

**THE  
LEOPALDO  
SAGA**

SCIENCE FICTION FOR PIPE SMOKERS

***BY  
JOHN P. SEILER***

<http://mysite.verizon.net/seilerjp>

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>TITLE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
SATISFACTION	3
DEATH IN A CLOSED ROOM	10
THE PIPE SHOW MURDER	15
THE PIPE CLEANER'S TWIST	25
THE COLLECTOR'S TINS	34
THE GOOD WEDDING	60
ONE DAY IN THE LIFE	74
HAWKBILLS IN SPACE	92
HOW EMPEROR LEOPALDO ACHIEVES THE PERFECT SMOKE	123
THE DISAPPEARING CHARATANS	126
THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE AMAZING LIGHT AND THE BANK HEIST	142
THE COUNTDOWN	162
REPRODUCTION	178
THE THREE AMIGOS	200
THE SCHEME OF DOCTOR FU MANCHU	218

# SATISFACTION

By  
John Seiler

Copyright © 2000, SATISFACTION, All Rights Reserved

## Prologue

There had been three ages of mankind. The First Age of Man ended with the First Galactic War. The Second Age of Man ended with the Revolt Against Utopia. Mankind was in the Third Age of Man, some 20,000 years since the revolt. The Empire encompassed over 50,000 worlds. The form of government was basically feudal, having an Emperor at its head, a mostly ceremonial legislative body (Reischstagen), and was based more on political alliances between families.

-1-

Emperor Leopaldo XVI, of the dynastic Family Lineaus walked deep into Castle Pesaro. Disturbing reports had filtered in all day. Varten von Eckman, the Emperor's weapons master and chief-of-staff, had reported a rumor he had received concerning an expected attempt on the Emperor's son, Kyle's life. There were inferences that Family Chesterfield, a family with whom there had been a long on-going vendetta, was behind such a plot. He also realized that they would use intermediaries so there would be no way to prove the source of the attack. On the good side, however, he received a message from Johannes Seiler. His family, a noble but minor one in the Reischstagen, had ties within the mercantile directorates. He was known to be able to obtain the unobtainable, through trade and other means. The Emperor had much on his mind as he entered his private study.

He walked into his library, and sat in his comfortable chair before a massive ornate polished oak desk. He had been assured that the oak was genuine, from Old Earth. He chuckled to himself. It was well known that he was a collector of pipes from all over the Universe and a smoker of the high nicotine content golden seaweed that passed these days for tobacco. The journals of the day spoke of his favorite deep brown pipe, carved from Acatian wercarra wood. In-fact, he was the owner of quite a collection of smoking pipes, and even had a small group of ancient briar pipes and a small cache of Old Earth pipe tobacco.

His eyes revolved around the room past the numerous bookcases lining the walls. He still had a large collection of books, even though "hollo-books" had done away with real books many centuries previously. Leopaldo, Leo to his intimates, tried to obtain the real books, as he found he enjoyed them so much more than by getting information from electro-optical means. He had a number of rare books on pipes and tobacco in his collection, including books by Ehwa, Hacker, Herment, and many others. He also had some journals from ancient times such as Pipe and Tobacco, The Pipe Collector, and the Pipe Smokers Ephemeris. It was a very expensive proposition restoring and maintaining the old books, but it was one of his petty vices. As his

eyes continued around the room, they fell on a large mahogany cabinet. Rich in ornate scroll work, it had an optical/thumbprint activated lock. This limited access to the contents to himself, alone, unless one of the devilish Carnish shape-changers could assume his form and fingerprints. Inside the cabinet was his pride and joy: several hundred currently available pipes from many of the known worlds of the universe, plus the jewels of his collection; six pipes from Old Earth.

Pipes from Old Earth were extremely difficult to obtain. During the First Inter-Galactic War, ending the first Age of Man, Old Earth had been ravished and destroyed. The old European heath bush used to make briar pipes and the tobacco plants all went up in a nuclear nightmare. It was the end of the briar pipe and genuine tobacco. Neither the heath bush nor genuine tobacco was found to grow well off of the Earth. Although substitutes were found, and very good ones at that, it was generally agreed among connoisseurs that there was nothing like the real briar pipes and tobacco from Old Earth.

He walked over to the cabinet, activated the eye scan, placed his thumb in the slot, and watched the doors open after his identity was validated. Inside were a number of pipe racks, all full of pipes of every sort. He selected an ancient pipe rack made by a skilled carver named Von-Erck. His eyes grazed lovingly over the six pipes housed in the rack. All were from Old Earth, and all were worth their weight in any of the Universe's rarest commodities. These pipes were the crowning pieces of his collection, worth more than the total holdings of some of the empire's first families.

The Duke knew the history of five of the six ancient pipes. The first pipe was a Savinelli Autograph from a part of Old Earth called Italy. He figured it was from the late 20th century First Age (F.A.). It was a full bent with a beautiful smooth finish. It was a grade 00 pipe. It was one of his favorite smokers, pleasant to hold with a straight grain. Over the centuries, it had colored to a deep, dark brown. The signature on the stem was almost gone, but this added to its uniqueness.

The second and third pipes were made by a company named Dunhill. It was from a political subdivision of Old Earth called England. It had a white spot or dot on the stem, and by studying his reference books, he knew from the code stamped on the pipe, that they were made in 1978 and 1984 F.A., respectively. The first pipe was a group 4 tanshell full bent billiard. The second a group 6 Cumberland billiard. Both were very nicely made and smoked well. He knew that Dunhill pipes were made to last, and these had lasted many centuries. He often wondered if the original pipe maker ever envisioned how long their pipes would last?

The fourth pipe in the series was a Castello natural vergin, Shape #65. It also came from Italy and was a full bent billiard. Rough and craggy, it felt fantastic when he smoked it. He was not sure what the little diamond in the stem meant, but liked the appearance of the pipe. He believed that Carlo Scotti really enjoyed making pipes for others to enjoy. He also knew that a Castello with a white stem was one of the most valuable of pipes ever produced, but he also heard rumors that the head of Family Trego had cornered the black market on them.

The fifth pipe was an enigma to him. The pipe came from an Old Earth political subdivision

called Ireland. It was a Peterson Sherlock Holmes Series but had two stems. The first stem was a normal Peterson P-lip. The second stem looked like someone had taken a rasp and filed off the P-lip. From his extensive references on pipes, he knew that the pipes were designed based on those that Peterson thought were smoked during the period of Sherlock Holmes. He also knew that Sherlock Holmes was a fictional character. He had a copy of the rare Christopher Morley edition of Sherlock Holmes stories in his library.

The last of the Old Earth pipes was a complete mystery. The only stampings on it was a "DA". The pipe, a full bent with a screw-type curve on the shank, was very unusual. Sophisticated non-destructive dating techniques placed its carving around 1995 - 2000 F.A. He had Varten, conduct an informational search to find information on the "DA" pipe. There were some references to an IRC #PIPES Chat Channel, and one of the people that frequented it, but nothing concrete. It was also known that the original carver had once has honorable mention in a pipe carving contest sponsored by the old Pipe and Tobacco magazine. No one knew where or by whom the pipe was made.

Inside his mahogany pipe/tobacco cabinet were three drawers. They held about two dozen sealed tins and some loose bags tobacco from Old Earth. They had names like Deep Hollow, Frog Morton, Beacon, Chatsworth, etc. After all these years, they were still nicely aged and preserved since they were held in null-entropy fields. His researches had indicated that most of the really good Old Earth tobacco disappeared around the year 2010 F.A. when the anti-smoking movement took control of the political governments of Old Earth. That which survived was from caches from pipe collectors and those that had the forethought to put it in storage. He could not believe the gross stupidity of the anti-tobacco faction. Nothing that man ever developed was such a stress-breaker as pipe smoking. Everything has risks. Man had learned over the centuries that you cannot make a risk-free society. When they tried to create a Utopian society by turning everything over to computers and machines, the machines soon took control over mankind. Life had not been worth living for the humans, and much of mankind had ended up as slaves to the thinking machines. Thus mankind revolted against the machines. This event marked the end of the Second Age of Man. Nevermore would machines run mankind. But his thoughts went back to the tobacco. Although the pseudo-tobacco, golden nicotine laden seaweed was good, it was just not like real tobacco from Old Earth.

The last drawer in the cabinet held pipe tampers, matches, and pipe cleaners. After all these years, pipe cleaners were still made. Matches were not much used, since all the new pipes came with autoigniters. Since most of the pseudo-tobaccos left no ash, pipe tampers were not really needed, however, since he enjoyed his ancient Old Earth pipes, he had need for pipe tampers. His collection ran the gamut from the old aluminum nail with a flat shovel on the end, to a Ming Kahuna tamper, finally, to some exquisite rare wood tampers made by an artist named Vautrin.

He reached into the cabinet, selected the Dunhill Cumberland to smoke, carefully filled it, pinch by pinch, with a blend named Tom's Red and Black, of which he only had a few ounces left, lit the pipe, and sat back in his chair and enjoyed the taste and aroma.

As he blew smoke rings he thought about the package that he was going to receive. The message

from Johannes was rather short"

To: Emperor Leopaldo, Castle Pesaro

From: Johannes, Family Seiler, Pittman IV

A messenger will call on you tonight with a package containing a Castello Shape #84 and some assorted Old Earth tins of real tobacco. If you wish to keep the package, the cost will be dear. You will know the messenger by the password "asp". rosebud

Another Castello Pipe! A shape #84!! He had read the treatise in his library on the collectability of this shape by Messrs. McCain and Davis! He knew that Castello had only made a few of this shape. If the message was true, it would be one great addition to his collection, but at what price? As these thoughts passed through his mind, he sat, smoked, and waited....

