An expensive trip

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About this story

James Winston goes home to visit his family in Phekda, which is noted as being a dangerous system to start off with. It's the first time he's been back for six years...and it turns out to be a rather expensive trip. The reason? Lots of hull damage from a determined attack by persons unknown...
The story is written in first–person as it would be told by James Winston himself. It's written in a fairly conversational style – a bit of an experiment by me – so I apologise in advance if it's a little incoherent in places. I personally feel that this is my weakest story, but I'll let you be the final judge.

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Suggestions about this or other stories from alioth.net are welcome.

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

An Expensive Trip

Editor's Note: We decided to let James Winston tell this one himself. We thank him for taking the time to write this article for us.

"Ready?" I asked.
"OK, as good as I'll get" replied Pam Gilmour.

Pam, my new co−pilot, set the Asp's autopilot to point to Newtown. I was going to visit my folks for the first time in over six years. A lot had happened to me in those six years. I was only 24 years old, but I felt quite a grizzled veteran. I had been bounty hunting for two years, and had just been rated "Dangerous" by the Elite Federation. The Asp was my latest ship, and I had flown her for just over a month at this point. The Asp was also my first two−crew ship, so I had to hire a copilot. Pam had worked on large traders and had got bored. She had answered my ad for a copilot. Anarchy systems were by now familiar to me, but this was her first one. The Phekda system was (and still is) a particularly nasty Anarchy; the nearest you ever seem to jump in is around 40 AU from civilization...which means the pirates have a good chance of taking pot−shots at you.

I watched as the autopilot pointed the ship in the direction of Nirvana. I was really enjoying the Asp − faster than my old Cobra Mk III and certainly well armed. I was now making good money with bounty hunting − a tractor beam cargo scoop saw to that. It was amazing what came out of some of the pirates − stuff they'd scooped off someone else no doubt. Every so often you'd get some really good stuff that really made it pay. You'd get a decent bounty, then maybe some gemstones or even alien artefacts. Often you could find deals on the bulletin boards at anarchy systems − most items were in short supply.

I pulled up the star chart and set up our emergency exit system. A policy of mine when going to anarchy systems was to target another system so if the chips were down, I could just press the hyperspace button and be gone. This had saved the day on many occasions. The day I forgot to do this still haunts my dreams from time to time... the Imperial Explorer pouring out plasma whilst I desperately tried to target a system to hyperspace to. Call me a coward, but unless I can get on the six of a beast like that I don't hang around. In the bounty hunting game, being a coward that's alive beats being a hero that's dead. Any bounty hunter worth their salt knows this. The ones that don't usually will not last long.

We accelerated on our journey. There didn't seem to be too much action − for the first 30 AU, we were only attacked twice and both attackers (a pair of Adders followed by a threesome comprising of a Harris, a Cobra and a Saker) all succumbed easily to our guns. I had been nervous about this trip − Phekda not only had the long journey time from hyperspace entry to the destination, but it also had a reputation for having the better and more vicious pirates. They didn't seem any tougher than the ones I usually battled in Reidquat. It seemed rather quiet too − normally the pirates find you on a long−range scan and all manoevre to intercept. Only two encounters in 30 AU was quite unusual in my experience.

"James, take a look at this"

I looked at the scanner.

"Right here, that ship has been following us for the past 2 AU just on the edge of the scan"
"Perhaps he's just trying to go where we are," I responded. I wasn't too worried.
"I don't think so − he actively tried to stay out of scan range when we got attacked last. I don't think he realizes that we've got a new−generation scanner"

The new combat scanners had another 50 km of scan range. I selected the trace, which showed up as a red return. The ship wasn't too big if it showed up as red. The targetter was set, and the ship's computer began to analyse the return. The ship type appeared on the HUD. Viper Defence Craft, with some decent shield generation too. No hyperdrive. This wasn't someone who came into the system to go to Newtown – they were based here. I started to get the uncomfortable impression that we were being followed. The ship then started to pull back somewhat and began sliding off the extreme range of the scanner. Half an hour later, with no sign of the Viper, we stopped worrying.

AHHHUGA! AHHHUGA!

The attack klaxon sounded. A hostile had been detected coming for us. I made a mental note to change the klaxon on this ship, it made an extremely annoying sound. Suddenly the ship's computer said "Incoming Message."

"You'll regret dealing with Michael Nguyen!"

Oh no, not again. I was getting tired of the bounty hunters after me. The assasination I had done years ago on Johnson kept haunting me – assassin after assassin had been coming after me ever since the deed was done. Necessity had forced me to become a good combateer. Pam looked around at me questioningly.

"I'll tell you about it when we get down," I answered the inevitable question before she could even ask it.

It didn't really surprise us when it turned out to be that Viper that had been following us. A Viper would be easy to send to the dogs. This guy must have been suicidal. I got us into a combat–ready position and watched the range counter come down. He'd shortly be in firing range.

"Incoming Missile", said the computer softly.

I saw four tiny specks depart from the Viper.

"Holy Cow, he's unloaded all his missiles at us!" I exclaimed.
"OK, I've got the ECM," said Pam as the ECM activated. "Uh oh, NN–550's!"

The missiles were still coming. Pam activated the ECM again, just to make sure. Nothing happened. Suddenly, laser fire came in rapidly. The missiles were coming really fast, but I knew I had enough shields to eat them without taking hull damage. It would be a close thing, though. We began returning fire. However, we could not hit the Viper. He seemed to stay one step ahead of us, anticipating our every move. His laser was most certainly biting into our shields though.

