

The hunter and the hunted

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About this story

This is the first story about James Winston. The year is 3255, and James is not even 20 years old – but his talent for getting into trouble is already showing. He has a score to settle, and acts of revenge are often done in very poor judgement...

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

[0] This may be wishful thinking on my part

The Hunter and the Hunted

The harsh blue sunlight glinted off the hull of the Boa as it gently rotated towards the planet, as the helmsman set a new course to enter a low orbit. Deep inside the ship, lives were in the balance. Mika Nguyen was trying as hard as possible not to give away his intense nervousness as he faced Senator Kenneth Johnson, the most notorious gangster in the system. He'd faced bad people before, and had a reputation in the system for being notorious himself. But there was something about Johnson that he didn't feel when dealing with the other powerful and dangerous organizations throughout Phekda. The meeting had only just begun, and the tension in the room was almost palpable. It was to discuss the theft of a Class 4 military drive from the Alioth research labs, and it had gone badly wrong. He now had to break the news to his client.

Johnson examined his perfectly manicured fingers in a bored manner before speaking. He then picked up the ceremonial sword that was lying on the table and paced slowly around the room looking at the flawless blade, feeling the weight of the steel.

"You failed me, Nguyen", he said after a short pause.

Nguyen looked up in disbelief. He was sure that Johnson hadn't heard of the fiasco yet. He had prepared a good cover story – a tactic that had worked in the past to buy him enough additional time to complete the mission, but it didn't look like that was going to work.

"You told me you'd have the drive here two days ago. I heard about your incompetent operation to try to obtain the drive."

Nguyen opened his mouth to rebut the statement about his incompetence, but he felt that at this stage, discretion was the better part of valour. However, it wouldn't have mattered at this stage, because Johnson suddenly plunged the gleaming blade through Nguyen's chest, who promptly slid to the floor. Johnson called the ship's commander on the comm.

"Commander, set a course for Nguyen Industries headquarters on Nirvana, and ensure it ceases to exist. Oh, and a rather unfortunate accident has overcome my friend in my ready-room. Please have it seen to".

The Boa slid away towards the planet.

Commander James Winston gently dozed in the liqui-seat of his Saker Mk. III. as it neared its destination of Epping Newtown in Eta Cassiopeia. He had been working as a civil contractor for the Federal Military for almost a year now. It paid the bills but it could hardly be described as an exciting life. He'd seen the run between Eta Cassiopeia and AC-79 3888 so often now that he could time the courier runs he was making to the nearest minute. Sometime he hoped for a promotion to Sergeant since it offered the more lucrative courier runs.

The autopilot requested clearance from Epping Newtown control, waking Winston out of his slumber. The ship rotated, and the bright sunshine shone through the Saker's main window. Winston was certain that the ship somehow knew how to give him the most irritating wake-up calls that he simply couldn't ignore. A few moments later, the Saker gently settled onto its landing gear, and Winston completed the shutdown checklist. He'd been in space too long. It was time to spend a day on the planet outside instead of cooped up in the Saker. He hadn't left the ship in three months, and missed the fresh air.

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"Commander James K Winston, I grant you two days of planet leave", he said to himself in a pompous voice. Well, he was the captain at any rate.

However, he decided to check the bulletin board first. He didn't want to miss some lucrative deal that might be waiting there. He flicked through the listings with a sigh. The same old stuff. Federal Military wants you for adventures unlimited. Yada, yada, yada. Delivery of package to some benighted system. Wanted: Passage for a group of six to Barnard's star. He wondered if any bulletin board ever had something exciting that he could get his hands on. He read on. Merchant Davis no longer wanted...blah. Senator Johnson of Phekda needs a permanent...hold on, what was that? Senator Johnson?

Senator Johnson. Just the mention of the words "Senator Johnson" in near proximity could make Winston's blood run cold. He'd witnessed the murder of his best friend only three years ago at the hands of Johnson, one of Phekda's lowlife rulers. With trepidation, he selected the entry. It appeared on his screen.

