

SELF DEFENSE

Jason M. Hardy

He knew he shouldn't be here. The risks of his first stay had been bad enough, but the repeat visits were completely reckless, bordering on insane.

But business kept taking him to this planet. And each time he stepped off the DropShip ... well, each time it seemed like he could hear this place, no matter how far away he was. It wouldn't stop calling to him.

But it would be okay. He was safe. Anyone looking in would simply see a single man on a well-earned break. They would know nothing about what else had gone on in the room.

Everything was fine.

* * *

"He's only a tax collector."

"He's a little more than that."

"Doesn't mean he's important."

The glass dome was just above the water level, and it would have taken a careful observer indeed to pick out the submersible in the dark. The dome covered a camera, and the camera was trained on the room of Ronald Ekkers, Star League Regional Deputy Consul.

"He's not showing us anything we can use," said the submersible's pilot, a short, impatient man.

"Not from this angle, perhaps," the other man said. He looked quite comfortable despite the cramped quarters he had been sitting in for hours. "But we're not the only ones watching. Once we put everything together, I'm sure we'll have enough."

"But he's only a tax collector. He doesn't control the *level* of the taxes. You get rid of him, they'll send another one in his place."

The other man, whose name was Burlson, smiled thinly. "Let's get rid of him safely first. Then we'll worry about what happens next."

"What do you mean, 'safely'? He's a bureaucrat. What's going to happen?"

Burlson didn't respond.

"It just doesn't make sense, is all I'm saying," the pilot muttered. Then he watched the picture on the monitor, which showed nothing more than a Star League consul standing in his bathrobe while he looked at the lake.

Burlson put his feet up on the submersible's console. "One step at a time," he said.

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"I trust everything was according to your desires, Mr. Tait?" the desk clerk asked.

Ekkers, who was smart enough not to use his real name, smiled. "Very much so," he said. And it had better be. If it wasn't—well, then what other purpose would this entire nation serve, if they couldn't provide a good time? He signed for the bill, which was paid with funds that even a veteran intelligence agent would have had trouble tracing, smiled at the desk clerk one more time, then went on his way. A few kilometers down the road he'd shrug off the identity of Mr. Tait and return to the business of representing the Star League's interests in the Magistracy.

"Mr. Tait!" said a voice to his left. Ekkers started. Besides the desk clerk, he'd only given his name to three or four people at the resort, and none of them were the type to be greeting him openly in the lobby.

He recovered soon enough, he hoped, so that his face looked bland when he turned toward the speaker.

"Yes?"

A lean whippet of a man with grey hair and a neatly trimmed beard smiled as he walked toward him. "I wonder if I might have a moment of your time?"

"Not at the moment, I'm afraid. I was just leaving."

"Would it help if I told you the matter was urgent?"

Ekkers pursed his lips. "No. I have no time to talk at the moment, and your claim of urgency will do nothing to make the day longer and create more time."

"I understand, of course. If you'd prefer, I could talk to you as you walked to your vehicle."

Ekkers was on the verge of offering another dismissive reply when the man leaned closer, looking much like a palm tree bending in the wind.

"I was wondering," the man said in an undertone, "if you'd be interested in seeing some pictures of your activities last night. Before we send them on to your family."

Ekkers stopped in mid-stride. "I was in my room last night," he said. "I retired early."

"Indeed you did," the man said, "but not for sleep. Are you sure this is a conversation you wish to have here?"

Ekkers looked at the thin man. *I could snap him like a twig if I wanted to*, he thought.

"You have no idea who I am," he snarled.

"I know precisely who you are," the man said smoothly. "That's why I'm doing this."

* * *

For a man who had just been blackmailed, Ekkers was in a surprisingly cheerful mood. He could still hear the resort's noises as he drove away, watching the sun glint off the lake behind him.

He chuckled to himself. Maybe it was true, he thought, that too much pleasure addled the brain. If the Canopians thought they could force the Star League to ease up on its tax collections through an elementary blackmail scheme, then they underestimated the League's dedication to implementing tax laws, not to mention Ekkers' own personal preparedness—which some mistakenly called paranoia.

He would not take long to make their mistake plain.

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There were many in the Star League who argued that sending human bureaucrats all the way to the Periphery was an unnecessary waste. It wasn't as if cash needed to be handled in person—the tariffs and excise taxes could be transferred to the appropriate accounts by bureaucrats thousands of light years away.

But Ekkers' superiors had argued that the purpose of having deputy consuls in the system had nothing to do with handling the actual funds. The deputies were there to make sure the taxes were collected smoothly, to ensure that any hitches were resolved as easily as possible. The deputies had a number of persuasive tools at their disposal to keep the funds flowing in the proper direction, and Ekkers was ready to call on one tool he had hand-picked. There had been serious questions when he proposed his contingency plan—many of his colleagues thought he was being excessive—but now events showed he was only demonstrating foresight. Now, because he had the right tool in place, ready and waiting, collections would proceed without interruption. This mission would justify his supposed paranoia.

