

ONE DAY IN THE LIFE

By
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Varten von Eckman, weapons master to Emperor Leopaldo, arose around 4 A.M. each morning. Over his morning coffee, he read the latest dispatches, and news from all over the Empire. He reviewed and arranged Leo's calendar of appointments and daily schedule. He would have breakfast with Leo around 6:30 A.M. During the early morning meal, they would discuss the day's schedule, and any other events that may have transpired over the previous night. This day was much like many in the past, and many in the future yet to come.

At precisely 6:00 A.M. Leo's valet, Helmsford, would knock at his door. He would have a glass of fresh orange juice from oranges flown in from the Kintair galaxy. He would awaken Leo. After Leo had awakened, he would assist him with his toiletry. When done, Leo would go to the sunroom where he would meet Varten von Eckman for the morning breakfast. This day started much like many in the past, and many in the future yet to come, or so the thought.

Sunrise was about 6:45 A.M. each day, every day over Castle Pesaro. The castle was located on the planet Hayden, in the Lynase star system. This castle was the ancestral home of Emperor Leopaldo XVI, of the Lineaus Family, Emperor of the known universe. The universe he oversaw contained over 50,000 star systems and governed billions upon billions of people. Castle Pesaro was the nerve center of the Empire. All lines of communications led to Castle Pesaro. It was also Leo's home.

The castle sat on a high mountain ridge at one end of a long valley. A small town was barely visible located at the end of the valley, many miles away. On the right side of the castle, a stream cascaded down the tree-covered mountain side and gently flowed through the length of the valley until it reached the town. A space port was located in Hayden's main city, Samlis, approximately 50 miles from Castle Pesaro, or about fifteen minutes by aircar.

Varten arrived in the sunroom about 5 minutes early. He always arrived before the Emperor. He felt that it was a sign of respect; after all, it was his duty to wait upon the

Emperor, not the other way around. Leopaldo, Leo to his intimates in private, arrived precisely at 6:30 A.M. He greeted Varten. They sat down at the table on the far side of the room, having the glass walls, and the panoramic view down the valley. They always sat at the same table since Leo enjoyed watching the rising sun each morning. Leo nodded to the waiter and asked that their breakfast be served. The waiters brought them their drinks and meal. It varied little from day-to-day. Juice, coffee, fresh fruit, cereals, eggs, and meats were brought in succession for their enjoyment. After the meal was consumed, they were served more coffee. During the course of the meal, they talked over small items of news. When the dishes were cleared, the coffee poured, and the servants departed, the pipes were taken out, filled, and lit. Leo was smoking an exquisite Old Earth Dunhill shell bulldog shaped pipe, Group 4. Varten was smoking his favorite Cooke stacked chimney with a saddle stem. They both were smoking a light pseudo-tobacco from Varcania. Then, and only after the pipes were alight and smoke lifted towards the ceiling, did the morning briefing begin.

“What do you have for me this morning, Varten”, Leo enquired?

“ First of all, in your private mail box is a letter from my son-in-law Robert Kostik and his wife, my daughter, Lynda, thanking you for being able to make the wedding and for the generous gifts you presented them. “

“That was most kind. Nick Reardon and I thoroughly enjoyed the wedding, or as it was know as the social event of the season. We also got to meet some very fine people on Capella II. I also picked up some nice additions to my pipe collection. Did you hear what Nick did? He purchased an old paperback book called “Secret Agent Girl” and sent to Lu Jo at the EIS Training Academy. Last I heard he was awaiting a response.”

“Yes, I heard about Nick’s little prank. I am sure it will irritate Lu Jo very much. If I gauge her correct, she will find a small way to get back at him. We shall see! Anyways, you have a trip scheduled to visit the EIS Training Academy on planet Virginia in two weeks. You also asked about Lu Jo’s progress. I have sent a copy of her file to your private e-box which you can read at your pleasure. To summarize, she is making excellent progress. By all accounts, she is one of the best students to ever go through the EIS Academy. She is at the top of her class. Her instructors expect her to solo before the end of the year. After she solos, she will graduate and become a full fledged EIS Agent.”

“Make a notation Varten that I want to talk with the Academy Superintendent during our visit. I also want to attend the graduation ceremonies and address the graduating class.”

“They will be honored, Leo. I think that is an excellent idea. You have a 10:00 A.M. meeting with Governor Hamford of the planet Carstello, and lunch with Ambassador Parzelnitsky. The meeting with Governor Hamford regards his annual 5-yr pilgrimage to meet with you and await your judgment concerning any transfer to another posting. He has done a good job administering Carstello. The planet is secure and the taxes are paid on-time. Nothing unusual here.”

“Good, as I recall, Hamford is a very reliable individual. A good administrator”

“During your luncheon with Ambassador Parzelnitsky, it is expected that he will request that you travel to the Loimar star system and visit the chief planet, Loimar. It is their 200th anniversary of joining the Empire. If I may suggest, it would be a good idea to accept the invitation. They have a nice world, in a strategic defensive location. Your attendance at the celebration would enhance the Imperial presence in the sector. There have been some reports of finds of crashed First and Second Age ships containing rare artifacts. I think some could be nice additions to your collections.”

“OK” Leo responded “I think that is something that is doable.”