"Senator Johnson is wanted dead for the recent destruction of a large quantity of Nguyen Industries Assets. The fee for a successful kill is CR 20,000. Apply in person at 4750 Bexar Blvd."

Winston thought it a bit odd that they only wanted personal callers. Most assassination jobs were all done via the bulletin board with no personal contact. But... 20K credits. That was a great deal of money. Most of those kind of jobs commanded around half that. Well, some bounty hunter was bound to take it. Winston smiled with the satisfaction that Johnson would now meet his end, as he left the ship for a couple of days of relaxation. Time for a beer, he thought.

Winston stepped out into the sunlight, wincing from the unaccustomed brightness of the light. The concrete landing pad reflected the cruel rays back to increase the effect. At the other side, an auto-shuttle waited to take him to whatever destination he desired within Epping Newtown. He strapped in. "Lanner's Bar please" he said. The shuttle beeped, and moments later he landed outside the bar. "Cost is one point five credits. Thank you for choosing Epping Newtown local transport", said the shuttle's autopilot. The banking system was very efficient, and the transport company was quickly paid by remote transfer. The door opened and Winston stepped out once again, and made his way quickly into the bar.

The bar wasn't called Lanner's bar for nothing – it was basically the hull of an old, shot-up Lanner that had been lying in one of the orbital scrapyards for a while. Someone had taken the time to transport it down to the surface and turn it into a tavern. A pretty good one at that. Winston strolled up to the bar, where the barman was setting up some beers for a couple of shady characters who were quietly talking to each other. As Winston walked up, he noticed that they stopped talking, and watched him take a seat at the bar.

"I'd like a pint of your best local bitter", Winston said to the barman, fishing out his credit counters. Most establishments like this preferred hard cash. Most of them said "I don't take it if you can't scratch a window with it".

"Pint?" said the barman.

"Errr.. half litre I mean."

"You aint from around here, are you?" said the barman, as he turned away to fill a half with beer.

Winston had discovered soon after leaving Phekda that they had some odd, outdated customs there. Like pints of beer. No one seemed to have heard of these "pint" things outside of Phekda. He wondered where the Phekda measurement system had come from. He had to admit that the odd units he used as he was growing up were pretty illogical. The barman placed the half-litre of beer on the bar.

"That'll be one point eight please."

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Winston handed the man the money. If pints were some sort of Phekdan anachronism, only accepting physical money was certainly a much bigger one. Winston took a deep pull of his beer. It had a sharp, but quite pleasant taste. He hadn't had a beer for months. Relaxing, at last, he had some time to think.

"...and, well, that's how I got here", slurred Winston some four hours later to the two he'd seen when he had first walked into the bar. He couldn't believe it; he'd now told his whole life story to two complete strangers. He also couldn't believe that he was getting quite drunk after only three beers. He'd been there for a few moments when they had turned to him. They had introduced themselves as Bob Kulski and Janis Hayes. They were bounty hunters having repairs done to their Asp after they had come under heavy attack in AC 79-3888 a week earlier. As the evening rolled on, Winston had been telling taller and taller stories about his adventures of the past year in the Saker (the elaboration growing as the beer flowed). The table was quiet as they all lifted their beers. Winston realized he'd started to quaff his beer. His better judgement suggested that it was time to head back to the ship and sleep it off in his cabin.

A touch of bravado suddenly entered his inebriated mind and he said:
"You don't know where Bexar Blvd is, do you?"

They did know. And it was close. Winston finished his beer and bade his new friends farewell, explaining he had "some business to attend to".

Five minutes later, he was walking into the entrance of a nondescript concrete building labeled 4750 Bexar. He looked around furtively for signs of life. The whole place seemed unoccupied. His boots clicked on the hard floor as he went through the main entrance into a dimly lit room. There was nothing in there except for a couple of chairs and a desk. Suddenly the door he walked through swung shut, and from a side entrance, in strode a large man. He was carrying a plasma rifle.

"So, you've come along for the job then?"

"Yes I have", said Winston. Adrenaline coursed through his body, and he suddenly realized the stupidity of what he was doing. He also realized how young and inexperienced he must have looked.