-2-

Varten von Eckman entered the library, "Emperor Leopaldo! A courier has arrived from Pittman IV. He is a man named Grey-bo. He gave the correct password, "asp". Isn't that the name of an Old Earth Snake? Killed some queen during the First Age?"

"I believe so, Varten. Admit the courier. Have him sent here. I want you to stay. Be on the alert!"

The Imperial Guards admitted the small man, dressed in the Family Seiler colors, red and brown. Before Leo, he saw a small man wearing the assumed pose of importance. The Emperor indicated for the visitor to sit, opposite his desk, with Varten to Leo's right.

"Would you like some refreshments Gray-bo?"

"No, thank you M'lord, however, if you will permit, I would join you in a pipe."

"Please do. Gra-bo, are you a collector?", asked Leo.

Gray-bo replied "I am somewhat knowledgeable in pipe-lore, and have some Old Earth tobacco".

He took a pipe and a pouch of tobacco out of his jacket pocket .

"May I look at your pipe?" Leo enquired.

"It is a rare pipe from the late 20th century, First Age. It was made by a firm named Yello-bole".

Leo returned the pipe after noting the charred condition of the bowl, and that it badly needed a reaming and a cleaning. Gray-bo filled up the pipe and lit it.

"I have a nice blend that is made from an Old Earth Blend named "half and half" and a pseudo-tobacco from Cottman IX. My associates say that it has the aroma of stall apples from a Salusian Bull!"

Indeed, Leo tended to agree with the opinions of Gray-bo's associates as he found the aroma coming from Gray-bo's pipe quite offensive, but he said nothing.

Leo peered at his visitor, "Enough of the pleasantries, what has Johannes found for me?"

"Emperor Leopaldo! Sixteenth bearer of that venerated name to sit on the Lion Throne. Johannes of the Family Seiler offers you this pipe from Old Earth. It was found in an old derelict vessel. We believe to be from Old Earth. I believe it is a Castello #84 shape, also known as a hawkbill."

Leo checked the security seals on the package, opened the box and saw the most beautiful pipe he had ever seen in the real. He picked it up and studied it. Indeed, it was a smooth finished, Castello #84, KKKK Collection with a castle logo, no. 41.

"Truly, this is one beautiful pipe!" Leo said, "I see that you are a lover of pipes, Gray-bo, what can you tell me about this one?"

"Yes, I do enjoy collecting and smoking pipes, although I do not have the size nor quality of a collection like yours. Sire, your collection is known throughout the Empire!", he said, "The Castello #84 was made in 1988 as indicated from the stampings. A hawkbill is a unique shape. Not many were made. A Collection Grade hawkbill is most rare. Most of the #84 shapes were found in two great collections, however, they disappeared at the end of the First Age of Man, and have not been seen since."

Leo reflected a minute and said "Your knowledge is deep, accurate, and flawless, just as this pipe is!"

"Thanks sire, now the price." he retorted

"The price!" the Leo repeated "What is the price?"

"Emperor Leopaldo, it is known to us that the Oracle and her followers have "seen" that Prince Kyle's first descendent, will be the source of a dynastic line that will threaten their power in the future. They have also "seen" that he will mate between the age of 20 and 22 years of age, and this offspring will be the threat to them. They would like this mating not to happen! The timing is important. There are chemical means to prevent this. It would not be permanent. He could still have an heir, however, it could not be conceived until after that period of time. Then it will not matter. If you will accede to these wishes, the gift is yours!" he stated as if from rote memory.

"This is a handsome gift. It is extremely costly. You know the importance placed on Prince

Kyle having an heir. This is a choice I cannot make alone!" stated the Emperor.

"Varten, summon Prince Kyle to our presence!" ordered the Emperor.

As Gray-bo looked on, Varten summoned the young Kyle to the room using the communicator.

Leo studied Gray-bo intently. The door to the left of the room began to open. As Gray-bo stood up and turned, Leo motioned a command to Varten using a secret sign they had worked out long ago. Two darts sped out from the Weapon Master's sleeves and resided in Gray-bo's neck. He fell over dead from the neuro-toxins on the tip of the darts.

As Kyle entered he exclaimed "Father!" "Varten!" "What has happened?"

"I am not quite sure, Prince Kyle, but a first-order computation indicates that this man, Gray-bo, was the assassin that we feared. Ask your father." responded Varten.

"Varten, if you look you will find some sort of hidden weapon on Gray-bo" Varten looked, and found a small needle blaster under the skin of his right wrist, similar to the one just used.

"Son, Obviously this was a well thought out attempt on your life. If I had declined the "gift", he would have taken your life. If you look, you will see that Gray-bo is really a Carnish shape-changer. The real courier from Johannes is probably dead! I must let Johannes know of the lapse in his security."

"But how did you know?" asked Varten.

"Actually, it is not difficult to figure out! Johannes is an old friend of mine. He has helped me acquire pipes, tobacco, and other odd items from Old Earth in the past. The word "rosebud" in his message indicated that it was genuine", he recanted.

"First, the password "ASP". While you are correct that it is a snake from Old Earth, it is also an acronym for "Alt.Smokers.Pipes" which was an Old Earth computer newsgroup according to my research. In the early days of computers, it was used to disseminate news on pipes and tobacco. We usually use that password, but in the newsgroup sense. This is sort of a built-in security procedure. A real courier would have used it in the sense, as Johannes and I knew it, and mentioned it in our initial conversation."

"Second, a knowledgeable pipe collector would know that a Castello Shape #84 is referred to as a "donkeynut". A pipe of the same shape made by anyone else is a "hawkbill". He obviously never read the monograph by McCain and Davis, who were both donkeynut collectors of note on Old Earth!"

"Third, a Yello-bole pipe was a rather boring pipe, not a great one, and finally, his pipes looked like the remains of a desiccating carcass! He was not a TRUE pipe smoker." he concluded.

"Therefore, Gray-bo was not what he seemed. It appears that the purpose of the visit was for Gray-bo to get into Prince Kyle's presence and eliminate him, if the "gift" did not do its job! I suspected it at the very beginning, when Gray-bo arrived. This is why I had Varten stay with me. You really were in no danger. When Kyle entered the room I read the intent from his movements and realized it was time for the game to end, hence my instructions to you Varten", Leo explained.

"Amazing Leopaldo!" commented Varten.

"Very instructive" said Kyle.

"Elementary", exclaimed Leo.

"Varten, get rid of Gray-bo's body and send out the usual reprisal messages to those involved. Let them all sweat for a while. I want you to find out who exactly is responsible!" ordered the Emperor.

The body was removed. Varten went off to perform his duties. Prince Kyle left.

Emperor Leopaldo sat behind his desk staring at the Castello Donkeynut. It has been a good day, he thought. One plot foiled. One new, old pipe obtained! Kyle's fate is decided. It's off to my old friend Viscount Hawman on Macamas VI where Kyle can further his education for a year. Maybe if he is gone, the plots will end.

He picked up his new Donkeynut, filled it with some Deep Hollow, lit it and was off to dream land. Satisfactory! Most Satisfactory he thought!

END

## DEATH IN A CLOSED ROOM

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright ©f2000, DEATH IN A CLOSED ROOM, ALL Rights Reserved

This story may not be reproduced in any form for profit, or on another website without written permission of the author. The story may be freely distributed with this entire notice attached. The author may be contacted by e-mail at: [seilerjp@telerama.lm.com](mailto:seilerjp@telerama.lm.com)

[Note: This story is the second in a series of stories drawn from the same socio-political-economic background found in the story entitled “Satisfaction”.]

My name is Nick Reardon, intelligence officer extraordinaire, confirmed bachelor, and dedicated pipe smoker. Varten von Eckman has sent me to the planet Chrisongas in the Spirelli System on an assignment from Emperor Leopaldo. This was to be a short investigation job. On my last assignment, I prevented a Carnish shape changer from murdering the head of the Vermelli Family. This job was supposed to be a welcomed change of pace.

There had been a number of strange, unsolved deaths in the main city, Polomos. Polomos was the only city of major size on the planet. The deaths were all of asphyxiation, in a locked room. A morbidity statistical analysis had shown an unusual factor; ninety-eight percent of the deaths were to non-smokers. Local investigating authorities had come up empty-handed. My assignment was to find out what was going on?

I landed at the Polomos spaceport at night and was quickly whisked to the city. I met with my old friend Paul Oom. Early in our careers, Paul and I had seen much duty together. I went into the Emperor’s intelligence service; Paul went into the government administrative branch. Paul was the head of the local branch of the Empire’s Administration.

The Chrisongans main source of income came from the wexel plant that grows on the low land marshes. Once the wexel plant is processed, a very fine pseudo-tobacco is produced. This “wexel tobacco” is aged and used in making the finest pipe tobacco, cigars, and high-priced cigarette tobacco in the Empire.

A secondary find on the planet was a curious animal called a Tex-mebe. This animal is an amoebae type creature with some amazing characteristics. A normal Tex-mebe is roughly the size of an Old Earth baseball. However, it expands itself until it covers the surface area of the volume it is in. If placed in a room, it would expand to cover the walls, even though it would only be a few thousandths of an inch thick. It also is phototropic; that is, it becomes the color that a creature entering the room would desire it to be.

“Here on Chrisongas, you will not find any use of any solvents or paint. Our paint is biological

rather than chemical. It is very beneficial to the ecology of the planet.” Paul said, “If you walk into a room and think blue, the walls become blue. The Tex-mebe adheres to the walls, and senses the colors, and either becomes it or psychically/telepathically makes you believe it is the color of the room that you wished.”

I really did not quite believe this, but did note how the appearance of the room was very satisfying. I thought blue...and the walls became blue. I thought red...and they became red. If I did not think of any specific color, I just did not pay any attention to the color. I wondered if the colors appeared the same to Paul?

