

The Proposal

By

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LuJo had been away from Castle Pesaro for a long time. Her last assignment had taken her to the edge of the Empire. She was returning in a one-person needle ship from a successful mission, smoking a nondescript pipe she had picked up along the way with a pseudo-tobacco she had purchased on that far away planet. She had foiled an attempt by House Chesterfield to develop a synthetic bio-chemical that when burnt would break down the cell walls within the lungs, thus causing a painful death to anyone who had inhaled the combustion products. If tobacco were treated with this substance, the smoker would die. They were developing it to be used as a means to murder Empire officials, specifically, Emperor Leopaldo. However, with the failure of their plot Emperor Leopaldo had exacted a high punishment on House Chesterfield. By its nature, this was not the type of success that would appear in the press. However, her friends at Castle Pesaro and in the Empire Intelligence Service (EIS) would be well aware of her success.

She was practically exhausted. Emperor Leopaldo, 'Leo' to his friends, was quite proud of her accomplishment. The last communication from him was that she was to report to a resort in the Byrd Star System for some rest and relaxation. He had informed her that there would be two surprises awaiting her upon arrival.

Leo is great at surprising people, she thought. I wonder what awaits me. She thought while she programmed the last jump into the ship's computer system. I will probably have to wait until I get back to Castle Pesaro to see Nick again. The last I heard, he was on some assignment for Leo. As these thoughts were going through her mind, an alarm went off on her subspace communicator. She responded "LuJo here".

A voice came back "This is Carson on the Empire Navy Cruiser Chicago. Please plan for your ship to be brought aboard the Chicago. We are only a short distance away. Emperor Leopaldo requires you for a new assignment. Details will be made available once you arrive."

She acknowledged the transmission and prepared her ship to be taken aboard. She said to herself "Now what is going on to disturb my R&R?" She put out her pipe "Lousy tobacco, crappy pipe. I hope that there is better on the Chicago."

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The transfer of her needle ship to the Chicago occurred without any problem. She had been met by a newly minted ensign and was guided to the Chicago's officers' wardroom. As she approached, she could smell the aroma of a fine Virginia tobacco. She entered the smoke filled room, while the ensign left. There was a distinct haze above the table around which several men pored over documents. A tall man moved away from the table to greet her, a large pipe in his mouth. I am Captain Pedersen, captain of the Chicago. At the table are several of my officers, and someone I believe you know.

She looked a little closer. A man on the left side raised his pipe to her and exclaimed "About time you got here!"

"Nick, what a pleasant surprise." She said with a bit of joy in her voice.

Captain Pedersen continued "On the right is Lieutenant Carol Jensen, in the center is Lieutenant Bruce Weaver and Ambassador John Clinton of the Empire Department of State. On the other side is EIS operative Liz Porter. We have been assembled at the request of Emperor Leopaldo. It seems that after your latest assignment, of which we have all been briefed, House Chesterfield is sending signals through House Seiler that they wish to have peace between themselves and Emperor Leopaldo. We are to participate in a preliminary meeting with representatives from both Great Houses to discuss issues and determine if a peace proposal can be developed, approved, and implemented.

She walked over next to Nick "You got a spare pipe on you buddy" she asked.

"Why is just so happens that I do. You forget yours?" he asked.

"No, I lost my Rathenburg carved neer-briar pipe while on assignment and the one I purchased to replace it was a factory pipe made from green neer-briar. It was just soooo crappy" she replied.

Nick handed her an Old Earth (O.E.) Sassini 4-dot billiard shaped pipe and his tobacco pouch. She opened the pouch and smelled the contents "McNay's Red Ribbon" she said "I thought you might have some". She filled the pipe and lit it "Good Stuff! Thanks!"

"I never travel without it" he stated.

"Gentlemen and Ladies" Commander Pedersen started "Now that LuJo is among us, Mr. Clinton can now brief us on the upcoming meeting and the expectations of Emperor Leopaldo".

Ambassador Clinton raised himself from the table. He was smoking what appeared to be an O.E. Dunhill Shell Briar, about Group 6 Size billiard. "Following Ms. LuJo's most recent work, peace overtures have been made from House Chesterfield through House Seiler and have found their way to Emperor Leopaldo. It seems that House Chesterfield wants to end their feud with the Emperor and to have peace---or so they say. We, of course have our doubts. Ms. Porter will now brief us from the EIS perspective.

Ms. Porter began "As you have been briefed, LuJo blunted a recent effort by House Chesterfield to develop a new weapon to use against the Emperor. It seems that she is becoming a legend among the

EIS. We do not believe that the intentions of House Chesterfield are genuine. House Seiler, while a Great House friendly to the Emperor is probably a bit naïve in this matter. Our assessment is that they are being used by House Chesterfield. While Ambassador Clinton and his staff, assisted by the crew of the Chicago will be negotiating, the EIS role is to find out the activities and motives of the actions going on behind the scene. We will report back to Ambassador Clinton and keep Castle Pesaro informed of our findings. The Emperor sends his regards to you LuJo, and wants to let you know that he is very impressed with your work and that your R&R is just a bit delayed until after this assignment.”

“Be sure to thank him for his kind words and I will hold him to the promise of R&R. Please tell him it better be at an impressive location, not some two-bit fleabag resort” she said with a laugh.

They all laughed with her.

Captain Pedersen continued “We will be traveling to the city of Geneva in the Swiss star system. The planet has had a tradition of neutrality for centuries during all of the galactic strife that has occurred. We will be housed at the Empire Hotel. An advance team is already there making sure the facility is secure. The meetings will be held at the Geneva Conference Center. We expect that high level representatives will be present from both House Seiler and House Chesterfield. The Baron Chesterfield will not attend these meetings. There will be an observer delegation present from the Reichstagen.”

Ms Porter now continued “Nick and LuJo will not be staying with us in the Empire Hotel. You will be posing as a newly married couple just arriving to tour Geneva. Geneva is a well known tourist spot with excellent food, beautiful countryside, and many athletic sport opportunities. They also have museums dedicated to their many centuries as acting as political facilitators among the politically powerful of the Empire.”

“What? Me married to him”, LuJo pointed a finger at Nick.

“Nice assignment”, Nick responded.

“Screwed again I see. Well, I guess I have to make the best of a bad situation” she retorted.

They all laughed.

“One final thing” Ms Porter said “The Barron of House Chesterfield has a deep interest in pipe and tobacco lore. Geneva was at one time home to the ‘Royal Swiss Tobacco Company’, a company that can trace its roots back to Old Earth. While they have been purchased recently by a conglomerate, we believe they now have connections to the House Chesterfield. We would like you to start by touring the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company factory. They have a rather extensive library dating back to the First Age of Man. If necessary, we have a contact at the factory that goes by the name Oleg Larsen. Keep in touch with us via the secure communicator link on your specially adapted communicator.”

While the meeting was breaking up, Captain Pedersen met with LuJo and Nick in his private conference room away from the others. “I have a private message for the two of you from the Emperor. He handed them the message viewer and left the room. They activated the device and an image of Leopaldo on the

screen. "I trust this message will find you both well. LuJo, you did a superlative job on your last assignment. I am sorry that I had to divert you from your well earned R&R. I want the two of you to be extremely cautious on this assignment, especially you LuJo as your success has earned you the ire of House Chesterfield. Be careful! Be together at all times, play up the newlyweds role, it may serve you well on this assignment. If you meet my old friend Oleg Larsen, please give him my regards and tell him I am not sore with him anymore. I am looking forward to you both returning to Castle Pesaro. Helen, Varten, and I miss our dear friends. Come back to us soon."

