

## THE THREE AMIGOS

By  
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Emperor Leopaldo and Helen Chamberlain had just finished a quiet dinner for two at Castle Pesaro. Dinner had been magnificent, and they were now smoking their Charatan Grand Coronation and Coronation pipes respectively filled with a blend called Craven Mixture from Old Earth.

Leo had informed Helen that they would dine alone that night as Varten von Eckman the Emperor's weapons master had left earlier in the day on an assignment to the Caroline star system to discuss security arrangements for Leo's pending visit the following month. Nick and Lu Jo, the Emperor's close friends and confidants in the Empire Intelligence Service, were still away from the castle exploring a lead on a new topping tobacco found in the Santorum Star System.

"Do you know, Helen, that we have an anniversary tomorrow? Thirty years ago you, Varten, and I graduated from the Empire Military Academy as brand new midshipmen. Ensign Helen Kirkenbrunner of the Empire Naval Fleet, as I recall, engaged to Capt. Robert Chamberlain was shining her new symbol of rank. We had just completed five hard years at the Academy and our senior flight project. You and Varten were the brains of the class; numbers 1 and 2. To this day, I do not recall how they drew the distinction between the two of you. I was not shabby, about half way down the list in class rank." he said as rings of smoke billowed towards the ceiling and the fragrance of latakia permeated the room.

"I had forgotten the date", she admitted. "We were the three musketeers. What did they call us?"

"I believe we were referred to as 'the three "B"s; the brains, the beauty, and the brawn.' I believe Varten was the "brains", you were the "beauty", and I was the "brawn"."

"Yes, that's it. We're still together after all these years. My 'beauty' has been fleeting. Varten still is the 'brains', and you are our Emperor, still a bit brawny" she said puffing on her magnificent pipe.

"As I recall, you did not smoke a pipe while we were at the Academy. Varten and I did, but you did not partake."

“You are correct. However, it was not very long after graduation until I learned of the pleasure of the pipe. Did you forget the Yorktown?”

“No, I have not forgotten. Your finding the enjoyment from pipes and the Yorktown makes a fine story.”

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They had just graduated from the Academy. Their newly minted, shiny symbols of their rank had not even had a chance to tarnish on their new dress uniforms. Helen, Varten, and Leo were the newest members of the crew of the Empire Ring Drive Cruiser Yorktown. They had joined the ship following its recent overhaul in the Phillipean star system’s shipyards. Once they had stored their kit bags, they had been instructed to report to the Captain’s quarters. After cleaning up from their travel, they had donned their uniforms and promptly reported. They were admitted to the Captain’s study. The inside of the room was rather dim with several shaded lamps lit. They noted that the walls were ensconced with wood book cases filled with every kind of tome. At the far end of the room a large wooden desk and three overstuffed leather chairs were situated. A desk lamp was lit. An older uniformed gentleman sat behind the desk smoking a pipe and was oblivious to their arrival. A stream of smoke ran from the bowl of the bent poker upwards towards the ceiling. They approached the desk. Varten cleared his throat. At the sound, the captain looked up.

“Please sit down Ensigns.” he said “I am Norman Webster, captain of this fine ship, the Yorktown. I am glad to have you all aboard. Let me welcome you on my behalf, on behalf of the other officers, and on behalf of the crew.” he said. “You are most fortunate to have been assigned here and we are glad to have you. Please sit down.”

They sat in the three chairs.

“If you smoke, please light up.” He continued “There is a fine blend in the tobacco jar on the corner of the desk”

Varten and Leo both removed their pipes from their pockets and began filling them from the proffered tobacco jar. The pipes were a matched set of KrenellianB’iar from Rencell-IV in a straight dublin shape with a saddle stem. They had purchased them to commemorate their Academy graduation. They filled the bowls and lit them with wooden matches from the small holder next to the tobacco jar on the desk.

“I take it you do not smoke” he said to Helen.

“No, no I do not, but I do enjoy the aroma from others pipes. This tobacco has a very pleasing aroma.” she said.

“Yes it does” he replied “It is a blend of a pseudo-Virginia and a pinch of latakia. It has an anise top note that you can barely detect. I have it specially blended for me at a shop

on the planet Kartour. Based on my past experience, Ensign Kirkenbrunner, I think that you will find yourself a confirmed pipe smoker before your tour of duty on the Yorktown is complete.”

“Why is that?” she asked.

“Oh, I just have a feeling about you. We shall see.” he replied “Mr. Von Eckman, I knew your father in my younger days. A fine man.”

“Thank you sir.” Varten replied.

“As for you Prince Leopaldo, your father, the Emperor, has asked me not to show you any favoritism or privileges. I will respect the wishes of my Emperor. Let me say though that it is an honor having you on my ship.” Captain Webster said.

“I am glad to be here, and I do not expect any favors or anything out of the ordinary.” Leopaldo replied. “That is a mighty fine pipe you are smoking.”