“There are three other items on the agenda today for discussion. Prince Kyle is making great progress in his studies. He is with Viscount Hawman on planet Macamas VI. The Viscount reports that he is a very bright young man. The military training is sinking in. He enjoys military strategy and small arms training. Hawman feels that he will be ready for further training at the Empire Military Academy in about six months.”

“Please thank the Viscount for the report and the fine job he had done with a most difficult student. Contact the Empire Military Academy and forward the report to the Superintendent. Tell him that I expect Prince Kyle to be attending starting with next year’s incoming class. There are to be no special privileges for the prince.”

“Yes sir, will do. The second item is in regard to the movement in the Reichstagen to place a high tax on neer-tobacco and a lower tax on pseudo-tobacco. This is a move by some to decrease tobacco-like products that are grown and increase tobacco-like products that are produced synthetically. Pseudo-tobaccos would be cheap and neer-tobaccos expensive after the treasury receives the taxes. This increase in tax is being sponsored by the industrial complex at the expense of the farming collective interests. It would mean higher profits for the manufacturing interests and lower profits for the farming interests. The manufacturing portion now has the upper hand through various political wheeling-dealing. I would recommend that this is an issue that we should not get involved.”

“Varten, this is an issue in which I do have an interest. Once the pseudo-tobacco overwhelms the neer-tobacco, the latter will diminish throughout the Empire. Once the neer-tobacco farming goes away, it will be hard to bring it back. Also, the tax is being supported by House Chesterfield, and you are aware of the enmity between us. Pass the word through our channels that I want there to be an even balance between tobacco farming and synthetic manufacturing. There is to be no increase in the tax on neer-tobacco. If this issue cannot be resolved in the Reichstagen, then I will resolve it personally.”

“Yes sir, I will take these instructions back to our faction in the Reichstagen. I do not think this problem will bother you anymore. The final issue is the extensive storms on the planet New Florida. You will recall that the small terrorist cell there was able to blow up the planetary weather control system. As a result, there has been a weather nightmare

on the planet. Hurricanes, tornados, and floods are the order of the day. We ordered a military squadron to assist the local governmental organizations. We have been successful in restoring the weather control with our military intervention and our engineers. However, there has been much suffering among the populace. Govenor Bush reports that approximately 10% of the population is gone, and the manufacturing and farming is in shambles.”

“Let’s get them all the assistance we can, both governmental and private. I believe you told me that it was a suicide-destruction team of terrorists. I don’t know what they thought they would gain by this activity. I fail to understand. Keep our military forces there for the present. Send out an Empire Intelligence Service (EIS) team to see if the terrorist group can still be found there. Let’s try to put an end to their activities on New Florida. I know we probably cannot be 100% successful, but let’s see what we can do. Get an emergency appropriation of 100,000 solaris from the Reichstagen for a relief fund for New Florida. Have our military commander work closely with Govenor Bush. I want you to oversee daily reports from both.”

“Yes sir, I will implement your instructions immediately.” Varten replied. “After lunch, you have an hour for your quiet retreat followed by a report from Telix le Valiea of the Castle Financial Office. It seems that he has been performing an audit on the household accounts and has found some discrepancies. This evening, there is a dinner party for Mr. and Mrs. Donald Trimp. They are one of your supporters in the Reichstagen from the Cimmaron Sector, and are very wealthy via their trade in mining ore and natural gemstones. The Trimps are strong supporters of the arts. Mr. Trimp is a noted collector of Old Earth books and pipes. Mrs. Trimp is well known for her social work. They are visiting Hayden on an across the galaxy tour. There will be approximately 100 people, mostly from here on Hayden in attendance. All of the castle notables will be in attendance. A quartet from the Hayden Symphony will be the main entertainment.”

“I want you to be here for the meeting with Mr. le Valiea. Now this evening’s party looks like something I will enjoy. I think that Mr. Trimp may want to do some book trading before the night is over. Discreetly try to find out what he is offering and what he wants.”

“I will join you for the financial discussion. I will engage Donald Trimp, or someone on his staff, in conversation sometime today and see if my discreet inquiry will obtain some results.”

The beautiful sunrise had long passed. Leo and Varten had long finished their morning pipes. Varten excused himself and went about the Emperor’s business.

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The morning’s business pretty much went the way that Leo and Varten had planned. He had a good meeting with Governor Hamford and was well pleased with his report. He commended the governor for the high quality of his administrative duties. The governor

requested that he be allowed another five years at his post on on planet Carstello, which Leo granted.

Leo had a most enjoyable lunch with Ambassador Parzelnitsky. The Ambassador was very pleased that Leo would attend the celebration on Loimar. His staff and Leo's staff would proceed in working out the details of Leo's visit. During his visit, Ambassador Parzelnitsky presented Leo with an Old Earth hardback book entitled "My Lady Nicotine", by J.M. Barrie. This book was a classic on smoking originally published at the turn of the 20th Century, First Age, on Old Earth. He did not let on that he already had several copies in his extensive collection on pipe related books, but accepted the gift graciously. The Ambassador intimated that there were other artifacts that Leo could examine once he was on Loimar.

Following lunch, as was customary, Leo retreated to his private study for a rest and a pipe. Leo chose to smoke his Old Earth von Erck pipe. He often smoked this pipe as he enjoyed it very much. Although non-classical in shape, its fine lines and delicate shape made it one that he greatly enjoyed. Beside the visual appeal, the pipe was one of his best smokers. He filled it up with an Old Earth tobacco from a long gone manufacturer named McCrannies. He still had some of their Red Ribbon Flake, another one of the Old Earth tobaccos that he enjoyed a great deal.