The screen went blank. LuJo was the first to speak "In my years of growing up, I never had friends as dear to me as you and the rest of the group at Castle Pesaro. I find that I miss them dearly also."

"Yes LuJo, we are both very fortunate people" Nick replied.

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Nick and LuJo had arrived in Geneva well ahead of the Chicago on a private packet launch. They quickly cleared the spaceport customs and took ground transportation to the 'Pipe and Baccy resort'. This resort was operated by the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company and was adjacent to the factory grounds. Its architecture replicated an ancient Swiss Chalet. The outside of the buildings had an ancient European style of stucco combined with ornate woodwork. Once inside the building, they found the interiors to be just as ornate with carved banisters on the stairways. The old side had all of the antique style type suites in the old style buildings. In the far corner of the property was a new tower hotel building and state-of-the-art conference center. They were housed in one of the old style suites.

Arriving at their room, they scanned it for any microphones, or other snooping devices. They had found none. They had checked in with the local EIS operatives that were going to be working the upcoming conference using their secure communicator. Following a short nap after they had checked in at the resort and moved into their assigned smoking room, they decided to go to the outdoor restaurant for a smoke, coffee, and a bit to eat.

Following the consumption of the great Swiss pastry, Nick filled his Larenzetti bent pipe and LuJo her Dunhill Group 2 black tanshell briar with some of the McNay's Red Ribbon. The scene before them was one of being alongside a lake with huge mountains surrounding them off in a distance. The peaks of the mountains were topped with snow caps. They lit their pipes and a pleasant aroma surrounded them. Another gentleman was sitting on the porch smoking a pipe. He tipped his pipe to them acknowledging another fellow pipe smoker. He rose from his seat and approached them.

"I believe you and I have a mutual friend" he said as he puffed on what could only be said to be some sort of ancient Tyrolean pipe and joined them at their table "Of course I mean Leo. My name is Oleg Larsen."

"I do recall that name" Nick said "What was our friend sore at you about?" he asked.

"I am correct that you are Nick Reardon" he pointed his pipe towards Nick "and you are his lovely wife, LuJo" he pointed his pipe towards LuJo. They indicated that he was correct. "Good" he continued "Leo

and I go back many years. I met him during one of his first assignments when he was just a green officer of the Empire Navy. At the time, I did not know who he was. If I had known, I may have acted a bit different. To make a long story short, we were friends and at a pipe show. During the blind auction, we ended up bidding on the same pipe; we did not know who each of us were bidding against since it was blind. The price went to double its value. I won the pipe and Leo always held it against me.”

“Leo instructed us to give you his regards and that he wasn’t sore with you anymore”, LuJo replied.

“Ah, good old Leo. You gave the correct countersign. Of course Leo wasn’t sore with me anymore, he was never sore at me to begin with”, he chuckled “But in these days, you can’t be too sure or too careful. Had you not given me the proper countersign, I am afraid you would have never left this resort except in a body bag.”

“It’s a shame we are dealing with such serious matters and in such serious times”, LuJo said “That is a nice pipe you have and what are you smoking in it?”

Oleg answered “the pipe is an old Tyrolean style of pipe from Old Earth being made in the mountains of the original Germany. There is not specific manufacturer of the pipe. The tobacco is from our own Royal Swiss Tobacco Company, a neer-tobacco grown from a genetically altered seed and a secret curing process. It is called ‘Mountain Lake’ tobacco. The tobacco only grows in high mountain climates, is very rare, and is not widely known. It is very similar to a mature Virginia. It is only available in the gift shop in our factory.”

Nick smelled the aroma from Oleg’s burning pipe tobacco “It has the aroma of a very mature virginia, sort of like some of Leo’s Old Earth virgina blends. It reminds me of the O.E. McClelland’s #5100 bulk tobacco.”

LuJo agreed “Very nice indeed.”

Oleg passed an envelope to Nick “Inside are two ticket’s for tomorrows tour of the Royal Swiss Tobacco factory. There are also passes to visit the Company Library if you need to use them. As you are aware, ownership has passed to House Chesterfield. I expect that their delegation will make some use of it. At the end of the tour when you come to the Visitors Shop, come inside and look at all the items. Ask for some ‘Mountain Lake Tobacco’ and I will come out, tell you about the tobacco and prepare your package. There will be other material in your package that may help you in your assignment. It has been a pleasure meeting you Mr. and Mrs. Reardon. It is always a pleasure to meet a fellow brother and sister of the briar” he finished in a rather loud voice which could be heard by others on the porch of the outdoor eating facility. He left them and returned to his original table.

“Did you hear that Nick? ‘Mr. and Mrs. Reardon’ he called us, it does have a nice ring to it” she said as she elbowed him in his side “ring, ring---get it?”

“Oh I get it little secret agent girl. I also get it that he is trying to either tell us something or pass something on to us that he could not do here. We shall see tomorrow. I do like the Mountain Lake neer-tobacco and think we should get some tins tomorrow when we take the tour.”

Nick and LuJo finished their coffee and pipes. They decided to walk around and tour the resort which was adjacent to the large mountain lake. They found out that the resort had once been a private lodge of one of the Great Houses of the Reichstagen which had fallen upon bad times and the property had been sold. You could do almost anything you wanted at the resort from jogging and swimming to them making arrangements for you to travel to the mountains to ski. After about two hours, they returned to their suite to watch the evening news.

The lead story on the news was the anticipated arrival of the three delegations; the Empire delegation staying at the Empire Hotel, the House Seiler delegation staying at the Geneva Plaza Hotel, and the House Chesterfield delegation staying at the Pipe and Baccy resort. They looked at each other "Oh my gosh, no wonder Oleg was so concerned. We are staying at the heart of the enemy's encampment."

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"Do not worry Leo" Varten stated "Nick and LuJo should be in place at the Pipe and Baccy resort by now. Oleg will see that no harm comes to them. While in harness, he was one of our best EIS operatives. Since he has retired, he has become an invaluable resource. Both Nick and LuJo are two of our most highly skilled and experienced operatives. Look at the superb job LuJo did on her last assignment. Our local EIS operatives will be there to support them and we have poured more resources into Geneva since the meeting was announced. We also have other EIS operatives in place at the resort."

"I know, but I worry anyway with those two", Leo said as he tamped his O.E. Clarence Mickles blasted prince "We can only move matters as we are able to give them every advantage."

"Yes, that we can do" Varten replied as he filled and lit his O.E. Charatan Supreme cup and saucer shaped pipe "I always enjoy smoking a pipe with you since you always provide the best tobacco. This Old Earth Butera Dark Stoved virginia has got to be one of your best."

"My friend Donald Trimp sent it to me in our last pipe and tobacco deal. He had it in his private cellar. I traded him an O.E. Castello Flame #84 Donkeynut shape pipe for a special pipe that will be my wedding gift to Helen."

"You and your trades!" Varten exclaimed "It must be a fine pipe indeed that you are going to give her for her wedding present. An O.E. Castello Flame grade pipe is about their highest grade of Castello pipe. I can't even compute the solaris that must be involved since Old Earth pipes are so expensive. Why one O.E. pipe's cost, and not even a high grade at that, could equal the entire economy of a small planet for a year."

