to peter out. As the evening began to set in, the rear hatch cracked open.

“Got movement here, Hanno,” Deek said, and he was shocked to see who stepped out, and her state of being.

The woman was wearing a respirator—strange, because even

wounded, the starfighter would have had readings on the atmosphere, if she'd bothered to read them or knew how.

“She sure don't look the part of a fighter pilot, Hanno,” Deek said. “She's not even wearing a jump suit.”

“Passenger?” Spiro Hanno said.

“Maybe the pilot's hurt or dead?”

“Could be. No sense speculating, Deek. Just keep your eyes on.”

“Roger.”

Deek watched as the young lady sat on the rear gate looking around the desolate valley. She gave off decidedly unmilitary vibes. For one, even flaming, any pilot beyond a rank novice would have circled around a bit to find a better place to set down—some shade, a source of water, something. Second, her behavior seemed undirected, objectiveless passivity and a distinct air of despair in her manner. He caught her crying as the sun went down.

“Don’t that just yank at the heart, Hanno?” he said. “We’re going to end up picking her up anyway, right? Might as well spare her the anguish.”

“Negative, Deek,” Hanno said. “Still a chance she can get herself sorted, or maybe she’ll have got off a message on the way here. Could get picked up.”

“And then what?”

“This is a problem we don’t need. Let’s see if it fixes itself before we go stuffing our noses in it.”

“Okay, boss.”

As the sun set, the young lady went back inside and the rear hatch closed. Deek spent the night on the cliff with his oculus trained on the starfighter.

Early the next morning, the woman climbed atop the ship with a scope and began to survey the landscape.

“Oh, hell,” Deek said. “I think she’s going to make a break for it.”

Spiro Hanno watched from the station in Kalb City. He didn’t like what he saw, but he had to agree.

“We gonna let her, boss?” Deek asked. “She’s gonna fry down there. If help were coming, she sure as hell wouldn’t be cutting out into the desert, at daybreak no less.”

“Hell is right,” Hanno said.

It was trouble. It’d been over sixty years since the Denerans had splintered off the Trasp colony. Hanno’s father had spent over two years in space looking for a site like Denera. Spiro Hanno had heard all the stories, of the wars, of the exodus, and for the sake of the old-timers who’d lived through it all and his kids who shouldn’t have to, Sheriff Hanno didn’t want their position revealed after all this time. Not to Trasp, not to the Etterans, not to nobody.

“Do I get her?” Deek said.

“What’s your timeframe to get to the basin floor?”

“Two hours tops, boss. Half hour if I fly out there in the hopper.”

“Hell.”

“She spent an awful long time eying up the canyon to the Hot Basin.”

“Standby,” Hanno said.

“You’re not going to make me watch this disaster, boss? I know she’s Etteran, but damn, she don’t look like much of a threat.”

“It’s not her I’m worried about, Deek. Standby.”

Deacon Dawes grumbled and framed his oculus’s sights on the star-fighter in the basin again. What he saw next changed the equation.

“Hell, Hanno. She’s got a kid down there with her. Looks like eight, maybe nine. I ain’t standing by no more.”

Deacon hadn’t seen the boy the previous day, probably because the mother had kept him in the ship out of an abundance of caution on the strange planet. Deacon started for the hopper double-time. The sun was rising fast.

Deek set out across the basin, and opted to set the hopper down in a crag where they wouldn’t see him coming.

He planned to approach on foot without it seeming like a ship was running them down. The mother and the boy were walking along a narrow canyon along the basin floor when Deek approached on foot, he thought, in plain enough sight that he wouldn't startle them. Apparently, though, they weren't even looking straight ahead.

Deek said hello and the woman screamed, recoiling and stooping to protect her son. She rushed to pull out what looked to be a charged Etteran bolt pistol and pointed it at Deek's head.

"Whoa, there, ma'am," he said, putting his hands up to calm the situation.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" she said.

He pulled the cloth mask away from his mouth so she could see his face.

"My name is Deacon," Deek said, "and I certainly don't mean you or your boy any harm. Fact, I came down

to make sure harm didn't come to you."

"Is that so?"

Deek nodded. "Fact, if I wanted harm to come to you, I'da let you keep walking toward the canyon wall you was eying up from your ship. 'Bout a ten-mile walk, not a drop of water, and with the sun coming up, you'd both be dead by sundown."