I asked Paul if I could light up my pipe. He said sure and asked if I would like some well-aged wexel tobacco. He handed me a very old tobacco jar. I opened it, breathed in the aroma, and was in love with it. Paul told me that the blend was called wexel-virginia, and was aged over ten years.

I took my Old Earth pipe out of its special travel case. It was a bent apple made by an Old Earth firm named Larenzetti, from Italy. I filled it up and lit it. Paul did likewise with a very nice new pipe from Rencell-IV, made of Krenellian B'iar.

As soon as the pipes were lit, I noticed a feeling of general well being settle in the room. Paul and I felt very mellow. I also noticed or it became evident to me of the colors becoming very vivid in the room.

We finished our pipe in silence. I complimented him on the quality of the wexel tobacco. He saw me to the guest apartment where I retired for the night.

-2-

The next morning, I awoke to a buzzing door ringing. I found a messenger at the door. “Mr. Reardon, there has been another mysterious death! It was right here, in the administrative household! Please come at once!”

I dressed and followed the messenger to the other side of the building to one of the apartments. Paul awaited me at the door. “Nothing has been touched, pending your arrival, Nick.”

We went through the door. Sprawled upon the floor was a man around forty years of age. He showed all the signs of suffocation, but there was no signs on his body as to the cause of his death.

“I take it that this man is a non-smoker.”, I asked Paul.

“That is correct.” He replied. “He also has no enemies, but found out yesterday that all his investments were basically bust! The door was locked from the inside.”

I asked Paul to instruct his people to perform a full set of laboratory tests and let me know what

they found. As I left the room, I noticed brief flicks in the room color. It was as if the Tex-mebe was having trouble maintaining the color in the room.

I pointed this out to Paul. He told me that this was often an effect noticed when the room host, a termed used to denote the “primary room user, died. The flicks ended when a new “host” took possession of the room. This was noted at all the earlier death scenes.

I went back to my apartment, packed my pipe with some Old Earth tobacco called Mc Clelland Deep Hollow that I received in trade from an old space jockey. I lit the pipe and settled back to think over the situation. Again, I noticed a feeling of well being upon me. The feeling reminded me of someone in total satisfaction.

After ten minutes, the communicator broke my train of thought. It was Paul. He told me that the laboratory reports all turned out negative.

“Paul, could you have a finer statistical breakdown of the deaths conducted? I want to know of the two percent of the population that were smokers, what percentages were pipe smokers, cigar smokers, and cigarette.”, I inquired.

“Hang on while I request the numbers!” “OK, of the two percent of smokers, there were 78% that smoked cigarettes. Twenty-two percent smoked cigars. None were pipe smokers. Now, that is interesting!”, Paul commented.

I turned off the communicator. “Interesting, the majority of the deaths were non-smokers, and of the smokers, they were either cigarette or cigar smokers. None of the deaths were from pipe smokers.”

As Nick puffed on his pipe and thought over his classical “three-pipe problem”; he paced around the apartment. He observed that as he walked near the Tex-mebe coating on the wall, it blurred and cleared as he walked close, and then backed away from the wall. It reminded him of placing a magnet near and away from a video communicator screen.

Immediately, Nick reached for his pocket communicator. He called the communications division, and waited.

-3-

Five minutes passed.

Ten minutes passed.

His communicator rang. The voice on the other line spoke one word “DONE”. He left immediately for Paul Oom’s rooms. He knew the door would be locked, so he kicked down the door, ran inside, and found a bare walled room. Paul was in his chair covered by a slime-like layer or outer skin of many colors, gasping for air.

He quickly set off a smoke bomb in the room and remembered happy, joyous thoughts. He

thought of the day Emperor Leopaldo decorated him and presented him with his gift pipe from Old Earth. The layer of slime rolled off Paul, slithered to the walls and ran back up them and covered the ceiling. The room took on a uniform hue of blue.

Paul caught his breath.

“Sorry old friend, but I had to have Proof!”

“What do you mean, Nick?”

“Well, actually, it is quite simple. All of the deaths were suffocations. We also noted that while predominantly among non-smokers, some of the deaths were to cigarette and cigar smokers, and none to pipe smokers. You also told me that the Tex-mebe had some psycho-telepathic abilities. That is, in some way it reads your thoughts or senses your emotions and it reflects them by selecting a suitable hue or color to display.”

“Let me tell you what I have observed.” Nick continued.

“I observed that the Tex-mebe respond directly to smoke. Smoke contains Carbon Monoxide. There is no detectable carbon monoxide in the atmosphere. The Tex-mebe enjoys it, which is why they enhance your perception of emotional well being when you smoke. This turns out to be a positive factor for smokers, and a negative factor for non-smokers.”

“Secondly, the Tex-mebe are telepathic or capable of reading or sensing emotions. They sense the host’s emotional state.”

I am sorry for the trick I pulled on you but let me explain. You were in your room. You received a message from communications to the effect that your daughter perished in a commercial transport accident. You were not smoking; however, you felt great depression and despair. Let me assure, your daughter, Christiana, is fine.”

Nick continued, “The Tex-mebe was not being exposed to any pipe smoke, but was being overloaded by your emotional distress. It essentially collapsed off the wall on to you and you started suffocating. I entered the room, and drove it off using a combination of carbon monoxide from the smoke bomb, and what were good thoughts on my behalf. Let me assure you, everything that happened is a natural reaction for the Tex-mebe, and was not planned nor on purpose.”

Nick observed, “I think we now know enough to prevent this from happening again. Since the atmosphere of Chrisongas has no free carbon monoxide, we put a tiny carbon monoxide generator in each location that has a Tex-mebe. Second, we contact the Emperor’s research group to develop a body worn screen that either projects only positive emotional vibrations, or blocks the projection of anything of a depression or negative vibes. The threshold will be low enough so that the Tex-mebe can still be phototropic. These units will have to be used by non-smokers.”

“Another solution would be implementation of a program to encourage smoking by the population, but I don’t believe this solution would be politically correct”

I guess the least favored solution to the problem would be to end the use of the Tex-mebe, however, I understand this would not be economically feasible.”

Paul asked, “But why were the pipe smokers not affected?”

Nick responded “Have you ever met a depressed pipe smoker?” He winked, and left the room to continue his well-deserved vacation.

END

## THE PIPE SHOW MURDER

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright ©f2000, THE PIPE SHOW MURDER, ALL Rights Reserved

This story may not be reproduced in any form for profit, or on another website without written permission of the author. The story may be freely distributed with this entire notice attached. The author may be contacted by e-mail at: [seilerjp@telerama.lm.com](mailto:seilerjp@telerama.lm.com)

[Note: This story is the third in a series of stories drawn from the same socio-political-economic background found in the stories entitled "Satisfaction" and "Death in a Closed Room".]

-1-

The hyper drive cruise ship Rinaldo was outbound to the pentel star system. The Rinaldo was an Empire class ship; one of the most luxurious ever designed, built, and launched. It had a full line of upper class suites, exhibition halls, dining rooms, smoking lounges and other amenities. It was the Titanic of its day and, unlike the Titanic, it would not sink.

This trip was unlike any other of its jaunts down the starways. On board were the Emperor Leopaldo and his retinue. His staff went all the way from his chief weapons master Varten von Eckman down to his personal chef. Leopaldo was, ironically, housed in the lavish "Emperor's Suite".

Varten von Eckman knocked on the study door and was ushered into the presence of the Emperor by one of the attendants.

"My Emperor."

"Don't be so formal Varten. It's just the two of us. Sit down and light up your pipe."

Varten observed that Leo was smoking a new acquisition. The pipe was an Old Earth Ser Jacopo briar calabash. He also eyed the "NO SMOKING" sign on the wall behind Leo's overstuffed chair.

"No Smoking in the Emperor's Suite!" he chided his friend.

"Yeah, isn't that a blast!" he chuckled. "I'll send the captain of the ship a decree to correct the sign to "Pipe smoking is mandatory in the Emperor's Suite!" he said with a grin and a laugh.

Varten filled up his straight saddle bit sandblasted stacked chimney pipe. Leo had given it to him many years ago. It had a deep blast and was from Old Earth. The nomenclature had been worn off over the centuries. All that could be read was "oke" on the shank of the pipe and

remnants of a yin/yang symbol on the stem.

“Leo” he asked, “What do you hope to accomplish by this trip?”

Leo puffed and answered “As you know, one of the activities scheduled on the Rinaldo’s voyage is a pipe collectors’ exhibition and show. There are probably several hundred pipe collectors and fanciers on board. Beside myself, there are four collectors worthy of mention that are in my league.”

“Jan Folders of the Merde Family has a nice collection of Old Earth Pipes, mainly from Italian Carvers. Richard Marriann of the Span Family is a collector of Old Earth pipes made by late 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Carvers. Tony Tragarra of the Family Stone is a collector that specializes in high-grade Old Earth pipes from Denmark, and white stemmed pipes from Italy. Finally, Mark McNam of the Family Sherlock has a well respected collection of Peterson Pipes.”

“While others at the convention have very nice collections of new pipes, pipes from their planetary systems, and pipes made from many exotic materials, these four are the collectors of primary interest to me. One of these four, I don’t know which one, has sent a message to me and offered to trade me a very rare Old Earth pipe carved by a man named Micoli. In his lifetime Micoli only made a few pipes. Today, only two are known by me to exist. One is known to be in the collection of Jan Folders and the other is in the possession of one of these four collectors.”

“I intend to obtain the Micoli pipe for my collection. Oh, by the way, this aged wexel virginia tobacco that Nick Reardon sent me is excellent!” Leo exclaimed.

“Yes it is!” commented Varten “Nick did an excellent job in solving those murders on Chrisongas. The wexel virginia tobacco that he brought back is most excellent. You know that Nick is on board mingling with the passengers and keeping his eyes and ears open.”