The regional consul, however, was not immediately convinced that it was time to put Ekkers' special contingency into action.

"Couldn't you just reject the blackmail?" The consul, Mildred Canuth, pushed her glasses to the top of her nose. "Just don't do what they want, and everything continues on its normal course."

"It's not enough," Ekkers insisted. "Turning them down won't send a harsh enough message. They need to know we won't put up with their nonsense. And my family..."

"Well, yes, but what you're proposing..."

"...will send a strong message."

"It could start a war!" Canuth's right eye was visibly twitching.

"The Magistracy is not going to declare war on the Star League!" Ekkers said. "They're children, trying to see how much they can get away with. We're the adults here, so we need to punish them when they get out of line."

She was starting to cave—not because she agreed with him, but because she didn't like to argue and generally saw concession as the simplest way out of any disagreement. It was why, after decades of loyal service, she was still mired at the farthest edges of the Star League.

She had one more weak protest to make. "But what you're proposing could hurt innocent people. That isn't right."

Ekkers smile was more wolfish than he intended. "Trust me, Mildred," he said. "*No one* on Canopus is innocent."

* * *

It was times like this that Ekkers briefly wondered if the Star League was perhaps too wealthy, too powerful. There were nations on the Periphery that couldn't put any firepower together when pirate raids came, and here he was, gliding in a customized Cormorant WiGE, complete with LRMs, about to pump a few volleys of missiles into a resort simply because they'd irritated him.

But then he dismissed his reservations. It only seems like too much power if you're on the wrong end of it.

The speed of the Cormorant as it sped over the lake was exhilarating. Ekkers wished he had a better view of the resort drawing closer in front of him, but he was lucky to be on this mission at all. The vehicle's commander was understandably reluctant to carry a non-military person on board, but when Ekkers reminded him that the vehicle and crew would not exist without him, the commander relented. He was not, however, about to give Ekkers a front seat view of the action.

"Mdobe, what's on the radar?" Commander Ferenze asked, as he had every few minutes. Ekkers wasn't sure why he bothered, as Canopian resorts were not known for their security presence. But better safe than sorry, he supposed.

"Plenty of vehicles in the area, but most of them are powered down," Mdobe said.

Ekkers saw the lights of the resort through the craft's front window, and leaned forward. They didn't have to do much—some missiles here, some machine gun rounds there, a few broken windows, maybe even a fire somewhere—that should be enough to get the message across. And if the first pass didn't seem to do enough damage, they could always make another one or two or three.

"I've got something," Mdobe said abruptly, and his tone turned Ekkers' head.

"What?" Ferenze asked.

"There's two, four—six. It looks like six crafts powered up and on the move. All towards us."

"What kind of craft?"

"Planes, all of them. Spread out in an arc, closing on an intercept course."

Ferenze looked quickly at Ekkers, and Ekkers hoped he looked composed and confident. What were these vehicles? Why were they closing?

He wanted to give orders. After all, he'd paid for the plane. He'd arranged for the existence of the crew. What good was being a patron if you couldn't direct how the assets you supplied would be used? But he knew that military types did not take well to civilians attempting to issue orders. He bit his tongue and tried to let Ferenze do his job.

"Hail them," Ferenze said.

And with that, Ekkers could bite his tongue no more.

"This is a *stealth mission!*" he said. "*We are sneaking in!* That means we should *not announce our presence over the comm!*"

Ferenze turned on Ekkers and showed the mettle that made him a commander of a small vehicle out in the Periphery rather than in any significant military unit.

"I'm ... I'm sorry, Deputy Ekkers. Thank you for the correction." He turned to Mdobe. "Keep all channels silent."

Ekkers smiled. There was so much to appreciate about being a big fish in a small pond.

Mdobe continued staring at his scanner in a way that Ekkers didn't appreciate—he hoped the aircraft would be something he could ignore, but Mdobe's vigilance was not encouraging.

He wondered how far off they were. He wanted to ask, but he probably shouldn't. He'd already undermined Ferenze enough.

"How long until the aircraft intercept us?" Ferenze asked.

"At the present speed, just under a minute."

Ferenze looked at Ekkers. Ekkers returned what he intended to be a steely, determined gaze. Ferenze, however, did not seem satisfied.

Then the comm came to life.

"Hey," a rough voice said. "You in the Cormorant. Get the hell out of here."

Ekkers raised an eyebrow, but he didn't have time to give Ferenze instructions. The commander was already angry.

"This is Commander Ivor Ferenze," he said, "Star League Revenue. Identify yourself—and watch your tone."

