

The Collector's Tins

By
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The small scooter that carried Old Red John approached the asteroid on an intersecting trajectory. John had been mining the asteroid belt in the Santori star system for too many years. He had yet to get his big break and find his path to riches. If he did not find it soon, he would have to retire and give up asteroid mining just as his body was giving him up. It was interesting to him how one's body started going down hill at 40, steeper at 50, exponentially down at 60, and heading for a crash landing at 70. Now in his 70th year, he had little to look forward to and only his pipe as his constant companion.

Forty years ago, while scouting out a claim, he found an abandoned space ship from sometime during the 2nd Age of Man. Inside, among other treasures, he found a Whitehall pipe. That pipe was all he had left, the rest just squandered away in women and drink. He chuckled to himself; after all, he was a lot younger then and could handle both, in either hand!

The blue light on the control panel started flashing. This meant that the scooter was closing in on the asteroid. He took manual control, and brought the scooter to a landing on the underside of the asteroid where his mass/density scanning detector had indicated something out-of-synch with the mass/density of the rest of the asteroid. A visual search had indicated the presence of a small dome. He put on his air suit, left the scooter and proceeded to investigate the mysterious dome.

Arriving at the site, he found a small dome approximately fifty feet in diameter. He immediately recognized it for what it was, an escape survival dome. Someone had located the dome on the asteroid where it would not be seen by a passing ship. It was pure luck that he had found it. By examining the gauge at the air-lock entrance, he found that the environment inside was breathable and safe for him to enter through the dome's air-lock.

Inside the escape dome, he found a bare enclosed area. In the corner, he found the remains of a small man and a small chest. Opening the chest he found a note and several small packages. He retrieved the packages and note and returned to the scooter.

Once on board the scooter, he lifted off and placed the scooter on autopilot to Storn. He lit up his Whitehall pipe filled with a local pseudo-tobacco. "Too bad I

can't find or afford any real Old Earth tobacco" he said to himself. He opened the note and read the contents:

My name is John Smith. In my youth I was a dedicated collector of everything written by, about, and related to J.R.R. Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings Trilogy of books. On my way to the planet Storn, my ship was attacked and I was wounded. I escaped in a lifeboat and now find myself in this escape dome. Soon I will be no more. I bequeath this part of my small collection of books and paraphernalia to you and hope it brings you better luck than it did me.

Signed, John Smith

He read the letter several times and said a prayer for the long deceased John Smith. The first package contained a red leather bound edition of "The Lord of the Rings" dated from the year 1970 in the First Age plus several paperback editions. The second package contained a box with 10 tins of pipe tobacco. "I have hit the mother load here", he thought. "These tins of Old Earth tobacco should get me around 500 solaris each." He then decided to visit his old friend Willem van Derjinn on Storn and sell him everything except three tins of the Old Earth tobacco, which he would keep for himself. He had dealt with Willem before and found him to be the best of a bad lot. He would get a good percentage of the value of the merchandise. He did not begrudge Willem his cut after all there was a cost to doing business.

"I finally get to try some Old Earth tobacco, instead of this garbage I have been smoking all these years" he said to himself as he opened a tin of McClelland Organic Virginia. He dumped out the pseudo-tobacco he had been smoking and filled his Whitehall pipe with the Old Earth tobacco. He had a little difficulty lighting the pipe, however once it got going a fragrant stream of smoke lifted into the cabin of the scooter. "Outstanding" he thought as the scooter proceeded onward towards Storn.

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Willem van Derjinn was surprised at the request for a meeting from Old Red John. John was an honest miner who seldom had any luck. He had been an asteroid miner for many years. They had occasionally had dealings, however, Old Red John's findings had been of little value.

Willem was puffing on his Orlik Judges' Pipe, a pipe from Old Earth dating to the First Age. He knew it was made of real briar and was manufactured in a political subdivision in Europe. He was smoking some of the last of his supply of Old Earth tobacco. The tin indicated that it was a Pease blend called "Inverness". Greg Pease was a tobacco blender/designer from the late 20th and early 21st century, F.A. "When I run out, I Guess I will have to get some good pseudo-Virginia tobacco or else smoke nothing at all" he thought. He had become

acutely aware that Old Earth tobacco was becoming increasingly hard to come by. Its scarcity was driving up the price and value, when it could be found.

Old Red John arrived punctually at the designated time at Willem's antique showroom in center city New Columbus and was in a very good mood.

"What have you got for me, John?" Willem enquired.

John told him the story of his finding the cache. He showed Willem the books.

"I can probably get you somewhere in the neighborhood of 1,000 solaris for the books, especially to a Tolkien collector".

John opened the box with the tobacco and took out seven tins. He gave them to Willem who looked them over and read the writing on the tins. The tins were labeled as follows: "Old Toby", "Longbottom Leaf", "Southern Star", "Southfarthing", "Southlynch", "Smaugweed", and "Aragorn". Some of the tins were marked "N.A.S.P.C."

"I can tell you that these are indeed rare. These tobaccos are all Tolkien-related and must come from some pipe show back in the First Age.

"John, you know I have always dealt fairly with you. However, there is a cost of doing business. I can give you about 400 Solaris per tin." Willem replied.

"Well, I kind of figured about 500 solaris per tin." John indicated.

"How about 450 solaris per tin? That is my last offer. Don't forget I have to go to collectors to move this merchandise and you don't have any of the requisite contacts either on Storn or off world."

"You are a hard man, Willem, but fair. Deal. Let's have a smoke of this other Old Earth tobacco I found" John said as he passed the opened tin of McClelland Organic Virginia to Willem who enjoyed the tin aroma and quickly proceeded to fill his Orlik pipe. "You know John that it is amazing after all this time how good Old Earth tobaccos preserve and smoke. I don't think there is anything else like it in the Universe!"

The deal was closed, the amount credited to Old Red John's bank account. It brought Willem's monetary reserve dangerously low, but he felt he knew just the person who would be interested in the tobacco. He would sell the tobacco as a set or package deal. The books he could quickly sell to a fellow antiquarian who dealt in books for about double the price he paid John.

Several days later, at castle Pesario on planet Hayden in the Lynase star system, Emperor Leopaldo was reviewing the latest dispatches from all over the Empire with his weapons master Varten von Eckman. Both were smoking pipes filled with a rare Old Earth tobacco called Deep Hollow. While tamping the tobacco in his pipe, relighting, and puffing away, Leo noticed a small privacy capsule and proceeded to open it. He scanned the message it contained.

“Varten, come take a look at this.”

“What is it Leo, another invitation to some courtier’s daughters wedding? Varten asked.

“No, it is a rather unique business opportunity. You remember our old friend Willem van Derjinn from the planet Storn in the Santori System? It seems that he has come into the possession of seven rare tins of Old Earth tobacco. The tobaccos tins have names taken from a series of books written by an author from the Old Earth political subdivision Great Britain. The author was John R.R. Tolkien who wrote a series of books called “The Lord of the Rings”. The tins are also stamped N.A.S.P.C. Let’s see what turns up in a computer search.”