Leo grinned "You have to keep it all relative, Varten. Remember, in the end it's just a block of wood, real, genuine O.E. briar at that. Let's get back to business."

"OK, we know that House Chesterfield was a little upset when you spoiled their last scheme. We also know that they have duped House Seiler to come to you with their 'peace proposal'. They have no

intension to have peace. It is like asking an O.E. tiger to remove its stripes. The EIS intel is that the Barron of House Chesterfield will most likely send his nephew, Count Rabin, to lead their delegation. He is in his mid 60s which is relatively young when you consider that our lifetime has been greatly expanded. The Count has been well trained and experienced in diplomacy. You may recall that Count Rabin was the envoy sent to the Selenese star system several years back. He convinced them to start a revolt against the Empire, which we subsequently put down. Following the aborted revolt, we went through all of the recordings of meetings and transcripts that he had with the Selenese government. The EIS applied symbolic and analytical logic to all of the diplomatic baloney. Guess what they found out.”

“I would guess that, on balance, it all equated out to zero.” Leo responded.

“You are correct.” Varten replied “Their promise of support was basically that House Chesterfield owed them nothing and the Selenese owed House Chesterfield nothing. This is why we did not go after House Chesterfield. Of course, that is not what the Selenese had ‘heard’.”

“But isn’t that exactly what skilled diplomats do? They get what they want without any bond or commitment on themselves.” Leo stated.

“Yes, and that is why we sent Ambassador Clinton. He is just as skilled at his profession, and I hope for our sake, is better” Varten responded.

“What do you think the ‘peace proposal’ proffered by House Chesterfield will be”, Leo enquired.

“We expect that they will offer several insignificant planets they control to be offered to you, and a sort of dynastic marriage between Prince Kyle and the Barron’s daughter Stephanie.” Varten answered.

“I recall the Barron’s daughter, very pretty to look at, but not playing with a full deck”

Varten stated “You do not judge a book by its cover, so do not do the same with her. We believe the foolish little girl aspect of her to be an act. We believe her to be very sharp as we would expect a daughter of the Barron to be. If we fall for their trick, Prince Kyle may have a tiger on his hands.”

Leo laughed “I have had reports from my old friend Viscount Hawman about Prince Kyle. It seems that, in his opinion, Prince Kyle is turning into quite an adult. He scores very high in his martial abilities. Hawman says that he has the potential to be a weapons master like you. He also says that he is quite astute in political matters and will be a great person to eventually succeed me.”

“Yes, I have seen the reports. He also did well while at the Academy. He will be a worthy successor. I have even heard that he now has a small pipe collection, one of a discerning taste.”

Leo laughed again “I guess he is a chip off the old block. Regardless, let’s do everything to support Nick and LuJo. It may be time to activate our mole in the Barron’s staff to ensure Nick and LuJo’s safety. She should only be used as a last resort.”

“I hate to activate a sleeper agent; however, I agree with you that it may be necessary in this instance. In fact, I have already taken action to prepare her if her use is necessary.” Varten responded.

“Good, Nick and LuJo are very important to us. We should spare no resources to ensure their safety.”

They lit other pipes and spent a long night smoking their pipes, discussing the situation on Geneva and other matters that troubled the Emperor’s rest.

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She sat in her stately office smoking a Peterson Tavern pipe filled with their house near-tobacco. Officially, she was Assistant Director of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company. Unofficially, she was a respected member of the Barron Chesterfield’s Business Consultancy which now owned the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company. She had been in her official position for a year since the business transaction had closed. It helped her in her new position to be an avid and knowledgeable pipe collector and smoker. Why even the old Barron had asked (or tested) her on some of the finer points of pipe collecting and pipe smoking. She had passed with flying colors. It was she that had discovered the buried research on their rare Mountain Lake tobacco.

She had received the coded instruction in some quite ordinary business data that had come to her in the course of her daily activities. She suspected the message had come from within the highest levels of Castle Pesaro. Her instructions were to ensure the safety of a Mr. and Mrs. Reardon at all costs, even if it meant a blown cover and her removal as a mole within House Chesterfield. It had taken her over 20 years to rise within House Chesterfield and her activation must be for a cause that was very important personally to the Emperor. Only Leo knew of the events that had driven her away from House Chesterfield to his service.

It happened many years ago. The Barron had a son, now long dead, that was basically a very brutal, self-indulgent individual, much like his father. The son, named Victor, had basically raped her at a very young age and left her for dead. She had been rescued by a young pipe smoking officer of the Empire Navy which had invaded the planet once the House Chesterfield forces had retreated. During the final encounter between the Empire fleet and the House Chesterfield fleet, the ship the son was on, unknown to the Barron, had been destroyed. Victor was officially missing in action. She knew otherwise. It later turned out that she entered the EIS and had a great amount of training. She found out that the young officer was actually now Emperor Leopaldo. She knew that he knew who she was and where she now was stationed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there had been no child from the rape. However, hatred for the House Chesterfield had been burned into her mind. As time passed, she grew quite confident and her role fell naturally to her. But, for her, the hatred had dulled, but never totally dissipated. “Vengeance is mine”, she thought to herself.

She did not know any of the EIS operatives in Geneva and she was sure that none knew of her role as a mole within House Chesterfield. She did have a suspicion that she was acquainted with one EIS agent, or a retired agent that worked at the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company gift shop.

It was all over the televisions – the arrival of the Empire and House Delegations to Geneva. Even use to the media outlets on the Emperor’s home world, it seemed like they had all left Castle Pesaro and moved to Geneva. It looked like Ambassador Clinton loved all the attention. Although videoed when leaving their ship, there was not much coverage of Rabin and House Chesterfield. House Seiler was seen as one of the movers of the meeting, although that was not strictly true. Nick and LuJo sat on the little outdoor porch of their suite smoking their morning pipe. They had picked up some Royal Swiss Tobacco Company’s House Blend at the shop in the resort. As they sat smoking their pipe, they heard a loud noise in the sky and saw several aircars arrive and land. The House Chesterfield contingent had arrived at the resort.

The arrival of a Great House delegation always causes major disruptions in the location in which they reside. It was no exception at the Pipe and Baccy resort. As was custom, the hotel had copies of their travel documents made in the name of Mr. and Mrs. Nick Reardon, and the documents would pass muster anywhere in the Empire. However, this was not the Empire; it was within the compound in which House Chesterfield was staying.

The aroma of a fine tobacco smoke wafted from the porch inside the room.

There was a knock on the door. Nick answered the door and Mr. James, the head of hotel security entered with a man in a dark brown uniform who he introduced as Security Leader Jensen. “On behalf of the resort, I apologize for this interruption, however with the arrival of the House Chesterfield delegation; they have asked to interview all of the people staying in the hotel.”

“I totally understand, Nick replied as LuJo came inside from the porch. “This is my wife, LuJo Reardon”.

Mr. James repeated the introductions and the apology to LuJo “Security Leader Jensen has reviewed your travel documents and has one or two questions to ask”

“Go ahead” LuJo replied.

“Thanks mam, Mr. Reardon’s papers are totally in order, as are yours, but for the record, you come from the city of New Columbus on the planet Storn, is that correct” Leader Jensen asked.

“Yes, that is so. I and my sister were born there. I grew up there and worked for a time with Willem van Derjinn. He passed away several years ago. I met Nick while he was a visitor to our fair city. We were just recently wed.”

“Why did the two of you come to Geneva”. He asked.