"Well here's the deal. Come back with proof of Johnson's...erasure... and you'll be twenty thousand credits better off. Let him get away, and I assure you we'll find you."

It was a do-or-die. The alcohol still sloshing through Winston's body kept his misplaced bravado alive.

"Well how do I find our mutual friend?" said Winston, trying to sound a little menacing. He wasn't convinced it was working.

"This information has everything we know. We have discovered Johnson's itinerary for the next month. You must assassinate him within this time because after that...we don't know where he will be. When you have done the job, come back to this location and I will meet you. Good day, Commander Winston."

This unnerved Winston. He wasn't sure how the man knew who he was. However, he was now in too deep. The man handed him the small DSU that contained the information, then left the room, leaving Winston alone with his thoughts. A few seconds later, the main entrance opened. Winston walked back to the bar, the alcohol coursing through his veins masking the true seriousness of the situation he'd landed himself in. Whatever it was, he was sure it was time to get a few more beers in.

Pain. Light. Winston looked around, and for a panicked few seconds, couldn't recognise where he was nor remember the events of the last few seconds. Then it came back to him. He was still at Lanner's Bar, where he'd passed out from excess alcohol consumption the prior evening. Someone had been kind enough to lay him on one of the soft benches in the bar so at least he could get a reasonable night's sleep. He tried recalling

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the events of the previous evening. He could remember talking to two people at great length, but couldn't remember who they were. Then with a cold shiver...he remembered the contract. Hoping it was a figment of his inebriated mind, he felt his pockets. A cold clammy feeling came over him as he felt the DSU he'd been given. He pulled the DSU out and thoughtfully turned it around in his fingers. He thought about his options at this point, which basically came down to running away and hiding until the whole thing had blown over, selling the ship and changing his identity and living the rest of his life grounded, or actually carrying out the contract. Each of them seemed to lead to James Winston (Deceased). The problem was that he had the distinct feeling that if he reneged on the deal, they'd find him anyway.

Winston got up at last, and staggered over to the bar and looked for somewhere to get a glass of water to try and do something about his hurting head. He'd kill for his medical supply kit now, currently safely stored a few k's away in his Saker. He picked up a beerglass, filled it with water, and quaffed it. The water didn't taste that good, but at least it might help clear the hangover. At this point, he decided that there was no point vacillating over what to do next any longer. He'd find a way to carry out the contract. The problem now was all he had was himself, a Saker with a 1MW pulse laser and a single shield generator and an ability to get himself into trouble. He still might not make his twentieth birthday but at least nobody would accuse him of cowardice that way. He thought about how he could carry it out with the equipment he had as he took a shuttle back to the spaceport. He thought of a solution... one that might still get him killed, but at least it would have the despised Senator Johnson wiped off the face of the universe at the same time. At least this way he had a chance of not getting killed.

Back at the ship, Winston inserted the DSU into the ship's computer. He scanned the information. There wasn't much there, but in ten day's time, Johnson would be coming in quite close to Eta Cassiopeia. He had a choice: Barnard's Star in ten days time, or Veliaze in sixteen days. It was only really a choice in so far as he could actually be there at the same time, since he knew full well his Saker wouldn't get anywhere near Chester on Veliaze before some pirate killed him for the scrap value of his ship. However, Barnard's was his only and rather uncomfortable option. Although it was a safe system, it was safe for a reason – the police were efficient. The police would almost certainly get him before he could escape. Unless he thought of a very good escape plan...

Ten Days Later, Boston Base Starport, Barnard's Star.