"Is that so?" she said, seeming to trust there was truth to what Deek was saying.

"That's so," he said.

"Who are you?" she repeated. "This planet is meant to be deserted."

"There's more than a few of us disagree, and a lucky bit of business for you and your boy on that point."

"That would seem so," the woman conceded. "You have an outpost nearby?"

"Not nearby," Deek said. "We saw you coming. Your entry wasn't exactly inconspicuous, wouldn't you say?"

The woman nodded.

“What’s your name, young man?”  
Deek asked the boy.

He looked at his mother, who shook her head at him. The boy didn’t respond.

“All right,” Deek said. “You folks want to die out here in the desert or would you prefer to come meet your new friends?” He smiled. “Come on.”

He led the way to the hopper and the mother and son followed reluctantly, but it didn’t take long for them to realize that Deek’s courtesy was genuine. He stopped at the ship again while they waited for the davjet to come get Deek’s hopper. Deek pulled the transponder and diagnostic data from the starfighter.

Neither the mother nor the boy opened up much on the two-hour ride back to Kalb City. They had the look of folks who recognized their fate now relied upon the charity of others, and, Deek recognized, that for Etterans, that

had to be an uncomfortable proposition.

Hanno was at the port to meet all six deputies on the detail as well as the davjet pilot, and it was an uneasy meeting, because no one really knew what to do with their new guests. The presence of Etterans on Denera would certainly set off a charged debate about the fate of the mother and the boy, and Hanno was old enough to know that debate could go to some uncomfortable places awful fast. He ordered his deputies to strictest secrecy and set about interviewing the woman to figure out how she'd come to be on Denera.

She and Hanno had a long discussion in a quiet side-office in the port's admin wing. She wasn't as initially forthcoming as Hanno would've liked. But he came to believe it wasn't anything other than dumb luck that had brought her there. She'd rushed the boy into the starfighter

when their home on Attis was hit. And when things got too hot to wait for her husband to get back to them, he'd told her to take off. They'd barely gotten out on autopilot, and not unscathed at that, and, according to the woman, who purported to be a Mrs. Keenan Stock of Etterus, it had been the autopilot and a random scan through reconnaissance logs that set them on a path to the safest uninhabited planet they could cruise to.

“Who are you people?” she said, after Hanno seemed satisfied that he wasn't going to get any better answers. “You're not flying any colours. Not of Trasp nor Etterus. What are you going to do with us?”

“That is complicated,” Hanno said. “It would certainly have been less complicated for us if you hadn't found us here, ma'am, but it happens now that you have.”

“I'd like to go home.”

“That’s interesting,” Hanno said. “Seems to me like you fled home fast enough to smoke out your engines.”

“You know what I mean, sheriff.”

“We’re rather isolated here. Only ship on the planet capable of getting you back to Etterus, if there is one, was the one you flew in on, which, I hear is in pretty rough shape.”

“You wouldn’t let us go if it could fly, would you?”

Hanno thought about whether he would be straight with Mrs. Stock.

“Right now? No. I couldn’t let you go. Our stability here has relied upon no one knowing we existed. I’m hopeful we can come to an understanding. But Deek was left with a tough choice, ma’am, and he chose to save your lives. In return for that kindness, I suppose we’re going to ask you for your patience and cooperation while we figure out what to do about you now that he did. It’s not a

straightforward situation you and your son are in exactly.”

“Are we in danger, sheriff?”

“Relative to the Hot Basin without a canteen, ma’am? Your patience, please. We’re civil people, but we too have cause to be cautious. Fair enough?”

Mrs. Stock nodded.

Deek was waiting in the hallway when the sheriff left the office. Hanno could see the young deputy was more invested in the situation than he cared for him to be.

“What are you going to do with her, Hanno?”

Spiro Hanno shook his head. “Do me a favor and call Pip,” he said. “She’s going to raise holy hell with me, but who better to trust when you need it than family?”

Hanno briefed the deputies, swearing them all to secrecy, and in the moment, it seemed the best of limited options. Kalb City was a small place, and her people had ample cause to be

suspicious and even hostile to outsiders, especially Etteran ones. But as Sheriff Hanno put it, Mrs. Stock didn't need her day to get any worse, and being the focus of a planet-wide debate where her identity, liberty, safety, and even her life would be imperiled wasn't exactly the kind of welcome Spiro Hanno had in mind for a harmless young art teacher and her eight-year-old son.