Leto keyed in a search sequence of “N.A.S.P.C., Old Earth, First Age, and tobacco”. The results on the visiscreen indicated:

N.A.S.P.C. pronounced “NAS-Pac” was an organization of pipe collectors based out of Columbus, Ohio in the political subdivision of the United States. It was founded around 1996 First Age and lasted until 2010 F.A. when it was suppressed by the Anti-smokers took over the governments of the United States. The club consisted of approximately 1000 members from all over the world. Its membership included some of the most knowledgeable collectors in the hobby who had some of the best collections for that time period. Each summer NASPC held a show in Columbus, Ohio where the members gathered to buy/trade pipes and tobacco, and to discuss the latest happenings. This show was one of the three top pipe shows in the United States. One unique feature was that they had a custom tobacco specially tinned for the show. For a number of years the tobaccos had a hobbit theme (hobbit being a character from the Lord of the Rings series of books). Also, each year they sponsored a club pipe that was stamped NASPC. Both the show tobaccos and club pipes are very rare.

“Quite interesting, eh Varten?”

“Yes Leo, are you interested?”

“These are one series of Old Earth tobaccos that I am definitely interest in. Their acquisition would be a jewel in my collection of pipes and tobacco. Who do you have available to send to procure these items for me?”

Varten concentrated on the aromatic smoke drifting up from the bowl of his pipe, scratched his head and said “Nick Reardon is probably two weeks away from Storn by fast ship. Spencer Smith is in the Hercon System Sector and could make contact with Willem in two days.”

“Go ahead and send Spencer. I don’t think you should divert Nick for this mission. You can authorize Spencer to spend up to 700 Solaris for each tin. Any more would require a separate authorization. You know that this is a large amount of money, close to 5,000 solaris, but I think the treasury can stand it.” Leo stated with a sly laugh.

“Done my lord. I will communicate with Spencer via the hyperlink and have him contact Willem at his establishment on Storn. We should hear from him in a couple of days!”

“You know Varten that some pipe collectors think that this deep hollow tobacco has a tin aroma of ketchup. I don’t know where they get this foolish idea. Whatever they think, this is one excellent tobacco. Too bad I only have a half a dozen tins left. Well, we might as well enjoy it while we can!”

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Spencer Smith departed the space liner “Corinthian” between Carten IV and Storn in the early afternoon while rain was falling. The trip was quite short since Carten IV was in a system next to the solar system to which Storn belonged. The rain was heavy and he was dressed in a waterproof hoodie. His instructions from Mr. von Eckman were very clear, meet Willem van Derjinn’s agent, be transported to the meeting location with Mr. Derjinn, and complete the transaction. A communiqué during the trip had informed him that he would be met at the spaceport by an agent of Mr. Van Derjinn. It seems that there had been some trouble, and caution was the order of the day.

He cleared customs quickly and proceeded down a long hallway carrying a small travel bag. To all appearance, the travel bag was ordinary. It did have a false compartment that was impervious to the spaceport security detection equipment, and could not be found through visual examination. “Nothing too good for the Empire IntelligenceService” he thought.

Passing through the entrance to the main terminal, as instructed, he proceeded to the smoking lounge. There were a number of people smoking cigarettes, cigars, and a few even had pipes, He sat in a corner seat and lit a full bent rattiliwood briar pipe with a quantity of a dark shag pseudo-tobaccos supposedly to simulate

a heavy latakia English blend. Although not very rare, rattiliwood had been found to have similar smoking properties as Old Earth briar, or so he had been told. It made for a very good traveling pipe. As he lit the pipe, he noticed a very shapely young woman, dressed in a tight, low-cut jumpsuit, sitting across and to his right that was trying to use a lighter to fire up a black bent sandblasted pipe. She gave up, got up, and walked over to him.

“Seems like I have run out of fuel for my lighter” she said.

He gave the counter-sign, as he had been instructed, “You know, lighters may tend to alter the taste of the tobacco. You should always use wooden matches”, and he struck a match and helped light her pipe.

Her pipe being lit, they sat back and enjoyed the smoke. “My name is Lu Jo”, she said in a low voice, “and I will take you to Willem van Derjinn as soon as we finish.”

“That is a fine pipe you have, a bit on the small side for me, but splendid. What is it, and what are you smoking?”

She responded “Well, at least you didn’t call it a Ladies Pipe! I have worked for Mr. Van Derjinn since I graduated from college five years ago. An antiquarian comes up with some pretty strange items. He got this pipe in a deal a couple of years ago. It is from Old Earth, and was made by Dunhill. From the stampings you can see that it is a group 2 Tanshell made in 1977, First Age. The pseudo-tobacco is made by the Sim Gorwaith company on Vesper II, and is their “Best Brown” blend.”

“Well, the pipe is very nice, the Best Brown smells fantastic and you are very intriguing. Let’s finish our pipes and get about our business” he said.

“Fine by me” Lu Jo replied.

They sat in silence, finished their pipes, emptied the ash and dottle into the ash tray, and walked out of the terminal. As they approached her aircar in the holding zone, she noted “We have to be very careful. I will tell you more once we get inside the car.” They got into the car, lifted up, and put the car on autopilot heading towards New Columbus, the main city on Storn.

Lu Jo turned to Spencer and said “You may call me Lu if you wish. Mr. van Derjinn sent me to meet you at the spaceport. It seems that all this secrecy is necessary. Yesterday, an attempt was made on the life of the man who found the cache of books and tobacco. He escaped with nary a scratch, but has by now left this planet. However, Mr. van Derjinn is now very nervous. He thinks it will be best to take precautions. I agree.”

“All this over a simple negotiation for some pipe tobacco?” Spencer said “I don’t understand all the fuss?”

“You have to understand, this Old Earth tobacco was produced in a very small quantity. First, when it was offered, there was probably only 300 tins of each tinned. Second, for it to have survived all this time makes it exceedingly rare. Third, each tin had custom art on it which had not been passed down over the centuries. Finally, as far as we know, this is a complete set of tins. The last tin was issued in 2004 First Age. There after, the spotty records indicate that the club switched the theme for their show tobacco. However, the records are incomplete, at best.”

She went on “I don’t know how much money you are authorized in this deal. I do know that, in an age when an individual having an annual income of 100 Solaris is considered to be well off, this merchandise can be very expensive and some very powerful people may be interested in obtaining it through both legal and illegal means.”

A buzzer went off and Lu Jo took manual control of the aircar. She landed the ship in a private holding space next to an older building on the northern side of New Columbus. She turned to Spencer and said “I will leave you here. When you exit the aircar, turn right and you will see a doorway in the building. Knock three times. You will hear three knocks in return. Knock two more times, and the door will open and you will be admitted. I have some errands to run. I will pick you up here in one-hour. I think you will find Mr. Van Derjinn to be a very interesting person.”

As Spencer was leaving the air car, he turned to her and said “Thanks for all your help. You have been most gracious. I will see you in an hour.” He left the air craft and approached the door. He knocked three times, heard a return three knock rap. He knocked two more times and the door opened.

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Spencer was admitted by a tall, thin man into a darkened hallway. They walked a short distance and entered a large room. The room looked like a small library with many book cases, display cases, and antiques.

“Welcome to New Columbus, Mr. Smith. I am Willem Van Derjinn. I am sorry for all the security and secrecy, but I assume Lu told you the reason. We are at my second home, a villa located on the edge of the city. In lieu of what has happened, I thought it best that we not meet at my main showroom.”