“Thank you Ensign. As you are aware, the shape is a bent poker. You may be surprised to know that it is roughly 50,000 years old and was made on Old Earth! From the stampings and logo you would find out that it was made by a company named Dunhill from the Old Earth political subdivision named England in the year 2002, First Age. The finish is one they call a “shell”. In its day, a Dunhill pipe was considered very exclusive. Just like me, there is a lot of history to this old pipe.”

“I did not realize the lineage of your pipe” Leo said.

“There is a lot of history to Old Earth pipes. There are people who collect them. There are people who swear by their smoking properties. They are immensely expensive and hard to find. You have to remember that these pipes are made of true, Old Earth briar. Your Krenellian B’iar is only a close substitute to true briar. The heath bush from which briar is taken was destroyed during the First Age of Man when Old Earth was destroyed. Today, unless you are smoking a genuine Old Earth pipe, you are not smoking real briar. However, there are many good briar substitutes available today, but it is not as good as the real thing.” Webster expounded. “As I said, Old Earth pipes are very rare and expensive. You can sometimes find them on old, abandoned hulks floating in the galaxy from the first age or in abandoned settlements. There have been cases of collectors hiding their hoards of Old Earth pipes and tobacco when the antismoking political factions took control of the Earth. Just like the pipes, genuine Old Earth tobacco is also quite rare. After all these years, it is still possible to encounter some sealed tins of Old Earth tobacco that have withstood the ravages of time.”

“Wow. Looks like Leo and I have a lot to learn about pipes and tobacco in addition to our duties and responsibilities at our new posting.” Varten responded.

“Yes you do, and I will be glad to help in all of these areas. If you have any questions, please feel free to come in and sit a spell. Make sure you bring your pipe. You too Ensign Kirkenbrunner, bring a pipe, if you dare.” he said with a wink as he rose from his seat.

They knew they had been dismissed. They saluted and left the Captain’s study. Lt. Commander Mannaccini, the Yorktown’s Executive Officer, met them at the door. He told them that he would give them a tour of the ship, meet the crew, and learn their new assignments.

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The first week aboard the Yorktown went very quickly. Between the long hours of duty, meals, and sleep, they had very little time to themselves. A pipe was something that Varten and Leo enjoyed very much, occasionally, as time permitted. Varten had an assignment on the ship’s bridge working on hyperwave communications systems. Leo was assigned the number 1 laser cannon crew. Helen’s assignment was in astrogation. They saw each other only briefly. Finally Friday night arrived, along with a message from the captain to attend him in the Officer’s wardroom at 8:00 PM.

As they walked in, they found many of the ship’s officers in attendance with Captain Webster at the head of the table. “Gentlemen, ladies, you may smoke if you so desire” he said as he filled up his Dunhill poker with pipe tobacco and lit it. Others followed suit including Leo and Varten.

“By now you have all met our three new ensigns, Mr. von Eckman, Prince Leopaldo, and Ms. Kirkenbrunner. I hope you have all welcomed them to the Yorktown. There is a tradition on the Yorktown, that each of the new officers, upon joining the crew, is given a welcoming pipe by the Captain. While I have been Captain, I have kept this tradition. In the three cases in front of me are three exquisite pseudo-briar pipes with the silver bands engraved showing your rank, the Yorktown, and the date of your arrival. I offer them to you in the hope that you will enjoy them when times are both good and bad, and that in future years you will look back on the time that you served with us on the Yorktown as a fond memory.”

He presented each one with a box. They opened the box and found that the pipes were all small, group 3 in size, smooth, and in a basic dublin shape. They were all well crafted.

“Ensign Kirkenbrunner, I know that you don’t smoke a pipe yet, but I have my hopes. Keep yours until you feel the time is right.”

They all thanked the captain and spent the remainder of the evening with the officers talking over old war stories, and enjoying their pipes. Although they all knew Leo’s rank and status, he was treated as one of the group. Helen was one of five women officers on the Yorktown, and the only non-smoker in the group. They tried to tease her into trying the pipe, but had no luck. The little party broke up near midnight.

The next morning they received instructions to report to the wardroom at 0900. They arrived just before a meeting of the ship's officers. A number of the officers were smoking small pipes, very similar to the ones that the Ensigns had received the night before. Captain Webster, smoking his ever present Dunhill poker, informed the group that they had received new orders and were heading towards the Ovac system with all speed. He told them that there would be a number of jumps in quick succession. Upon arrival in the Ovac star system, they were to dispatch the small "jeeps" to conduct a search in the asteroid system for a derelict hulk. Several weeks earlier, a robot freighter had passed through the system and there was an indication of a derelict on the ship's tapes. The Empire Sector Military Command had dispatched the Yorktown to investigate and recover the derelict. He emptied his pipe in the ashtray and said "Gentlemen, ladies, let's all take our duty stations and proceed."