"How long do you think you'll be able to keep this a secret, Dad?" Pippa asked when she got to the port. "She even sounds Etteran. What the hell do I tell the neighbors?"

"Tell them to mind their own damn business and come see me if they have a problem."

"And Mat?"

"I trusted him to look out for my daughter, didn't I? Now, I'm trusting him with her."

Pip shook her head. "This isn't going to end well, Dad."

“The longer she’s among us, the softer the landing’s going to be when she’s found out, Pip. Just do your best.”

“So, is this permanent or what?”

“Well, not in your house, but unless you know someone who can repair an Etteran starfighter, I’d prepare Mrs. Stock to settle in.”

Pip sighed.

The day’s problem quietly became the week’s. And, to Deek and Hanno’s surprise, after a month or so no one had raised any alarm at all. Pip convinced the neighbors that the woman was a childhood friend who had suddenly and contentiously split with her husband, and Mrs. Stock had quickly learned to say very little and to say it quietly enough that her accent wasn’t so prominent or alarming. The boy, Ayrik, meanwhile, with the company of Pip’s kids, seamlessly adapted to Deneran culture, which wasn’t so different to Etteran life that he seemed foreign very long.

Within several months, Ayrik was sent to school, and Mrs. Stock herself went to work for the Kalb City maintenance department. Soon after she was given her own water truck and care of the trees in the southwest quadrant, which she cared for as diligently as any of Kalb City's own workers would.

In the months that followed, every several weeks or so, though, Mrs. Stock would approach Sheriff Hanno about the starfighter, and each time he would deflect, stating that he was working on it, trying to get someone qualified to look at it. But to her, Hanno didn't seem all that eager to help. After a while, she gave up on him and went to Deacon Dawes.

Deek tried his best to make sense of the diagnostics, and he often needed help from Mrs. Stock to read through the script in the obscure files of the Etteran diagnostics manual. A few months later, she told him to stop

calling her Mrs. Stock. It was Keenan now. Just Keenan. And as helpful as Deek tried to be, he couldn't help but hope he never got the ship off the ground.

Hanno sanctioned two trips out to Heavy Basin the following year. The first with himself, Deek, and Keenan, which bore no fruit. The second, with Deek, Keenan, and a hopper mechanic Grayson, who was a friend of Deek's. Grayson was suspicious but seemed earnest in his efforts to get the starfighter powered up again. But it had spent months idle in the desert sun, and it hadn't been in flying shape to begin with. Between the heat, the wind, the sand, the sun, and the passage of time, the starfighter was looking less and less space worthy, and for Keenan and Ayrik, Denera was beginning to feel more and more like home.

One particularly hot afternoon in Kalb City several months after the most recent trip to Heavy Basin,

Sheriff Hanno happened upon Keenan, he on his way to a council meeting, she on her usual route, lounging beneath one of her farroe oaks. She seemed pleasantly engaged in a respite from both the sun and her work. Hanno stopped his vehicle to say hello.

“Mrs. Stock,” he said.

“Hello, sheriff,” she said. “Keenan, please.”

“Hot one,” he said, noticing the sweat bleeding into her clothing.

She nodded.

“There was something I wanted to broach with you at some point, Keenan, if you’re open to a conversation?”

“Sounds serious.”

“Delicate,” Hanno said. “Not easy, but probably not something an intelligent woman such as yourself couldn’t have predicted.”

“The ship?”

“Like I said,” Hanno replied.

“Grayson’s been asking me about it,” she said, “and I was asking him about you folks—all the ships that got your parents here. Ever since, I’ve been noticing parts of the ships all over town.”

“Yeah, the Starcatcher’s got a bit of a theme in the lounge that probably makes a little more sense after that conversation.”

“It’s tough,” she said. “I realized a while back that as earnest as Deek is, he’s no mechanic, and even if he were, he’s not a miracle worker. But if I give Grayson permission to go out there and husk the ship, it’s almost like I’m giving up hope of ever going back. And the truth is that if I could snap my fingers and make it fly, I’m not certain I would anymore.”

“If you’d like a second opinion to be sure you’re getting a fair price for it, I’m happy to advocate on your behalf.”

“Mat’s actually been helping me with it, estimating price per kilogram and transport costs.”

“That’s good of him,” Hanno said.