Spencer indicated that he fully understood the precautions and that they were quite necessary.

“I have been informed by your principal in this matter that, besides your credentials, you would have an independent way to assure me of your identity.”

“Yes, I will show it to you.” He reached into his pocket and took out a small foiled pack containing an alcohol soaked pad. He turned his right hand palm up. He wiped the pad on his palm. Slowly an image took form on his palm. An image of the head of Sherlock Holmes with a deerstalker hat and a calabash pipe became visible. After a minute, the image disappeared.

“Well, I guess you are who you say you are. As Leo indicated, that was the emblem of the Empire Intelligence Service. You know that in all the Sherlock Holmes stories by Doyle, Sherlock never smoked a calabash pipe. It came into the cannon through the actor William Gillette. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!” he said with a grin.

Willem walked towards the library desk and went behind it. He removed three large volumes. Behind the books was a built in safe. He punched in the code and a door opened. He took out a small package, closed the safe, and put the package on the desk.

“This is what it is all about! Please note, the box is made to look like finished wood. There is a small dragon on the front and top of the box with two jewels in the eyes. The latch is phony. To open the box you must cover both of the eyes with your finger and press this small indentation near the tail of the dragon. If that is done all at once, the box will open.” He showed Spencer how to open the dragon box. The lid opened. Inside were seven tins of tobacco. He took each tin out of the box and set it on the desk. “Please examine each one and ensure that the tins are sealed and are just as I described them.”

Spencer did as he was directed. “Everything appears to be in order.”

Willem replaced the tins in the box and closed the lid. “OK, let’s talk turkey! I would like 1000 solaris for each tin, a total of 7,000 solaris” he said.

“The Emperor has instructed me to offer you 500 solaris for each tin, or a total of 3,500 solaris.

“You jest, I am sure. A real collector would know that it is worth considerably more than I am asking. The price is so low because I am really worried about handling this merchandise, especially after what has happened to the finder of the tobacco!”

“As you are sure to know, the Emperor has only authorized me up to a certain amount. For me to go much higher would require additional authorization which would take a significant additional amount of time. I will be honest with you, I

can go up to 700 solaris per tin or a total of 4,900 solaris. I can add an additional 100 solaris as a sort of finders fee.”

Willem picked up his Orlik pipe, lit it up and pondered it for a couple of minutes. “Fine, I will take the 5,000 solaris. Consider the deal agreed. You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Smith!”

Spencer took a negotiable check drawn on the Emperor’s account out of his wallet. He took his pen and entered the amount and gave it to Willem. He had Willem place his thumbprint at the designated space on the check.

“This check is good at any of the financial institutions in the Empire. Now, it can only be cashed or deposited by you.”

Willem took the check and examined it. “All seems to be in order” he said as he placed the check in his wallet and gave Spencer the box. “It has been a pleasure doing business with you.

Spencer placed the “dragon box” into his travel bag. They left the room together going back the way they came. “How are you going to get back to Castle Presaro?” he asked.

“I have a room tonight at the Empire Hotel in New Columbus. The Emperor has dispatched a cruiser to meet me tomorrow at the spaceport. By tomorrow evening the Emperor shall have his package.”

“Lu Jo will take you to your hotel. I hope you have a pleasant trip back. Please give my regards to Leo.”

“I shall, and it was my pleasure meeting you and hope to see you again. Maybe we can smoke a pipe together sometime. Goodnight!”

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Spencer went outside. He noticed that the rain had quit. Lu’s aircar was awaiting him. He got inside. The aircar lifted up into the night.

“Where are we going Mr. Smith?”

“Let’s go to the Empire Hotel. I have a room booked. Nothing is too good for the Emperor’s men!” He chuckled “By the way, do you have any plans for the rest of the evening? How about dinner?”

“Sounds like an excellent idea. It has been a long day” Lu exclaimed.

They sped on towards center city New Columbus. They landed in the holding zone and parked the aircar. They entered the hotel and went to the front desk.

“I believe I have a room booked in the name of Smith” he told the desk agent.

“Yes, here we are, Spencer Smith.” He said “You will be with us one night, correct? What form of payment will you use?”

“Yes, correct. Here is my Empire Express Card.”

The clerk took the card, ran an imprint and gave Spencer a form to sign. “One key or two?” he asked.

“One is all that is necessary. The lady and I will be having dinner tonight and I expect to be leaving in the morning. Please give me a wake up call at 7:00 A.M.”

“Will do, and please have a pleasant stay with us, Sir.” He gave Spencer his key and told him the room was on the 66th floor.

Spencer and Lu took the lift to the 66th floor. They used the key to let themselves into the suite of rooms. They found themselves in a rather opulent suite. “A bit palatial don’t you think Spencer?”

“More than I am use to. Usually we stay in less expensive and more mundane quarters when on official business.”

Spencer placed the Dragon Box in the room safe and set the combination. He left his travel bag on the bed. He and Lu left the room and went downstairs to dinner.

They went to the restaurant and had a fine dinner on Storn-grown shell fish and local vegetables. A fine cheese cake with neer-coffee topped off the dinner. Following dinner they paid a visit to the sky lounge for a pipe. They filled up their pipes with some of Lu’s Sim Gorwaith Best Brown pseudo-tobacco. “Here!” she said, “I picked you up a couple of ounces while I was running my errands and you were doing your negotiating. I thought I would be kind to you. I hope this makes us even for the excellent dinner.”

“Even!” he exclaimed “It leaves me deeply in your debt, young lady. This Best Brown is reminiscent of an Old Earth tobacco also with the name Best Brown, made by some company in the Lake District of England. I can’t remember the company’s name, but the Emperor let me try some a while back.”

“I am sure Mr. Gorwaith probably designed the tobacco to resemble the Old Earth product. With all the advances we have seen over the centuries, the pseudo-tobacco that is available to day almost surpasses the natural products, whether grown naturally now as a neer-tobacco, or manufactured artificially as a pseudo-tobacco. However, nothing surpasses the original Old Earth tobacco, when it can

be found.” Lu and Spencer finished their pipes. “What are your plans for the rest of the evening Spencer?”

“I kind of thought you might spend the evening with me and in my one-night set of palatial rooms” he explained with an exaggerated evil leer and a smile.

“I was hoping you would say that. I think you are one of the most charming men that I have ever met. However, I must warn you that I have to leave before 5 A.M. as I have work that must be done prior to Mr. van Derjinn opening his showroom tomorrow.”

“Sounds great! The night is young, and I think there is much we can do to amuse ourselves. I think that we can live with that time stipulation.”

They left the lounge arm in arm and headed up to the rooms on the 66th floor. Little did they notice the short fat man that had followed them from the restaurant and was in the smoking lounge get up and follow them up to the 66th floor.

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It was the middle of the night when Varten’s communicator went off. He picked up the communicator and heard the security service communications officer on the other end.

“Sir, a disturbing message has been received from the planet Storn. It seems that one of our operatives, Spencer Smith has been found dead in his hotel room. Details are a bit sketchy, but it seems that he was found shot and the room safe was forced. Time of the incident was about 7:30 A.M. local time. Local authorities are investigating.”

