

To Bait a Trap

By

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-1-

They were sitting in Leo's smoking room at Castle Pesaro following a sumptuous meal prepared by the castle kitchen staff. Leo had just taken out a large sized carved white pipe from its case. He began to fill it with a virginia neer-tobacco grown and aged from one of his estates. Varten, who had been contemplating the smoke rising from his own pipe, remarked "That is a very nice pipe, Leo. Where did you get it?"

"It is from Old Earth. I believe it was hand carved in a country identified as Turkey. The pipe is made from a material which was mined there called Meerschaum which means 'sea foam' in the old German language. It is a very light, porous material that was cherished among pipe smokers. If Old Earth briar was the king of pipes, then meerschaum was the queen." He replied "The shape of the pipe is the head of an ancient saint named Nicholas. Tradition has it that at Christmas time, St. Nicholas or Santa Claus brought gifts to all of the good boys and girls in the First Age of Man. Meerschaum is a special material for pipes. As you smoke the meerschaum pipe the outside of the bowl changes in color from white to pink to browns to finally a dark black color. Historically, according to our best information, people smoked meerschaum pipes before the briar pipe."

"Is that one new to your collection? I don't recall seeing it before." Varten asked.

"Yes it is. It came in a package from Nick and LuJo. I can tell you that smoking this pipe is different from smoking any of our Old Earth briar pipes or the artificial briar that we can purchase today. I have even tried some of the artificial meerschaum pipes but they do not compare to this genuine Old Earth block meerschaum. You get a pure taste of the tobacco and nothing else."

"Beside that" Varten replied "It is very beautiful to see the pipe's carving. It is truly a work of art."

"Thanks" Leo answered as he tamped the top of the tobacco "It seems that it came to Nick during the course of one of his investigations. He shipped it to me, but decided to bring the Old Earth Tobaccos in person."

“It seems that they always come up with something” Varten stated as he continued smoking.

“Yes and the tale is always worth the wait” Leo replied. “They are bringing me a couple of sleeves of Old Earth Tobacco from Donald Trimp. They did not want to leave it to any other form of shipping due to its high value. One tin alone could be worth over several year’s wages. According to Donald’s text message to me, they are bringing me three sleeves of Samuel Galwith’s Full Virginia Flake, six tins of the original McCranies Red Ribbon, and about a dozen other tins of Old Earth tobacco. One of Donald’s teams found them stashed away at one of their previously abandoned asteroid mining projects. Donald kept the rest of the Old Earth tins of tobacco for his own collection.”

There was a knock from the door and the officer delivered a message to Varten. He dismissed the officer, read the message and turned to Leo “The needle ship that is carrying Nick and LuJo is missing. A distress message was sent out and it appears that an emergency jump was made.”

-2-

The two-person needle ship was limping at its greatly reduced top speed towards planet Hayden in the Lynase star system, home of the Empire’s central administrative headquarters. They had been making good speed until they were ambushed by a mysterious vessel. The massive star ship was unmarked. There had been no communications with the needle ship prior to the attack. The amount of damage was relatively minor. They had been lucky. Their on-board experimental Artificial Intelligence Ship Operating System (AISOS) had performed flawlessly, making a jump through hyperspace at the first sign of danger. Fortunately, they had not been near any massive planets or suns which would have prevented the engagement of the hyper-drive system and not permitted the emergency jump.

They were in the needle ship’s command room. “You assess the damage” Nick said to LuJo “I will try to find out exactly where we are in all creation”. He had the ship’s computerized navigation system start to scan maps of known space with information from the jump coordinates to find their location. LuJo was assessing the amount of damage to the ship and determine what, if any repairs they could make.

They met about an hour later in the meal room. “The ship is not in too bad a shape” LuJo stated as she lit her small Old Earth Dunhill Group 3 Lovat filled with a virginia blend “The damage was minor and AISOS has already made the necessary drive repairs.”