“We both have an interest in pipes and tobacco. Geneva is such a lovely location and the home of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company, a company with a long history back to Old Earth. In fact, we plan to tour the factory later today. The combination of the location, its beauty, and the factory made Geneva a natural location for us to honeymoon.” LuJo answered.

“Ok, we will be back if we have any additional questions. During your stay, please keep away from the resort conference center and the tower adjoining it where the delegation is housed. If you enter that area, it may be difficult for you to get out.” Jensen stated.

“I don’t believe we have ANY business there, so we will not even approach it. Thanks for the advice” Nick said.

James and Jensen left the room. They closed the door. Nick held his hand up to his lips and shished LuJo. He rescanned the room and found a small capsule sized device near the floorboard next to the door. He picked it up and crushed it. “I guess Mr. Jensen accidently dropped something.” Nick stated.

“Do you think they bought it” LuJo asked.

“I think they did” he replied “What’s this about a sister” he asked.

“Oh don’t give me that, you know all about SalMar. I am sure you read the file on me.”

“I did” he laughed and “I do. Wait, I mean I do know about SalMar not that ‘I do’ that goes with marriage.”

“Well, for better or worse, you did” she laughed “and here we are.”

They left the resort for the short trip to the Royal Swiss Tobacco Factory. They entered a building that could have come from Geneva, Switzerland many centuries ago, before Earth was destroyed. They went inside. A crowd was forming for the tour. Nick showed the tour group leader his two tickets and they joined the group.

The tour leader began “Ladies and gentlemen, we will shortly begin our tour. My name is Russ Oulettee. I am a master tobacco blender at the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company. We shall go through the factory where you will learn how high quality pipe tobacco is made. At the end of the tour, we will stop at the gift shop and you will be given samples and an opportunity to purchase our products. I would ask that you refrain from smoking until the tour is over and you reach the gift shop. We do not want you to interfere with the precise tobacco production that goes on in this plant. You will see that we spare no expense to make one of the best tobaccos in the Empire.”

They went down a hall into a large, temperature and humidity controlled room containing bale after bale of tobacco. “This is the room where we keep all of our tobacco when it is received until it is used. You will note that the room is controlled for temperature, pressure, humidity, and there is a uv-light system that prevents the development of mold and kills any of the wee beasties that may be in the tobacco. We purchase the choicest neer-tobacco from all over the empire. “Who knows the difference between a neer-tobacco and a pseudo-tobacco vs an Old Earth Tobacco?” he asked.

LuJo raised her hand “you, young lady.” She responded “Let me start in reverse order. When the earth was destroyed at the end of the First Age of Man, all tobacco plants, and incidentally briar bushes were incinerated. It was found that cuttings from old earth tobacco plants would not grow off of Earth. The

only Old Earth tobacco that is found today is that which has been found in lost star ships from an earlier time and the small supply in the hands of pipe collectors. Pseudo-tobacco is a tobacco that is 'grown' through chemistry that is, it is all artificially made. Neer-tobacco is a modern form of tobacco that is grown from the ground using plants that are similar to tobacco in which the tobacco genes have been implanted. Hence, it is nearly tobacco."

"You know your history young lady. You must be a pipe collector" the tour leader said.

"Thanks, well since I own more than one pipe, I guess I am a pipe collector" she replied.

Unbeknown to LuJo, a young man in the back was recording her audio comments down word for word. They left the tobacco aging room and went into the next room which contained many specialty machines, presses, and cutting machines.

The tour leader continued "This is the stripping and cutting room. The tobacco leaves are steamed and then removed from the stems. The stems and other wastes are saved for later use in ground snuff and cigarettes. The tobacco leaves are then either pressed into molds, further aged, and then cut or they are cut without the further aging. We produce several types of tobacco at this plant. A virginia blend can either be loose or a flake, straight virginia or blended with other tobaccos. An English tobacco usually contains latakia and is usually a loose tobacco. An aromatic tobacco is usually loose and is blended with many types of tobacco and contains toppings or casings. Again, we make all of these types of tobacco."

They moved on to the next room. The leader continued "This room is another aging room. This room contains both straight tobacco and blended tobaccos. Once the tobacco has been blended it comes to this room to mature or let the various blend flavors meld. A tobacco can stay here from a couple of days to many years, depending on the end product."

One gentleman raised his hand "Is it true that the passage of time improves the taste of a tobacco or a blend."

"That is a good question" the tour leader stated "There are many factors that are involved such as the quality and type of tobacco, how the tobacco was processed, how it was tinned, and how it was stored". It has been found that most virginia or virginia based tobaccos will improve with age. Other condimental tobaccos only improve slightly to not at all. Tobaccos like Burley do not tend to improve. I have heard, but have no firsthand experience to judge, that some of the original Old Earth tobaccos smoke magnificently today." LuJo started to raise her hand but suddenly lowered it and coughed. "Today's neer-tobaccos, especially the virginia-type does age, but only up to a maximum of 10 years or so and then there is no further improvement. Does that answer your question?" The man indicated it did.

They walked further inside the factory to a noisy room with many cutting machines, circular blending machines, and other specialty machines. Russ continued "Once the tobacco or blend has perfectly aged, it comes here where it is blended with other tobaccos, and loose cut, pressed, rolled or put into its final

form. If it an aromatic tobacco, the casings or top notes are added. Once again, the tobacco is aged again before it goes to final packing.

The same gentleman raised his hand again “Sir, when you pack the tobacco, is it vacuum packed?”

Russ replied “No, whether it is sealed in a plastowrap, sealed in a pouch, or sealed in to a metal tin, we always leave a little air to help the aerobic chemical-biological activity that overtime leads to a better tasting tobacco.” He moved on “The next room is the packaging room. In this room, you will see a totally robotic operation. The tobacco is weighed, packed into the pouch or tin, and sealed. The appropriate labels are added to the tin or pouch.”

“This concludes our tour today. We are now at the Royal Swiss Tobacco Factory gift shop. You may purchase any of the tobaccos we produce. We also stock local neer-briar pipes. You may wish to pick up a tin of Mountain Lake Tobacco which is our newest blend available in a limited supply. If you contact our Assistant Director, she may be able to obtain Library passes for you if you are into pipe and tobacco research. Thanks for coming along on our tour today.” He concluded.

Nick and LuJo walked hand in hand into the gift shop. The gift shop was designed to replicate an old 20<sup>th</sup> century tobacco shop complete with easy chairs, counters loaded with loose tobacco, boards holding neer- or pseudo-briar pipes covered the wall, and behind the counters were displays of tinned tobacco. There were several clerks behind the counters. Nick spotted Oleg Larsen and they walked to his portion of one of the counters. “Sir” Nick started “I smoke virginia tobacco similar to McNay Red Ribbon and would like to find a suitable replacement. It keeps going up in price. Also, Mr. Oulettee, our tour guide mentioned the new Mountain Lake tobacco, and I would like a couple of tins.”

“Let me recommend our Royal Red Kake tobacco which is a replacement made to be close to the Old Earth Red Kake tobacco. I can only let you have one tin of the Mountain Lake tobacco since supplies are so limited.” Oleg answered.

“Let me have a pound of the Royal Red Kake tobacco, oh, my wife is a pipe smoker also, could we get two tins of the Mountain Lake tobacco” he asked as LuJo showed him her cheap neer-briar pipe.

Oleg measured out the pound of Royal Red Kake tobacco and added two tins of the Mountain Lake tobacco. He put them in a bag and said “That will be about fifteen point four solaris. Nick paid for his purchase using the empire currency.