“Tell the local authorities to remove the body for autopsy and let their crime scene investigators do the work. Afterwards I want the room sealed until we can send one of our own people to look into things. There is an Empire cruiser set to land there today to pick up Spencer. Have them remain at the spaceport for the time being. Get hold of Nick Reardon. Have him hire the fastest mode of transportation, and get him to Storn. We will send him briefing materials on his way out via hyperwave. Do not disturb the Emperor. I will tend to him the first thing in the morning.” Varten rasped into the communicator.

He heard the communications officer acknowledge the orders. He wondered what had gone wrong on such a simple task. He wondered if some new plot against Leo was in the offering. The remainder of the night was sleepless.

Leo was just finishing his breakfast when Varten entered. “Varten, old friend, you seem like you world has collapsed this morning. What has happened?”

Varten told Leo about the communications that had been received. A later communiqué had indicated that Nick Reardon was heading at all speed to the planet Storn in a hyper-speed needle ship, a one person ship that traveled at hyper speed. If all the space jumps were correctly made, he would be on Storn within twelve-hours, or at dawn on the day after the incident. He also informed Leo that an Empire cruiser was being held at Nick's disposal at the Storn spaceport.

“What instructions have you given Nick?”

“Nick has several tasks and objectives. Proceed to Storn and investigate the crime. Try to retrace Spencer's last steps. Find the killer or killers. Retrieve the merchandise.”

“That should be sufficient Varten. I have faith in Nick. He has never let us down. Now, sit down and lets light up a pipe in Spencer's memory. He was a good, loyal intelligence operative. The good ones are few and far between. He also was a good brother of the briar, also few and far between!”

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It had been a hard trip for Nick Reardon. He had made a two-week trip in twelve hours. Whereas he had planned to return to Castle Pesaro via a leisurely two week trip on a space liner, he had done it in a hyper-speed one-person needle ship. Hyper-speed needle ships were just out of the Empire research labs. Small, and amazingly fast, you were able to bend space and go tremendous distances in short amounts of time. The drawback was that you had to be exacting in navigating the jumps, and you were crammed into a ship full of equipment with barely enough space to straighten out. Regardless, he had reached the spaceport.

At the spaceport, a quick meeting was held with Nick, Captain Regan of the Empire Ship “Constance”, and Sergeant Polombo, a plainclothes detective from the local New Columbus police department. Captain Regan told Nick that his ship and crew were at his disposal. Sergeant Polombo offered the assistance of the police department. Nick and Polombo left via aircar and went to the Empire Hotel.

At the hotel, they went to the sealed room on the 66th floor. Sergeant Polombo was explaining the lab reports and their findings. “Medical reports indicate that Mr. Smith died of a needle blast to the heart. He died instantly, without any pain if that is of any help. Mr. Smith was found still dressed in his sleeping clothes. He had not performed his morning toilet. Hotel staff indicates that Mr. Smith had checked in with and entertained a young lady last night with dinner. After dinner they went to the lounge, and later on came up here in the room. She was observed leaving around 5 A.M. local time. We do not know who she is however; there is some surveillance video with her in it. She will not be hard to identify. Mr.

Smith responded to his automatic wake up call at 7:00 A.M. He ordered strong tea be sent up to the room at 8:00 A.M. When the tea arrived and there was no response, the hotel staff used a key to open the door and deliver the tea. She found Mr. Smith's body over there. You will also notice that the room safe has been forced. Lab analysis of the residue shows that a small amount of sarrat-explosive was used to force the door of the safe. The lab also identified at least two types of pipe tobacco that was smoked and found the end of a small cigar."

Nick thanked him for the report. "This is all very interesting, especially two points; I know Mr. Smith very well, and he drinks coffee. He also detests cigars, large or small. You can see now that at least three people have been in the room."

We have identification on the young lady. Her name is Lu Jo, a life-long resident of New Columbus. She works for Willem van Derjinn, an antique dealer. Does that help? Also, now that you are on the scene, what do you want the role of the local police to be?"

"The identification helps. I want to visit Lu Jo and Mr. van Derjinn. I do not want the local police to go any further in the investigation. I do want you to be assigned to me and assist me in my role as the Emperor's official representative. Please clear this with your chief. I want to look around a little, then we can meet with the antique dealer and his assistant."

Nick continued his examination of the room while Sergeant Polombo contacted his superiors. After a short time, Sergeant Polombo informed Nick that his superiors had acceded to his wishes and that he was at Nick's beck and call.

"What pieces of surveillance tapes can I see, and is there a room where we can see it in private? Nick enquired.

"We have some footage from their visit to the lounge. The lounge is under surveillance due to the potential for theft. There is a small room we can use downstairs."

They left the room on the 66th floor and sealed it. A couple items bothered Nick beside the tea-coffee. Why was Spencer still in his night clothes when he had an early morning rendezvous with the Empire cruiser? If the locals were correct, the murder happened between 7:00 A.M. and 8:00 A.M., there was not much time to commit the crime, blow the safe, and escape. Finally, Spencer's travel bag was nowhere to be found.

They went to a small room on the first floor. As they went in, Nick pulled a small box out of his pocket. "This device is a disruptor. It insures that we are not being observed either visually or by any listening devices. At this point in time, I think it would be prudent to think that we are being observed at all times. Do you mind if I smoke?" he said as he pulled out his favorite Larenzetti pipe.

“No, I don’t mind if you smoke your pipe so long as you don’t object to my small cigar.” Sergeant Polombo stated as he took out a small cigar and lit it. “The cigars are locally made and called parodees. They have been made on Storn for many years, modeled after a cigar from the Old Earth country called Italy.”

“Interesting” Nick said “My pipe also came from the same Old Earth country. My tobacco is also made similar to one produced for a few years by the pipe manufacturer Castello, also from Old Earth Italy.”

The video started and Nick could see an image of Spencer enjoying dinner with a beautiful young lady. I assume that the lady is Lu Jo. It seems that they are both enjoying each others company very much.”

“So it does. It does seem that Mr. Smith had a way with young women.”

“He did indeed! Look at the short fat man in the booth behind them. He seems to be playing with his food. It almost seems like he is toying with his meal. It appears that he is also trying to listen to the conversation. Do you know him?”

“It does appear like he is trying to overhear the conversation. No, I do not know him. I do not believe him to be one of the citizens of New Columbus. I know most of the criminal element, and he is unknown to me. Too bad there is no audio, but you know how it is with all these privacy laws”

“Do you have any other surveillance cameras we can see?”

“Except for the main entrance, the sky lounge and the aircar parking areas there are no other cameras”

“Can you have someone search the surveillance tapes for the day before and day of the incident and determine when the short fat man arrived and when he departed?”

“I will have an office go through the surveillance video and report to us.”

“I think you should know the mission that brought Mr. Spencer Smith to Storn.”

Nick briefed Polombo on Spencer’s mission. He told him about the Old Earth collector tobacco tins that had been found, the Emperor’s interest, and the negotiations. He told him that a check in the amount of 5,000 solaris had been deposited to the account of Willem van Derjinn on the day of the murder.