“I wish that my report was just as good” Nick said as he lit his small Old Earth Steve Weiner travel pipe “Our hyperwave communications system is out. All we have is close range interplanetary communication. We are somewhere in the Quanase Nebula. I would make an educated guess that we are close to the Vansant star system. We can make a couple of jumps and get home. But that is not what bothers me. We were attacked right outside the alpha Centane star system by that mysterious ship. I don’t know why we were attacked, but we must get a

message through to Castle Pesaro to let them know our status, and that somebody is going around attacking Empire ships.”

As LuJo puffed on her pipe she continued “I think our best course of action is to head to the Empire Base on the occupied planet in the Vansant star system. If my memory is correct, it is named Tyndal and there is a major Empire Naval base there. They can send a hyperwave message to Castle Pesaro and let them know our situation.”

“Yes, I agree” Nick replied as he instructed AISOS to head towards Tyndal “We can let the people with the brains plan out the next step.”

“On a side note, I hope that Leo is enjoying the meerschaum pipe you sent. I agreed with you that you could not trust shipping the Old Earth tobacco.” LuJo remarked.

“If I know Leo” he replied “not only is he enjoying it, but he is probably researching the topic and expounding on the wonders of meerschaum pipes to anyone and everyone!” Nick replied with a laugh.

As they approached the Centane star system, two marked Empire Naval Cruisers picked up their trail. They communicated with the ships, identified themselves as Castle Pesaro staff, and asked to be picked up. The needle ship was attached to the larger cruiser via a tractor beam. Once attached to the larger ship, the airlock was opened. Nick and LuJo entered the cruiser where they were met by a detail of armed Empire marines. They were escorted to the Cruiser’s command conference room. There were several Empire Naval uniformed people in the room. A tall man rose to meet them as the others took seats at the table. “I am Captain Nelson and you are on the Empire Cruiser Alpha with our twin cruiser Beta following. You may smoke, if you wish.” he said as he shook their hands.

“I am Nick Reardon and this is my wife LuJo” Nick replied “We are on the Emperor’s staff at Castle Pesaro” he answered the Captain. Nick saw that two of the officers at the table were smoking pipes while the third a cigar. The Commander was holding a rather large full bent brandy shaped pipe.

The Commander indicated their seats around the table. He introduced the others at the table as Lieutenants Smithton, Jonas, and Smyth, who were responsible respectively for engineering, communications, and propulsion on the Alpha. As they sat down he said to them “We have already communicated with our base on Tyndal. They have communicated with Castle Pesaro over the hyperwave. I have been instructed to take you and your ship to Tyndal. When we get there, you will meet with Admiral Haynes. Your ship’s computer files will be analyzed, and the necessary repairs to your needleship will be made. Other than that, we have instructions not to quiz you regarding what happened to you and your ship but are to make you welcomed to our ship and at home.”

“Thank you Captain. Both Nick and I appreciate your help and welcoming. I am sure that it will all come out in the end. Is that an Old Earth Northern Briars pipe you are smoking Captain” Lu Jo asked as she took out her small Old Earth Dunhill tanshell briar and began filling it up with the tobacco jar she was offered from Lieutenant Smyth.

“It is indeed, young lady” the Captain replied “I can tell you are quite knowledgeable about pipe, and rare ones at that. Would that be an Old Earth Dunhill you are smoking”.

“It is” LuJo replied as she smelled the aroma of the tobacco in the jar “I would believe this to be a neer-tobacco blend similar to Sim Gorwaith’s Full Virginia Flake.”

“You are correct again” the young lieutenant Smyth said “how did you ever get so much knowledge on pipes and tobacco? My pipe is a Thomas James Rachards pipe made of Krenelian B’iar”. Mr. Jonas is smoking a pipe made of neer-briar. We are quite envious of the Captain’s Old Earth pipe”.