“Yes, but he’s got ulterior motives. Pip too, I think, good as she’s been to us. They want their house back.”

“You ready, you think?”

“To move out?” she said, thinking. “Yeah. It’ll be quieter without the little ones around, and I think Rik’s ready for his own space.”

“And you?”

Keenan smiled and shook her head. “Me and Rik got used to being alone together a long time ago.” She shrugged. “It’s peaceful here. It really is.”

Hanno nodded. “Have yourself a fine afternoon, Keenan.”

“You too, sheriff.”

A month or so later, Spiro Hanno heard from Pip that Keenan had given Grayson permission to husk the starfighter. It turned out to be

considerably heavier than expected, and Keenan was able to do better than a meager down payment on a modest place. She ended up purchasing outright a nice little townhouse down the street from Pip and Mat's. And just like that, Keenan Stock had become a regular Deneran from the Settler District of Kalb City. A short time later, Hanno learned, she and Deek were seeing quite a bit of each other. And not long after, they were engaged to be married.

It was in the weeks before Deacon Dawes and the former Mrs. Stock's wedding that the scandal finally broke. An ex of Deek's, more out of curiosity than jealousy tried to figure out who the mysterious woman he was marrying actually was. She found no childhood friends in the city, no school records, and no birth certificate for Keenan Stock. Like many others in Kalb City, she'd heard rumors of an Etteran starfighter that had crash

landed on the other side of the continent. Between the sudden appearance of Mrs. Stock and her son, her strange accent, and her missing past, Deek's ex had put two and two together. Fortunately for Sheriff Hanno, she approached him first, which put him in a position to soften the blow. Hanno told the young woman he'd look into it and get back to her and prepared the Stocks and Pip's family, and then he called the Kalb News Bureau and granted an interview. Hanno calmly explained that, yes, there'd been an Etteran among them, and she'd been a welcome addition to the city's work force who had voluntarily husked her ship, adding to the outpost's limited metal supplies and cutting herself off from any chance of returning home forever. He explained the choice that Deek had made that morning out in the Heavy Basin and that it was the only decision a decent people could have made. The

only thing he'd have changed about his actions, if any, was keeping the secret from the community for so long, but he was glad it was now out in the open.

Sheriff Hanno expected there to be calls for his resignation, but the response to his interview was far more muted than he'd anticipated. It seemed as though he'd banked enough trust with the community over the years that, though it was a big withdrawal, he hadn't quite overdrawn his account. It helped that Mrs. Stock herself came forward to explain herself, and her graciousness and gratitude toward the Deneran people for their hospitality turned her from a source of concern to a sympathetic figure in the eyes of many Denerans.

This, Sheriff Hanno thought, would finally draw the incident from that morning in the Heavy Basin to a close. It was about the best outcome everyone could have hoped for under the circumstances. The Stocks were

alive and happy. The outpost was still a secret to the Trasps and Etterans, and Deek and Keenan were getting married. Hanno didn't regret a thing. Over the years, he'd celebrated at their wedding, congratulated Deek and Keenan on the birth of two children, and had even gotten to know young Rik quite well as the boy grew into a teenager with an avid interest in scouting and law enforcement. He was such a personable kid, Hanno thought he'd make an excellent deputy, and he had a great example to look up to in his step-father. Both Hanno himself and Deek were looking forward to a day in the near future when they could pin a star on young Rik for the first time.

Hanno was counting down his final six months before retirement, on a morning much like the one eight years prior when Keenan and Rik had arrived, when the Oceanic picked up a signal from the passive monitors at the edge of the system. The ping was

confirmed, triangulated, and followed over the following sixteen hours, and though they'd picked up passing ships often enough over the years, none of them had given him the sinking feeling in his stomach that this one did. They couldn't get a transponder lock on it, but Hanno almost didn't need technological confirmation to tell him what his gut told him. It was Etteran.

When it got close enough for a visual from Farside the night before it arrived, the picture on the scope was clear—a starfighter similar in make to the former Mrs. Stock's ship. Hanno suspected this ship, though, was neither damaged nor piloted by an amateur. He expected to be seeing the pilot soon, and tracking as it was, steadily for Denera, Hanno knew the time of arrival.

The following afternoon, just ahead of Hanno's expected time frame, the starfighter touched down at an inconspicuous distance from Kalb City.