Police Chief Mikhail Gordon checked the day's scheduled events. He was the new police chief, recently sworn in by the Barnard's Star police department. He was determined to keep the spaceport crime free. It had been years since there had been any serious trouble in the vicinity of Barnard's Star due to efficient policing. He wanted to get tougher still – too many gangsters and pirates (while admittedly not carrying out any crimes within the borders of system space) were making deals in his space station. He wanted to simply deny anyone with a serious criminal record access to any spaceports on Barnard's Star, but the Merchant's Guild wouldn't have it. He shook his head sadly as he idented the Boa sliding into the docking port. It had been involved in several kills, but right now...he had no legal power against it. "It's all about money" he thought, as the last of the ship disappeared into the bowels of the enormous orbiting city. He watched the arrivals and departures for a couple of minutes before turning back to his work. To add insult to injury, he had to now find an escort for the people on board the Boa he had just watched. Some two-bit anarchy planet "senator" and his lackeys. Money, that's all it took. The Station Administration had all been falling over themselves to pander to this criminal when he flashed some credits. Perhaps he could encourage one of his police force to "accidentally" finish him off...well, he'd only get found out and no doubt executed himself if he authorized such an act. Besides it'd stain Barnard's reputation as a safe system with a good police network.

Commander Jades Buford watched Boston Base grow big in front of his ship, thankful that at least Barnard's Star was a safe system. He cast his mind back to recent events...the image of the Cobra rising over his own Osprey-X, closing for the kill...the scream of the hull as the 4MW laser started slicing at his hull, just

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before the hyperspace drive engaged to get him out of there. Now trapped deep in Federation space, he had to get the damage repaired and leave as soon as possible before he ran out of money. Bounty hunting did have its rough spots, and this was indeed one of them. He watched the Boa ahead of him slide into the bowels of the station. A few seconds later, his clearance was through and with a sigh, Buford selected the auto-dock. It had been a long week.

Winston was extremely nervous. His hands left sweaty marks on the ornate stock of the weapon he was trying to assemble. He slid the last latch home, and started loading the small green cartridges. The dull light filtering through the ventilation grille he was crouching behind gleamed off the brass on the base of the cartridges as he loaded them. Clack clack! He slid the loading mechanism forward and back, and the weapon was ready. He looked at the weapon, a device that had not been manufactured for a thousand years. It was the only way he could sneak a weapon into the highly secure environment on a Barnard's Star spaceport. The sensors could not recognise the double-barrelled 12-bore pump action shotgun once it was disassembled. Back on Nirvana, Winston and his father had both enjoyed using the antique firearm replicas; carefully machining the barrels and carving the ornate stocks. The weapons had never been used in anger, only to shoot targets fired from a spring-loaded machine. However, at short range they were as deadly as any modern energy weapon. The explosive charge would propel hundreds of tiny lead shot at a lethal velocity. Winston stroked the long barrel of the weapon and remembered his father. He felt very alone, remembering his fifteenth birthday, when his father had presented him with the gun. He never had any idea that just over four years later, he'd be cowering in a ventilation shaft using the gun in an ambush attempt.

"Greetings, Senator Johnson. Welcome to Barnard's Star", said Police Constable Joan Weaver. Johnson stepped off the hatch to his ship, and smiled pleasantly at the police officer sent to guide him to his destination. He noticed another police officer, who would trail behind him and his entourage and ensure that no danger would lurk behind their party. It was unfortunate that his business here today was to try and salvage the future of his latest business venture, black market small-arms trading. Unfortunately, the police in Wolf 359 had been rather efficient at intercepting his biggest shipment that was destined for a rebel group in Vequess (and a large profit). He could still make a profit, so long as he could convince the Vequess Liberation Army that he could deliver. Johnson did not like feeling out of control, and this was one of these days. Millions of credits lay in the balance. Although the constables accompanying his party would ensure they came to no harm, he quietly despised the Federation police forces for being too efficient. He had been messed around by the new police commissioner at this station already. PC Weaver lead him and his party (two personal bodyguards, built like gorillas, his lawyer and his personal valet) towards their meeting in the Rance suite at the station. Johnson looked around at the clean floor and walls, the civilized looking people and the general hustle as thousands of station occupants conducted their business. It was a big change from the grubby city streets that was a hallmark of any population centre in Nirvana. One day, he thought...one day...when I take control of the planet, it will look like this. Their party rounded a corner as they entered the conference centre. Ahead were several highly appointed business suites, including their destination. The smell of sumptuous leather permeated the atmosphere. The sudden ejection of a ventilation grille seemed a little incongruous with the surroundings. Johnson was just about to comment about this to PC Weaver when a young man, dressed in black, carrying some kind of long tube erupted from where the ventilation grille had been...