“Thanks”, Nick replied “If I find I like the Mountain Lake tobacco, can I come back tomorrow for more?”

“Yes, you can get one tin per trip. I am sorry to limit you, but you know, company rules.”

They left the gift shop and went back outside to hail an aircab. The young man that was following them throughout the tour went outside behind them. Nick turned around and said “Look buddy, I have a concealed needle gun aimed at your side. I suggest you carefully come with my wife and me over to the side of the building for a little chat.” They walked around the side of the building out of the range of any of the camera covering the front of the factory. Once they reached a shaded and concealed area Nick

said “Ok, who are you and why have you been following us all day. I saw you recording my wife’s question and her actions.

The young man was quite shaken “I work here at the factory. I am an intern with the administrative office, assigned to the Assistant Director. I was asked to look for a newly married couple that would be touring the factory, record any conversation and report back. I have only done what I was asked to do by my employer.”

“Assistant Director” Nick pondered “I am going to ask you one question, do you work for the factory or House Chesterfield? Answer truthfully because I will be able to tell if you do. If you are false, there will be consequences.”

“Look Mister, I am only a college student on an internship. I attend the Geneva Imperial College. I work for the factory and no one else.”

Nick turned to LuJo “What do you think?”

“He is being truthful” she replied.

Nick turned to him and held out his hand “Look no needle gun. Go back and make your report and be truthful”

The young man ran away from them. They went back to the aircab stand, hailed a cab, and returned to the resort.

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Once Nick and LuJo had returned to their room, Nick did a quick snooper scan and found the room was clean. “LuJo, did you notice the young man following us? I had to find out why and who he worked for. I wonder what interest the Assistant Director of the factory had in us.

“I left the noticing up to you, Nick. I did realize I almost gave us away when Russ mentioned the Old Earth tobacco. I wanted to tell him how good it was, but realized any comment by me would be out of line and caught myself. I hope it wasn’t noticed.”

“It may not have been as the cough you covered with your hand as it was being raised, covered your action” Nick replied.

“Oleg gave us two tins of Mountain Lake Tobacco. The first of the tins is totally sealed, but look at this second tin. There are scratch marks on the lid. It has been opened.” LuJo examined the tin. They opened it and placed the contents on the table on top of a white piece of paper. They spread out the stands of tobacco. “Look Nick, a microchip”. Nick took a small visiscreen out of his suitcase. He inserted the microchip and a bunch of documents came up on the screen. He read the top document.

*I have ascertained through my contacts that there will be an attempt on Ambassador Clinton’s life while he is on Geneva. It will look like an accident, but will be executed at the orders of House Chesterfield.*

*With Clinton out of the picture, they expect Rabin will either be able to extort demands from the Emperor or cause the meeting to be a failure which will later be used as a pretext to attack the Emperor. Attached are some documents that were rifled from House Chesterfield that may be of use to the EIS.*

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“This is what Oleg wanted to tell us” Nick said as he used his visicorder to send the intel to the Chicago via a secure link. He knew that the documents would quickly be forwarded to Castle Pesaro. He then used a match to destroy the microchip and mixed in with pipe tobacco ash in the ash tray.

Nick and LuJo then put the Mountain Lake Tobacco back into the tin after filling their pipes. They lit their pipes and plumes of smoke wafted into the room. “I like it Nick. It tastes like a virginia with the essence of old leather and nuttiness in the taste” LuJo said.

“Yes, quite good” Nick said as he turned on the videoscreen to watch the news. The news stories continued about the arrival of the delegations on Geneva. The story detailed the relations between Emperor Leopaldo and House Chesterfield, at least what was publically known. Suddenly there was a NEWS BREAK as the announcer came on:

#### **NEWS BREAK**

*We have breaking news today about a terrible accident that happened outside the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company. A damaged aircab ran down two employees at the Royal Swiss Tobacco Factory. The victims have been identified as Mr. Oleg Larsen, a long time employee and a Mr. Scott Jacobsen, a student at Geneva’s Imperial College who was an intern at the factory. The Geneva Police and the Empire Security Services are investigating this terrible accident. Since the aircabs are robotically controlled the chance of such an accident are rare. More details will appear on the nightly news. Back to the regularly scheduled program*

Nick and LuJo sat stunned. “We just talked with both of them.” She exclaimed.

“Yes, I guess House Chesterfield is quick to act.” Nick replied “Somehow this tobacco now leaves a bitter taste in my mouth”.

“I don’t believe in coincidences” Nick replied “I’ll bet that House Chesterfield is behind this so-called ‘accident’. I think that we will need more information on this ‘Assistant Director of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company’. We may have to visit the office.” He got into communications again with the Chicago and requested information on the Assistant Director. Nick was also instructed again to be careful.

Unlike most communicators, Nick’s had a special feature. It could generate a Q-beam private link to the EIS communications network. He quickly used it to contact the EIS unit on the Chicago. He explained what had happened and their discussion with Oleg and the intern. He was assured the situation was being thoroughly investigated and was instructed to be extra careful.

They had extinguished their pipes filled with the Mountain Lakes tobacco. They each took out another pipe and filled them with the Royal Red Kake blend. "It does smoke a lot like the O.E. McClelland #5100 Red Kake" LuJo exclaimed "I would bet that even Leo would enjoy this blend."

"Yes, I believe he would. It would be a nice every day smoking tobacco and I believe it will taste even better with a little more aging, say 2 years or more. We should suggest to the company that besides having it in bulk, that they produce a tinned version." Nick stated.

"Nick, it is now more important that we stay in character as newlyweds. We should go for dinner and then go night clubbing as many have done over the years." LuJo commented.

"Well you know, I am sure there are many newlyweds that never leave their suite, If you get what I mean" he replied.

She threw a pillow at him "If we go out, we may learn something, and I have more important things to do than to stay here with you."

They got suitably dressed to go out for the evening, took an aircab to the 'Mandarin Orange' Chinese buffet which was rated as one of the best in the Empire. They ate a sumptuous dinner. Following dinner, they again took an aircab to the Britannia Lounge where they drank and danced for several hours. They ended up in the Britannia's smoking lounge around midnight sitting in a booth around a round table enjoying a pipe over glasses of tawny port wine. "Again I have to say that this Royal Red Kake is quite a good tobacco. We will have to go back to the factory tomorrow and get a few pounds. You know Lu, if we have a couple of pounds transshipped to your mail drop address in New Columbus on Storn, it may throw off those individuals that are keeping an eye on us."

"I think that would be a good idea, we should also check out the Library, and who knows, maybe meet the Assistant Director." LuJo replied.

As they sat and enjoyed their pipes, Nick leaned over to take his pipe tamper from the table when he heard the whizz of a needle dart as it passed close to his ear. He looked at LuJo who had a look of alarm on her face. "Needle dart" she said.

"Yes" he replied as he examined the room for the source of the dart but found nothing. He gently pried the dart loose from the cushion on his chair in which it had become imbedded. "It looks like it was made by the assassin guild. Look at the shape and coloration of the body of the dart."

"Looks like it to me" she responded with the color coming back into her face "You will never find the person that fired the gun."

"No, probably not. I think it is time for us to turn in for the night" he said.