The meeting broke up. Varten and Helen went to the bridge. Leo took up his station in the number 1 ship's lasgun blister. About ten minutes later, the pre-jump alarm sounded, followed by the jump alert alarm, then the jump was made. One condition for conducting a "jump" in a ring drive ship is that the ship had to be far away in empty space between star systems. This meant that normal propulsion methods had to be used to get from a planet within a star system, outside the star system, to such a distance away that a jump could be made. A jump could not be made within a solar system due to the mass of the sun and its strong gravitational field strength.

When a ship "jumps" or moves almost instantaneously from one point in space to another a lot of energy is expended, and there is a disruption of the time-mass-energy continuum. Over the centuries doctors found that people handle jumps in different ways. Some feel no discomfort. Some people feel a mild discomfort. Some people are affected by the jump in a physical way, a mental way or a combination of both. The unlucky ones, an infinitesimally small number, die from the jump. Leo, Varten, and Helen were the lucky ones. During their testing and trips while in training at the Academy, a number of monitored jumps had occurred under controlled conditions. None had suffered any adverse effects during a jump. This had later been verified during long space journeys.

There quickly followed a series of jumps. Finally the 'all clear' alarm sounded. They switched over to the non-jump propulsion system and approached the Ovac star system.

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The crew had been broken up into small groups to man the jeeps during the search. The captain had decided to use the three Ensigns as a single team. Leo, Varten and Helen found themselves in charge of one of the jeeps. A jeep is a small spacecraft that was used for short-range search and recovery operations. It could easily travel between areas of space containing obstacles such as asteroids and other space junk. A pilot, co-pilot and navigator were required to operate the jeep. It could hold ten passengers and a small amount of cargo within the vessel.

The jeep left the Yorktown. They had been given a volume of space between the third and fourth planet in the Ovac system to search. Search and recovery operations were normally very boring work. One had to constantly watch the mass detector displays trying to find the object of concern. The pilot had to be on guard to avoid collisions with space debris. They constantly switched assignments while one person rested. When it was Varten or Leo's turn to rest, the pipe usually came out for smoking.

Helen had just finished her first stint as pilot and at the mass display screen. She sat down and turned to Leo and Varten and said "Hey guys, I have a little surprise for you." She took out the small Dublin pipe that Captain Webster had given to her. "You two will have to loan me some tobacco." She began to fill her pipe with the pseudo-tobacco blend. When she had the bowl filled, she tamped it down with her finger. She took out a match and lit the top of the tobacco, tamped it down, and relit it.

"Where did you learn to pack and light the pipe?" Leo asked.

"After associating with you guys for so long, a girl has got to have learned something." she retorted.

She began puffing on the pipe. "This isn't half bad. The tobacco could be a bit better though." she said.

"Well, you are just going to have to visit the Captain to get the really good stuff" Varten responded.

"That can be arranged" she said.

Varten and Leo were stunned at her newly found pipe smoking expertise. They had little more to say.

The search continued for the rest of the day with no results. No other search team had any good results. They were ordered back to the ship for dinner and a rest while a relief crew continued the search. They were so tired that they immediately went to sleep once their heads hit the pillow.

The next morning they continued the search and rescue operation in the jeep. It was during the fourth hour that Varten noted the presence of an asteroid with an unusually large mass to size ratio showing up on the screen. Helen was in the pilot's chair. Leo returned to the co-pilot's seat while returning his pipe to his pocket. They communicated with the Yorktown to the effect that they were going to check out the asteroid in question. Helen took the jeep out of their search route and headed towards the asteroid on an intersecting orbit. As they approached, they kept a watch on the ship's screens, both visual and radiofrequency. They went into orbit around the asteroid and began a visual and electronic sweep over the surface. About an hour into the sweep, Varten pointed out a deep, cavern running into a series of mountains on the asteroid. Although the

mountains effectively blocked any radiofrequency waves, he was receiving strange readings from a long chasm that ran through the mountains.

“Either the mountains are refocusing our E-M beams and funneling some strange electromagnetic waves out through the chasm, or else there is something very strange going on inside the mountain range. I think we should investigate.” Varten said. Additional examination of the scanners showed a large opening at the foot of one of the mountains at the end of the deep chasm.

“I agree, let’s take a look.” Leo said.

“Not without letting the Yorktown know our plans.” Helen added.

They tried to raise the Yorktown on the hyperwave, but without any success. “It doesn’t surprise me.” Varten said “With all of this electromagnetic radiation going on around here, I doubt we could send anything out. They decided to land the jeep on the asteroid and to explore the chasm and the mysterious opening. Prior to landing, they encoded their intentions onto a memory disk that was launched into space on a beacons drone ship. They knew that the Yorktown would retrieve the drone and their intentions would be known.

Helen landed the jeep softly on the asteroid in a flat location about 500 yards from the cavern entrance. They donned their spacesuits and exited the jeep through the airlock.