“Yes, and the pipe tobacco is one we can all agree on, except for Lieutenant Smithton who only enjoys cigars.” Captain Nelson added.

“I guess she is so knowledgeable because she associates with me” Nick answered as he lit his travel pipe and winked. “We also have many friends that enjoy pipes and pipe lore.”

“We have noticed that there seems to be a trend that where once, even though rare, OE tobaccos could be found. It seems that it is becoming rarer and rarer to find these treasures.” Captain Nelson stated.’

“We haven’t noticed that” LuJo responded “but we will mention it to our friends and see what they think”.

They continued to discuss pipe lore on their way to the Empire Naval Base on Tyndal. The trip, while relatively short, was quite enjoyable for both Nick and LuJo.

-3-

As they arrived at the Empire Naval base on Tyndal, Nick was watching the naval ships that encircled the planet. There seemed to be more than usual. “Isn’t that the Lexington over there” he asked as their shuttle headed planet-side.

“I do believe it is” LuJo replied “it looks like a regular flotilla of vessels is here. I wonder what is going on to attract such firepower.”

They arrived on the planet and were dispatched to the main Empire Naval facility by aircar. Once they arrived, a young ensign escorted them to the base conference room. As they walked in, they encountered a thick fog of pipe smoke. There were about a half dozen officers smoking pipes and cigars sitting around the conference table. The Visi-screen was showing a similar conference room that Nick noticed was located at Castle Pesaro. A familiar face rose to meet

them as they entered. “Hey Nick” he said “I heard that you finally lassoed that young mustang” as he pointed to LuJo with his big Old Earth Castello shape #84.”

“Lassoed me?” LuJo said “I had to stop for him to catch me” which caused Commodore to break out laughing. Commodore Rio introduced them to Admiral Haynes and other officers around the table. They took their seats around the table between the Admiral and the Commodore.

“Emperor Leopaldo wants you to know that he is glad that you are safe and sound. Our best people are going over your ships records to determine where you were attacked and to find out more information on the attackers.” Admiral Haynes informed them “We are awaiting for Varten von Eckman, Emperor Leopaldo, and Naval Chief of Staff Haney to join us in conference. We have an extremely highly secured Hyper Wave Video Conference System which was just upgraded to a “000” security level.”

“We know about the Commodore’s passion for Castello Hawkbills, but I see you are smoking a very rare Old Earth Michael Butera Billiard pipe” LuJo said to the Admiral “and a very beautiful one at that.”

“Thank you mam” the admiral replied “It smokes as great as it looks” he added.

The video screen showed three people entering the room at Castle Pesaro. Varten von Eckman, the Emperor’s weapons master and head of the Empire Intelligence Service (EIS) was smoking an old Old Earth GBD Prehistoric Bulldog shaped pipe with an orange stem. Admiral Haney was smoking what appeared to be a Rathenberg black pebble grain pipe in the shape of a pot. Emperor Leopaldo was smoking his Old Earth Jim Cooke straight black sandblasted billiard. He began to speak “I believe that you know everyone on this end. We know everyone there on Tyndal. It is great to see that you and LuJo are safe, Nick. Admiral Haynes has sent us your initial report and it has given us a better picture of the situation. Varten will bring us up to date.”

Varten began to speak interspacing his comments with pipe smoke. “It all started very slowly about a year ago, almost deliberately to stay off of our radar screen. Commercial and private ships carrying packages with Old Earth tobaccos on their manifest were disappearing, never reaching their destination. Even one of Donald Trimp’s private ships had disappeared. This resulted in the already enormous price of Old Earth tobaccos to go even more astronomical. There was a shortage in the marketplace and what did appear, was extremely expensive. The shipment of Donald’s that had disappeared had several tins which had been tagged. These tagged tins later showed up in the marketplace which made us very suspicious. Word of your secret cargo was deliberately leaked and you saw what happened. I’m sorry Nick and LuJo, but we had to have a ‘bait’ that was believable and you were it. I’m just glad that you both got away.”