Suddenly there was three concussions close to each other, followed by a tremendous crashing sound. The missiles had hit! I quickly glanced over at the defensive systems console. The shields were down, and the hull had taken damage. The laser fire had weakened the shields prior to the missile impact. Alarms started going off.

"Shit! We're out of here!" I shouted above the sound of the cabin starting to depressurize.

I hit the hyperdrive key, but nothing happened. Suddenly there was the sound of a large explosion.

"Drive damaged," came the soft voice of the computer once again.
"No shit Sherlock!" I yelled back at it. "Pam, you've got it!" I shouted over the cacaphony of alarms and leaking air.

I pulled myself out of the seat. I'd have to do something about the loss of air. Obviously the automatic systems must have been damaged – the ship should do this itself. I could feel my ears popping as the cabin pressure fell. Fortunately, the gravity generators were still working. I could feel the occasional tug as they tried to keep up with Pam's wild evasive manoevering. I wrenched the emegency flight deck isloation lever. I heard the airtight hatches slam closed, and the sound of escaping air cease. I jumped back into my seat and pulled my harness back down. The cabin pressure showed 700 hPa and increasing, plenty to sustain life.

Things weren't looking good. A lone Viper was slowly killing us. Our ship was vastly superior equipment, but the Viper was winning. We made another futile attempt to hit the Viper. It was if he could see into the future, and not be wherever our laser was. In desperation, I launched our only missile, an NN−550. Suddenly, the Viper dived towards us, hurtling right over the top of the Asp. Quickly glancing on the rearview, I could see what he was trying. The sly old fox was trying to have the missile lock onto us instead!

I saw my chance. The Viper was distracted by the missile, and had offered me an opportunity I couldn't refuse. I applied full main thrusters and turned to face the Viper's rear. This time he didn't evade our lasers – the beam laser started to rapidly deplete his shields. He swerved to get out of our beam, but now I had him. I hit him a couple more times. Suddenly, the missile streaked by the Asp. It hadn't locked onto us, and was still after the Viper. A few seconds later, it hit the Viper and exploded with a white flash of energy. I could see debris streaming out of our quarry. The hunter had now become the hunted. A few more hits from the laser, and the Viper suddenly exploded in a burst of light and debris. I watched the wreckage spin away in the blue light of Phekda, and from the middle of the wreckage came an escape capsule...

Pam looked at me questioningly as I pointed the ship at the escape capsule.

"Don't tell me you're going to do it!" she said.

I didn't even answer before the laser vaporised the escape capsule and its occupant. Pam looked at me with a slight look of horror at what I had just done.

"Look, I know what you're thinking. But if you don't finish them off, they just come back again and try and do you in a second time." My explanation was simple and to the point.
"But still..."

Her voice trailed off. I could see she could see the cold logic of it. I never felt to good about wasting escape capsules, but I had learned what happens if you don't finish them off. They come back, seething with vengance and equipped with a better ship. Whoever we had encountered was a good combateer. I had never been in a battle where I felt so out of control. I did not want to ever meet him again.

"OK, let's get a damage report," I said in a businesslike manner. We had a ship to run.

The damage report duly came. Hyperdrive was inoperative, several hull breaches, left thruster damaged and the naval ECM inoperative. This looked quite bad.

"OK, we better suit up," I said. "I'm going to try and check out the damage".

I pulled out a vacuum suit. These items were still rather bulky even now, but it would at least enable me to check out the rest of the ship. Pam also did the same. She remained on the flight deck, but since there was a hull breach in the living section and no airlock between it and the flight deck, the whole ship would be a total vacuum once I had re−opened the airtight hatches. I returned the emergency hatch lever to its normal position, and the remaining air escaped from the flight deck.

It was not a pretty sight. There was a large hole where the Viper's laser had penetrated the hull into the living section. There had been a brief fire until the lack of oxygen had choked it out. As I went back into the equipment deck things got worse. There was a large hole through which I could see open space. Two shield generators had been totally destroyed. The brand new Class 3 Military Drive was an unrecognisable lump of partially melted duralium alloy. The exposed core was blown into two pieces. We had to jettison it before it caused us any problems. To my relief, the prime mover was still intact so we'd have no problems reaching our destination.

Unfortunately, the jettison system didn't work. One of the mounts had welded itself to the side of the drive remnants. The cutting torch soon saw to that, and the wreckage was ejected into space. I thought of all the credits it cost to fit the drive...this trip was going to be expensive.

It did turn out to be extremely expensive. The repairs to the hull cost a small fortune, and I couldn't get a military drive at Phekda. I had to get a standard Class 3 and remove a number of shield generators. After visiting the family, I went directly to Sol and obtained a new Class 3 military drive. All said and told, this little episode cost me nearly 100,000 credits. I was just about flat broke by the time my ship was back to the state it was when we started the journey. On the bright side of it, at least my family was pleased to see me. I did feel guilty about not telling them what I did for a living. I lied and said I was a trader. Needless to say, I didn't show them the ship until the repairs were complete!

And our friend in the Viper? We went through the flight data recorder and found he'd been following us for 20 AU. He had been analysing our combat style as we dealt with the pirates. We never could find out who he was. I'm still curious to know where he came from, and what his combat rating was.

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