A little before two o'clock, Varten joined him for his meeting with Telix le Valiea. They left the study and went to his formal office where the meeting was to occur. When they arrived at the outer room, Leo's secretary, Miss Moneynickle had Telix cooling his heels in a chair. Telix was carrying a folder containing records and was awaiting his meeting. Leo could tell that he was nervous.

Miss Moneynickle had been with Leo for almost as many years as had Varten. She was very efficient, a quality that Leo greatly appreciated. She had great skills in dealing with people, putting them gently in their place, distilling those items of importance for Leo's consideration and taking care of the small matters. Between Varten and her, there was little that escaped their attention; there were many small issues that they handled in his name, which left the larger issues for his personal attention. Leo considered them to be some of his best finds in terms of associates. He fully trusted them and their judgments.

Leo asked her to make sure they were not interrupted. Leo, Varten, and Telix went into his office. His office was richly paneled in genuine mahogany. Three of the walls contained book cases that were full of books from Old Earth and the rest of the Empire. The back wall, behind his massive desk contained a visiscreen. The office contained state-of-the-art electronics that could not be matched by any other business head in the Empire. In front of his desk were several plush chairs with a smoking stand to one side. On the right of the room was a conference table with six leather chairs.

Leo indicated to Varten and Telix to sit in the chairs opposite his desk. He sat in the chair behind the desk. "Please feel free to light up, Telix" he said, "There is some excellent English type pseudo-tobacco in the jar on your smoking stand."

Telix took out a small pipe made of a neer-briar substitute and began to fill it. Varten took out his trusty Cooke Pipe. Leo took out an Old Earth Ascorti straight black rusticated pipe and filled it from his pouch which contained some Old Earth McClelland 5100. He did not mind offering great tobacco to his intimates and friends, but a line had to be drawn somewhere. He offered his employees that smoked pipes good tobacco, but not great tobacco. The three of them began smoking their pipes. Leo said “Telix, you requested this meeting. Varten has informed me that your office has been conducting an audit of the household accounts and that you have found some discrepancies.”

“Yes sir. It appears that approximately 5,000 solaris is missing from the Castle Pesaro restoration account. The budget for castle restoration is approximately 100,000 solaris annually. I have compared the invoices, paid bills, receipts, and electronic payments and can account for a total of 95,000 solaris. It seems that there are some instances where there were invoices, and bills paid, however, there is no record of the work being actually requested, authorized, or actually conducted.”

“How can this happen?” Leo asked “Who has the authority over these issues? I can only think of Roberto Hamlino, the castle architect. Roberto is one of the best architects in this sector of the galaxy. He did his undergraduate schooling at the New Pennsylvania State University and attended the ultra-elite school of architecture in New Florence, on the planet Venezia. He has worked here for over ten years. Is there any direct proof that Roberto may be involved?”

“There is none, sire” Telix stated “He is one of a couple of people that could possibly be involved. There are at least two individuals in the architect’s immediate office that could have pulled this off.”

“I find it hard to believe that Roberto would be involved. He is another well respected book collector and pipe collector/smoker. His reputation in architectural circles is quite good. Varten, I want you to interview Roberto and let me know what you find out. However, I am also aware that he has recently overextended his credit by purchasing some first edition Sherlock Holmes editions.”

“That I can do. Telix, please leave me copies of the relevant documents. I will try to interview him before tonight’s affair, sir.” They finished their pipes and left Leo. Leo returned to his quarters to prepare for the Trimp’s evening dinner.

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Varten interviewed Leo’s architect, Roberto Hamlino, in the architect’s office. The office was small, with room for a desk, several computers, two chairs, and a table with drawings strewn on the table top. Varten informed him that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss a shortage in the accounts assigned to his office. Roberto held an attitude indicative that he felt that the meeting was beneath him and it was an insult, an attitude that in Varten’s experience was held by many other prima donnas.

“It is my job to find out where the money is going, who took it, try for recovery, and put an end to the hemorrhage” Varten told Roberto “It’s your department, did you take it?”

“No, not I” Roberto responded “I didn’t divert any funds from the castle restoration budget. Why would I? The Emperor is a good employer and I get paid reasonably well for my services.”

“Isn’t it true that you are having a small cash flow problem at the current time? I believe you overextended your credit when you purchased those rare first edition Sherlock Holmes books, and the matched set of Old Earth Castello #65 shape pipes. The Emperor knows about the books, but not the pipes. I just found that out by going through your bank records.”

“Look Varten, if you think I did it, then arrest me. Otherwise, leave me alone. I have work to do and am attending the Trimp’s dinner tonight.”

“You are walking a thin line, Roberto. It is not good to be suspected of theft, especially theft of Empire Funds. It could go bad with you. When you change your attitude, please give me a call.”

“Good day Varten. Come back when you have something other than mere suspicion!”

Varten left Roberto Hamlino’s office and headed back towards his own quarters. When he had walked about half way to his rooms, his communicator rang. It was his executive officer who reported that one of his men had found out from an informant on Donald Trimp’s staff that he indeed had an ulterior motive for the trip. It seemed that he was interested in obtaining Leo’s 2nd complete set of “The Pipe Smokers’ Ephemeris” and had a set of the rare magazine entitled “The Wonderful World of Pipes” and an Old Earth Ardor Brissie Calabash to offer as trade bait. Varten returned to his quarters to dress for the evening affair.