They cautiously approached the mouth of the entrance to the mountain. They stepped through what appeared to be an immense doorway into a large, cavernous room with ceilings so high, the ceiling was shrouded in darkness which their searchlights could not penetrate. After walking about 100 ft, they turned back and saw an immense door closing through the opening they had just used, blocking their retreat. As the door closed, high powered lights turned on illuminating the vaulted room. Slowly, the sound of machinery could be heard as an atmosphere was being pumped into the room.

Varten checked his instruments and indicated that they could open their space suits as the atmosphere was breathable.

In front of them they saw what appeared to be the hulk of a large, old spaceship. It appeared to be an old war ship from ancient earth. From the damaged aft-section, it appeared that it had taken a direct hit on its rear propulsion system. Additionally, there was a jagged hole on the starboard side. The ship’s skin was rather dull, indicating that it had been in space a long time and had many collisions with interstellar-dust.

Leo wondered how the derelict hulk had gotten inside the cavern, and where he was?

Suddenly, they heard the pop as if a firecracker had gone off and then there was nothingness.

Slowly, consciousness came back to Leo. He opened his eyes and found himself in a bright, sterile white room. He was held immobile, upright in a stasis field of some sort. Varten was on his left, Helen on his right under identical conditions. He observed that both were coming back to full consciousness. His mouth was dry, but he found that he could speak. Varten and Helen indicated that they also were in good shape.

The door opposite them opened, and a tall, well shaped young woman entered the room. She was dressed in a trendy skimpy body suit, and was smoking what appeared, on first glance, to be an Old Earth Vez teardrop briar.

“Hmm, what have we here? Three brandy-new Academy Graduates that appear to be so green, that their insignias are still shiny!” she enquired. “I am Ptay Knight, and this is my home. I know that you are Crown Prince Leopaldo, but I do not know your associates.”

Leo glanced at the others and said “You are correct, we are fresh from the Academy and attached to the Yorktown. I am Ensign Leopaldo. My associates are Ensign Kirkenbruner and Ensign Von Eckmann. Where are we, and why are you keeping us prisoner?”

“Here” she indicated “is an old secret research laboratory set up sometime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Age of Man for weapons research and development.” It has been long abandoned and forgotten. My father, Richard Knight, and I found it many years ago and have kept its location to ourselves as we explored it. As to why you are being kept as our prisoner, we need to know why you are here, why you are snooping into our affairs, and what your intentions are.”

Leo explained their mission and that the Yorktown was in the asteroid’s spacial quadrant. He told her that they had sent out the signal drone and that the Yorktown knew their location even though they could not be in direct communications due to the electromagnetic interference. “That is quite a nice pipe” he commented, “and the tobacco you are smoking seems quite mild”.

“Thanks” she said “The pipe is an Old Earth Julius Vez pipe from the Old Earth political subdivision known as Canada. The tobacco is a neer-tobacco blend which was obtained while we were in the Carolinian star system. I will release you and your associates under two conditions, one is that you will not try to escape, two is that you will help me solve the mystery of my father’s disappearance.”

“I give you our word that we will not try to escape.” Leo said “However, in order for us to help you, we must find a way to communicate with the Yorktown.”

“That is easily accomplished once I turn off the random jamming field generator” she said as she depressed a control which released Leo, Varten, and Helen from their restraints. She led them to another, much more comfortable room. It had a number of

lounge chairs that faced windows that looked out over the asteroid. As they sat down, she depressed a button on the control panel in her seat. “You should now be able to communicate with the Yorktown”, she said as he passed a communicator to Leo.

Leo had a solid signal to the Yorktown. He informed Captain Webster of their meeting with Ptay Knight and that they had been requested to assist her in finding her father. He had omitted that they had been held as prisoners. Captain Webster informed him that he knew Richard Knight very well as a former military officer and as a star system governor. He agrees to leave them behind while they go on to their next assignment, but will be back in a week to retrieve them if progress has been made.

Ptay invites them to fill up their pipes from the jars of tobacco on the side table. They went over to the side table to make their tobacco selection from about a dozen jars. They filled up the pipes that had been given to them by Captain Webster. “Your selection of tobaccos are quite interesting! All from Old Earth, I see” Varten exclaimed.

“Yes they are, and that is part of the problem I am going to present to you. I think they are related to the disappearance of my father.” She said.

Leo chose a Virginia-based tobacco from the McClelland Tobacco Company named ‘Dark Star’. Helen chose a mild Virginia from McBarrens Company. Varten selected a strong latakia-based tobacco, also from McClellands, named Frog Morton. As they returned to their seats, Ptay said “My choice is a blend of about equal parts of McClelland 5100 and 5105, a mature Virginia and a dark, stoved Virginia in this Old Earth Michael Parks Pipe from around 2006 F.A. The pipe was made as a commemorative pipe for the North American Society of Pipe Collectors.