“That’s what we are here for” Nick said as he took a bow. The rest chuckled.

Admiral Haney began “As Mr. Von Eckman said, we do not know who the “they” are. We do know that they are well financed and have a significant military capability. We think they may be a minor house, but are not sure. As you have seen, the flotilla of ships under the command of Commodore Rio is now in your star system. The two cruisers Alpha and Beta will also be at the Commodore’s disposal. We propose that you continue your trip back to Castle Pesaro, Nick and LuJo, with your special cargo. We will leak news of the continuation of your trip, but you will be constantly under the protection of the flotilla. Our plan is to use you again as bait, and when the bait is taken, the ships under Commodore Rio’s command will capture the pirates.”

“Why would the pirates track and seize us when they know that the Commodore’s ships are in the area and that we are just bait?” LuJo asked.

Emperor Leopaldo replied “First, the cover story is that the Commodore’s ships will depart tomorrow for maneuvers in the Storagic Star System. Second, we are installing a newly invented, secure, hyperwave tracker on your needle ship. Your physical location will be known at all times. Once the fleet is gone, and you depart, we believe you will be a target that the pirates just cannot avoid.”

“Sounds like it will work to me” LuJo exclaimed “here we go again. It must be you Nick. You are just good for bait in a trap” as she pointed her finger at him.

“They have to design the trap to be sure that the bait is worth taking, which is why you are coming with me” he replied.

“No” Varten replied “the bait is not you two; it is the package of Old Earth tobacco tins.”

“Just be sure that if you are captured, you do nothing to earn the pirate’s displeasure, at least until the navy effects your recovery. We want you back in one piece, not many.” Leo ordered. “If there are no more questions, we will adjourn until after the operation. I expect we will see our “bait” next back at Castle Pesaro.”

The meeting ended and everyone left the room. Admiral Haynes and Commodore Rio together with Nick and LuJo retired to the Admiral’s private quarters. They sat down and relaxed with drinks and their pipes. The Admiral opened a tin of Old Earth McClelland’s Deep Hollow with a tin date of 1998 FA. “Ok Chuck, the public show is over” the Admiral said to the Commodore.

“What do you mean?” LuJo asked suspiciously.

“We know that there was a spy in the room” Commodore Rio said as he puffed on the pipe “We made sure he or she heard just what Emperor Leopaldo and his staff wanted to be heard.”

“Everything will take place just as you heard” the Admiral said “However, there will be two differences. The needle ship you brought here with will not be the one you will be using to leave. It is an identical duplicate with some very important differences. The hyperwave tracker

will be installed. Additionally, a new nullo-tractor beam system is being installed, and finally, the propulsion system is a new dual-hyper-speed drive. The nullo-tractor beam system allows you to either repel a tractor beam or to latch on to something and pull with over 1000 times the power of the current tractor beams. The new dual-hyper-speed drive can be used as a normal drive or it will allow you to transport things over 100 times more massive than you or to propel yourself at 100 times your current speed capabilities in normal space.”

“In other words” Commodore Rio explained “You will have all of the towing and speed as an Empire Battle Ship in basically an unarmed tiny needle ship. Your AISOS system has been upgraded to handle this new equipment and it has automatic programming to return it to the orbit of Hyden, Castle Pesaro which you can activate and program if you so desire. There is one more thing, but we are not at liberty to discuss it with you in case you are so unfortunate to be captured.”

They sat well into the night and about finished the excellent tin of McClelland Deep Hollow. Before leaving to retire for the night, Admiral Haynes gave them a shot of fine liquor. “It is called Cherry Kjifa, and is made from an Old Earth recipe. It tasted great. They were shown to their quarters for the night. Before any gymnastics, they found that they both fell into a deep sleep.