“Have Nick pay special attention to these four. He should get close with them. I would like him to find out who has the Micoli and what it will take to get it.”

“OK Leo, I will be seeing him later tonight in one of the public smoking lounges and will pass on your instructions.” Varten responded.

“Leo, what makes this Micoli pipe so desirable to you? After all, you have never seen it, smoked it, or even know what it looks like?” inquired Varten.

Leo replied “Varten, years ago I presented you with the pipe you are now finishing, correct?”

“Yes.” He replied “You didn’t think much about it. When you gave it to me you said that it was a pipe of good quality and would serve me well for many years as you hoped I would serve you.”

“Yes, that is true. I will tell you about the pipe you are holding. The symbol on the stem and the “oke” that is still readable indicates to me that it is a James T. Cooke pipe. James Cooke carved

pipes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century on Old Earth. He carved pipes in the geopolitical area known as the United States. In that time period, his pipes were highly desirable and hard to obtain. There are a number of reasons why this was so. One, his pipes were from the top Extra, Extra grade briar. Two, his execution of the pipe making craft was of the highest order. His attention to detail of the briar grain was pretty much unsurpassed. Three, the finishes he used were only known to him. Fourth, and finally, he only made a limited number of pipes in his lifetime, thus scarcity plays a factor as only a few survive to this day.”

“If the pipe you have just finished smoking had a clean nomenclature, its value could be equal to the holdings of some of the minor families in the Empire. Even as it is, it is a very valuable piece and would be very desirable to many of the attendees at this pipe show.” Leo concluded.

Varten choked, “Leo, I had no idea of the value of this pipe. I am truly honored. I had no idea.....” he stammered.

Leo continued “The Micoli pipe meets all of these criteria. From the holo I saw, the nomenclature on the bent bulldog is quite pronounced.”

Both of the smokers emptied their pipes into the portable smokes disposal.

Leo said, “I am going to bed. Find out for me who has the pipe. Good night Varten.”

Varten left the room. He was still shocked to his being told the value of the pipe he had just finished smoking.

-2-

Meanwhile, Nick Reardon was sitting in one of the smoking lounges in the first-class passenger decks on the Rinaldo. Thus far on this trip he had found out that pipe collectors and smokers were truly a unique group. They came from all walks of life, many backgrounds, but all were connected by the “brotherhood of the briar”. If there was one thing he learned, it was that pipe collectors love nothing more than to talk about their collections, especially to other collectors. He found that one collector never demeaned another's collection, and that, on a whole, they were honest in their dealings with each other.

Nick was engaged in a small group, all enjoying their favorite beverage and all smoking some fantastic pipes with different tobaccos. Beside himself, there were Rich Marriann, Jan Folders, Tony Tragarra, Mark McNam, and three other collectors. Nick and the other three collectors sat back and listened while the four others talked about their collections.

Jan was discussing his collection of Italian pipes. “You know that I have an extensive collection of fine Old Earth Italian pipes. I have a number of Castellos, Ser Jacopo, Maestro de Paja, and other fine pipes! I also have the only Micoli pipe that is known to exist. That is one pipe I will never get rid of!”

Tony laughed, “Yeah, but if the Emperor traded you his Castello #84 hawkbills, I bet you would snap them up for the Micoli!”

“No, I don’t think so, but I might consider it if the price was EXTREMELY right!”

Everyone laughed.

Mark intimated to the group in a low, barely audible voice “I heard that another Micoli pipe has surfaced and the Emperor is very interested in it!”

“Fat chance!” exclaimed Richard. If it were found, the collector would let everyone know, and see how high it would go!”

Jan interjected “I think we would have all seen it if it existed. It would make a nice partner to mine....sort of end its loneliness!”

“Right Jan!” Tony said, “If your Micoli met another Micoli, we might have little Micoliii!”

Everyone in the group chuckled.

“Real funny Tony. Bite Me!” retorted Jan as he puffed on an old craggy Ardor pipe.

“Has anyone seen my tobacco pouch?” asked Mark.

Everyone responded that they had not.

“Damn, lost another one!” he ranted.

The conversation turned to the virtues of black stems versus white stems, straight pipes versus bent pipes, and decrying the lack of any replacement for the true Old Earth tobaccos.

Nick excused himself from the group as he saw Varten enter the room. He joined him in a small booth where Varten ordered a drink.

Varten told him about his meeting with the Emperor. “... and to think how I have treated this old pipe. I never knew what I had.”

Nick reported on the conversation of the pipe group. “Well it looks like at least eight people, besides the Emperor and us, are aware of the existence of a rumored second Micoli pipe. Excluding myself and the other three in the group, one of the four others are lying low. If I were to hazard a guess, I would suspect Richard due to his interest in American carvers, or Mark since he brought up the topic.”

Varten resonded “I don’t know which one has it. All four bear a close watch. Let’s call it a night Nick.”

As they left the room Nick noticed that the group was still going at it. He chuckled "You better watch that Cooke pipe, Varten. Make sure it is not in your back pocket when you sit down!"

-3-

Nick was awakened to the sound of the beeping of his communicator. He hit the button and noted the time was 4:20 A.M. As he placed it to his ear, "Hello".

"Nick? Varten. Please come to Room 65 on the C deck, first class. There has been an accident. Mark McNam is dead!"

Nick dressed and arrived at cabin #65. He knocked on the door and Varten opened it. Inside he saw the Rinaldo's security personnel photographing and investigating the scene.

In a chair sat Mark McNam, obviously dead. His pipe lay on the floor with some ashes scattered about. Nick closely examined the body and the pipe. "What happened, Varten?"

"About 3:50 A.M. the Rinaldo's security officer got an anonymous call from this room to come to the apartment. The communicator used was the one over there on the table. Don't worry; it was wiped clean of prints. When security arrived, there was no answer. They used a master digital key to enter the room. They found the scene as you see it.", Varten answered.

The ship security people removed the body and finished their investigation. The chief investigating officer told Varten that a report would be sent to the Emperor's staff with their findings and the medical examiner's results. He asked Varten to lock up when he was finished. Before the officer left, Varten asked him to wake the purser and find out the number, types, and weight of the baggage that Mr. McNam had when he arrived on the ship and to contact him with the information. He also instructed him to caution the crew not to discuss the death with anyone, especially the Rinaldo's passengers.

After the officer left, Varten said to Nick "Of course you recognize all the signs of cyanide poisoning. The faint odor of almonds gives it away. It is very slight over the aroma of the tobacco, but it is there. You also noted the color of the victim. The autopsy will confirm the manner of the death."

"Yes, it looks like a poisoning. It was made to look like a natural death, but I am sure that it was not. Look at the pipe. It is a Peterson Sherlock Holmes series "Lestrade" with a non P-lip stem. The tobacco appears to be a fine cut English blend."

They searched the room and the contents of the three cases of pipes. All the slots contained their allotment of pipes. Among his personal effects they found several tins of a pseudo-Virginia tobacco. "It looks like theft was not the motive, Varten." Nick said.

Varten's communicator rang. He was informed, by the purser, that upon his arrival Mark had a

suitcase and three travel cases of pipes, and that the cause of death was found to be death by cyanide poison.

They examined the suitcase.

“Varten, Look! Either my eyes are off or this suitcase has a well concealed hidden compartment” said Nick. He felt around the inside of the suitcase and found a small unused stud and pressed it. A small door opened. Inside was a velvet pipe pouch containing a pipe. They opened the pipe pouch and took out a beautiful natural bulldog pipe.

“Don’t tell me Nick. I’ll bet the pipe is stamped “MICOLI”.

“Correct!”

“Nick, I’ll bet Mark McNam was murdered to obtain the Micoli. The murder did not find it! Such a loss!”

“Varten, look here. There is a note inside the bag.”

They took the piece of paper out of the pipe glove and read it.

*Emperor Leopaldo,*

*It was I who sent you the holo of the Micoli pipe. Many years ago, when I was a neophyte pipe collector, you gave me much advice to help me improve my collection. I recently found out that you worked through intermediaries to find and give me the opportunity to obtain pipes that I might never had the chance to acquire.*

*I am presenting you this Micoli pipe as a token of my gratitude.*

*Your fellow brother of the briar,  
Mark McNam*

“Wow Nick. This will hit the Emperor hard! I will take the pipe and letter to him and report what has happened.” Varten continued “The show starts at 10:00 A.M. Before that I want you to interview Folders, Tragarra, and Marriann. Find out who did this! We know that it was poison. We know the killer did not find the Micoli pipe so he doesn’t know where it is.”

-4-

Security personnel first brought Richard Marriann to Nick.

“Richard, I suppose that you know that Mark was found dead. It appears that he died while smoking his pipe.”

“Terrible, terrible, I heard it at breakfast.”

“What were you doing last night after the group broke up?” Nick inquired.

“I retired for the night.” He replied, “No one saw me until breakfast this morning. Did he die of natural causes?” Richard asked.

“Yes.” Nick lied. “I understand that Mark’s collection of Peterson pipes was quite extensive.”

“He did love his Peterson pipes. I’ll tell you a little story. He once met a man named Dale A’lkins who was also a Peterson collector. Dale only collected Petersons with a fishtail stem. He hated the Peterson P-lip stemmed pipes. Mark decided only to collect the Petersons with the P-lip stems. They use to have a grand go-at-it at the shows. Dale would bring his rasp and threaten Mark that he would file off the P-lips of every pipe in his collection and turn them into fishtail stems! Hahaha, they had a good time with the kidding.” related Richard.

Nick asked him if he knew if Dale A’lkins was at the show.

Richard replied that Dale had passed on several years earlier and was well over 150 years old when he died. “Even at 150 years old, he still considered himself a young man.”