“Do you have anyone here in New Columbus that would fit the profile of an eccentric collector of Old Earth pipe smoking pipes and tobacco, and would be interested in obtaining the merchandise?”

“No, I don’t think so. At least I have never run into such a person here in New Columbus. I will make an inquiry at the office.”

When they had finished smoking, Nick said “I think it is time we pay a visit to the antiquarian and his assistant. Please inform them of our impending visit and let’s get going.”

They left the Empire hotel and headed to the antique dealer’s showroom in New Columbus.

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They parked the Sergeant’s unmarked aircar in a public holding area and proceeded on foot to the antique showroom. All the while, Nick paid close attention to the people near them. They walked about six blocks when they came up to the door of the showroom. There was a sign on the door that they were closed. Nick knocked and the door was opened.

“Mr. van Derjinn, I am Nick Reardon and this is Sergeant Polombo. Could we talk with you for a few minutes?” he asked the tall distinguished gentleman.

“Certainly” he said as he let them in the showroom. As they entered, he locked the door behind him.

“I guess you are here regarding the unfortunate demise of Mr. Smith. Both Lu Jo and I are very upset over this incident. Lu Jo is very distraught. We both found that we rather liked Mr. Smith. Wait a minute and I will get Lu Jo.”

He went to the rear of the showroom and came back with the lady they had seen with Spencer in the surveillance video. To say the least, the video did not do her justice. She was more beautiful in person.

“Before we start, I would like to turn on this device”, which he did “I am going to use this disruptor so that our conversation cannot be accidentally heard.” He then took out another small unit out of his pocket and walked around the perimeter of the room. A small buzz came out of the instrument as he walked near an old urn containing large plants. He examined the urn and removed a small round object. He put the object on the floor and tramped on it with his foot. He continued around the room, but evidently found nothing else. “Just as I thought” he said as he returned to the three. Your showroom has been bugged. You should be more careful Mr. van Derjinn.

“I am the Emperor’s personal representative on this case. Here, let me show you my identification as a member of the Empire Intelligence Service.” He showed him his identification tattoo in the same manner as had Spencer. “I would ask the three of you not to divulge this to anyone in the future. “Please tell me what

transpired the night you all met Mr. Smith. Do not leave out any details, no matter how small.”

Lu Jo told them all the events up to Spencer being left outside Willems villa at the edge of New Columbus. Willem picked up the story and told them with great detail the negotiation and the transaction, including the operation of the dragon box. Lu Jo recounted the rest of the evening until they left the lounge and went up to Spencer’s room.

“We went back up to his room on the 66th floor. After that we uh.... Well, we...”

“You went back to his room where he charmed you and the two of yourselves totally enjoyed each other, correct?” he finished her sentence.

“Yes we did. A most remarkable man was Mr. Spencer Smith.”

“Lu Jo, now listen very carefully, “Did Spencer give you anything after your tryst?”

“Why yes he did. He gave me this pin.” She reached into her pocket and produced a small pin in the shape of a swan. “He told me it was a memento to remember him and a wonderful evening. He had gone to use the bathroom. When he came out he gave me the pin.”

“The pin is a standard issue recording device. If I put it in this unit, we will find out what he had to say.”

Suddenly, they hear Spencer’s voice:

“If you are hearing this recording, then something has happened to me. The negotiations and transaction went as planned. I had a fantastic evening with Lu Jo, Willem’s assistant. During the evening, I had the distinct impression that we were being observed. I cannot tell by whom or why. Please tell the Emperor that it was my honor to have served him in whatever capacity. Out, Smith.”

Nick removed the pin and gave it to Lu Jo. “Please keep this in remembrance of a true servant of the Empire. He served the Emperor on many missions and was a credit to the service.”

“What do we do now?” Willem asked “Are we in any danger?”

“I don’t think you are any danger, Willem” Sergeant Polombo said “After all, you do not have the merchandise any more. I will have officers around to keep an eye on you for protection for a while.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Lu Jo asked “I want to help you get the worms that did this. This is horrible!”

Sergeant Polombo’s communicator rang. He answered it and had a short conversation. “Mr. Reardon, I just heard from the office. The short fat man entered the hotel around 2:00 P.M. in the afternoon at the Empire Hotel. The video shows him leaving at 7:45 A.M. on the day of the murder via an aircar. The aircar had stolen ID plates. Furthermore, he had been staying at the hotel at the room across the hall from Mr. Smith on the 66th floor. He registered as Mr. James Weston from off world. He paid using a Visto credit card. A check on the card shows that it was issued on the planet Saru. No doubt that it is a dummy account, but it showed a credit of 2,000 solaris in it. I have also ordered officers to stand watch over Mr. van Derjinn. Also, the office reports no known people with any interest in Old Earth tobaccos or pipes.

“Fine” Nick said “I do have something for you both to do for me. Mr. van Derjinn, I want you to contact your acquaintances and business contacts and find out if there is anyone who has shown an interest in the merchandise, or any other leads you can find for me.” He gave them the number of his personal communicator so that he could be reached.

Nick and Detective Polombo left the showroom.

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Detective Polombo dropped Nick off at the Empire Hotel and went off to check on some informants he had in the New Columbus underworld. Nick went to the room he had procured. He had a quick bite to eat. He had not had any sleep since he had boarded the hyper-speed needle ship. He decided to take a nap and let things develop.

He thought he heard his communicator going off. His mind was in that cloudy state you find yourself in when you awake quickly from a deep sleep. Nick grabbed his communicator and hit the receive button. “Hello, Hello?”

“Nick, is this you? Lu Jo here. Did I wake you up? It’s important!”

Nick’s senses quickly became clearer and focused. “Yes Lu Jo, you did wake me. Have you come up with anything?”

“I was checking out a contact that Mr. van Derjinn mentioned. The man is Mr. Kapp Peterson. Mr Peterson is a fellow antiquarian. He indicated to me that Mr. van Derjinn had sold him the J.R.R. Tolkien books that were in the cache with the tobacco tins. He said he paid about 2000 solaris for the Houghton Mifflin leather bound edition of “The Lord of the Rings” and the several paperbacks that went with them. No sooner did Mr. van Derjinn leave then a gentleman showed up and

offered him 3000 solaris for the books. He said that he was a collector of Lord of the Rings-related material. He asked Mr. Peterson if he knew anything about other merchandise that may have been found with the books, to which he replied that he would have to ask Mr. van Derjinn. For some reason the stranger said that it would not be necessary. He paid for the material with a bonded check in the name of Stennett Biggens, and left the store.”

“Good job, Lu Jo. I think you may be on to something. Why don’t you come over to the hotel, we can have some dinner. I will ask Detective Sergeant Polombo to run the name, Stennett Biggens, through the local computer system for priors. I will also contact Captain Regan on the cruiser Constance to check for information on through the Empire Criminal Identification System (ECIS). We can await further information before proceeding.”

“That sounds great, Nick. I will join you downstairs in the restaurant in about an hour, 7:00 P.M. local time.” she said as the communicator went dead.

Nick contacted Sergeant Polombo and Regan and asked them to check their computer systems for information on Stennett Biggens. He then proceeded downstairs for dinner carrying his communicator, pipe & tobacco, and a needle blaster beneath his jacket.