-4-

They awoke late in the morning. Both felt like they had been hit by a truck. They felt much better after a shower, coffee and breakfast. They found that Commodore Rio’s flotilla had indeed left the star system. They were taken to their needle ship by a fast inter-space tug. Once aboard, they began to check everything out.

“It looks like we just got off the ship and came back on. I see no changes” LuJo said.

“Even our cargo is here, just as we left it. Whoever added the new equipment did an excellent, undetectable job” Nick replied.

They requested and were given permission to depart, bound for planet Hayden in the Lynase star system. They traveled within the local star system out to its outer edges, testing their new propulsion system. Once beyond the last planetary body, they made their first jump through interstellar space. As they left hyperspace and came back into real time space their detector alarms went off. A large unmarked ship was approaching with its tractor beam attaching itself and pulling their vessel towards it. They heard a voice coming from their communicator.

“Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Reardon, I suggest you do not try to run this time. You will not be as lucky as you were the last time” they heard.

“Lucky?” Nick replied “you almost killed us the last time”.

“You did not need to jump” the voice replied “you did it to yourself”.

“What do you want” LuJo asked.

“You know what I want, the Emperor’s Old Earth tobaccos” the voice replied.

“You are going to have to take it” she replied.

“We will “replied the voice.

Nick adjusted the nullo-tractor beam control until now the needle ship was towing the unknown ship. He engaged the dual-hyper-speed drive to the point that their needle ship was pulling both ships through local space.

“What are you doing?” the voice asked through the communicator.

“It looks like we have you” LuJo answered.

“Not for long” the voice replied.

Suddenly they heard a clanging on the hull of the needle ship. Then they heard the sound of something spinning. Then, they heard nothing or felt nothing.

-5-

“The paralysis gas wears off quickly” the man said. As they came too, they found that they were sitting in a room on a ship, not their needle ship. Their pipes and tobacco pouches were sitting on the table in front of them with the Emperor’s tobaccos. “Come, join me in a pipe.” He said “Here is a jar filled with your famed Old Earth McClelland’s #5100, Red Kake. Consider a bowl full as my gift to you for bringing me some of Emperor Leopaldo’s treasure.”

“How did we get here” LuJo asked.

“Well, I just couldn’t let you tow me all around the universe, now could I?” the man replied “just an old fashion tethered projectile that attached magnetically to the skin of your needle ship, drilled a little hole, and injected a paralysis gas. It is rather ingenious, don’t you think?”

“I guess so” Nick replied “and who are you?”

The man looked comically downcast and said “You don’t remember me - Captain Mondure of the War Bird? Well, the old War Bird, this is the new one. It is more up-to-date.”

“I remember you” Nick replied as he filled his pipe and lit it. What’s your game this time?”

Captain Mondure lit his pipe slowly, thought for a minute “The stock of Old Earth tobaccos is rather fixed within the Empire. Yes, it fluctuates slowly with the finding of a new cache or is reduced through smoking that which is in people’s private collections. However, there is a flow

of this special merchandise throughout the empire. If the flow were to stop, then the cost would go astronomically high. Even the rich collectors would have to slow down in their purchases, so those that have a huge supply could become enormously rich. I and my followers are disrupting the flow and will eventually become rich and a force for the emperor to recognize us as such.”

“It’s not like water or air, a necessity for life” LuJo said as she filled her pipe “It’s not something that you have to have to exist.”

“It is for the rich” the Captain Mondure replied. It is not the little man that rules, it is the rich. Always has been, always will be.

“Isn’t it time for the Calvary to arrive, Captain?” Nick asked.

Captain Mondure laughed “We have made 5 jumps and your hyperwave tracker was disconnected a long time ago. I think we are quite safe”

Nick looked at LuJo “I see your spy was quite effective” she told Mondure.

“Yes she was” he replied, but you did have a few things we did not take into account. Now that drive is sweet! The tractor beam modifications are magnificent. I think it is worth having the needle ship’s new technology regardless of the Old Earth tobaccos.”