It made no flyover and kept low enough to the horizon so that few in the city were even aware of its presence beyond the city officials. It hadn't even made the news yet. Sheriff Hanno went out to greet the pilot, grateful for the uncharacteristically muted approach from the Etteran military craft.

He arrived at the scene to an opening rear hatch and a middle-aged man wearing the uniform of a high-ranking officer, though he couldn't tell what rank at distance. The sheriff approached alone.

The Etteran officer stood, back straight, his feet planted firmly on the dry Deneran plain, awaiting the sheriff's arrival.

"Welcome, sir," Hanno said, nodding at the officer.

"Am I?" he responded. "I encountered a powerful jamming signal as I entered the planet's space. A sign of welcome, no doubt?"

“Far more welcoming than the alternative, I think you’d agree,” Hanno said. “We like our privacy here.”

“I see,” the pilot said. “Officer?”

“Sheriff Spiro Hanno, and I gather by your uniform and epaulettes you’re an Etteran Colonel?”

“Commodore.”

“Commodore? Oh, well, then sincerely, welcome, commodore. I’m going to take a stab in the dark here and guess you might go by Commodore Stock, then?”

The pilot’s eyes cracked slightly wider despite the well-practiced composure of a veteran fighter pilot.

“I wouldn’t have expected my reputation to precede me this far out.”

Hanno shook his head. “Not your reputation, sir.” He could see the commodore processing, struggling to keep his emotions hidden.

“What are you saying then, sir?”

“I suspect you’ve been traveling a while in your search, no? And given we have much to discuss, I’d consider it an act of good faith on your part if you powered down your weapons systems, your engines and your transponder and joined me at my daughter’s table for dinner, Commodore Stock.”

“We didn’t pick up the starfighter anywhere on our approach, sheriff. Will you tell me, please, are they alive? Are they here?”

“Yes, and yes, commodore.” Hanno said.

He watched the commodore work to contain a complex wave of emotions, from shock to disbelief to relief and who knows what else.

The commodore shook his head and spoke. “Derrian, please power everything down and join me outside. We’ve been invited to dinner.”

There was a long pause. “What is this, Willem?” a woman’s voice came back.

“I think we’ve found them,” Commodore Stock said. “Please.”

Sheriff Hanno nodded, as if to reassure the commodore. And the two men stood for some time looking at each other awkwardly, the sheriff unwilling to reveal more in that setting, and the commodore, having taken a measure of the sheriff, knew better than to ask.

The woman who stepped out the rear hatch of the starfighter also wore an Etteran officer’s uniform, and Hanno watched as she assessed their surroundings, scanning the horizon for vessels and positions where fire could come from, exposed as they were out on the plain.

“You’re safe here, ma’am,” Hanno said.

“You wear no colors,” she said, eyeing the sheriff suspiciously. “Are you Trasp?”

“I’m Spiro Hanno,” the sheriff said. “And you’re on neutral ground.”

The commodore gave the woman a reassuring look that confirmed the sheriff's suspicion—she was more than a junior officer to him.

“Please,” Hanno said, gesturing toward his vehicle.

Hanno took a roundabout route to Pip's house, trying to avoid the spectacle that would doubtless arise from two fully uniformed officers of the Etteran Guild riding with the sheriff of Kalb County through the heart of the city. In the vehicle, the silence was stark.

When he got them to Pip's house, she quickly ushered them inside.

“What'll you bring home next, Dad?” she said under her breath.

“You be good, Pippa,” he said.

Mat greeted both guests as they entered the living room, offering a seat. He'd just got in from work, and was surely not expecting Etteran houseguests.

“It’s going to take some time,” Hanno said, advising them to sit. “We’re just as shocked by your presence as you two must be yourselves. We’d ask you, please, for your patience.”

“Certainly,” the commodore said, gesturing for his companion to sit and following beside her.

“No chance for this to go sideways,” Pip whispered to Spiro Hanno as they stepped into the kitchen. “What do you suppose Etterans would like for dinner, Dad?”

“Same as anyone else, I guess, Pip. I’m sure they’ll be happy for a homecooked meal.”

Before long, Hanno saw Deek’s cruiser pull up. It was him and Keenan and Rik. Out of the corner of his eye, the Sheriff saw the commodore stand in anticipation. Hanno signaled for him to wait there and went to meet the Dawes family at the front door, conferring with Keenan and Rik to be

sure Deek had properly prepared them for what was awaiting. He wanted to confirm that no matter what happened, if they chose to stay, he would defend that choice no matter the cost, and if they chose to leave, they would be free to. They were both unequivocal. “Our family is here, sheriff,” Keenan said.