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About a half hour before the arrival of the Trimps and other guests for the dinner, Varten met Leo in the Emperor’s quarters. He told Leo that he got very little out of the meeting with Roberto Hamlino including the piece of information that he would be at the evening’s proceedings. He also passed on the information regarding Donald Trimp’s real reason for visiting Leo.

“Very interesting”, Leo replied “The Pipe Smokers’ Ephemeris’ is a very rare set of newsletters that were sent out during the First Age of Old Earth to pipe collectors. A gentleman named Tom Dunn was the editor and publisher. He sent out the irregular newsletter/magazine several times a year at no charge, just accepting contributions. The first 10, 20, and 30-year sets were bound on a limited edition basis. I have a complete set of the bound editions and a complete set of the loose newsletters. Some individual issues

were over 100 pages in length. You should read them sometime, they are in the castle library databank.”

“According to my researches, there were only two issues of ‘The Wonderful World of Pipes’ that saw print.” Leo told Varten “The Old Earth Pipe Company named Ardor, from the political subdivision of Italy, made a series of calabash briar pipes. The Brissie calabash was designed by a George Brissie, who was a noted pipe collector during the First Age.”

“I guess it is time for us to make our grand entrance”. He said as they left his rooms and headed to the grand ballroom. As they approached his private entrance, two footmen opened the massive double doors. They walked into a huge cavernous ball room. There were very high ceiling with about 20 grand candelabras suspended from the ceiling. The far wall was totally made up of glass panels which displayed the magnificent view from Castle Pesaro looking down the valley. The wall to the right was totally mirrored which made the ballroom look larger than its true size. The room was divided into two areas. One half was comprised of dining tables; the remainder of the room was set up for dancing. A musical quartet was set up on the far side of the room.

As Leo and Varten entered the room, they paused just inside the double doors. A small brass flourish rang out. They took two steps on to the platform overlooking the hall. Looking out over the assembled crowd, they watched as the crowd bowed to their Emperor. Emperor Leopaldo and Varten slowly walked down the left set of stairs and headed towards the head table. At the head table were Mr. and Mrs. Donald Trimp. Leo sat down next to Donald Trimp, with Varten on his left, Donald on his right. Mrs. Trimp was to the right of her husband. Next to her was Helen Chamberlain, Leo’s old friend who resided at the castle. The remainder of the head table was completed by the addition of some of the top financial and banking people from planet Hayden.

There was a short period for small talk. Finally, upon signal, Emperor Leopaldo arose and addressed his guests “I would like to welcome you all to this dinner in honor of our visitors, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Trimp. As many of you are aware, Donald is one of our supporters in the Reichstagen. I appreciate his support. I welcome Mr. and Mrs. Trimp to Castle Pesaro. I hope you all enjoy the dinner tonight and the entertainment to follow.” Leo sat down.

Donald Trimp arose and addressed the crowd “Emperor Leopaldo honors me tonight. I and my wife appreciate this honor. I would like to offer a toast to long life, good health, and good fortune to Emperor Leopaldo.” There was a general clash of glasses as they downed the drinks. The servants came out and began serving the dinner courses.

Donald turned to Leo in a side bar conversation and said “I know Leo that given enough time you find out all secrets. There is nothing that can be hidden from Varten and that damn Empire Intelligence Service. I do have a small surprise for you. Perhaps we can meet for a short time after dinner during the entertainment.”

“I believe that can be arranged, Donald, let’s say you, Varten and I slip away once the dancing starts. There is a small private room under the stairs where we came in. I think that will do.”

“That is fine with me, Leo.” They continued on with the dinner, and talked over some of the issues in mining and mineral trading among various planetary systems.

Following dinner, the servants cleared off the tables, and brought out dessert and coffee. The specialty for the evening was an excellent crème caramel. The coffee provided was a pseudo-coffee designed to reproduce an Old Earth Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee. The quartet began to play. Donald, Leo, and Varten took leave of their guests and headed to the private meeting room.

The meeting room had been configured to be small and intimate. There were three overstuffed chairs, a couple of smoking stands, and a small bar set up. Leo had brought a small Old Earth hawkbill pipe carved by Clarence Mickles, a carver from the First Age. Varten had brought an Old Earth GBD prehistoric bulldog shaped pipe. Donald Trimp took out a magnificent Old Earth S. Bang Danish shaped pipe. “That is a very nice pipe, Donald. I see that it was made in the Old Earth political subdivision of Denmark, by two of the most revered pipe carvers from Old Earth. Some people referred to them as “the Bang Boys”.”

Leo had arranged that a tin of Butera’s Dark Stoved tobacco from Old Earth be left for the evening. Leo popped the lid of the tin and was satisfied that the tin had remained intact. He offered the tin to his guests. They had to rub out the tobacco before packing their pipes. Leo was the last to fill his pipe. They were lit. They sat back and smoked the pipes over their glasses of cognac.

Donald broke the silence “Leo, This is one heck of a great tobacco. I sure would like to get more of this one. However, I have a proposition for you. I know that you have at least two complete sets of ‘The Pipe Smokers’ Ephemeris” and I would like to obtain one from you to add to my collection. In exchange, I propose to offer you two issues of ‘The Wonderful World of Pipes’ and an Ardor Brissie Calabash pipe from Old Earth. Both are rare items in their category, and are in excellent condition considering their age.”