He saw Lu Jo at the entrance to the restraint at precisely 7:00 P.M. They ate a light dinner and made small talk. Nick had a nice local trout while Lu Jo had some sea scallops in a buttery sauce. They enjoyed a bottle of local wine. Cheese cake topped with locally grown strawberries was the order for dessert.

Following dinner they went to the smoking lounge. LuJo took out her Dunhill group 2 black bent blast and started filling it with Gorwaith’s Best Brown. She told Nick that Spencer had enjoyed the pseudo-tobacco and then offered him some. Nick accepted graciously and began filling his Larenzetti smooth bent pipe with a silver mount. They used wooden matches for the charring light. Tamped the surface flat, then lit their pipes fully. A pleasant aroma pervaded the space around them.

“Here is what I think happened, Lu Jo. I believe that the murderer knew the location of the tins of tobacco because Mr. van Derjinn’s showroom was bugged. I think he picked up the story of the negotiations and transactions. He knew from observing the shop that you were working for Willem. I think you were followed from the spaceport to Willem’s villa. I think that this information was passed on to the short fat man here at the hotel. He picked you and Spencer up when the two of you had dinner in the hotel restaurant. You were probably followed up to the room on the 66th floor. The murderer saw you leave at 5:00 A.M. I think that Spencer had switched to his sleeping clothes. At some point in time, the murder obtained entrance to Spencer’s room. He murdered Spencer. He was the one that responded to the wake up call and ordered the tea. This gave him up to three

hours inside the room. The murderer had more than enough time to blow the safe and smoke a cigar. He left Spencer's room before 8:00 A.M. and did not go back to his empty room, rather moved around the hotel and eventually left via aircar."

"Geeze Nick! That was quite a recounting of events. You are probably correct.

Nick's communicator beeped. It was Sergeant Polombo. He reported that there was nothing in the criminal data bank regarding one Stennett Biggens. He rung off with no further instructions.

"We drew a blank on Mr. Biggens in the local crime data bank. I wonder what the Empire system will turn up." As he said this his communicator beeped again. It was Captain Regan who reported a match on the name Stennett Biggens. He said the report was rather long but simply Mr. Biggens was a know name on planets in the Rohin star system. It seems that he was a collector of items related to the Lord of the Rings trilogy and other works by the author J.R.R. Tolkien. He also had links to organized crime in the star system. Last report was that he was headed to a Tolkien Convention on the planet Imald in the small crab nebula. He had a booking on the space liner "Torcus" which had a two day layover here on Storn. It left Storn late on the day that Spencer had been murdered."

"Thanks Captain. I want you to have your ship ready for lift off. Contact the Empire Military Control and find out the exact location of the space liner Torcus. I think we shall try to rendezvous with it so I can go aboard. Contact their Captain and tell him I will be transferring on-board. Tell him I will provide an explanation once on board. Tell him this is a Code 1 Empire matter. We should not have any problem with the Torcus' Captain." Nick then broke the connection with the Empire Officer.

Nick spoke to Lu Jo "I have to leave and get to the Empire cruiser Constance. I am going to try to catch up with Mr. Biggens while he is in transit. I will try to contact you..."

"You are not going alone" Lu Jo insisted "I am going with you. After all, I have an interest in this matter and beside, wouldn't it look less suspicious if Mr. and Mrs. Reardon were on the space liner. Two sets of eyes and ears are better than one. I also feel somewhat responsible for what has happened to Spencer Smith"

"You are one forceful woman, Lu Jo, and very intelligent. I cannot counter your arguments. You can come. We have to get to the spaceport in an hour. We will go to the military side so that we do not have to go through screening and customs."

They emptied their pipes and left the lounge. They headed to the spaceport in Lu Jo's aircar. She left a short message for her employer. On the way to the spaceport, Nick called Sergeant Polombo and briefed him on Stennett Biggens and

his tentative plan. He also called Mr. Peterson and asked him to send a complete set of the LOTR books and the LOTR videos to the Empire cruiser Constance as quickly as possible. Once on board the cruiser Constance he could send Varten von Eckman a full report of what had transpired on Storn.

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They arrived at the spaceport, were met by Captain Regan. Immediately, they went onboard. A package had arrived for Nick from Mr. Peterson. A few minutes later the Constance departed planet Storn. Once in space they met Captain Regan in the Wardroom where they had a cup of neer-coffee.

“How long will it take us to catch up to the Torcus?” Nick enquired.

“Once we get far enough away from Storn, we can activate our ring-drive. Based on the information received from the Empire Military Control, I think we can catch up to them in about fourteen hours. It now is 1400 hours Universal Ships Time (UST). We should rendezvous with them at 0400 hours UST, well early in the morning on the Torcus.”

“That seems more than adequate, Captain. I am not sure what we are going to do for the next fourteen hours. Rest I guess.” Nick pondered.

“Well there is one slight problem, I only have one stateroom, and there are two of you.”

“That will not be a problem, Captain. At least that will not be a problem for Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Reardon.” She winked at the ship’s captain. “Please just show us our way.”

He did. Nick and Lu Jo followed. As they went into the stateroom, the “Occupied - Do Not Disturb” sign was placed on the door.

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Thirteen hours later Captain Regan called Nick on the cruiser intercom. “We are within hailing distance of the Torcus. Would you and ‘Mrs. Regan’ like to come to the bridge?”

“Sure would” he said. Nick and Lu Jo left the stateroom and headed to the Constance’s bridge. They were met by Captain Regan. He said that he was about an hour from the actual hookup and that they had been in contact with the space liner Torcus. It seems that the Torcus was a space liner that had seen better days. It had, at one time been considered opulent, but by now was well out of date. It

had an old fashion flash-drive, not a newer ring-drive, which is why the Constance was able to catch up to her.

If you and Lu Jo will go to the docking port, I will have one of the men take you over to the Torcus in one of our mini-boats when we match velocities.

“I want to thank you Captain for all your assistance. After the mini-boat gets back, I would like you to go and shadow the Torcus just out of the range of their detection screens. If you do not hear from Lu Jo or I within 2 standard days, then come back to the Torcus and do whatever you think necessary. At least impound the ship and crew until one of Varten von Eckman’s security teams can investigate more thoroughly. I have dispatched a report to Castel Persaro.

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Nick and Lu Jo were shuttled to the Torcus without incident. Once aboard the Torcus they were taken to Captain Sommerset, the captain of the Torcus. They met in his private study where he was smoking a morning pipe.

“Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Reardon. I don’t know who you are, but you do have pull. I can recognize this, and from the highest channels of the Empire.”

“Good morning Captain Sommerset. You are somewhat correct. At the last moment, I found out that I and my wife were heading to the planet Imald to attend a Tolkien fancier convention. I am representing Emperor Leopaldo on this trip. I have on of his copies of the Alan Lee illustrated volume of “The Lord of the Rings”, published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1991. It is the Centenary edition, 1892 -1992, published on the 100th anniversary of J.R.R. Tolkien’s birth. The Emperor has asked me to put the volume up for auction at the convention. The proceeds of the auction are to be given to the hurricane survivors on planet Florida. He feels that the book should net at least 3,000 solaris.”