He asked Richard “Do you know what kind of tobacco Mark smoked?”

“Yes, he usually smoked a Virginia Flake, nothing else.”

Nick asked him a few other perfunctory questions and then dismissed him.

Tony Tregarra was interviewed next. His interview confirmed the responses of Richard. He told Nick that his roomie for the night was a “Little Miss Bo” would vouch for his presence all night long. He also recalled that Mark smoked a Virginia Flake tobacco.

Finally, Jan Folders was brought in for an interview. He was aware of the passing of Mark. Like Richard, he had no alibi.

“Jan, What can you tell me about Mark?” inquired Nick.

“Mark and I became good friends over the years. He had an astounding collection of Peterson pipes with their P-lips. How he got some of his pieces, I’ll never know! You know how it is, he liked Irish Old Earth pipes, I liked Italian pipes. We helped each other out with acquisitions whenever we could.”

“What kind of tobacco did Mark smoke”, asked Nick.

“I’m not sure. He either liked a light aromatic or sometimes a latakia blend.”

After a few other general questions, Nick dismissed Jan. He used his communicator to report to Varten.

Varten told him to report to the Emperor's Suite at 10:00 and to have security round up the three suspects for an audience with the Emperor.

-5-

At 10:00 A.M. five people were assembled in the library of the Emperors Suite; Varten, Nick, Tony, Jan, and Richard awaiting the Emperor's arrival. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen minutes passed. The "three suspects" were getting restless. Finally Emperor Leopaldo arrived.

As the Emperor walked into the room, they all arose and began to bow.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Let's all be informal. To quote an Old Earth ruler "Gentlemen, you may smoke."

They all got out their favorite pipes, filled them up with some of the Emperor's finest tobacco, and lit them up.

"You have all met my assistants Varten von Eckman and Nick Reardon. They deliberately misled you about Mark's demise. It was not from natural causes. He was murdered."

Leopaldo looked at each of the three to see how they took the revelation.

"As we speak, your rooms are being searched, along with the pipes in the displays that you have for the show."

"What are you looking for? The rumored second Micoli pipe?" Richard asked timidly.

"No" the Emperor replied. "We are looking for the murder weapon!"

"Let me tell you what I believe the sequence of events were last night. Nick and you were all in a discussion last night with three other pipe collectors. One of you, Mr. X, purloined Mark's tobacco pouch. You all knew that there might be a second Micoli pipe, but Mr. X knew for sure that there was one and that it was somewhere in Mark's possession. Mr. X may have wanted to trade Mark for it or buy it outright or maybe he did not approach Mark. It does not matter."

"After you all left and went to your room, Mr. X applied cyanide to the tobacco in Mark's pouch, and either followed Mark, or later returned to Mark's room and returned his tobacco pouch."

"Mr. X and Mark smoked a pipe together. Mark drifted off to unconsciousness. Mr. X searched Mark's room and luggage, but did not find the Micoli. Mr. X exchanged Mark's pipe with one

he had brought with him that was previously smoked. He let it drop and scatter some ash. He took Mark's pipe and tobacco pouch. He removed all traces of his presence in the room. He then, using a voice distorter, called security and left before their arrival."

"When security arrived they found what looked like a man who died of natural causes, but, in fact died of cyanide poisoning."

Emperor Leopaldo reached into the pocket of his robes and pulled out a pipe pouch. "Here is the cause of the murder of a dear friend of mine." He placed the Micoli on the table for all to see. "Let me read you the note that was with it."

He read them the contents of the note.

The Emperor's communicator beeped. He answered it. "It is just as I suspected." He said to the person on the other end.

The three men looked at each other through lowered eyes.

Emperor Leopaldo said to the three "It's time to end this charade. Why did you do it Jan?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are Mr. X, Jan. You made several mistakes. You replaced Mark's P-lip Peterson with a Peterson pipe having a fishtail stem. It is well established that Mark only collected and smoked Peterson pipes having P-lip stems. Second, the tobacco left in the pipe was an Englis-latakia blend, something Mark never smoked, and you do. Thirdly, you took Mark's tobacco pouch with the cyanide laced virginia flake tobacco."

"Your room and display were searched. Security found Mark's Peterson P-lip pipe among your pipes. No doubt a chemical analysis will detect traces of cyanide in it. Also, the shredder-disposal in your room will no doubt show residues from the tobacco pouch and the cyanide laced tobacco."

"Jan, You are Mr. X! I even think I know why you did it. Until now you had the only Micoli pipe known to exist from Old Earth. For another to appear and you not to have it would be unbearable. This was something you could not deal with."

Jan looked up at the Emperor in defiance. "Yes, Yes. You are right. I almost got away with it. Mark would not let me have it. I could not figure out why, but now I see."

"Yes, you almost got away with the crime. Perhaps your biggest mistake was committing murder during a pipe exhibition.", retorted Leopaldo. "Take him away!"

Varten, and Nick remained in the room with Leopaldo.

“This was a very strange case sir. Nice work!” Nick said.

“I could not have done it without your eyes, ears, and deductions.”, he answered.

“As you observed, Nick, pipe collectors are one interesting and strange group of individuals. They are very involved in their collections. Pipe collecting is almost a disease, a pipe acquisition disease. Someone once observed ‘If you own one pipe you are a pipe smoker. If you have two or more you are a pipe collector.’”

“Tragic affair.” He said “However, let’s remember Mark and go to the show. I think I will enter this pipe in the best pipe judging contest to see if it wins the Best Pipe of Show contest.”

They went, it did, and the Rinaldo plotted its way among the stars.

-End-

## THE PIPE CLEANER'S TWIST

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 9/2004, THE PIPE CLEANER'S TWIST, All Rights Reserved

-1-

A pea soup fog engulfed the town of Kirkland, capital city of the fourth planet of the Pentel star system. Even the light of its twin moons could not penetrate the fog. Out near the spaceport, in the small area of support buildings, a young lady, of dubious reputation and in a more than slightly inebriated condition, was trying to navigate the tertiary street under near zero visibility.

“Three blocks more to go!” she said to herself. She thought she saw a dim red light in the far distance. “Home!” Suddenly, she thought she heard a noise off to her left in front of her. “Probably some old cat”, she imagined. All at once, a big hulking shadow appeared in front. She started to scream, but it was too late. She thought she saw the flash of a las-knife, then all went blank.

The towering shadowy figure stood above the prone body. A las-knife could be seen moving over the body performing its unspeakable task. When the work was completed, the las-knife was deactivated. The figure reached into its pocket and dropped something tiny on the body. The shadowy figure disappeared into the fog. All that remained was a motionless lump on the ground in the quiet, dismal night.

-2-

Emperor Leopaldo was in the office of the suite of rooms provided to him by his appointed governor. He was quickly reading the latest news dispatches when Varten von Eckman, his weapons master/security chief entered.

“Your majesty, you will recall the rash of unsolved murders that Governor Harkin was telling us about when we arrived yesterday. Last night, there was another. As in the other four murders, the victim was a young lady of no family or occupation, who earned her keep through questionable means. Like the other victims, a las-knife was the murder weapon and the corps was horribly mutilated. There was no witness to the attack and the perpetrator left a calling card; two pipe cleaners twisted in an unusual fashion. Wilkins, the governor's head of planetary security has requested our assistance in ending these gruesome attacks.”

“What do you suggest Varten?” Leo asked as he lit up his favorite Accatian Wercarra wood pipe?

“It has some similarities to the old Jack-the-Ripper case from Old Earth in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, First Age. I think we are dealing with a very twisted mind. One big difference is the used pipe

cleaners left at the crime scene. Spectra-graphic analysis, performed by the Kirkland CSI, did not indicate much, only that the pipe cleaners were not used recently. However, it is curious that all of the pipe cleaners are twisted to form a loop at the top with two twists near the bottom. Mass spectrometric and Chemical analysis of the residual indicated that the residue of a high grade pseudo-tobacco was found on the pipe cleaners taken from the crime scene.” Varten reported.

“On all accounts Varten, provide as much assistance to the locals. I want you and nick to personally get involved. I will discuss this with the governor when we meet later today”.

“To change the subject, Varten, what do you think of this local neer-tobacco that is locally grown? You realize that the weather conditions between the temperature, rain, and fog does not permit the growth of a natural tobacco crop.”

“It is not bad.” Varten stated, “It reminds me of a Virginia based tobacco with a little touch of perique. I could get use to it if it were all I had to smoke.”

“I think you are being much too kind” Leo responded. “I think I will stick to my remaining supply of Old Earth tins that I picked up at the pipe show we attended on the space liner Rinaldo. In my opinion, the local tobacco leaves a lot to be desired.”

With that, Leo dismissed Varten and went back to viewing the latest news and intelligence dispatches from across the Empire.

-3-

Several hours later, Leo was relaxing in the suite’s large, comfortable den. It was a big room lined with a walnut-like surface, many book cases, a thick, deep carpet, and many plush chairs. The room was very clean with several empty ash trays on the coffee table and side tables next to the chairs. He had decided that this would be the ideal location to meet with Governor Harkin and his family. Varten had briefed him on the status of the planet, and the biographies of the ruling families. He knew that Govenor Harkin was the younger brother of William Harkin, the head of the Chatwood Family. William was one of his political supporters in the legislative branch of the Empire and had sizeable holdings in the Mercantile Directorate. He also was aware that Governor John Harkin’s wife had died two years earlier and that he had a son, Charles, and a daughter, Jewel. He also had been told that Jewel was the apple of her father’s eye, and that Charles was studying for a Ph.D. to become an acoustical engineer at Pittpenn University located on planet New Philadelphia.

The royal attendant opened the ornate doors and admitted the governor and his family to the den. Before him was an older man, approximately 60 years of age, a young man approximately 25 years old, and a 23 year-old shapely young lady.