“Yes, Donald, I do have multiple sets of the Ephemeris. I do like the Brissie Calabash, however, I have the issues of the magazine that you are offering. As you put it, my excellent intelligence service has informed me that you have been trying to unload two Jim Cooke pipes from your collection, at rather steep prices.”

“Why yes I am trying to exchange two Cooke blasts from my collection at bottom basement prices.” He responded. He took the two pipes out of his case and let Varten and Leo examine them. They looked at two straight sand blasted black billiards exhibiting a uniform grain around the bowl and a deep blast.

“I would consider a trade of my complete loose set of the Ephemeris for the two Cooke pipes. Although the Brissie Calabash is an excellent pipe, I really do not care for the Calabash shape. There were two collectors on Old Earth named Dave Weber and Fred Heim who collected calabash pipes. Reportedly, they had very extensive collections. However, the calabash shape is not my cup of tea. I do like the Cooke pipes. Do you wish to have the set of the Ephemeris brought here so you can examine them?” Leo asked.

“No, Leo, I know that if you say they are in excellent shape, then they are. How can I not trust my Emperor? You do drive a hard bargain. Please have them delivered to my rooms tonight. My wife sacks out early and I often stay up late into the night reading. This will provide good reading material! Take the two Cooke pipes with you.”

Leo placed the Cooke pipes in his jacket pocket. They left the room and rejoined the group. Most of the guests were chatting near the tables, enjoying drinks near the bar, or dancing to the quartet. Leo was circulating among the guests making small talk. He noted a number of the castle functionaries in attendance. He also noted a couple of the EIS agents circulating.

About an hour later, Leo and Varten were talking with the Hayden administrator when one of Varten’s men took him aside. He spoke with Varten for only a minute. Varten came over and asked the Hayden administrator to excuse them as there was business they had to attend. He took Leo aside and said “Sir, a body has been found in the lower garden. It has been identified as Roberto Hamlino. He has been murdered.”

“Varten, let the dinner and dancing continue. We have a list of the people who attended. We also have the security videos. There is no need to keep anyone here. Let the evening end naturally for them. I think the evening is just beginning for you and me. Let us discreetly leave. I will meet you in 10 minutes in the antechamber to the ballroom. Make sure your security people do not admit anyone to the lower garden. Summon the EIS doctor to the scene.”

Leo continued to circulate for about five minutes, and then left the ballroom saying that he had an early morning. He met Varten and some security people in the antechamber. They left the ballroom and headed for the lower garden. It was about a 5 minute walk. There were many gardens at Castle Pesaro. The lower garden was one which was totally indoors in a climate controlled environment. Leo recalled that it contained many tropical plants from all over the universe. In the center of the lower garden was a reproduction of a temple to the Goddess Athena, one of the ancient Old Earth Greek Goddesses. Although a very nice garden, Leo preferred outdoor gardens. He had not been there in several years.

They entered the lower garden and were directed by one of Varten’s men to the temple in the center. Entering the small temple they saw the body on the floor. Varten was assured that the body had not been moved nor anything touched. The body was face down in a pool of blood. “It looks like a professional job, Varten” Leo said “His throat was cut by a

lazknife. Notice the small incision. Only a professional would have done that. It does not appear like there was a struggle. Note that the dust has not been disturbed. I believe that he knew his killer. Seeing as how remote this spot is, I wonder if he was here to meet someone. I also wonder if there is a connection between his death and the missing money from the household accounts.”

“You make good observations, and you ask good questions” Varten said “I about came to the same conclusions. I am going to have the EIS criminal scene investigation team take charge over the site and do their job. After that, the body will be removed for an autopsy. I already have staff reviewing the security films to see if we can determine when Roberto left the party, and identify others that had gone about the same time. I am going to start by questioning Telix le Valiea. I am also going to start immediate questioning of others in Roberto’s immediate office. The body was discovered by the night watchman. He said he did not hear anything or see anything. I think a further discussion with him is warranted. I was planning to see what our local informants can tell us about Roberto Hamlino because of the allegations of misuse of funds; I think we can now accelerate the process. It is ten o’clock now. I will report back to you around midnight.”

“That is fine Varten, however, you should also see if Roberto had any enemies or someone jealous of his position and stature. You would also do well to check if there are any know assassins, representatives of my enemies, or anyone with criminal backgrounds on Hayden. I will await your report in my den. Please have one of you men accompany me back to my quarters. The game is afoot!”

One of Varten’s junior staffers accompanied him back to his quarters.

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Back in his quarters, Leo took out his duplicate set of the Ephemeris and gave instructions for it to be sent to Donald Trimp’s rooms. He took out one of the Cooke pipes and examined it closely. “Very fine pipe indeed” he said to himself. He noted that Donald had had the pipes cleaned, reamed, and sanitized. He filled it with tobacco from the opened tin of Butera’s Dark Stoved, after he had rubbed it out. He lit the pipe, sat down, and reviewed the events leading up to the murder. Around 11:00 P.M. he had a short communication from Varten informing him that Roberto had been observed leaving the ballroom around 9:15 P.M. and that Telix le Valiea did not leave until 10:30 P.M. He also was told that the cause of death was the lazknife cut and that nothing had been stolen. The EIS doctor estimated the time of death to have been between 9:30 and 9:45 PM. Varten told him he would get back to him at midnight.