Winston kicked hard at the grille. He had heard Johnson's voice as the party had rounded the corner. There was no way he could forget what Johnson's voice sounded like, not after they murdered Jiang in cold blood, in front of his eyes. On the second attempt, the grille burst open and flew across the wide corridor. Winston grabbed the edges of the hole and thrust himself out through the opening. As he saw Johnson, his fear was stripped away by a mix of adrenaline and hatred.

"This is for Jiang!" yelled Winston.

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He lifted the shotgun and pointed it at Johnson's head. He had a sudden flash of doubt as to the sanity of what he was doing as he squeezed the trigger. Suddenly the concussion from the black powder in the cartridges broke the peace, and the gun kicked his shoulder hard. Clack clack! He reloaded and shot again, doubt erased as the bodyguards and two police officers, one male and one female, started to dash towards him. Clack clack! Boom! One of the bodyguards collapsed in a heap. Johnson was already dead, his head and upper body obliterated by a shower of shot. Winston dashed back towards the ventilation system and dived through the hole, just as Weaver's hand made a grab for his collar. He scrambled through the tube and dropped headfirst down a vertical riser. A bolt of energy screamed past from Weaver's handgun as she tried to stun her quarry. Winston squeezed around a bend, barely wide enough to fit his slight frame and shimmied through the pipe. He kept going for a few minutes, pausing only to kick a ventilation fan out of his way and navigate a four-way junction in the pipework. He crawled through the darkness and fell hard into a larger space. The sounds of pursuit had ceased since none of his pursuers could fit through two of the shafts he had just pulled himself through. Now in total darkness, he knew he had to get off the station...and quickly. He pulled out a small flashlight from his jacket and switched it on. He was now in a large conduit. To one side was a door. The door was obviously low use since it had no automatic mechanism. Winston carefully turned the handle and looked out into the dimly lit service corridor that was revealed.

Commissioner Mikhail Gordon looked at the bloody mess which lay just at the entrance to the business centre. He hadn't seen anything quite like it. The deafening siren from the station's general alarm added to the bizarreness of the whole scene. Gordon snorted angrily. No crimes had been committed on this station for years, and now someone's managed to commit murder. It would be highly embarrassing. The guest of the station (despite his criminal connections) was lying dead, beyond the help of any medical technology. One of his party had a serious wound to his right leg. Neither constable could catch the assassin who had made good his escape through a narrow ventilation tube only a whippet could fit through. This was not a good start for his first term in office. Gordon watched with distaste as the motuary workers zipped the body-bag. Seething with anger, he would personally see that the assassin was dealt with using the full force of the law. He looked over at PCs Weaver and Voss, who had been escorting Johnson's group. The irritating tone of the station's general alarm was really grating on Gordon's nerves.

"OK, now I want it seen to that the assassin does not leave the station"

"We'll set up a photo-ident of all departing commanders," said PC Weaver.

"Good. Make sure you have every ventilation grille on the station guarded. Oh, and have that alarm silenced!"

Police had swarmed over the station already, guarding the grilles. Voss had radioed all officers as Winston had made good his escape down the shaft. The photo-ident would make mandatory that all commanders established a video com-link with station control as they left. This way, if the assassin was already in his ship, he'd get caught leaving. Thankfully the alarm silenced at this point. Gordon decided to return to his office. The security cameras had got a good view of the assassin doing his business...plenty of evidence for a trial, and plenty of identity for the station controllers as they checked the departing traffic. Gordon ground his teeth on the ten minute walk back to his office. He was going to personally find out who this person was. Someone who could carry out a crime with such unique audacity had to have a record of some sort.

Winston looked around the service corridor. Several ladders left the area up and down. He spotted one marked "Dock level" and decided that was a good place to try and make good his escape. As he walked towards the ladder, he heard footsteps and voices.

"There he is! Get him!" yelled a voice.