“Your majesty” Governor Harkin said as he bowed, “Let me present my son, Charles, and daughter, Jewel.”

The both bowed before their Emperor.

“I am pleased to finally meet your family, John. Let’s dispense with the formalities. You may all address me as Leo. Sit down. I understand that all three of you are pipe smokers, so please join me.”, Leo stated as he began to fill his straight Pre-transition Barling Pot with Old Earth McClelland’s Christmas Cheer 1993 tobacco.

“Yes we are.” the Governor responded.

They sat in the three chairs facing the Emperor with a coffee table separating them from Leo. A large ornate ash tray was in the middle of the coffee table adjacent to a lighter, and a small cylinder holding wooden matches. A pack of Shorties Pipe Cleaners was on the table.

Leo saw the governor take out and fill a small bent bulldog wooden pipe with a blue dot on the stem. A straight black billiard pipe was filled and lit by Charles. Jewel took out a small bent apple pipe with no markings. She carefully filled it from a small leather pouch.

“John, I recognize that your bent bulldog pipe is from Old Earth, made by a company named Ardor from a political subdivision named Italy. I am not familiar with the pipes smoked by Charles and Jewel,”, stated Leo.

“Your majesty.” Charles stammered, “This straight dublin pipe is made by a local talented carver named Mick Tinsk. As you can see, he makes a beautiful pipe. He found a wood similar to the Old Earth briar on a planet in the Georgian star system.”

“Please ask Mr. Tinsk to visit me while we are here. I would like to commission a pipe from him. As for your pipe Jewel, please tell me about it.”

As she puffed on the small bent apple pipe Jewel responded “This pipe is quite an enigma. It was carved in the Old Earth political subdivision known as Canada. All we know is that the gentleman who made it was known as Grandpax2. We have no additional information.”

They chatted for about an hour about the local economy, their locally grown neer- tobacco, and gossip floating around the Empire. They all thought the locally neer-tobacco was pretty good, however, they all said they had never tried any Old Earth tobacco. Leo said he would send a tin of a brand called “Capstan” to John once he got back to his palace as his supply of Old Earth tobacco was dwindling very fast on this trip. Leo asked them about the series of unsolved murders and all agreed that they were very tragic and hoped that they would soon be solved with the murderer being brought to justice. Govenor Harkin suggested that he believed that they had been committed by a deranged person who simply needed the money for drugs. He thought that when the murderer was caught it would be a very simple case. However, he could not answer why there had been so many murders, why only women, why women with virtually no money, and why the perpetrator had not yet been caught. At the end of the discussion, and after they had finished their pipes, they were on the point of leaving when Charles asked Leo if he was familiar

with a detective from Old Earth named Sherlock Holmes.

“Yes, yes I am very familiar with Sherlock Holmes” Leo informed Charles, “I have read the stories in the original book form, having several in my library. Being a pipe smoker and collector, I can really appreciate this great piece of literature.”

“You are aware of Sherlock’s axiom never to theorize until all the facts were known?” Charles asked Leo.

“Yes I am.”

“Well, I would hesitate to think that the five killings were as simple as my father seems to believe. They may be more involved. Let us hope that the killings end very soon.” Charles stated.

After his guests had left, Leo closed the door and walked over to the coffee table to retrieve his pipe. He dumped the cold ashes into the ash tray when he noticed an oddity. Inside the ash tray were several pipe cleaners; however two were twisted in a curious manner. He tried to remember, John used two pipe cleaners from the pack of twenty, Jewel one, Charles one, and two for himself. He counted. There were fourteen pipe cleaners remaining in the pack. There were seven used pipe cleaners in the ash tray with two twisted in an unusual fashion.

He summoned Varten. He explained the puzzle of the pipe cleaners to Varten. “Varten, there are several questions that bear examination! Do the twisted pipe cleaners match those found and the crime scene? Why is there more pipe cleaners present than the 20 in the pack of Shorties? Were they used today or had they been used an earlier time? What does the tobacco residue tell us? I have a feeling we are dealing with a deliberate, skilled, thoughtful murder. I think the glove has been dropped. The murderer has challenged me to bring his or her activities to an end. We must unmask the murderer before another takes place!” Leo explained.

Varten carefully took the ashtray with its contents and left.

-4-

After Varten left Leo, he delivered the ashtray to the Kirkland CSI laboratory for processing. Strict instructions were given to the laboratory chemists to only provide results to him, and that he could be contacted by communicator when the work was completed. He contacted Nick Reardon and instructed Nick to meet him at the Golden Pipe Bar in an hour. This was a small bar near the Governor’s mansion.

Nick was already at the Golden Pipe Bar when he arrived. They sat in a private booth away from the customers. They lit their pipes and smoked them over a tall glass of the local brew. Varten filled him in on the latest happenings.

“So, we are provided information on a gift platter. From what you tell me, it appears that the murderer we are looking for is right under our nose. It has to be either the governor or one of his children.”, Nick observed.

“Yes” Varten said, “So it would seem.”

“So it appears. I wonder if a servant or someone else could have planted the oddly twisted pipe cleaners.” Nick said outloud, “Brazen, very brazen the challenge left to us. I doubt if the remaining two people in the governor’s family know that the third is a killer!”

“I don’t believe that it is possible. No one else was in the room prior to the audience with Leo, and he said the ash tray was clean before the guests were admitted to the room.”, explained Varten.

Varten looked into the ash tray that they were using. Both of them had been using pipe cleaners. He saw two pipe cleaners in the ash tray. One was straight. One was curved. Neither were twisted.

“Look Nick, the straight pipe cleaner is mine. I smoke a straight pipe and the cleaner passes through it without interruption. Yours is bent because your pipe is bent. The bend in the pipe causes the bend in the pipe cleaner”.

“Yes, it is so obvious when one thinks of it! So, to get a twisted pipe cleaner, it must be done afterwards, with deliberation.” Nick observed.

Varten’s communicator rang. The lab director reported to him that all of the pipe cleaners were recently used, except for one. The twisted pipe cleaner with the Old Earth tobacco residue appeared to have not been recently used and matched the ones left at the crime scene. The other twisted pipe cleaners was recently used and a residue of neer-tobacco was found on it.

He asked the lab director to carefully examine the five non-twisted cleaners and determine if they had come from a straight pipe or a bent pipe. Did they exhibit the curvature from the bent pipe or less from a straight pipe?

A minute later the lab director informed him that three of the cleaners were bent and two were straight, and, of course, he could not tell from the ones with the loop and double twist.

Varten rung off and told Nick the results.

“So, where does that leave us?” Nick questioned.

“I am not sure.” Varten responded, “One of the pipe cleaners with the twist matches exactly the ones left at the murder scene. The murderer probably twists the pipe cleaner out of habit. I am going back to the governor’s palace and report to Leo. I want you to circulate, make some discreet inquiries regarding the governor and his family. I think you should also interview the carver, Mick Tinsk. He has a shop in a small suburb of Kirkland called M’tanna. Afterwards, let’s meet back at the palace.”

Nick took ground transportation to the central part of the small suburb called M'tanna. After a few missteps, he arrived at an older building with a faded sign in the front announcing that this was the shop of Mick Tinsk, pipe artist.

He entered the older shop and found two ancient display cases near the front. They appeared like they had not been cleaned in years. Thick layers of dust had settled on the top and side glass. Inside were numerous pipes of all shapes and sizes. He heard a sound behind him, turned around and encountered the proprietor of the shop. The proprietor was a short, slightly balding man well into his fifties. In his mouth was clenched a large bent freehand pipe from which ethereal clouds of smoke rose to the wood dust, and soot covered ceiling. An aroma of strong latakia tobacco pervaded the room.

"May I be of service?", the old man asked.

"Yes", Nick replied, "Are you Mick Tinsk, the pipe carver?"

"No, I am Mick Tinsk, the pipe artist." He retorted, "There is a big difference, you know. Any cluck can carve a pipe, but a true pipe artist creates a masterpiece of art!"

"Oh, OK" Nick said, "my name is Nick Reardon. I have come here to invite you to visit Emperor Leopaldo, who is staying at the governor's mansion in Kirkland. The Emperor has heard of your work and has heard from all accounts that it is of the highest quality. He would like to commission a piece from you."

"I don't know. I don't get out much anymore. I am quite busy. Look how many pieces are in those display cases! Pipes just don't sell like they use to. Well, well, I guess I could make a trip to Kirkland." he said, "Tell the Emperor that I will attend him tomorrow at his convenience."

"Fine. I see that you have many nice pieces. I understand that the governor's son, Charles, purchased a nice straight Dublin pipe from you a while back. Would you have one that I could purchase that would match it?" Nick asked.

Mick approached the larger display case, opened it and took out a nice straight Dublin pipe with a Lucite saddle stem. Mick handed it to him and said, "This pipe is designed from a piece of wood that is very close to the quality of Old Earth briar. I got a limited amount of the wood from the Georgian star system. The smoking properties are very good. Look at that grain! It is almost a pure straight grain, just as I designed it. The wood spoke to me when I planned and executed the pipe. You can have it for 200 solaris."

"200 solaris!" Mick exclaimed, "that ten times what it is worth! Only the Emperor could afford this pipe!"

“You want quality? Quality costs! Remember, I am a pipe artist, not a pipe carpenter!” Mick retorted.

“OK, I will take it, but I need some information” he responded, “I take it that you know the governor and his two children”.

“Yes, I have supplied them all with pipes and tobacco over the years. I even made pipes for his wife, Jewel and Charles mother. It was a shame when she died, and it did not have to happen. She was accidentally killed when an irate woman shot at another woman while shopping in Kirkland. It seems that the woman that was the target was having an affair with the shooter’s husband. Mrs. Hawkin was at the wrong place at the wrong time, and got caught in the cross fire. Sad, sad occurrence. Governor Hawkin and the children took it very bad. I think Jewel was the most devastated by the incident. She was very close to her mother.” he replied.