A little before midnight, there was a ring at the door. Varten was admitted. He sat down and took out his old Cooke Pipe. “Don’t you ever smoke anything other than that old pipe I gave you?” Leo asked?

“Why should I?” he asked “When you have the perfect pipe, why change? Can I try some more of that Dark Stoved tobacco? I think it is quite good. You know this is going to be a long night.”

“Sure, have some. I think I will join you. This Cooke pipe smokes pretty well. I can see why you enjoy yours so much! What did you find out?”

Varten filled his pipe, lit it, thought for a minute and started “This case runs very deep. There is more to it than what we see on the surface. It seems that there was no need for Roberto to take money from the household funds to enhance his finances as it turns out he has been blackmailing several people. During a search of his room the EIS team found a small black book that was kept in code. It was found hidden inside a secret compartment in the head of his bed. After it was deciphered by my code people, we found names and amounts. If we read it alright, he has been blackmailing some people for at least the past five years. I am sure you will find this interesting since one of the people was Telix le Valiea! There were many small fish, in for small amounts, but two additional names stood out. Two of the names were Kenneth Feelds, your stable master, and Craig Pashko, one of my people who works in the communications office. These names stood out. As far as we can determine neither were in attendance at the dinner tonight.”

“That is a surprise. I would have never suspected him of being a blackmailer. Did you interview Telix again?”

“Yes I did. I don’t think he is the murder since he did not leave the dinner party until well after the murder. I don’t think he commissioned the killing either. He did admit under threat of mindprobe that Roberto had been blackmailing him. He told us that he had been making regular payments to him for the past five years and was prepared to continue. It seems that twenty years ago Telix had an affair with one of the wives of a military officer when he was stationed on New Brittany. This was well before he came to work here at the castle. The affair had been discovered. It was all hushed up; however Telix had to leave New Brittany. Several years later he turned up here for work. Roberto had found out about the affair. Telix was by then secure in his position here and did not want to lose it if the scandal had seen the light of day. It seems that the accusation of the missing funds was true, but now I think a second audit will have to be conducted. Telix appeared not know what to do with the information, thus his nervousness when we interviewed him this afternoon, or else he is a very good actor. It could have been very dicey, Telix squealing on the man who was squeezing him all this time.”

“Yes, if Roberto had been charged, Telix could have ended up in a bad way. What about the other two? Have they been brought in for questioning?”

“They are being brought in as we speak. I expect to hear soon when they arrive for questioning.”

Varten's communicator rang. He answered and held a short conversation with the person on the other end. "They have been apprehended. They are now in the security office, being kept in separate interrogation rooms. Do you wish to come and question them?"

"Yes I do. I told you Varten, it is going to be a long night."

They left the Emperor's private quarters and went to the security office.

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They soon arrived at the security offices for the castle. Varten spoke with the duty officer for a short time. He told Leo that the men had been brought in for questioning. Feelds and Pashko had been placed in separate interrogation rooms. Varten gave Leo two files. "This is the information we have on the two suspects. Kenneth Feelds came to Hayden fifteen years ago. He worked in the horse stables. He rose to be your stable master. There is nothing unusual about his life style. He is single. Craig Pashko is, also single. He works in the castle's communications section. He is involved in the reception and transmission of hyper-wave traffic. He has a high security clearance. He has worked here for about 5 years. His folder indicates that he likes to tour off-world. It may be a concern that he can afford the interstellar travel. He takes trips off-world about every six months."

Leo told Varten that they would start with Mr. Feelds. Leo closely read his file. Kenneth Feelds graduated from the University of New Virginia with a degree in animal husbandry. He had worked for Pirema Animal Foods for five years. He came to Castle Pesaro from there. He had outstanding reviews from his supervisors.

Leo and Varten agreed that Varten would play Mr. Bad guy, and Leo would play Mr. Good guy during the interrogations. They entered his interrogation cell. Kenneth Feelds was a tall, bulky man without an inch of fat. His physique indicated a lot of manual labor. Leo remembered Kenneth from the many times he had gone on hunts and rides with the fine horses he kept in the stables at Castle Pesaro.

Feelds turned when they entered and said "Your majesty, I don't believe that I have done anything that requires your presence."

"Where were you this evening, Ken?" Varten asked.

"I was working in the horse stables giving a rubdown to MorningWind, your prized stud."

"Did anyone see you or talk with you?"

"No, I was quite alone. The horses can vouch for my presence" Feelds stated.

"Don't get impudent!" Varten replied.

Leo said gently “Do you know why you are here? They found the body of Roberto Hamlino in the lower garden. He was quite dead. A search of his room was conducted and a small coded notebook was found. It seems that he had the predilection to blackmail people. Your name was in his book. Is there something you want to tell us about?”

“No, there is nothing. I don’t even personally know Roberto Hamlino! I only know him by his reputation as a great architect.”

Varten said “Ken, you know we have been talking with the people that work for you in the horse stables. We keep hearing the name Samantha Stone! Perhaps if we talked to her...”

“You just better keep her out of this!” he said with a sudden furry “She doesn’t know anything!”

“Varten, just who is Samantha Stone?” Leo enquired.

“Sire, she works in the Castle Pesaro library. She is a minor library clerk. We have been told that she knows Kenneth very well. In fact, they know each other more than just well. They seem to be very close. Do you have any comment Kenneth?”