As they got up to leave, an employee of the Britannia Lounge approached them. Here is your jacket madam and yours also sir. They paid their bill and left. As he was leaving, he turned to LuJo "there is a

packet inside an envelope in my jacket pocket. We will take a look when we get back to our room” Nick said to her in a low voice. They had an uneventful aircab trip back to the resort. As they came into the main entrance to the resort, they saw Mr. James and Mr. Jensen talking off to the left. They motioned Nick and LuJo over to them.

“I hope you had a nice evening out” Mr James said.

“We did” LuJo replied.

“I guess you heard about the accident earlier next door at the factory” Jensen said. “Wasn’t that one of the victims I saw you talking with on the outdoor porch the other day? The news reports identified him as Mr. Oleg Larsen”?

“Why yes it was. We were discussing the merit of the tobacco he was smoking. I found out that it was a local blend named “Mountain Lake”. I bought some while at the factory gift shop today. We found it to be most enjoyable.” Nick continued “yes, we saw the news report, it was quite the shock.”

“The news report said it was an accident. It had something to do with a runaway aircab. I thought aircabs were not capable of running away.” She said in a rather deadpan voice. “You know what I mean, the robotic biochemical-electronic positronic brain that controlled the cab. We have been using them for centuries.”

“Yes, very unusual” James replied “I am sure the incident will be thoroughly investigated.”

They said good night and left for their suite. Again, once inside the first thing Nick did was a snooper sweep of the rooms and found nothing. “Well Lu, that tells you that we have been under observation since our arrival.”

“Yes, and I don’t like it. I think they are just pushing us to force our hand or bring us into the open. I don’t trust Jensen an inch.” She replied.

Meanwhile, Nick checked his communicator and listened to a message “The Chicago has no information on the Assistant Director of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company” he told LuJo.

Nick opened the door and placed the “Do Not Disturb” sign on the handle. They retired to other activities for the night.

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Nick slowly was drifting back from deep sleep. He realized that his communicator was ringing. He grabbed it from the night stand by the bed. LuJo was slowly waking up also. He activated the communicator.

“Yeah” he said rather sleepily.”

“Nick, this is Lieutenant Shania from the Chicago. We are on a secure link. Ambassador Clinton has disappeared from the Imperial Hotel. All indications are that he was kidnapped.”

“Feared kidnapped” he repeated “What are the details?”

The lieutenant replied “Ambassador Clinton attended a formal dinner last evening at the House Seiler compound. There were many dignitaries present including the Geneva President. His party returned to the Imperial Hotel around midnight. He smoked a pipe with his assistant, Mr. Wolgeman and then retired.” Around 1:00 AM his valet checked his bedroom and found that the Ambassador was missing and that his bed had not been used. We also have video showing an abnormal amount of aircar traffic around the Imperial Hotel at that time. We believe the Ambassador was incapacitated, transported to the hotel roof, and removed from the rooftop garage. Some of the aircar traffic in this time period was shown to be heading to your location, the Pipe and Baccy resort.”

“What are your instructions” Nick asked.

“We here on the Chicago suggest that you follow through with a second visit to the Royal Swiss Tobacco Factory. Even with the recent deaths, they have chosen not to close down today. All indications are that Ambassador Clinton is still alive; we have no information to the contrary. We will continue to follow-up on both the Clinton disappearance and in investigating the two accidental deaths from yesterday.” She replied.

“I understand” he said as he disconnected the link and put his communicator in standby mode. He briefed LuJo on the conversation he had just had with the EIS contingent onboard the Chicago.

“What time is it” she asked?

“About 5 AM local time” he replied “Let’s make some in-room coffee and have a morning pipe.” He opened his travel bag and took out two matched neer-briar pipes. He passed one to her. The pipes were both small billiard shaped reddish sand blasted pipes with a saddle brindle stem. “If you look closely, you will find that they were hand made by Brian Rathenberg, the new pipe carver that we met. He did a nice job on them.”

“I do recall him. Wasn’t he at the Emperor’s pipe show that was held at Castle Pesaro? He is doing incredible things with neer-briar. He said he has a new curing process that makes the wood accept a dark, craggy sandblast. You know Nick, there are many ways to break in a new pipe. You have the method of ‘quarters’ where you smoke the pipe several times at  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$  until you reach a full pipe. Others advocate filling the bowl completely the first time and just smoke it, and not baby the pipe. Other people put honey or other materials inside the bowl for the first smoke. What method do you prefer” she asked.

“I much prefer an estate pipe over a new pipe since I hate breaking in new pipes. I fall into the group that moistens the inside of the bowl with saliva the first time, fill the bowl up with quality tobacco and smoke it. However I usually use a shovel type tamper and once I get an ash, rub the ash to the sides of the bowl as I smoke. When I am done, I shake the remaining ash inside the pipe to encourage it to stick

to the walls. At any time I taste burning briar, I stop. After having up to five smokes, I smoke it like I would any other pipe. This method works for me” Nick replied.

“I think that I will try it on this new Rathenberg pipe. Do you use a special tobacco to break in your pipe?” she enquired.

“No, since I usually smoke a mature virginia tobacco, I usually break the pipe in with the same tobacco. I do not use anything special” he replied.

They filled their new pipes with a virginia blend Nick had in one of his travel pouches. It took several matches to light the pipe and keep an even burning surface. “Nice pipe, nice smoke.” LuJo said “and thanks for the new pipe.”

“Just trying to butter you up, wifey” he replied as she threw a pillow at him, missing by a mile.

The finally left their suite to get breakfast during which they discussed their return visit to the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company’s factory.

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Rabin was in the House Chesterfield rooms located on the top 5 floors of the tower at the Pipe and Baccy resort. He was in a very foul mood, puffing on his large blackened briar like a pirate. If there was a knowledgeable pipester present, they would realize he was smoking a large O.E. L’Antra rusticated pipe stuffed full with a black shag tobacco.

The instruction given to his minions were to kidnap the Empire Ambassador, but to do it in a totally untraceable way. So what do they do? Get him out of the Imperial Hotel in the wee hours of the morning when aircar traffic would be light, bring him to their compound here directly to the Pipe and Baccy resort. ‘Incompetence! Incompetence! It is so hard to get competent help these days’ he thought to himself. Like they would just ignore heavier than average aircar traffic at that time of night? There would be a trail to see, especially the aircars from the Imperial Hotel to their compound. Although their ambassador status gave them diplomatic immunity and their lodgings were immune to search, the presence of the Ambassador made him very nervous.

Rabin had just ended a meeting with a delegation from both the Emperor and House Seiler in the conference center. He expounded the position that House Chesterfield was not responsible for the kidnapping and knew nothing about it. He offered his personal security detail to help in locating the Ambassador. He knew they did not believe him, but he had to try. They left in a huff, and suspended the tri-partite conference until Ambassador Clinton could be located. Little did they know he was sedated, in a room several floors above them within the resort Tower.

Now, to make matters worse, his incompetent staff had botched another job. There just were not any runaway aircars. Everyone knew they were robotically controlled just as everyone knew that they were incapable of crashing. Plus, they accidently killed an intern at the factory, quite by mistake. They just did

not need the publicity. They could have just as well used an undetectable poison on the old man and made it look like he had died in his sleep. Incompetence, again!

He decided then and there to leak their demands for a dynastic marriage between Prince Kyle and his cousin, the Barron's daughter, Stephanie. There were other demands, which were minor in nature. They wanted the return of several star systems to their domain and a ten year exclusion from the proposed higher levies on pseudo-tobacco, which was made in most of their factories. The Royal Swiss Tobacco Factory's near-tobacco production was abnormal in the House Chesterfield's economic program. Either way, he would get his goal, bad PR for the Empire in rejecting his demands and worse PR for the 'peace' conference to be suspended.