They lit their pipes and awaited the proper time until Ptay began “My father and I have led a rather quiet and sedate life here on the asteroid for a number of years after he retired from the military and civil service. He has been preparing his memoirs and I my Doctorial Dissertation in the field of artificial intelligence. Occasionally, we have visitors, however most of the time we are by ourselves. Of course, with the sophisticated interstellar hyperwave communications systems, you are never truly by yourself. About six weeks ago, the hulk that you saw in the docking station, showed up weakly on our screens. Using our tractor beams, it was steered into the docking bay. We explored the ship and found it to be late First Age, or early Second Age from dating of the weapons and propulsion systems. You could see that the aft-section of the ship was blasted and there was a gaping hole in its side. We also found out that it could be either robotically controlled or piloted by humans. There were no bodies on board, so we concluded that it was being controlled robotically when it was disabled. We did find a number of pipes and tobacco in the ship’s sleeping quarters as well as crates and casks of tobacco in the ship’s hold.”

She continued “Under treaty, the vessel and its contents become the property of my father and me. We therefore kept the pipes and the tobacco. Father and I both are aware of the value of Old Earth pipes and tobacco. There are people that would commit crimes, even

murder to obtain the pipes and tobacco that we took from the derelict. As you are probably aware, Old Earth pipes and tobaccos are priceless. Two days ago, my father was out on a survey mission among the asteroids as we thought that we had detected one with an orbit that would eventually collide with us. He thought he could nudge it out its current orbit into one that would not be of concern. He left with one of our small scout cruisers and never returned. Although it was beacons, I could not locate the scout with our scanners. He has been missing for two days. That is why I took no chances when you landed.”

“Why did you not request the Yorktown to stay behind and conduct a search?” Helen asked as she pondered the pipe smoke arising from the bowl of her pipe.

“Your presence here provided me with an opportunity. I think that the fewer people that know about the Old Earth pipes and tobacco, the better. If the Yorktown became involved, then it has the potential to snowball into something much larger. After all, you know how bureaucracies are! By the time the search was done, the Emperor himself would be involved!” she stated rather forcefully.

“You are probably correct” Leo said “We will help you in any way we can. Do you have a quadrant map of the asteroid belt?” he asked.

She ran her hand over a set of controls and a 3-dimensioned cube formed in the space above their head representing the near-space quadrant. The asteroids were clearly visible. “The red one is where we are now. The blue one is the one my father went out to move. Between here and there must be over a thousand individual asteroids. We cannot search them all!”

“No, we can’t” Leo stated “However, you do have the computer tracking of your father’s trajectory. We should start there and see what happens. I would suggest that Helen and I take our jeep. She is a crack pilot. Varten will remain here with you. I want to be in constant communications, however, they should be encoded. I have a suspicion that someone is in the vicinity of this asteroid, and that something funny is going on.”

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About an hour later, Leo and Helen had left Ptay’s home asteroid and were following in the footsteps of Richard Knight on his two day earlier trip. Ptay had provided them with the navigational disk. The ship’s computational navigation system automatically corrected for changes in location of the various asteroids. They had checked that the orbit of the problem asteroid had been changed. Leo had come to the conclusion that Richard Knight had completed his job and something had happened when he had returned to his home.

“You know Leo, that tobacco that Ptay gave us was excellent. I have never seen such a varied supply of Old Earth tobaccos, in such quantities, in one place. I can see her point.

Even Captain Webster, in whom I have the highest regard and trust fully, might be tempted by such a supply of tobacco and pipes.”

“Yes Helen, the Old Earth pipes and tobacco that they recovered are above value due to their age and scarcity. It would tempt almost anyone. I am surprised that she has trusted us with her secret. I would not be surprised that someone else is aware of their little stash of goodies, and that someone else is not a person you would hold in high esteem or trust.”

“Well, I guess if you can’t trust the Crown Prince of the Empire, who can you trust?” she replied.

“Your esteem is appreciated; now let’s find out what happened to Richard’s ship.”

They had traveled to within 100 kilometers of the problem asteroid when they started being pulled out of orbit. “We are being pulled out of orbit by a tractor beam.” Helen stated “from that large asteroid off our port-side”. They engaged the drive system even harder, but could not shake out of the grasp of the tractor beam.

They tried to contact Varten and Ptay at the home asteroid, but were unsuccessful due to artificial generated E-M interference. However a local communication was received instructing them to either shut off their drive or else be blown apart. Reluctantly, they donned their space suits, turned off the propulsion system and waited to be boarded.

They did not have long to wait. The jeep was lowered to the surface of the asteroid. Several armed vehicles had weapons aimed at the jeep. About a dozen armed men in space suits surrounded the jeep while they were instructed to disembark from the jeep. They left the jeep, were encircled by their guards and driven off.

A short time later the vehicle entered a doorway which closed around them. They and their captors removed their space suits. They were taken to a room. Their captors pushed them inside with the door slamming behind. Once inside the room, they found that they were not alone. Another man was being held captive. He was a tall, distinguished looking older man with a full head of silver-grey hair.

“Richard Knight, I presume.” Leo said.