“Oh what’s the point? Yes, I know Samantha Stone and Yes, I know Roberto Hamlino, and yes, he was blackmailing me. It seems that he learned that Samantha and I were on extremely intimate terms. Samantha is from one of the ruling families on Hayden. Her father works directly under the Hayden administrator. It would create a scandal if I, a common worker in the Emperor’s stable would marry a woman of her lineage. It matters little that I am in charge of the horse stables. We love each other very much. Roberto threatened to expose us. I was paying him 20 solaris every month to keep his mouth shut. But I did not kill him!”

“Give us some time, Leo said. We will look into this a bit farther. Be patient. We will get back to you.”

They left Ken Feelds interrogation room and entered Craig Pashko’s interrogation room. When the door was opened, Craig Pashko snapped to attention. Varten and Leo entered and approached Craig. “Please sit down Craig. I see from your file that you are ex-empire Army.”

He sat down across from Leo and Varten. “Yes sir, I served with the fleet during the Panteen revolt. I was in for twenty years, retired, and came here to Castle Pesaro to work in the communications office. I have been here for five years.”

“I saw from your service record that you had an honorable discharge.” Leo said “Do you know why you are here? They found the body of Roberto Hamlino in the lower garden. He was quite dead. A search of his room was conducted and a small coded notebook was

found hidden among his personal effects. It seems that he had the predilection to blackmail people. Your name was in his book. Is there something you want to tell us about?”

“Blackmailing me? There must be some mistake. No one is blackmailing me.” Craig said emphatically.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Leo asked “It tends to help clear the mind.”

“Only if I may join you” Craig Pashko replied “I left hastily, brought a pipe, but no tobacco.”

Leo passed around the remains of the tin of Butera’s Dark Stoved. All three filled their pipes after rubbing out the mature stoved Virginia flake. They then lit their pipe. “That is a remarkable pipe you have, Craig. Just what is it?”

“It is a reproduction Ser Jacopo Double Maxima in a hawkbill shape. I received it as a gift a while back from some friends.”

“It is a mighty fine looking pipe” Leo said.

“Awesome tobacco Sire” Craig stated. He blew a smoke ring towards the ceiling.

“Let’s get back to matters at hand.” Leo remarked “I see that you like to travel off world. You go at least twice a year. Tell me why you go and what you do.”

“When I was in the service of the Empire, I found that I enjoyed traveling to see new worlds and new people. I do this every year for vacation.”

“How can you afford it on such a meager salary? Even with your navy pension, it must be very difficult.” Varten asked.

“It is difficult, and finances are tight, but I always seem to be able to do it”.

“Yes you do, and you still can maintain a bank balance of 2,000 solaris?” Varten continued.

“The money in the bank comes from an inheritance and good investments.” Craig asserted.

“With such a balance, why do you even need to work here at the Castle?” Leo asked.

“I work just to give me something to do. I also enjoy the people in my work group.”

“Why do your banking records indicate a withdrawal of 30 solaris a month, every month for the past two years?” Varten demanded.

“I take the money out to pay gambling losses. It seems that I regularly lose at high stakes poker at the Hayden casino. You can check!”

“Yes, Craig, this tobacco is excellent. It is a very good mature Virginia tobacco. It’s from Old Earth you know.” Leo said to change the subject.

“It is very good sire. But I do not know tobacco like you do. Your expertise in the area of pipes and tobacco is known across the universe. I understand that you go all over purchasing Old Earth pipes and tobaccos. I also hear that you invest in yearly tobacco harvests from the best planets. Rumor has it that you have recently lost a bid on the procurement of this years harvest of Organnon Red Virginia neer-tobacco.” Craig continued.

“Hmm, interesting rumors” Leo said. “Varten, I think that Mr. Pashko knows more about Roberto Hamlino than he is telling us. Let’s leave him be for a while to think about the merits of talking to us.”

Leo and Varten left the room. They went around the corner to look into the one-way mirror into the room. They saw Craig sitting at the table finishing his pipe and mumbling to himself.

“There is something very wrong here, Varten. That pipe he is smoking is genuine Old Earth. It is no reproduction! If there is one think I know, I know pipes! He does not spout rumors. I recently lost a bid to House Chesterfield for the entire harvest of Organnon Red Virginia neer-tobacco. It is now in their bonded warehouse. How did he know of this? How did House Chesterfield learn the amount of my bid? How does a low-salaried pensioner have the wherewithal to take a very expensive trip, twice a year, and have a fortune in the bank? I smell a rat.” Leo expounded.

“All I can think of is that he is getting funding from an outside source, on the Q.T.”

“Varten, I want you to do two things. First check with the Hayden casino and verify his losses. See if there is anyone to whom he regularly ends up owing money. I also want you to go back two years and compare the ships manifests of the passengers on the trips he took. See if there are any common names among the passengers. I will wait here until you return.”

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Leo took a short nap while waiting for Varten to check out his questions. It was about 3:00 A.M. when Varten awakened him. “I have done what you have asked. The Hayden casino verified that Craig goes there once a month, usually on the third Friday. It seems he gambles a little. Then sits at the high-stakes poker game and loses about 30 solaris. The funny thing is that he usually loses to the same person. I faxed them a picture, and they confirmed the name, Roberto Hamlino. I also checked the logs of the previous four

trips that Craig took off-world. Only one name came up on all four logs, William Renton.” William Renton is here at present in Samlis City.”