Winston didn't even look behind. Running away was on his mind as he grabbed the ladder and started to climb up it, two rungs at a time. He could hear his pursuer starting to gain on him. In desperation, he trod on his

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pursuers fingers to try and shake him off. He heard a shout below him accompanied by the sound of something soft falling down a ladder. He carried on climbing as fast as possible, spurred by the shouts and the sound of renewed pursuit below him. Gravity was now getting weaker as he neared the docking section towards the centre of the space station. He came to the top of the ladder, into a narrow corridor. There was a door at both ends. He took the right hand passageway on an impulse and burst through the door, into the docking section. With no time to lose, he ran as far into the ship deck as possible, and hid behind the rear of a beaten up Osprey X. He could see his ship from here – it was only two docking bays away! However...he had been on a station when a general alarm was sounded before, and they photo-identified all crew leaving. He felt that there was no way to leave, but if he didn't leave soon, he'd get caught. Above him, he could see two police officers patrolling a catwalk that lead past the ventilation ducts.

Buford sighed heavily. The ship repairs were now scheduled, and would take a few days. His credit rating was going to take yet another battering. He contemplated giving up the whole bounty hunting thing and go and freelance for the Imperial Navy. At least his ship was less likely to get beaten up that way. This was the second time in three months that his ship had taken expensive damage. Deciding that he could dwell on the point better after having whatever the Federation running-dogs made for beer would be better. He grabbed his jacket and opened the hatch. It looked like the police were still looking for whoever it was they were after – there were a couple of officers pacing along the service catwalk like a pair of caged tigers. They didn't even look down as he paced past a couple of ships on the way to the elevator down to the main station plaza. Just as he was reaching the door, he was jerked to a stop by a rough hand clamped over his mouth! He also felt something blunt poke into the small of his back.

"Stay quiet, walk this way or your guts will be spread over this deck," a hoarse voice whispered in his ear.

The only reply Buford could give at this point was a muffled "mmmmf" so he decided not to bother and just quietly comply. If someone was mad enough to kidnap him under the nose of two police officers, they were probably insane enough to carry out their threat too. His captor marched him towards a parked Saker. The entrance hatch opened, and he was forced inside. The door closed firmly behind him.

Buford felt the grip on his mouth release. He slowly turned around to face a young man of slight build who was probably not even 20 years old. He was carrying some kind of metal tube with a rather nicely carved piece of wood at one end.

"I'm sorry I had to do that. My name's James Winston, and I have a business proposition to make to you."

Buford was about to get indignant and start demanding what the hell the deal with the frogmarch and the funny metal tube was, but Winston cut him off just as he was opening his mouth.

"I'm having a spot of bother with a crooked cop who wants to kill me," lied Winston. "I think they are probably identifying everyone here as they leave. If you can take me to Eta Cassiopeia in my ship, I'll pay you CR4000."

Four thousand credits! For a taxi run! In his own ship! He must be crazy. There's got to be more to this.

"Five thousand," said Buford flatly.

"Deal!"

They shook on it. Buford looked around in wonder. Five k's will pay for all the repairs and then some. Maybe it was his lucky day. Winston went to the back of the ship, and hid by the drive containment vessel to evade detection as Buford went forward to ready the ship for departure. He shook his head in wonder once more as he settled into the Saker's flight deck and called for clearance. Winston had been right, they photo

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identified him. The drive section seemed to do its job since they only read one life sign on board.

Winston crept out of the tight access area around the prime-mover containment walls. Five thousand credits! At least he was alive and would have fifteen k's to go on. It'd keep the loan sharks off his back for a while. He decided to go up to the flight deck. He'd at least be able to pass the time and get to know who the commander he had sort of reverse kidnapped was. He had a quirky accent, he sounded like he was from the Empire. That wasn't so bad though, at least it would make it unlikely that he'd get turned into the Fed police by this guy. He opened the flight deck door just as Buford was activating the ship's drive, targeted for Eta Cassiopeia.

"Would you care to tell me what all that is about?" asked Buford.

"Well, can you tell me who you are first?" answered Winston, deciding that answering with a question was probably a good start.

"I am Commander Jades Buford of the Empire."