“If you ever smoked pipes with them, did you ever notice it any of them twisted their used pipe cleaners in a peculiar manner” Nick asked.

“No, no, I did not notice anything unusual.”

Nick put the new Tinsk pipe on his government Gold Empire Express credit card and thanked Mick Tinsk for his “new work of art”. As he left the store, Mick told him that he would call on Emperor Leopaldo the following day at the Governor’s mansion.

Nick left the shop, called Varten on the communicator, and briefed him on what he had found. Subsequently, he returned to the governor’s mansion.

-6-

Later that night, in the Emperor’s suite of rooms, Leopaldo, Varten, and Nick met for an after dinner discussion over pipes and drinks. They sat in the smoke filled den and were discussion the case. Streams of smoke arose from the pipes to the ceiling. A fabulous aroma pervaded the room.

“Leo, do you want me to detain all three of the Hawkin family for questioning? Should we get out the mindprobe? It has to be one of them!” Varten asked.

“No, no, that will not be necessary. I believe I know who committed the murders and the reason.” Leo responded, “I want you to arrange a meeting tomorrow morning after breakfast with the entire Hawkin family present. I want you to have them all under surveillance tonight, but I don’t think anything will happen.”

Varten used his personal communicator to set up the surveillance, and sent messages for John, Jewel, Charles, and the security chief, Wilkins, to meet Leo after his breakfast the following day.

“So, tell me what you think of Mick Tinsk and his work, Nick” Leo asked.

“Well, he is definitely a man with an ego” replied Nick, “but he does excellent work. See how well this new pipe smoke. It smokes all the better, especially since you are paying for it as part of my expenses! You do know that I used my Gold Empire Express Card”

They all laughed and called it a night some time later.

-7-

After breakfast the next morning, Leo, Varten, Nick, John, Jewel, Charles and Wilkins met in the den. Pipes were all lit. Varten and Nick closely watched as the three suspects smoked their pipes during the chitchat. They noticed nothing unusual. After a while, they glanced in the ashtray at the pipe cleaners, and again there was nothing unusual.

Finally, Leo addressed the group “I called you all here because I think I now know who is committing the murders and why they were committed. The reasoning for the murders goes back to when Mrs. Hawkin was killed. Her death was unfortunate and although tragic, affected all of you in the family. However, one of you took it harder than the others, whether you knew it or not. Mrs. Hawkin was mistakenly killed when a harlot was the actual intended victim, which is why the five murdered victims were all women of ill repute. These unfortunate women were blamed by you, Charles, for your mother’s death, hence you vengeance. Am I not correct, Charles?” Leo asked.

Charles’ pipe fell out of his mouth. “How, how ,how did you know?” he stammered, “ I thought I had covered everything! I, I don’t understand.”

“Actually, it was quite simple, once the numbers add up. Yesterday, I noticed that John and Jewel had bent pipes. You, Charles, and I had straight pipes. I was the only one smoking Old Earth tobacco. There were 7 pipe cleaners in the ash tray after we finished. Two were twisted, the remaining five either straight or with a slight curvature. I used two pipe cleaners, John used 2, Jewel and you each used one. Laboratory analysis indicated that one of the twisted pipe cleaners was old, and one new with the old one showing signs of Old Earth tobacco residue. By a process of elimination, it had to be you. Of the seven pipe cleaners in the ashtray, throw away the old curved one as it was planted by the murderer. The three bent pipe cleaners belonged to John and Jewel. That left two straight pipe cleaners, and one twisted. The straight pipe cleaners had to belong to me since I am not the murderer. The new, twisted pipe cleaner was yours.” Leo expounded.

“Ah, Ah,” Charles stammered,

“Look at your hands, Charles, you are so nervous right now that you are twisting that pipe cleaner between your fingers. It is a habit. You just can’t help yourself!” Leo expounded.

“I, I did murder those harlots. If it wasn’t for them, Mother never would have died. I am

sorry father, but, but, I, I just couldn't help myself.”

“Leo, is there anything we can do for him?” Governor Harking asked?

“Yes, John, we will get him the best medical treatment in the Empire. I am sure that after some medical attention he can be restored to being a good citizen. Of course there will be a penalty to pay, but in the long-run he can be salvaged”.

Charles was taken into custody by Wilkins and the Kirkland security people. The Hawkin family left.

Leo, Varten, and Nick remained. Nick reminded Leo of his upcoming appointment with Mick Tinsk.

“Nick, please lend me your Gold Empire Express Card, as I seem to have left mine in my room. After all, I have to keep that pipe artist happy because if you don't he can make one ugly, ugly pipe!”

They all left the room laughing!

-End-

## THE COLLECTOR'S TINS

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 9/2004, THE COLLECTOR'S TIN, All Rights Reserved

-1-

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

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

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

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

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

Once on board the scooter, he lifted off and placed the scooter on autopilot to Storn. He lit up his Whitehall pipe filled with a local pseudo-tobacco. "Too bad I can't find or afford any real Old Earth tobacco" he said to himself. He opened the note and read the contents:

*My name is John Smith. In my youth I was a dedicated collector of everything written by, about, and related to J.R.R. Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings Trilogy of*

*books. On my way to the planet Storn, my ship was attacked and I was wounded. I escaped in a lifeboat and now find myself in this escape dome. Soon I will be no more. I bequeath this part of my small collection of books and paraphernalia to you and hope it brings you better luck than it did me.*

*Signed, John Smith*

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

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

-2-

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

Willem was puffing on his Orlik Judges’ Pipe, a pipe from Old Earth dating to the First Age. He knew it was made of real briar and was manufactured in a political subdivision in Europe. He was smoking some of the last of his supply of Old Earth tobacco. The tin indicated that it was a Pease blend called “Inverness”. Greg Pease was a tobacco blender/designer from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, F.A. “When I run out, I Guess I will have to get some good pseudo-Virginia tobacco or else smoke nothing at all” he thought. He had become acutely aware that Old Earth tobacco was becoming increasingly hard to come by. Its scarcity was driving up the price and value, when it could be found.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-3-

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

“Varten, come take a look at this.”

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

“No, it is a rather unique business opportunity. You remember our old friend Willem van Derjinn from the planet Storn in the Santori System? It seems that he has come into the

possession of seven rare tins of Old Earth tobacco. The tobaccos tins have names taken from a series of books written by an author from the Old Earth political subdivision Great Britain. The author was John R.R. Tolkien who wrote a series of books called “The Lord of the Rings”. The tins are also stamped N.A.S.P.C. Let’s see what turns up in a computer search.”

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

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

“Quite interesting, eh Varten?”

“Yes Leo, are you interested?”

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

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

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

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

“You know Varten that some pipe collectors think that this deep hollow tobacco has a tin aroma of ketchup. I don’t know where they get this foolish idea. Whatever they think, this is one

excellent tobacco. Too bad I only have a half a dozen tins left. Well, we might as well enjoy it while we can!”

-4-

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

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

Passing through the entrance to the main terminal, as instructed, he proceeded to the smoking lounge. There were a number of people smoking cigarettes, cigars, and a few even had pipes, He sat in a corner seat and lit a full bent rattiliwood briar pipe with a quantity of a dark shag pseudo-tobaccos supposedly to simulate a heavy latakia English blend. Although not very rare, rattiliwood had been found to have similar smoking properties as Old Earth briar, or so he had been told. It made for a very good traveling pipe. As he lit the pipe, he noticed a very shapely young woman, dressed in a tight, low-cut jumpsuit, sitting across and to his right that was trying to use a lighter to fire up a black bent sandblasted pipe. She gave up, got up, and walked over to him.

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

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

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

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

She responded “Well, at least you didn’t call it a Ladies Pipe! I have worked for Mr. Van Derjinn since I graduated from college five years ago. An antiquarian comes up with some pretty strange items. He got this pipe in a deal a couple of years ago. It is from Old Earth, and was made by Dunhill. From the stampings you can see that it is a group 2 Tanshell made in

1977, First Age. The pseudo-tobacco is made by the Sim Gorwaith company on Vesper II, and is their “Best Brown” blend.”

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

“Fine by me” Lu Jo replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the door opened.

-5-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As you are sure to know, the Emperor has only authorized me up to a certain amount. For me to go much higher would require additional authorization which would take a significant additional amount of time. I will be honest with you, I can go up to 700 solaris per tin or a total of 4,900 solaris. I can add an additional 100 solaris as a sort of finders fee.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-6-

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

“Where are we going Mr. Smith?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I am sure Mr. Gorwaith probably designed the tobacco to resemble the Old Earth product. With all the advances we have seen over the centuries, the pseudo-tobacco that is available to day almost surpasses the natural products, whether grown naturally now as a neer-tobacco, or manufactured artificially as a pseudo-tobacco. However, nothing surpasses the original Old Earth tobacco, when it can be found.” Lu and Spencer finished their pipes. “What are you plans for the rest of the evening Spencer?”

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

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

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

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

-7-

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What instructions have you given Nick?”