"Shove your outrage up your ass, Ferenze," the voice said. "You don't need any names. You just need to know that the minute you fire a shot, we're sending you to the bottom of the lake."

Ferenze, leaving the comm microphone off, shook his head. "Must be mercenaries. Most of them don't have the manners of barnyard animals." He glanced toward Ekkers, but did not seem to want to look him in the eyes. "Perhaps we should...do this another time?"

Ekkers sighed. Spinelessness clearly was a very limited virtue. "This is not a bloody tea party!" he said. "We are not going to reschedule! The people here attempted to blackmail an officer of the Star League, and we will not turn away!" He took a breath. "Commander Ferenze, you are relieved. I'm taking command of the vehicle."

"You...command?" Ferenze sputtered. "Under what authority?"

"Under my own damn authority since this craft wouldn't exist without me! It's my craft and I'm taking it back." It probably wasn't a secure legal precedent he was invoking, but Ekkers was pretty sure Ferenze would back down.

And, with a sulk, he did. "Fine. It's your mess now."

"Mdobe, turn off the comm. I don't want to talk to them and I certainly don't want to hear any more from them. You, pilot, get into position and execute the attack as planned."

He looked out the forward window now, scanning for a visual on the aircraft, but it was night and they, like the Cormorant, were flying without lights. The first time he saw them might be when they fired on him.

He could, however, see the resort, gaudy and bright. An inviting target, easy to hit.

"The intercepting craft are curving away!" Mdobe said abruptly. "Breaking into two groups, looking like they're going to pass us."

Ekkers smiled hesitantly, though he suspected this was too good to be true. Ferenze confirmed it.

"They're wheeling around behind you," he said. "They'll wait until you fire, then close on your tail."

Ekkers gripped his armrests. They would not frighten him.

"Are we in range?"

"We will be in less than thirty seconds," Mdobe said.

"Fire with everything we've got as soon as we're in range!"

The fraction of a minute passed silently. There weren't any more orders to give.

"In range!" Mdobe finally said.

"Fire!" Ekkers said, but it was unnecessary. A volley of missiles was already on its way.

"Get us out of here!" Ekkers ordered, and the pilot banked the Cormorant as sharply as she could—though it was tough to pivot sharply with only a cushion of air for traction. The tail of the craft bobbed and weaved, skimming over the air instead of grabbing it as it turned.

"Craft behind us are firing!" Mdobe yelled.

"Countermeasures!" Ekkers said, but no one did anything. Ferenze shook his head.

"What kind of a craft do you think this is?" Ferenze said.

Ekkers was thinking that he probably could have prepared for this mission better when the first volley of missiles hit the Cormorant. It was closely followed by metal slugs digging into the skin of the craft, rattling into the sides like hail stones on a tin roof.

"Evasive action!" Ekkers cried.

Something hit him. A hand. A bony hand caught him across his cheek and he tasted blood. Ferenze stood above him, glaring down, his hand open and visibly shaking but still ready for another backhanded slap.

"Shut the hell up!" he said, his voice high and cracking. "You haven't known what you were doing this whole damn mission! Don't say another damned word!"

Ekkers started to reply, wanted to reply, but his mouth opened and closed a few times without words coming out. Then he thought

he had a reply, and he started to talk, but something else hit the WiGE. The whole cockpit shook, and the concussion of a blast made Ekkers feel like his skull had imploded.

His vision had narrowed to a small cone. He could only see the sky beyond the window, and it was filled with explosions and glowing trails. He wished he could see the pilot, wondering if he was as dazed as Ekkers felt. He better not be. If he was...

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The submersible came up to the surface when it received the all-clear signal.

"Seemed like it went pretty cleanly," the pilot said.

"I'm satisfied," Burlson said.

"Can I ask you a question?" the pilot asked.

"Sure."

"Where did those aero units come from? Since when does the Magistracy have an air force to spare on defending a resort?"

Burlson chuckled. "We don't. Those were mercenaries."

"The government has enough spare cash to hire mercenaries to shoot down a WiGE over the Loon Resort?"

"No, no, no. Those were volunteers. Volunteers with no traceable attachment to the Magistracy."

"Volunteers?"

"Yes. Once we knew about Ekkers' plan—"

"And how did you know about that?"

"When you have access to pillow talk," Burlson said airily, "you have access to all the secrets of the universe. Anyway, once we knew about Ekkers' plan, we spread the word among some of the resort's guests. And some of them stepped forward, volunteering to defend us. A gesture of goodwill born of their love for Loon Resort."

"Is that...normal to have a number of mercenaries staying here?"

“Of course! Good quality ones, too. It’s an important thing to remember—poor mercenaries spend their money on new gear. Rich mercenaries spend it here.”