"OK, this is a long story" began Winston. Buford was all ears.

Winston decided the better part of caution was to continue the lie about the corrupt police officer wanting him dead. He explained in some detail the chase through the space station, carefully omitting the part about Senator Johnson and his part on the other end of a shotgun. He couldn't really tell whether Jades Buford was believing all this at the moment.

It had been a long day. The ship was on autopilot, and Buford had agreed to remain up front. Winston went back to his cabin, and slept fitfully. He still wasn't sure whether Buford really trusted him, after all, sticking a gun in someone's back was hardly like putting a "Wanted: Pilot" ad in the BBS. Maybe he'd wake up in a Federation police cell on Eta Cassiopeia instead of at Barnard's Star.

Gordon was now taking personal interest in the affair. He had passed the bubbling rage of anger, and was now in the calm that went past anger. His voice was brittle with impatience. He sat down in front of his computer system and started going through records. He reviewed the security camera recordings. At least he got a really good image of the fugitive pointing that tube weapon at Johnson and firing it. A bit of searching using the heuristic data search engine and he was onto a lead on his suspect. A pilot's certificate appeared on the screen. He had some details.

NAME: WINSTON, JAMES K

DATE OF ISSUANCE: 3253 07 25

PLACE OF ISSUANCE: NEW ROSSYTH, ALIOTH – VINE ROAD TESTING CENTRE

DATE OF BIRTH : 3236 05 20

BIRTHPLACE: (City) NEWTOWN (Planet) NIRVANA (System) PHEKDA

The photo certainly matched the suspect. The picture search algorithm was working well today. He searched a little more. No criminal records anywhere (yet). A ship registration document showed up. Alioth license plate TY-155. Quickly, he opened a channel to control.

"Aaah, hello Control. Do we have a Saker Mk III on board, Alioth registration Tango Yankee One Five Five?"

"Standby one... no we don't, it left fifteen minutes ago."

Gordon's jaw jutted out and he quietly snarled. The perp, James K Winston, a nineteen year old puke had slipped through his fingers. The day was going further downhill.

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"What about the photo idents?" Gordon asked the control supervisor in a brittle voice. He wanted to wring the controller's neck.

"Commissioner, we have a photo ident for Alioth Tango Yankee One Five Five. It was being piloted by Commander Jades Buford. No other life signs on board."

No other life signs on board! That had to be wrong. Winston obviously had some sort of accomplice. "I'll track you down, see if I don't," Gordon thought to himself bitterly. Aaah, Jades Buford. He searched on that name. A few seconds later he had a list of people with that name. Only two had ships registered to them.

"OK Control, do we have a Tionisla plate, Mike Golf two three three, should be an Anaconda?" Gordon asked.

"Sorry, that one's not on board, we've never seen it."

"Let's try this other one. Exioce plate, Whiskey Charlie zero two six, should be an Osprey-X?"

"Yep, we've got that one on board. Docking bay Alpha one seven"

"OK, thanks for your time, have a good day"

Gordon immediately had a couple of officers go and monitor the Osprey X. He told them to be discreet. He wanted to give whoever left in that ship a very unpleasant surprise.

Epping Newtown, Eta Casseopia.

Winston disappeared into 4750 Bexar, leaving Buford waiting nervously outside. He had managed to convince Buford to wait outside after a lot of arguing. He had wanted his 5K badly. Fortunately, Winston had managed to concoct a convincing story about a business deal that he had to close alone to get the 5K with which to pay him. He knew if Buford had followed him, he'd have discovered the web of lies. This could not happen, at any cost. Winston stepped into the cold, grey room in which he had drunkenly signed up to all this madness less than three weeks earlier, glad it was all over. He looked in the direction the man had come from the last time. Once again, the door slammed shut behind him in a startling manner, and in strode the same man as he had met last time...this time without the rifle.

"Well, you made quite an impression amongst our group," said the man. Winston took some comfort in the fact that he was smiling. At least it was probably a good impression he thought.