“Well, that explains all the to do. I guess with the Emperor’s backing all things become possible. One of our passengers, a Mr. Stennett Biggens, is also a Tolkien fancier. Perhaps I can arrange for him to meet you and your wife. A little social gathering.”

“Does Mr. Biggens smoke? I notice you do, and a very fine pipe you have. Perhaps we can meet after lunch and have a few drinks over pipes.” Lu Jo asked.

“Yes he does, and I will see what I can arrange. I am sure that he will agree as he is traveling alone. Not too many smokers on this trip. After all, we pipe smokers must stick together. May I mention your mission to Mr. Biggens and the book you are transporting?”

“Yes you may, but do not mention the value. I have specific instructions that it is not for sale. It has to be won at auction, during the Tolkien convention. We are pretty beat up from all the excitement. Could you show us to our stateroom?”

“That is something I can do. I will also order breakfast to be sent to your room. I will contact you when arrangements are made for our little smoker after lunch. By the way Mrs. Reardon, the pipe I am smoking is an old Ashton pebble grain Lx from Old Earth. I usually smoke McClelland’s 2100 from Old Earth, when I can find it. If I can’t find it or run out, Morton’s Pipe Shop on Cortman’s IX makes a very close pseudo-tobacco that is very close to it, and of course, less expensive.”

“I look forward to discussing pipes and tobaccos with you when we meet after lunch” Lu Jo said.

The captain rang a bell and a steward appeared. He took Nick and Lu Jo to their stateroom where a very nice breakfast awaited them. Afterwards, if one were standing in the hall, one would see the hand of a young woman place a “Do Not Disturb” sign on the door handle.

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At 1:00 P.M. UST Nick and Lu Jo left the stateroom and headed to a meeting room adjoining the Blue Seas restaurant. They had received a note from Captain Sommerset that he and Mr. Biggens would indeed meet them over drinks and pipes. The Blue Seas restaurant was themed after a Polynesian Island, with blue being the primary thematic color.

They found the side room and entered. A steward told them that they were the first ones to arrive and asked if they would like a drink. Nick ordered a standard cognac on ice. Lu Jo ordered a white wine. They began filling their pipes with the Sim Golwaith Best Brown that they had brought from Storn. Shortly after they had lit their pipes, Mr. Biggens and Captain Sommerset arrived. The Captain introduced Mr and Mrs Reardon to Mr. Biggens. The captain ordered a bourbon and water while Stennett Biggens ordered a Scotch and water. The drinks arrived and were served as Biggens and the Captain lit their pipes.

“Quite nice pipes you have their Mr. and Mrs. Reardon” Biggens exclaimed. “My own is a Ser Jacopo smooth Gandalf pipe, it being one of five pipes in a series made by Ser Jacopo for a Canadian distributor. My pipe was a prototype for the Gandalf design. The Gandalf pipe is a sitter with a bamboo shaft and a bent stem. The silver ring has “Gandalf, LOTR” cast into the silver band. You note that my pipe has a Ser Jacopo logo “J” on the stem and is stamped Ser Jacopo, the rest of the pipes that were made have a different logo, hence the added value to my Old Earth pipe. The other pipes in the series are named “Frodo”, “Bilbo”, “Horn of Gondor”, and “Aragorn”. My tobacco is an Old Earth tin from

a company called McClellands named “Deep Hollow”, again from the Lord of the Rings Trilogy or “LOTR” as we fanciers call it.”

“Very nice Mr. Biggens” Lu Jo said.

They then told Biggens the lineage of their pipes and the tobaccos that they were smoking. He seemed very interesting but he then steered the discussion from their pipes to their mission.

“The Captain has informed me, Mr. Reardon, that you are quite firm in that you would not want to sell the Centenary version of LOTR before you got to the Tolkien convention.”

“Yes, that is quite correct. I have very strict instructions from the Emperor, and one does not disobey the Emperor. Tell me sir, just how extensive is your collection of Tolkien-related antiques and paraphernalia.”

“To a Tolkien fancier, my collection is quite minor. From roughly 1950 First Age until 2001, all the public had was the books. They were great sellers and earned a strong following, some were even fanatics. From 2001 – 2003 F.A. the LOTR movies were issued. Talk about an impact, everything from shirts, rings, swords, jewelry, pipes, tobacco, paintings, jackets, knives, statues, almost anything that was found in the movies was manufactured for the fans. It was a totally merchandised movie. Much of the items have been lost over the centuries. Some has been saved in private collections. All originals come at a high price.”

“My collection contains some very rare books, a number of swords and other paraphernalia from the period that is Tolkien-related. It includes the four rings that were made, one ring and the three elven rings; the swords Anduril, Glamdring, Witch King, and Sting; and of course numerous copies in varying formats of the Peter Jackson movie. You know, over all these centuries, no one has quite come up to the standard for making the movie like Peter Jackson did way back in the First Age of Man.” Biggens continued his discourse.

“While we laid over on Storn, I had the opportunity to pick up a leather bound edition of LOTR that was published by Houghton Mifflin Company back in the First Age. The red leather bindings was to remind us that it was the Red Book of the Westmark.” He finished.

“And did you by chance find anything else while on Storn? Perhaps you obtained some Old Earth tobacco?”

“No, No I did not. Although I heard a rumor that some had been found, I also heard that it had already gone off world. Why do you ask?”

“I figured that if you had some of the Old Earth tobacco, we could open a tin and share some.”

“If I had it” Stennett replied “I would not open it. That would just destroy the value of the antique. The artwork on the tins and the historical value alone is beyond measure or cost. I would not purchase the seven tins for smoking, rather to accent my Tolkien collection”

As they finished their drink and pipe, Nick indicated that it was time to adjourn the little meeting.

“Could we possibly get together tonight? I would like to see your Centenary LOTR edition, and I could show you the Red Book version. Perhaps we could get together over pipes in my rooms at 8:00 P.M.?”

“That would be fine” Nick said “8 P.M. sharp!”

Once Nick and Lu Jo got back to their cabin, Lu Jo said “He is the one who murdered Spencer!”

“No, not Mr. Stennett Biggens, Lu Jo, not himself personally, but I am sure he gave the order for the murder and theft. Did you notice that he knew that there were 7 tins in the series that “went off world”. Of course they went off world, they went off world with him! Did you also notice he knew about the artwork on the tins.”

“Yes, I noticed, but how do we get enough evidence on him?” she asked. “Do you think he suspects that we are more than we seem?”

Nick responded “I don’t know if he does, he should, but I am quite sure the Captain suspects we are Empire Intelligence Service people. I think we are going to have to trap him.”

“I have an idea.” Lu Jo said “Do you remember the old Sherlock Holmes story “A Scandal in Bohemia”? When the suspect was in a compromising position due to smoke or fire, she grabbed that which was important to her when she made her escape. I wonder if it would work with Mr. Biggens. Tolkien he may know, but does he know Conan Doyle?”

“Great Idea” Lu Jo “You have quite the scheming mind!”

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They had a pleasant dinner in the Torcus’ French Restaurant. At 8:00 P.M. they knocked on Stennett Biggens cabin door. He admitted them to a very modern

suite. He proceeded to pour Nick and Lu Jo drinks as they began filling and lighting their pipes. Looking around the room, Nick noticed a rather thick book with red leather bindings on the desk. On the table behind the desk was a medium box a dragon on the front and on the top. He had finally found the dragon box. He said nothing.