“Yes, I am he” the man responded “You look a little familiar, but I don’t recall the name”

“I am Ensign Leopaldo, and my associate Ensign Kirkenbruner”. We are attached to the Empire Cruiser Yorktown. Your daughter, Ptay, has asked us to find you. It looks like we have, however, we now find ourselves in a quite interesting predicament.”

“Of course, Prince Leopaldo, I know and am known to your father, the Emperor. If anything should happen to you, he will be most distressed!” he stated.

“Let’s not worry about that, let’s think of how we are going to get out of our current situation. How have they been treating you? What do you know about the people holding us?”

“I have been treated well. They appear to know about the derelict hulk we found. It seems that I have stumbled across a rather well organized contraband ring. They are selling stolen items on the black market in several star systems. Their merchandise is low quality, fake, reproductions, or stolen items. They buy low and sell high, often to unsuspecting customers. Of course, they pay no taxes to the Emperor. I have heard that the leader’s name is Drago.”

He continued “Drago has offered to ransom me for the derelict ship. He suspects the cargo we found on it. However, you would be a better captive to ransom if he suspects you are the Prince. I would suggest that you do not tell him your true identity.”

“I agree” Leo said “let’s see how we can get out of here. Did you notice any means of escape since you have been here?”

“I have not.”

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It was not long before the guards came back and escorted the captives to a large office. A tall man with a balding head and a long aquiline nose was standing behind the large oak desk. He had a military bearing, use to receiving reports and making decisions. He dismissed the guards and invited the three “visitors” to sit down. “My name is Drago” he said. “I am the leader and brains behind this group of smugglers. I know Mr. Knight. I know that you two are Ensigns in the Empire Star Fleet. To whom do I have the privilege of addressing?” he said in a mocking manner.

“I am Ensign Helen Kirkenbruner” she said “This is Ensign Lee Cantu. We are from the Empire Cruiser Yorktown. We were assigned to search for Mr. Knight and have been patrolling this asteroid system for the past three days. If I might suggest, it will go better for you if you release us now before the Yorktown comes to our aid.”

“Nice try little lady.” Drago replied “The Yorktown jumped space a little over six hours ago. Don’t you think we watch our screens and the communications traffic? But, like I said, nice try.”

“Actually”, Leo said “We are on assignment to assist Richard Knight’s daughter to find her father, and you are correct, the Yorktown did leave this quadrant a short time ago, but sooner or later the Yorktown will return.”

“Ensign Cantu, I get the feeling we have met before. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but I will. Something about you seems familiar.”

“Here is the way I see it. If the Yorktown comes back, I will have to relocate my ‘business’, either way, if I keep the three of you alive or just do away with you altogether. My business in this quadrant is done. However, if I ransom you, then I can make a profit while covering my relocation costs. How does that seem to you?”

“I doubt anyone would find us worth a ransom, even though a small one” Helen replied.

“Well, let’s discuss it a bit.” Drago said “Over on yon table are your pipes. The two pipes that you Ensigns brought are of little value. However, the one you brought Richard is quite interesting. It looks like a Dunhill pipe from the First Age of Man, and a very fine specimen at that. It is probably worth a bundle to a collector. Go get them and let’s light up. I have a very fine pseudo-latakia blend in the jar on the desk. Please fill up and light up, after all, you are my guests!”

They went over and retrieved their pipes, filled them up and lit them. The smell of a heavy latakia tobacco filled the room. Drago took a sandblasted straight billard pipe out of the desk and began to light it.

“This pipe is also from Old Earth” Drago stated “It is made by Ashton, from the Old Earth political subdivision of England. I found it many years ago on an old abandoned starship which we had captured for its scrap value. I have to wonder, Richard, how you came to have such a valuable pipe in your possession.”

“It was a gift from the Emperor to me while I was the Govenor of the Sayshelle Star System.” Richard replied.

“I rather doubt that, because I examined that pipe and found that it had been lightly smoked, and only recently. Of course, I am also aware of the old hulk that you captured and moved to your home asteroid. I rather believe that you found it on that ship.”

“Ensign Chamberlain, I believe that there are a number of people that could come up with a ransom for you and that you are of some value. Richard’s daughter comes to mind immediately. Also, the Empire Naval Service could come up with something, after all, being “two new ensigns lost in space” would be bad public relations for the service. Tell me your opinion on the pseudo-latakia blend.”

“Not bad” said Richard.

“Pretty good, but I prefer a pseudo-virginia tobacco” said Helen.

“Actually, I quite like it” said Leo

“You are a man after my own heart, Ensign Cantu. I have the tobacco especially blended for me. Over many years of pipe smoking, I have found that each person has to find the blend that they like. It is very rare that people will come to have the same opinion on a pipe tobacco. I have also found that there are two types of pipe smokers. Type A is the

kind of person that constantly is in search of a satisfying smoke and goes from tobacco to tobacco, never settling on one. Type B is the person who finds one and never smokes anything else. I am what you could call Type C, a person who has a favorite blend but is open to trying others.”