The room communicator suddenly alarmed “Captain, we are surrounded by a fleet of Empire ships. Three cruisers have their tractor beams on us. We are dead in space.”

“Dammit, how did we fail this time” he shouted as he ran out of the room. A short time later they felt a lurch and a ship’s officer came into their room. “Sir, Mam, we surrender to superior forces. Please tell the Empire ships that we give up.”

They were led to the helm of the ship and the communicator. Nick spoke with Commodore Rio “They wish to surrender. It seems that the lurch we felt was former Captain Mondure leaving the scene of the crime in our needle ship. You won’t be able to hold him.”

“It’s a shame he got away” the Commodore said “tell the people on the ship that we are going to board them and take them captive.”

“Will do” Nick replied “What time is it? He asked.

“It is about 2330 hours space time, Why?” she replied

“Well in about 5 minutes, Captain Mondure will be in for a surprise”.

At 2335 hours space time, the programming of the AISOS of the needle ship took control and began its automatic jump program that would end its trip in the space around Planet Hayden, of the Lynase star system, site of Castle Pesaro and home of Emperor Leopaldo.

It took Captain Mondure a while to figure out exactly what was happening. When he did, he did his best to force a change in the programming, but was unsuccessful. He opened a tin of Old Earth Full Virginia Flake tobacco, filled his pipe and sat down to enjoy it while contemplating the failure of this exercise.

-6-

Once more, they gathered in Leo's comfortable smoking room. His package of Old Earth pipe tins safely on the table (minus one tin) along with many opened tins and jars of tobacco. They were all sitting around the table enjoying their pipes, Leo, Helen, Nick, LuJo, Varten, and Admiral Haynes and Commodore Rio.

"He was really surprised when the fleet showed up, wasn't he" Varten said puffing on his Old Earth GBD prehistoric bulldog.

"Yes he was, and so were we, with the hyperwave tracker disconnected and multiple jumps made. How did you locate us" Nick asked.

Haynes puffed on his Savinelli Autograph looked at Rio who was clenching his Old Earth Castello GG-65 Old Antiquari pipe "you remember your parting drink, the Cherry Kjifa?"

"Yes" LuJo looked quizzically smoking her Old Earth Group 3 Dunhill Shell briar in a lovat shape.

"Well I wasn't sure you would make it to your quarters before it knocked you out. Our medical teams implanted a small device, no larger than a small capsule, under the skin of the right armpit of you and Nick. You won't see a surgical scar, but now we can locate you anywhere in the universe now. It is one of Varten's new devices for the EIS."

"It sure worked in your case" Varten replied "we can't afford to lose our best operatives."

"Was Captain Mondure surprised on the lack of control he had on our needle ship?" Nick asked as he puffed on his Old Earth Dunhill Group 5 2000 RTDA black sandblast pipe.

Leo puffed on his Old Earth SMS Meerschaum St. Nicholas pipe "You could say that. He had the complete control consol torn apart when he was apprehended in orbit above us. He couldn't understand why the needle ship was unresponsive to his command."

Helen stood up "It is great to have you all back with us. The price of Old Earth tobaccos will still be high but something that will be within the reach of many. Your efforts have made this possible. Leo and I both want to thank you."

"Hear Hear" they all replied.

Varten's communicator beeped. He read the text message. "Damn!" he exclaimed "It seems that our Captain Mondure has escaped again. It seems he had help escaping while en-route to the prison colony where he was assigned. Last heard, he was on a needle ship, destination unknown."

A man knocked at the door and entered carrying a package. He gave it to LuJo. She opened the card. "It's from Captain Monjure for me." She said "Captain Mondure says that we will meet again sometime in the future but until then this package will have to do."

She opened the package and out fell a book onto the table. The book was entitled "Secret Agent Girl – How to Bait a Hook".

They all just laughed.

"Boy has this joke gone too far" LuJo exclaimed.

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