“So it is,” Hanno agreed, and he stood aside as they entered the home.

When they finally stepped into the living room, it seemed to Hanno like there was some galaxy-wide record set for suppressed emotions. Though, eventually, Rik was the one to bridge the gap and embrace his father. Hanno stepped in to make introductions between Deek and Commodore Stock, who took the opportunity to introduce his wife, the new Mrs. Stock to the former Mrs. Stock, who were both gracious if a bit apprehensive.

“We thought you were dead,” Rik said after an awkward silence.

They all sat, and the commodore leaned forward to talk to his eldest son. “I was deployed after the Attis attack. From that day for two straight years. It was the fiercest stretch of the war—”

“Was, you said?” Keenan interrupted. “Does that mean it’s over?”

There was an apprehensive nod from the commodore and his spouse. “There’s been an armistice. It has held for two years without violation. A tenuous peace,” he said.

“All that time you were fighting?” Rik asked.

Commodore Stock nodded. “You were both declared dead,” he said. “But I didn’t want to believe it, not without confirmation—debris, a witness, DNA. Over time, I started wondering what kind of information might have been in that starfighter’s navigation drives, and we discovered that the squadron had done some reconnaissance work in the year before the Attis attack. Derrian was able to track down in Archives the

list of survey targets for that starfighter you took. This planet was site sixty-two.”

“It’s very gracious of you,” Keenan said to Mrs. Stock. “To aid Willem in searching for us. It can’t have been easy for you.”

She smiled. “I didn’t imagine we’d find a trace of you, and certainly not alive, and in such circumstances. But it was important for him to look.”

“We’re grateful,” Keenan said.

“It’s strange,” Derrian said. “It’s unexpected, but I am very glad to see you both alive. You know Willem says very little about such things, but I can tell it has worn on his heart.”

“Ours too,” Rik said. “Only we didn’t have a way to search.”

“You look well,” Commodore Stock said to his son. “Healthy, strong—”

“Handsome,” Mrs. Stock interjected. “I’ve only seen pictures of a boy, and here we find a young man nearly ready to don the colours of Etterus.”

Rik smiled, and Keenan sat back ever so slightly in her chair.

“Shall we eat,” Sheriff Hanno asked from the doorway. “Pip tells me dinner’s about ready.”

“Smells heavenly,” Commodore Stock said, standing.

They adjourned to the dining room, and sat. For most of the meal, the silverware made more noise than the diners, clinking against plates as the eight people enjoyed the goodness of the meal in silence.

“You’ve been quite hospitable, ma’am” the commodore said to Pip. “And you as well, Sheriff, though I get the sense that our presence here is not entirely welcome.”

The sheriff smiled. “My grandparents and your grandparents made quite the habit of killing the other. They did it for long enough my parents’ generation thought it a better course of action to cut ties with their own parents for the sake of their kids.

And they came here. There's been no colours and no war on Denera, so the sight of an Etteran starfighter outside Kalb City, well, it won't take long to raise the anxiety level, let's say."

"I see," Commodore Stock said. "What little we saw on the way here...seemed a peaceful place."

"I was of two minds that morning your wife appeared in the desert. The smart thing, I kept telling myself was to let the desert take care of the problem for us. Of course, I didn't know her name yet, but Keenan was in a bad spot, and then Rik appeared, and Deek went running out into that desert too fast for me to tell him otherwise. While they was in the air on the way back here, all I could think was what the hell I was going to do with them. And then I got a chance to look a pair of Etterans in the eyes that afternoon, and all I could think was who in all of creation would allow a harm to come upon a pair such as them. And to think our grandparents

had deliberately been doing it to each other for decades, and for what?”

Hanno shook his head.

“I’m ashamed Deek acted before I told him to. Been so since I laid eyes on the both of them. And I tell you, commodore, I got hope that one day your grandchildren will meet each other in the depths of space and the thought will never cross their minds that it’s even an option to blow the hell out of each other.”

The commodore looked across the table at the sheriff, processing, taking in the implications of his statement. Keenan was here, settled, among family with these people, and here, his son, without the need to don colours. The years of war. His personal losses.