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"Sir, my office is totally shielded. It is impervious to any type of electromagnetic signals coming in or leaving this office. No one can snoop within here. I could quite literally murder you and your wife within this room and no one would be any wiser. The disrupter bin over there would even get rid of the physical evidence." She told Nick and his wife LuJo. They had stopped by the gift shop of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company and only found one clerk, the rest having taken the day off in remembrance of their co-worker who had been involved in an aircab accident the day before. They had used their pass to enter the factory library. Shortly after arriving in the library, they had been 'escorted' to the Assistant Director's office.

"I have been asked to keep an eye on the two of you. I know you met with my intern yesterday who was following his assignment. You are of course aware that he was brutally murdered yesterday along with my other employee, Mr. Oleg Larsen. I am not happy about these senseless deaths and if I hear that your EIS had anything to do with it, I have my means of getting even. I want you out of my office and out of my factory. Do not come back. If you do, I will take appropriate action." They were escorted out of the factory by a plant guard.

Back in their swept suite, LuJo said "I don't think she quite likes us."

"You will notice, Lu, that she did not say who told her to keep an eye on us. She also had the gumption to insinuate that the EIS was responsible for the accidents. I think she was playing to an unknown observer. The room was not as immune as she let on for it to be."

"Who would the observer be" LuJo asked as she lit a pipe.

"I suspect House Chesterfield. After all, they own the factory."

Nick's communicator beacons on the secure channel. It was Lt. Shania from the Chicago. "Nick, we have located the Ambassador. It turns out that he is in a room two floors from the top of the Tower at the Pipe and Baccy resort. We will be executing plan 3N at exactly 2000 hours local."

Nick replied "Got it, 2000 hours, plan 3N. We will be there and assist in any way. Who is commanding the operation on the ground?"

"It will be commanded by Captain Martin of the Space Marines" she responded.

"Very well, over and out." He said as he broke the communications link. "You better enjoy your pipe now, Lu, as it looks like we will have a busy night ahead of us."

They left their room at 1900 hours and headed for the far corner of the resort. They wore dark, body-fitting suits so that they could not be seen in the darkness of the night. One of the documents provided by Oleg was a complete layout of the resort including passageways that were not on official drawings. They had noted that there was a secret lift in the Tower. They did not know if the House Chesterfield staff was aware of its existence.

As they got closer to the tower, then noticed the laser beam lines of light alarms were arrayed around the building. They also suspected that radio radiation was in use to provide warning of unwanted visitors. They were able to go over or under the laser trap lines. The clothing they wore was invisible to anything in the electromagnetic spectrum. They had reached the side of the tower.

The map had indicated a secret entrance to the tower located behind massive HVAC units. What appeared to be part of the machinery was a hidden door into the building. Nick and LuJo carefully entered the Tower. Ahead was one of the secret lifts which they took to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, two from the top. So far, they had seen no one, and no one had seen them. They identified the room wherein the Ambassador was being held. There were two husky armed men standing guard. A third man had just left the room and proceeded the opposite way down the hall.

EIS Plan 3N required dropout gas to be introduced into the building HVAC system prior to the attack. Hopefully, the defenders would be put to sleep. The attackers would be wearing gas masks. Nick and LuJo used special nose filters which combined with the gas and transmuted it into something non-toxic which could be inhaled.

As they watched, they saw the three men fall to the ground. They entered the room and found the unconscious body of Ambassador Clinton. They carried the body back to the Tower and went down the secret lift. The lift door opened and they found that two people with gas masks stood before them with lazguns pointed in their direction. They pointed them to go ahead and entered another secret room. They entered and a panel door fell quietly behind them. As the room was sealed, the two individuals removed their gas masks. They found that they were facing Rabin and the Assistant Director of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company. They placed the Ambassador's prone on top of a table and pushed their needle guns toward their captors.

"You two" the Assistant Director said "I should have known. Rabin, may I introduce Mr. and Mrs. Nick Reardon, who I believe to be EIS agents."

“Mr. Reardon I have heard of before. Mrs. Reardon I believe to be the EIS agent that just frustrated our plans to use a chemobiological agent against the Emperor. We paid a heavy price indeed” Rabin replied.

“When the Empire forces find the room empty and no one else in the Tower, they will have to retreat empty handed and we will be able to leave this gas-tight room. They we can figure out what to do with these two” the Assistant Director said.

Rabine raised his lazgun in the direction of Nick and LuJo “Say your prayers, at least the two of you will be together in Hell” as he started to pull the trigger he fell to the floor. A large hole appeared in the center of his head caused by a bolt from the Assistant Director’s lazgun.

“I’m confused” Lu Jo said.

“It’s quite simple Lu, the Assistant Director is really EIS or something like that.”

“You are almost correct Nick, but you will have to ask Emperor Leopaldo for the tale. Now listen, you will open the door and I will pass out from the dropout gas. You will take the Ambassador with the two of you to the Empire marines outside. The story you will tell is that you killed Rabin with my lazgun when the two of you overpowered me. I expect to pay a small price for being overpowered, but even the Barron realizes what a weakling that Rabin is or was.”

“I understand, but what is your name?”

“I am not going to tell you but ask Leopaldo about “the Loraine” star system.

The hidden door slowly opened. The Assistant Director fell to the floor. Nick and LuJo left to pass the Ambassador to the Empire Marines. After their hookup, Nick and LuJo quietly went back to their room. It had been a busy night and now it was time for fun. Once again, the “Do Not Disturb” sign went up on the door to their suite.

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The next morning Nick and LuJo watched the videoscreen. The breaking news was that Ambassador Clinton had been rescued from his kidnappers. It turned out that he was being held captive by an anti-Empire revolutionary group. Purportedly, the rescue had been facilitated by the Barron of House Chesterfield’s nephew, Rabin, who had died affecting the rescue. A report was breaking that Emperor Leopald was going to attend his funeral. The conference was officially put on hold by all of the involved parties and it was suggested that there would be some diplomatic meetings after Rabin’s funeral.

“Doesn’t that beat all” LuJo stated “Rabin is being made out to be a hero. You must be one of the ‘revolutionaries’, Nick.”

“I guess that would make you one also, LuJo” he replied “I hope the Assistant Director” turns out OK, I see no mention of her.” He called the Royal Tobacco Company factory and asked for the Assistant Director.

“Hello”, he heard in a familiar voice.

“Why hello, mam. I just wanted to let you know that my wife and I, the Reardons, thoroughly enjoyed our tour of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company the other day.. Could we have some of the Mountain Lake tobacco shipped monthly to our address on Storn?” He asked.

“I think that can be arranged” she responded “Please give my regards to our mutual friend” she said as she rung off.

“I’m glad she is OK” Nick replied “they must have done a lot of running around last night to come up with the emerging story. It is interesting when it is the Empire that really controls the media.”

“Yes, you ready to blow this place” Lu Jo asked as she packed.

“Definitely” he replied.

They checked out of the resort and thanked them for a great stay. The House Chesterfield delegation had checked out earlier. Ground transportation took them to the spaceport. A launch was used to transport them directly to the Chicago, which was still in orbit. They were met by a young Lieutenant Burla.