“Mr. Reardon, here is my copy of the Red Book Edition that you may wish to take a look at. I see you have the Centenary Edition under your arm.” He took the book from Nick when it was offered. “I see it is illustrated by Allan Lee. It is so very nice and well done. Mr. Lee was one of the technical advisors to Peter Jackson on the film version of the books.”

Nick thumbed through the Red Book edition and passed it on to Lu Jo for examination. She then placed the book back on the table. While Biggens was engrossed examining the Centenary Edition, Nick moved behind the couch so that he could not easily be observed. He took a small round object out of his pocket, turned the top half with a twist, and rolled it in the corner of the room. The device had been set for five minutes.

They continued chatting. Stennett Biggens tried again into talking Nick into selling the book to him prior to the convention. He offered him 3,000 solaris and said that Nick could tell the Emperor a little white lie. He then offered to give him another book of lesser lineage to offer for the auction and the 3,000 solaris. Nick made it appear that he was starting to waver. Suddenly the smoke device went off. A cloud of thick, smelly dense smoke quickly filled the room. Fire alarms and strobe lights went off inside the room. Nick yelled “Fire!” “Fire!”

He grabbed Lu Jo and headed towards the exit while trying to observe Biggens. It appeared that he had found a bag under the desk, placed the dragon box inside, and grabbed the Red Book edition in his hand with the Centary edition and headed for the door. Once outside the cabin, ships officers and the Captain came running with Fire extinguishers and entered the room. A little later the Captain came out of the room and addressed the three.

“Would someone tell me the meaning of this practical joke?”

Biggens turned to him and said “I don’t know what you mean. There was a fire and we rushed out to save our skins!”

Nick Reardon turned to the Captain and said “In the name of the Emperor, arrest this man!” “On what charge?” the Captain asked. “Murder” Nick replied.

The four of them retired to the Captain’s meeting room. Two guards were stationed at the door. “You have some explaining to do, Mr. Reardon” the captain demanded.

Nick showed the others his tattoo identification as an officer of the Empire Intelligence Service. He then told the Captain the background of the murder case.

“Although Mr. Biggens did not physically commit the murder of Spencer Smith, he certainly ordered the theft. The merchandise was delivered to him by the little fat man the day they left Storn.”

“You can’t prove any of this” Biggens said “Tell me where the tins of Old Earth tobacco are. I certainly do not have them.”

“Captain, please look inside the bag Mr. Biggens is holding.”

The Captain took the bag, opened it and looked inside. “Beside some odds and ends, there is nothing in there.”

“Of course you can’t find anything; it is an EIS travel bag. Please give it to me.” The captain gave it to Nick.

Nick reached inside the bag, pressed a catch, opened the false bottom, and pulled out a red box with a dragon relief on the top and bottom.

“Would you like to open the box for us Mr. Biggens?”

“NO you little SOB, if you are so smart, do it yourself.”

“You see Captain, If I press the latch button, nothing happens, but if I cover the two jeweled eyes and press this small indent at the tail of the dragon the lid opens!” and so it did.

“The looked inside the box and found five tins the same size, one slightly smaller, and one of a larger diameter, but of less height. All had beautiful artwork based on the LOTR.”

Upon seeing this, the Captain had Stennett Biggens cuffed. Nick had him contact the Constance and arrangements were made for them to be transferred to the military ship.”

As they departed for the Constance with Biggens in tow, Captain Sommerset turned to Nick and Lu Jo and said “It has been my pleasure working with you Nick and you Mrs. Reardon, if you are Mrs. Reardon and even if you are not, you make one heck of an intelligence operative!”

“Well thank you very much Captain” she said “I hope I get to travel again with you sometime under less stressful conditions.”

Several days later a meeting was held at Castle Presaro. Emperor Leopaldo, Varten von Eckman, Nick Reardon, and Lu Jo were sitting in the Emperor's study. Sitting on the table were the seven tins of the NASPC LOTR tobaccos. They were all quite enjoying smoking their pipes with some of the Emperor's best genuine Old Earth tobacco.

Emperor Leopaldo began by saying that he appreciated the Nick' and Lu Jo's excellent job regarding the "Affair of the Collector's Tins". He went on to say "I have a small gift for each of you" and he turned to them and gave them each a small box. Inside the box he gave to Nick was a large Dunhill Black Shell Briar, Group 5 having a silver band engraved 'San Antonio 2000', and stamped 6401. "This Dunhill pipe was produced in the First Age and commemorates a meeting of retail tobacco dealers in the town of San Antonio, in the state of Texas, a political subdivision of the United States." Lu Jo opened her box and took out a small straight pipe with a reddish tinge and a white dot on the stem. "Your pipe Lu Jo" Leopaldo continued "is a Group 4 Dunhill Tanshell canted Dublin stamped 157 F/T, made in 1964 F.A. It came from the exquisite collection of a lady from Old Earth named Louise Jones. During the first age she and her husband operated a very successful pipe and tobacco trading company named "Hermit Tobacco". She was a very noted pipe collector and pipe smoker. I hope you will treasure this token, or should I say Tolkien, of my esteem." They both thanked the Emperor for his generous gifts.

"So Nick, it seems ironic that Biggens took the tobacco not as a collectable tin of pipe tobacco, but as a Tolkien collectable. In the end it cost us one of our best operatives." The Emperor said "However, it has brought this young lady to our attention. Now, young lady, just what shall we do with you?"

"Emperor Leopaldo, I am at your service. I am just glad to see Stennett Biggens get his just rewards for the murder that was committed under his direction. I guess we will never find the short fat man that actually pulled the trigger of the needle blaster that killed Spencer Smith."

"No, we probably never will find him. He was attached to the underworld from the Rohin star system, Stennett's home turf. It seems that he heard Old Red John blabbing about the cache he found and his deal with Willem van Derjinn when he was drinking after he sold him the merchandise on storn. The little fat man contacted Biggens who ordered the theft."

"You know Leo, I think Captain Sommerset is wiser than he thinks." Varten continued "I think his observation is entirely correct. We may have the makings of an excellent Empire Intelligence Service operative in Lu Jo."

"What do you think young lady?" Leo asked her "Would you like to join the service? You would have some very difficult training to undergo, but I think you

have the qualities to pass all the courses and assignments. I have complete faith in you, and if I may so, so does one of our best EIS operatives, Nick Reardon.”

Nick blushed and turned to Lu Jo “I concur. I think this would be a great opportunity for you and open up doors that you cannot imagine. What do you think?”

“I accept. This is one opportunity I cannot afford to turn down.” When would I start? I hope not immediately!”

Varten responded “No, not immediately after all I think that you and Nick are entitled to some R&R. How about in two weeks!”

“Sounds great to us!” they both said.

“Just one last question” Varten asked “Just what did the two of you do behind the closed stateroom doors with the “Do Not Disturb” sign hung outside on the two vessels?”

“What do you think we did? In order to accomplish this mission, we had to watch three long videos containing the extended versions of the Lord of the Rings movies from the First Age, and also had to read very thick book! We didn’t have time for much else!” Nick said with a wink!

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