“I think that Helen and I are too new to pipes to yet be set in our ways. We are just newbys.” Leo replied.

“I think I am your Type B, I have my favorite blend, a pseudo-virginia tobacco, and seldom smoke anything else. My daughter, Ptay, is definitely in your Type A grouping.”

“Speaking of your daughter, I am going to send her an encoded message, once you give me the encoding sequence you use, and basically informing her that you are my guests, and that it will cost five Old Earth pipes for your safe return. I think that is a very generous offer since I will have to relocate my operation and it is a just compensation for my expenses.”

“I doubt she will comply” Richard said.

“She has little choice” Drago replied.

They finished their pipes. Drago told them to keep them. They were escorted back to their cell. Leo and Helen did not observe any means to escape.

-8-

Varten and Ptay had been searching the screens since they had lost communications with the jeep. They knew the spacial coordinates when they disappeared from their screens, but could not decide on a course of action.

“To quote the infamous Sherlock Holmes, ‘This is a real three pipe problem’” He said as they sat in the communications room chairs each smoking a pipe. Varten had his Dublin, Patty her Dunhill. They had about finished when they received an incoming communications. It appeared on the hyperwave communicator screen.

*I have as my guests, Ensigns Chamberlain and Cantu. I also am dining tonight with Mr. Richard Knight. Whether or not they return safely home tonight depends on you. I believe that you have in your possession a quantity of Old Earth pipes and tobacco. To guarantee their safe return, you are to deliver to me 5 Old Earth pipes and five pounds of an English Blend, preferably in tins. If you accept these terms, please respond with ‘accept’.*

*Drago*

“Well, at least we know they are safe” Varten retorted ‘But such a high ransom! Ensign Cantu eh!”

“We can handle the ransom” Ptay responded “However, we only got a dozen or so pipes from the hulk. Radio them that we accept their terms”

Varten sent the message. He received one back that they were to leave the ransom on asteroid number 4634 at 06:00 Universal Coordinated Space Time.

Varten and Ptay refilled their pipes and went back to the smoking room where Ptay unlocked a secret panel. Behind the panel was a wall full of pipes. “These ten pipes are all that remains from the haul of Old Earth pipes.” You can see they are as follows:

1. An Il Ceppo Poker
2. A Richard Lewis Original
3. A Larenzetti freehand
4. A Karl Erik freehand
5. A Ser Jacopo double maxima bent apple
6. A Dunhill 1/8 bent blasted billard
7. An Eltang sandblasted canted billard
8. A Clarence Mickles black rusticated prince
9. A J.T. Cooke black blasted apple with a tuxedo stem
10. A 1/8 bent rusticated Camminento Business

Which ones do you think we should pass on?”

Varten replied “I don’t know which ones to pass on, but I do know which ones I would keep. I would keep the Rich Lewis, the Dunhill, The Eltang, the Cooke, and the Ser Jacopo. However, as you know, pipes are a very personal item. I think the final call has to be yours.”

“That is so true. I concur with your choices, however, I would replace the Ser Jacopo with the Il Ceppo Poker as I like that shape.” She replied.

“Good decision, now what about the tobacco?”

“We easily have that many tins. Most are the McClelland English Blends in the green 100-gram tins. Dad and I like Virginias anyways, so no loss.”

They packaged the pipes and tobacco into a sealed capsule and attached a beacon as they had been instructed. Varten took the capsule and transported it to asteroid no. 4634 depositing it at the specified coordinates. He then returned to the home asteroid.

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Several hours had passed. Leo, Richard, and Helen had been afforded a comfortable meal in their cell. They were given enough tobacco for a smoke. After they had finished, they were escorted back to the room in which they had their previous conversation with

Drago. He stood behind his large desk and appeared to be examining the material sitting upon it.

“Look” he said “You are worth a ransom; a good ransom at that.”

They went over to the desk where they saw five Old Earth pipes and a good quantity of tinned tobacco. “I see that Ptay complied with your demands” Richard said.

“Yes she did, and she sent us some very nice pipes and nothing but top quality tobacco. McClelland English Blends are a fine tobacco, and very hard to find.” Drago said.

“So what about us?” asked Helen.

“I am going to have you escorted back to your jeep along with Richard. You will wait at least one hour until you take off. By then, we will have departed and exited to hyperspace. You will not be able to follow us in your little jeep, and the Yorktown is long gone.”

“Sound fair to me, but at least give us one of your tins of tobacco to pass the time in the Jeep” Leo asked.

“I see Ensign Cantu that you are developing a taste for Latakia. I think your request can be granted.”

They were escorted back to their jeep. While they waited for the hour to pass, they tried their communications gear, but found it had been made inoperative. They decided to smoke the tobacco that their captor had so generously supplied. When time was up, they started the ships drive and headed back to the home asteroid.

They had been traveling about 15 minutes when they found that something had latched on to them and was pulling them off course. “Oh damn, what is going on now?” Leo asked?