Mrs. Derrian Stock seemed to come to the understanding at that moment that Keenan and Ayrik’s apprehension wasn’t what she’d thought but more fear for their family and friends here,

and the sheriff could see the second Mrs. Stock calculating.

“I don’t suppose the Etteran Guild would write off a commodore and a Lt. colonel as lost in space in peacetime and not go looking if you didn’t make it home?”

“Not a chance, sheriff,” the commodore said.

“I figured as much, commodore, and to be honest, I’m happy to hear it. Takes any hard decisions off the table, at least on our end. All that leaves us is trust.”

Sheriff Hanno pulled his bolt pistol from his belt and neutralized it, handing it to Deek and gesturing for him to pass it down the table.

“This is my grandfather’s. I’d like you to have it, commodore.”

Deek looked at Spiro Hanno doubtfully, and Hanno gestured for Deek to pass it down the table.

“I’ve had a lot of deputies over the years. None better than Deek, as it

happens, but that's just an aside. I learned early on that authority wasn't in the weapon you wielded or even in the way that you wielded it. Real authority was in handing a weapon to your people and knowing that they'd wield it with the same care and considerations you would."

Mrs. Stock looked flabbergasted by the sheriff's gesture. She'd never seen a man do such a thing. The commodore took the weapon in his hand, gracefully accepted it and set it in his lap.

"I'm happy you found us, Willem," Keenan Dawes said.

The commodore reached across the table and took his son's hand, and then, after releasing it, found his wife Derrian's hand beside his, there to take it up again.

As the meal ended, word came to Deek and Hanno that the starfighter had been spotted outside Kalb City, and residents were beginning to congregate and ask questions of the

deputies who'd gone out to investigate the call. It occurred to Hanno that the longer the Stocks remained, the greater the probability the situation would grow complicated enough that he alone wouldn't be able to control it. He suggested they say their goodbyes then and there.

"I had hoped..." Willem Stock began to say.

"I know, sir," Hanno said. "Circumstances, though."

Stock nodded.

Sheriff Hanno and Deek took the Stocks back out to the plain after Rik and Keenan had said their goodbyes. The only thing that was said in the vehicle was Hanno suggesting that, for the sake of appearances, Mr. and Mrs. Stock should visit a few more planets on the list instead of returning to Etterus directly, and both seemed amenable.

The scene at the starfighter was more than Hanno and Deek were

expecting. A crowd of hundreds had gathered at the ship, many armed, with firearms, wrenches, long metal poles, and though they'd been listening on their earpieces en route, neither Deacon Dawes nor the sheriff himself had a sense for the tension that the starfighter's presence had stirred in the community. The sight of the crowd and their hand-lights encircling the base of the Stocks' starfighter caused a sudden palpable tension in the sheriff's vehicle as they approached.

“Cut us a path, Deek,” Hanno said as the vehicle came to a stop.

Deek got out and summoned two of the deputies that had been trying unsuccessfully to keep onlookers back from the ship. Deek ushered the deputies to the sheriff's vehicle, which prompted a large portion of the crowd to follow.

“Rest assured,” Hanno told the Stocks. “No harm will come to anyone tonight.” And he got out of the vehicle,

opened their door and placed his hand over Mrs. Derrian Stock's shoulder, and they all walked behind Deek as the other two deputies cleared a path to the back hatch of the starfighter.

"Where's your wife, Deek?" a voice in the crowd shouted.

"She's home," Deacon Dawes shouted back.

And the crowd parted, looking on as the Etterans were escorted to their ship, some in disbelief, some angry, most merely observing the unusual occurrence. But no one raised a hand toward the outsiders.

As they entered the back hatch, Commodore Stock gestured to the old bolt pistol he had tucked into his belt and nodded. Sheriff Hanno returned the nod and stepped out the back hatch, wishing them luck on their journey home.

The sheriff and his deputies cleared a safe perimeter around the base of the

starfighter. Concerned citizens demanded to know about the interlopers.

“You’re just letting them go?” someone shouted.

And before any of the deputies or the sheriff had a meaningful chance to answer, the starfighter’s engines hummed to life and a puff of hot air compelled the onlookers to step further back. Moments later, the dark plain lit up in a blinding light as a shock of noise and heat struck the onlookers, the engines propelling the commodore’s starfighter once more into the air. The vessel slowly rose into the night sky, before shooting out of Denera’s atmosphere and tracing a bright point of light into the stars.

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