"You certainly gave the police a run-around. We are quite impressed. I've never seen anyone assassinate in cold blood in that manner. That was a touch of pure class. The antique weapon too. Mmmm!"

Winston tried to look a bit relaxed about it all, but decided it was unconvincing. He certainly didn't want to reveal the fear and the relief that the whole ordeal was almost over.

"As we promised," continued the stranger, "you have been paid. The funds should be in your account. I hope we can have the pleasure of doing business with you again. Oh and by the way, I'd be a bit...cautious... about going back to Barnard's Star for a while, they found out who you are!"

As a traditional gesture, they shook hands. Winston left the room. Buford was still waiting outside the building.

"OK Jades, your 5k's in your credit account."

"Thank you," said Jades.

"Don't mention it," said Winston. "Let me buy you one at Lanner's".

A word from those involved

James Winston:

That was the first and last assassination I ever did. The whole experience is indelibly etched into my mind. At the time, it certainly relieved the pressure – it kept the loan shark off my back. However, it wasn't long before the whole thing came unravelled in a really nasty way. The whole incident, with my name on it, was splashed over the news in the Barnard's Star system. I had never been to a civilized place like that where piracy and murder was rare, and it got me completely by surprise. Also, a fairly hefty price was put on my head too, and I was having to try and shake off bounty hunters for some years. Johnson's sister subsequently took over the "family business" of theirs and was equally as brutal. I'm just glad they never found my family. In the end it cost me much more than the 15K that I kept from the deal – for years quite well armed bounty hunters took potshots at me. On the positive side, it did help my Elite rating somewhat, but three of my ships were written off as a direct consequence of this particular contract.

Finally I was good enough at combat to beat off my attackers, and also the contract on me expired. However, that wasn't the end of it. The Federation has a long and bitter memory, and gave the AJN a great deal of grief about this one incident when I was given command of the Fearless. Fortunately, skilled diplomacy on the part of the Alliance paid off and the Federation quietened down. But I've still not been back to Barnard's Star!

Jades Buford:

Well, I guess he did pay me well, and bought me a couple of beers at Lanner's. However, it didn't really make up for my ordeal when I got back to Barnard's to pick up the Osprey. Little did I know my ship was staked out. I was completely astonished as they arrested me when I tried to board my ship. I was promptly dragged off to the police cells. I spent six months in those cells. The station chief took a personal interest in the case and made my life an utter misery. He was convinced I knew where Winston was. Of course I didn't; he was probably in some miserable Frontier system by that time. Eventually, the chief had to release me as he hadn't obtained any new evidence and the maximum holding time expired. I vowed to find Winston and get some revenge for those six months. I did eventually catch up with him, but he was somewhat better armed. The Fearless would squash an Imperial Courier flat any day! We did end up making up somehow. Admiral James Winston seemed quite a different person to the 19-year old I met on Barnard's Star. But that weasel-like cunning that serves a bounty hunter so well was still definitely present. Would I sit down and have a beer with him again after all this? Actually, I think I probably would.

Mikhail Gordon:

That fateful day is etched in my mind as well as James Winston says it is etched in his. No crime of that order had been committed at the station in years. Of course I was the new Chief. I'd only been on the job for a week, and this happens. Privately, I was glad someone had rubbed Johnson out but on the other hand, it was a serious crime that happened on my watch. It blighted my career for years. I do have to give Winston credit for the sheer cunning audacity of the attack. I didn't even know what a shotgun was until that day. Needless to say, we started putting antique weapons into our scan after that one, but the trouble is that defeating the scan was still too easy. Once disassembled, the weapons just looked like pieces of tubing and wood to the scanners, and ammunition could be made by a shady dealer on the station. Fortunately, it never happened again.

I'm retired now, so no, I wouldn't arrest Winston if I saw him. I wouldn't congratulate him for bumping off Johnson either – he should have done it in deep space where it wouldn't have caused nearly so much trouble.

The hunter and the hunted

Editors note: *We did try and get hold of the police officers directly involved, and Johnson's bodyguards but they have all gone their separate ways. With the vastness of the human population spread amongst so many systems, we couldn't find them before our publishing deadline!*