“Well done, Varten. Have Mr. Renton picked up for questioning. Be sure to get to him before he gets a change to go off-world. Let’s see what Mr. Paschak has to say now!”

They went back into the small interrogation room where they found Craig dozing in his chair.

“Are you going to tell us the truth or play games with us?” Leo asked.

“What do you mean?” Craig asked.

“It may interest you that we are having Wiliam Renton arrested for the murder of Roberto Hamlino” Leo said. Varten looked at him dumfounded.

“It is actually quite simple.” Leo said. “First, Craig was being blackmailed by Roberto Hamlino. His just made payment regularly every month through the device of the casino. It was sort of a public place to exchange the monies in an almost undetectable manner. Second, he was being blackmailed because Roberto Hamlino found out that Craig was diverting secret information to House Chesterfield because of his position in the communications center. He was the one that fed my bid information to House Chesterfield which enabled them to out bid me. Third, the attention that the audit was drawing to Roberto Hamlino had the potential to blow the entire operation. From House Chesterfield’s point of view, either Hamlino had to go, which could keep their operation going, or Pashko had to go, which would be the end of a valuable resource to them. They chose the former.”

“I see”, Varten said “This explains the large bank accounts that Craig had.”

“Yes I was being blackmailed, but I DID NOT KILL Robert Hamlino”, Craig shouted.

“No you did not. I doubt that you had any idea that he was going to be killed. I think it was an on-the-spot decision on the part of House Chesterfield’s representative.

Craig’s off-world trips can easily be explained. It would be too difficult for him to meet with his connection to House Chesterfield here on Hayden. The trips were just covers for him to meet with his superiors from House Chesterfield.”

“Hence the connection to William Reston.” Varten added

“William Renton was Craig’s handler. He is also a professional assassin. I think you will find that he is the actual murder. I think we have enough suspicion that you may use a mindprobe if necessary. I feel sorry for him in a way since he will never be the same if you do have to use it. However, we now have the problem of a spy in our midst. What should we do with him, Varten?”

“Maybe we can turn him around and use him to feed information to House Chesterfield. They could use a little disinformation. Small pieces of information of little consequence can be fed. Just enough so they continue to trust him until something major comes along. Once Reston is out of the way, they will have to send a new handler to make contact with Craig. You will have to keep a close watch on him. What do you say?” Leo asked.

“What choice do I have?” Craig asked “Of course I agree”

“I want to be completely clear with you, Craig. If you fail me you will not be given a second chance. I will promise you that if House Chesterfield does become aware of the true situation, we will do everything in our power to protect you. By the way, when you get out of here, you will go to your bank and promptly donate 1,500 solaris to the relief fund for the recovery operation on New Florida. Also, you should have learned that you cannot pass off an Old Earth Ser Jacopo double maxima hawkbill to me as a reproduction. I know a real Old Earth pipe when I see one! I guess when you said you got it from ‘friends’ you meant your old friends from House Chesterfield. Your new friends can also be generous, but that will depend on you!”

Varten and Leo left the interrogation room. Kenneth Feelds was released with the assurance that Leo would talk to Samantha Stone’s father and convince him that the marriage of his daughter to one of Leo’s most trusted employees would be an honor for him. They retired to Leo’s private quarters.

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It was a little before dawn when Leo and Varten reached Leo’s rooms. They were met by Helmsford who had prepared breakfast for them. “A long night Sire” he said.

“Yes, a long night, Helmsford, but one that was most productive.”

Leo and Varten poured cups of coffee. They took out their pipes and filled it with the last of the Dark Stoved Virginia tobacco. The pipes were lit when Leo said “Varten, I am willing to wager that if you do a fresh audit of the household accounts you will find that there is no shortage. I think that it was Telix’s way to bring Robertos blackmail operation to our attention. I do not want you to take any action regarding Telix, however, I think it would be wise to move him to a less important position. We cannot fully trust him anymore. I don’t blame him, but he could have come to us a long time ago. Maybe a quiet retirement should be suggested to him.”

“I quite agree”, Varten said.

“I also want to meet Samantha Stone. As I told Kenneth Feelds, I plan to talk with her father and give him an attitude adjustment.” he continued “You know Varten I know how much you enjoy your Cooke pipe. It is about all I see you smoke. I think you should have this one.”

He gave Varten the second Cooke pipe that he had gotten in trade from Donald Trimp.

“I can’t accept.”

“Sure you can old friend, and I insist. Now we both have two matching Old Earth pipes. You remember the old adage of the North American Society of Pipe Collectors ‘If you have one pipe, you are a pipe smoker. If you have two or more, you are a pipe collector.’ Now you are a collector!”

“I guess it is now my turn. What choice do I have? Thank you sire.”

“Yes, you are right. In reality you have no choice!”

Leo noticed a communications tube next to his plate. He opened it and read the message. He turned to Varten and said “I just received a message from Lu Jo. It says that I can tell Nick that his choice in literature is not very good. However, the book has been very informative. She says that she would be glad to give Nick lessons on how to be a real secret agent anytime he so desires. She hopes to get a chance to see us when we visit the EIS Academy. I wonder how she knew of our planned visit. It is signed ‘Secret Agent Girl’.”

They both laughed. The sun was now breaking over the horizon. The valley below became visible in all of its glory. Weather control is a great thing. Another fine day began at Castle Pesaro.

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