Without communications equipment, they could not receive nor send signals. Finally they saw on their visual screens the ship that was pulling them towards it. “Look, It’s the Yorktown!” Helen exclaimed.

“Yes it is. I wonder how they knew.” Leo wondered.

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The jeep docked with the Yorktown. When the hatch was opened, they were escorted to a conference room. Inside the room was Captain Webster, Lt. Commander Mannaccini, Varten, Ptay, Drago in restraints and themselves. Sitting in the center of the table was the ‘ransom’ pipes and tobacco and the other five pipes from the derelict hoard.

“Welcome back my prodigals” Captain Webster said to Leo and Helen. “Hi Richard, and I have already met Ptay, a fine young daughter you have. Please light up your pipes if you desire. I think we can find one for Mr. Drago.”

To no ones surprise, they all began smoking their pipes.

He continued “I guess some explanation is in order. Our true mission was not to locate the derelict spaceship, but rather to investigate smuggling activities in the sector. Now, I am not so daft as to leave three brand new ensigns, and one being the crown prince, on their own, and go away leaving them in possible danger. I am well aware that there have been threats in the past to the Crown Prince’s life. I am smart enough to let them operate independently and monitor the situation and let it mature. Sort of like aging fine tobacco. We did depart the system this morning, but came back very quickly and monitored all activities on our screens, and checked all hyperwave communications. Once we saw that Drago and his cronies were deserting like rats leaving a sinking ship, we picked them up. We also picked up Varten and Ptay, and the jeep returning to the home asteroid.”

“A good plan Norman” Richard said “had you not have left the Ensigns and departed, Drago would not have showed his hand. He felt safe once he saw the Yorktown depart.”

“Looks like you have me” Drago responded “Lock, stock, and barrel. Crown Prince eh? I knew I recognized him from somewhere. Ensign Cantu? Cantu? Oh damn. Cantu is where Castello pipes were made on Old Earth. You are very clever and I see your daughter kept the best of the pipes!”

“Don’t go to harsh on Drago, Captain” Leo stated. After all, he did set us free. He is, in his own way, an honorable man.”

“I don’t think things will go bad with him, especially when you intercede for him with your father, the Emperor. Knowing you father, he will soon have Drago working for us. You see, I know that Drago was once the weapons master for House Unger, until it folded after the whale fur market fiasco. I think some of his tendencies towards smuggling were due to the sorry business tricks that were pulled on House Unger. However, I have a certain young Ensign named Varten von Eckman who needs specialized training in that area because I think he has a good future as a weapons master. It looks like a perfect match to me.”

“It sounds good to me” Varten replied “I do think this little exercise has demonstrated that the three of us do work well as a team.”

“I agree” both Leo and Helen responded.

“And so do I” Captain Webster answered.

The Lt. Commander departed with Drago to a more secure location on the ship.

“Truly a King’s ransom is on the table before us!” Captain Webster stated the obvious. “Yes” Richard replied, “I would like each of you to take one of these pipes. Friendship is much more valuable than all these Old Earth Pipes, and I would like to think of us as all friends.”

Richard doled out four of the pipes. Leo chose the Rich Lewis Pipe, Varten the Eltang, Helen the Mickles, and Captain Webster the J.T. Cooke.

“Fine selections! You all made very good selections. I hope you will keep these pipes and smoke them in good health.” Richard said. “For you new officers, I want you to remember that it is a good thing to gift a pipe. It is also good to receive one. It is bad taste to turn down such a generous gift.”

They all thanked Richard and Ptay for the pipes, and stayed up late trying out their new gifted pipes and Richard’s most excellent McClelland English blends.

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They had been smoking their pipes in a very pensive manner. “Thirty years ago, Helen. It has been a very interesting life. I wonder what ever happened to Captain Webster, Richard Knight and his daughter Ptay?”

“ Leo, I believe that Captain Webster retired as a vice-admiral. Robert served under him under one tour of duty during his career. Richard retired and became a pipe carver and noted pipe collector with Ptay following in his footsteps. I don’t believe she ever married.”

“Yes, and Varten completed a thorough training under Drago. I believe that is why he became such a successful weapons master to me. I heard that after his training had ended, Drago was assonated by one of his enemies from his long, dark past. You, on the other hand, became engaged to Robert Chamberlain, married him and both of you became a valuable team and remained good friends to me once I ascended the throne.”

“True, and this was when you and Varten turned me into a confirmed pipe smoker. It also taught you to be generous in terms of always gifting pipes to others so they could share in such a comfortable pursuit as pipe collecting and smoking. This is something the three of us all took away from the Yorktown and our adventure with Richard Knight and Drago. The Three Amigos, and so we have always been, that, and maybe a little more!”

“Yes, but it also was where we received our first Old Earth pipes, first among many in my collection” Leo replied.

The sun had long set over Castle Pesaro. Their pipes had gone out after being smoked several times. Leo and Helen got up; he placed his hand in hers. They left the dining room and headed off for another night together.

-END-