“We want you to take a little trip to sickbay” he said. They followed him to the sickbay and entered. In one bed was Oleg Larsen, and in the other, Scott the young intern.

“What?” they both said “We both thought the two of you were dead”

Oleg replied “We thought we were also. The accident happened so fast. What we did not know at the time was that the EIS was involved. They had discovered the altered aircab. However they changed the programming so that the vehicle would hit us, but not cause any serious damage. It seemed when we were hit, we were exposed to a little dropout gas as we fell. We both woke up here on the Chicago. Scott will return to his studies, but at PittPenn University. My cover is blown so I have been asked to return with you to Castle Pesaro with the two of you. We leave tomorrow morning.”

“Castle Pesaro!!! I thought I deserved a little R&R. Leo said I had two surprises coming. I guess I will just have to wait and see” LuJo said.

Later that night, Nick and LuJo were smoking their Rathenberg pipes filled with the Royal Swiss Mountain Lake tobacco. “I am glad that Oleg is alive and apparently quite well” LuJo says.

“I too” chimed in Nick “Uh, LuJo, we did have quite the time in Geneva. You will recall that there were several proposals being bandied about. I kind of liked the room assignments. We do fit quite well together both privately and as an operative team. I was wondering if you would kind of like to make our relationship a permanent.”

“Permanent? Permanent? What in space do you mean?” She asked.

“Well, LuJo I guess it means will you marry me?” he said as he got down one knee and showed her a beautiful diamond ring in an ancient carved ring box.

She almost choked on her pipe. “WOW if that ring isn’t a shiner. But what will it mean to our careers in the EIS? What will Leo say?” she asked.

“One questions at a time. With respect to the EIS, there have been married operative teams within the EIS. In some situations, it makes it easier in some cases to operate as a married team. With respect to Leo, the two surprises that were mentioned to you were to be the Rathenberg pipe as number 1, and this ring as number 2. He thought I was going to propose to you when I joined you for your R&R after your last assignment. This little unscheduled action seemed to spoil our plans. He will authorize us to act as a married EIS team. He insisted that we use this ring as it was his mothers.”

“Of course I accept you big goof.” LuJo responded “Wow, the gift of his mother’s wedding ring. Can you imagine it, the ring of an empress? I wonder what he has in store for Helen.”

“Oh, there is one more thing I forgot to mention. Leo wants Helen and his nuptials to be a double wedding and include us, which means that you and Helen will have to get cracking on the plans.”

“This is getting a bit much, is there anything else you forgot, like a black sheep in your family tree or some unknown disease you have? She asked.

“I can’t think of anything else. You still want to go through with it?” he asked.

“Of course, but I still have one little black sheep in my family tree, meaning SalMar, but until you meet her, I will have to vouch for her, if you will accept it.”

“I will, and I do” Nick replied “and I mean I will and I do in the marriage sense. We shall be back at Castle Pesaro in two days. Leo is aware, the rest of our friends are not, and maybe we can have a little fun with our friends.”

During the night a five person needle ship met with the Chicago. Captain Pedersen saw Nick, LuJo, and Oleg off. Before their departure, Captain Pedersen gave them each a package containing a sleeve of 8 tins of Royal Swiss Mountain Lake tobacco and a pound of the Royal Red Kake. There are two additional packages I am entrusting to you, one for Varten von Eckman, and one for Emperor Leopaldo that I requested. The Assistant Director of the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company sent them to me with a message expressing her pleasure in meeting the Reardons and that she would miss her old friend.

They departed the Chicago in the needle ship. A new Lieutenant from the Academy had been assigned to take them to Castle Pesaro. When they found out that he was a pipe smoker, they knew they would have a good trip.

They all met in Leo's large smoking room at the castle. Emperor Leopoldo, his wife to be Helen Chamberlain, Varten von Eckman his weapons master and chief advisor, Nick, LuJo, Oleg Larsen, and Ike McCane who was putting Leo's pipe collection and tobacciana in some sort of order.

Leo was very happy to see the safe return of Nick and LuJo. He was also very happy to see his old friend Oleg Larsen. Leo had them served with their favorite beverage as they sat down. "My friends, I am glad that those who have wandered from our fellowship have now returned. They have brought my old friend Oleg Larsen with them. Due to the recent events in Geneva, it would not be wise for him to return to his old job. He has accepted a position here at the castle to work on my pipe collection and tobacciana. He will work under Ike's direction in assembling everything; obtaining order from chaos. Since he will be working with many tempting pipes and tobacco, I thought I had better start him off right so I am giving him an O.E. Peterson Sherlock Holmes pipe in the shape of the "Watson" which is a bent bulldog. Oleg always had a taste for Peterson-like pipes."

He continued "our returned friends have brought us back pipe tobacco from the Royal Swiss Tobacco Company, which I have already sampled and found to be very good. They were once a very highly thought of tobacco company that had hit some hard times. I am glad that they are coming back to be a major player. I am sure that their Assistant Director will do a good job in turning the company around." He passed out the tobacco. Everyone present lit one of their favorite pipes either filled with the Royal Red Kake or the Mountain Lake tobacco. A virtual haze filled the room by the time the pipes were all lit.

"Leo", Nick said "I was told to ask you by the Assistant Director about 'Lorraine' star system.

"Many years ago when I was a newly minted lieutenant, I was involved in putting down a small revolt which had been instigated by House Chesterfield." When we landed on the third planet, the House Chesterfield forces were in retreat. During the course of the operation, I came into contact with a young lady that had been brutally assaulted by the Chesterfield forces, including the Barron's first son, Victor. According to the records, Victor went missing during the operation, but I believe he was killed during the action. At my suggestion, this young lady subsequently had high level training, both at the Academy and by the EIS. She decided on a very dangerous course to be a sleeper agent or a mole. You understand, driven by her motives, it was her way to eventually get revenge of House Chesterfield, and from what you have told me, she has achieved her goal, at least partially, but her role will never be known. And that is the way a lot of things go, as you have seen in the Geneva situation. The true story will never come out, only the diplomatic one that plays to the crowd will become public. I am not going to identify the lady as it is not important. What is important is that she is, and she is in an important position that may help us down the road." Leo reported.

Oleg responded "As a one-time EIS agent, I did not even suspect.

"And that is the way it should be" Leo replied "Anything else left to tie up"

"Oh, that is very good Leo. Tie up? Tie up? You mean like as in a knot?" LuJo asked.

"Yeah, exactly just like that." He replied. "Just like you new shiner"

They all looked at her face and saw nothing. "Not like a shiner on her eye, well maybe in her eyes, Look at her left hand" They looked down and saw the engagement ring. He walked around and grabbed LuJo by the waist and congratulated her and shook Nick's hand. The rest followed. "Was it hard to talk her into it, Nick? Leo asked.

"Piece of cake" Nick replied as she glared at him giving him the evil eye.

"Leo, I was blinded by the light of the diamond and momentarily went crazy" she replied. They all laughed.

"Oh, I have one more present for you LuJo" Leo said as he handed her a wrapped package. She opened it and took one look, stuck her tongue out at leo. She held the book up for all to see. It was a copy of an Old Earth book entitled "Secret Agent Girl in Love".

Leo replied "I just had to keep the joke going."

"LuJo, you and I will go see Helmsford in the morning. This will blow his mind going from a single wedding to a double. I sure hope he is up to it." Helen exclaimed.

They continued talking long into the night enjoying each other's fellowship.

When Nick and LuJo returned to their room, it was LuJo that put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door.

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