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

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

-8-

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

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

At the hotel, they went to the sealed room on the 66<sup>th</sup> floor. Sergeant Polombo was explaining the lab reports and their findings. “Medical reports indicate that Mr. Smith died of a needle blast to the heart. He died instantly, without any pain if that is of any help. Mr. Smith was found still dressed in his sleeping clothes. He had not performed his morning toilet. Hotel staff indicates that Mr. Smith had checked in with and entertained a young lady last night with dinner. After dinner they went to the lounge, and later on came up here in the room. She was observed leaving around 5 A.M. local time. We do not know who she is however; there is some surveillance video with her in it. She will not be hard to identify. Mr. Smith responded to his automatic wake up call at 7:00 A.M. He ordered strong tea be sent up to the room at 8:00 A.M. When the tea arrived and there was no response, the hotel staff used a key to open the door and deliver the

tea. She found Mr. Smith's body over there. You will also notice that the room safe has been forced. Lab analysis of the residue shows that a small amount of sarrat-explosive was used to force the door of the safe. The lab also identified at least two types of pipe tobacco that was smoked and found the end of a small cigar."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Interesting" Nick said "My pipe also came from the same Old Earth country. My tobacco is

also made similar to one produced for a few years by the pipe manufacturer Castello, also from Old Earth Italy.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-9-

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I am the Emperor's personal representative on this case. Here, let me show you my identification as a member of the Empire Intelligence Service." He showed him his identification tattoo in the same manner as had Spencer. "I would ask the three of you not to divulge this to anyone in the future. "Please tell me what transpired the night you all met Mr. Smith. Do not leave out any details, no matter how small."

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

"We went back up to his room on the 66<sup>th</sup> floor. After that we uh.... Well, we..."

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, they hear Spencer’s voice:

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Fine” Nick said “I do have something for you both to do for me. Mr. van Derjinn, I want you to

contact your acquaintances and business contacts and find out if there is anyone who has shown an interest in the merchandise, or any other leads you can find for me.” He gave them the number of his personal communicator so that he could be reached.

Nick and Detective Polombo left the showroom.

-10-

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

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

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

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

“I was checking out a contact that Mr. van Derjinn mentioned. The man is Mr. Kapp Peterson. Mr Peterson is a fellow antiquarian. He indicated to me that Mr. van Derjinn had sold him the J.R.R. Tolkien books that were in the cache with the tobacco tins. He said he paid about 2000 solaris for the Houghton Mifflin leather bound edition of “The Lord of the Rings” and the several paperbacks that went with them. No sooner did Mr. van Derjinn leave then a gentleman showed up and offered him 3000 solaris for the books. He said that he was a collector of Lord of the Rings-related material. He asked Mr. Peterson if he knew anything about other merchandise that may have been found with the books, to which he replied that he would have to ask Mr. van Derjinn. For some reason the stranger said that it would not be necessary. He paid for the material with a bonded check in the name of Stennett Biggens, and left the store.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Here is what I think happened, Lu Jo. I believe that the murderer knew the location of the tins of tobacco because Mr. van Derjinn's showroom was bugged. I think he picked up the story of the negotiations and transactions. He knew from observing the shop that you were working for Willem. I think you were followed from the spaceport to Willem's villa. I think that this information was passed on to the short fat man here at the hotel. He picked you and Spencer up when the two of you had dinner in the hotel restaurant. You were probably followed up to the room on the 66<sup>th</sup> floor. The murderer saw you leave at 5:00 A.M. I think that Spencer had switched to his sleeping clothes. At some point in time, the murderer obtained entrance to Spencer's room. He murdered Spencer. He was the one that responded to the wake up call and ordered the tea. This gave him up to three hours inside the room. The murderer had more than enough time to blow the safe and smoke a cigar. He left Spencer's room before 8:00 A.M. and did not go back to his empty room, rather moved around the hotel and eventually left via aircar."

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

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

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

"Thanks Captain. I want you to have your ship ready for lift off. Contact the Empire Military Control and find out the exact location of the space liner Torcus. I think we shall try to rendezvous with it so I can go aboard. Contact their Captain and tell him I will be transferring on-board. Tell him I will provide an explanation once on board. Tell him this is a Code 1

Empire matter. We should not have any problem with the Torcus' Captain." Nick then broke the connection with the Empire Officer.

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

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

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

They emptied their pipes and left the lounge. They headed to the spaceport in Lu Jo's aircar. She left a short message for her employer. On the way to the spaceport, Nick called Sergeant Polombo and briefed him on Stennett Biggens and his tentative plan. He also called Mr. Peterson and asked him to send a complete set of the LOTR books and the LOTR videos to the Empire cruiser Constance as quickly as possible. Once on board the cruiser Constance he could send Varten von Eckman a full report of what had transpired on Storn.

-11-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

--

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

“Sure would” he said. Nick and Lu Jo left the stateroom and headed to the Constance’s bridge. They were met by Captain Regan. He said that he was about an hour from the actual hookup and that they had been in contact with the space liner Torcus. It seems that the Torcus was a space liner that had seen better days. It had, at one time been considered opulent, but by now was well out of date. It had an old fashion flash-drive, not a newer ring-drive, which is why the Constance was able to catch up to her.

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

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

-12-

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

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

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

“Well, that explains all the to do. I guess with the Emperor’s backing all things become possible. One of our passengers, a Mr. Stennett Biggens, is also a Tolkien fancier. Perhaps I can

arrange for him to meet you and your wife. A little social gathering.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

-13-

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

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

“Quite nice pipes you have their Mr. and Mrs. Reardon” Biggens exclaimed. “My own is a Ser Jacopo smooth Gandalf pipe, it being one of five pipes in a series made by Ser Jacopo for a Canadian distributor. My pipe was a prototype for the Gandalf design. The Gandalf pipe is a sitter with a bamboo shaft and a bent stem. The silver ring has “Gandalf, LOTR” cast into the

silver band. You note that my pipe has a Ser Jacopo logo “J” on the stem and is stamped Ser Jacopo, the rest of the pipes that were made have a different logo, hence the added value to my Old Earth pipe. The other pipes in the series are named “Frodo”, “Bilbo”, “Horn of Gondor”, and “Aragorn”. My tobacco is an Old Earth tin from a company called McClellands named “Deep Hollow”, again from the Lord of the Rings Trilogy or “LOTR” as we fanciers call it.”

“Very nice Mr. Biggens” Lu Jo said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-14-

They had a pleasant dinner in the Torcus’ French Restaurant. At 8:00 P.M. they knocked on Stennett Biggens cabin door. He admitted them to a very modern suite. He proceeded to pour Nick and Lu Jo drinks as they began filling and lighting their pipes. Looking around the room, Nick noticed a rather thick book with red leather bindings on the desk. On the table behind the desk was a medium box a dragon on the front and on the top. He had finally found the dragon box. He said nothing.

“Mr. Reardon, here is my copy of the Red Book Edition that you may wish to take a look at. I see you have the Centenary Edition under your arm.” He took the book from Nick when it was

offered. “I see it is illustrated by Allan Lee. It is so very nice and well done. Mr. Lee was one of the technical advisors to Peter Jackson on the film version of the books.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-15-

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

Emperor Leopaldo began by saying that he appreciated the Nick' and Lu Jo's excellent job regarding the "Affair of the Collector's Tins". He went on to say "I have a small gift for each of you" and he turned to them and gave them each a small box. Inside the box he gave to Nick was a large Dunhill Black Shell Briar, Group 5 having a silver band engraved "San Antonio 2000", and stamped 6401. "This Dunhill pipe was produced in the First Age and commemorates a meeting of retail tobacco dealers in the town of San Antonio, in the state of Texas, a political subdivision of the United States." Lu Jo opened her box and took out a small straight pipe with a reddish tinge and a white dot on the stem. "Your pipe Lu Jo" Leopaldo continued "is a Group 4 Dunhill Tanshell canted Dublin stamped 157 F/T, made in 1964 F.A. It came from the exquisite

collection of a lady from Old Earth named Louise Jones. During the first age she and her husband operated a very successful pipe and tobacco trading company named “Hermit Tobacco”. She was a very noted pipe collector and pipe smoker. I hope you will treasure this token, or should I say Tolkien, of my esteem.” They both thanked the Emperor for his generous gifts.

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

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

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

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

“What do you think young lady?” Leo asked her “Would you like to join the service? You would have some very difficult training to undergo, but I think you have the qualities to pass all the courses and assignments. I have complete faith in you, and if I may so, so does one of our best EIS operatives, Nick Reardon.”

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

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

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

“Sounds great to us!” they both said.

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

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

-END-

## THE GOOD WEDDING

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 9/2004, THE GOOD WEDDING, All Rights Reserved

-1-

Emperor Leopaldo XVI of the House Lineas was sitting in his study enjoying a bowl of wexel-virginia pseudo-tobacco in his von Erck freehand pipe. The rather large non-classical shaped pipe was carved by an Old Earth craftsman named Lee Erck. Little did he know when the pipe was carved during the First Age that it would survive all these years and still be enjoyed fifty centuries after it was made.

The invitation had come with the morning dispatches. Varten von Eckman's daughter Lynda was going to be married to Robert Kostik of the House of Hanover. Varten had been Leo's weapons master/chief of security for many years. Of course he would attend the wedding of his dearest old friend's daughter, even if it meant traveling to Capella II in the Regular star cluster. The wedding would be one of the social events of the Empire this year. Representatives of all the Houses of the Reichstagen would be invited and attend, well they better attend, he thought.

Leo had known Lynda from childhood. She almost considered him to be her grandfather. He smiled as he recollected that "Grandfather" was what she called him as a child. Being Varten's only child, he knew she was the apple of her father's eye. His too, come to think of it. He also socially knew Robert Kostik who came from a good family. He had graduated from the Empire Military Academy at the top of his class and would appear to have a very promising career in the service of the Empire.

As he thought about attending the wedding, he remarked to himself how well the wexel-virginia smoked in the von Erck pipe. He knew the history of von Erck pipes. They were carved by Lee Erck who had developed a secret oil curing process for his briar. Unfortunately, his mixture went with him to his grave. It was never again quite duplicated. Some pipe connoisseurs believed that the taste of oil curing disappeared after 30 or so smokes, however Leo did not agree. He could always tell an oil-cured pipe, no matter how old.

He went to his computer and typed in for information on Capella II. The capitol of Capella II was the town of New Pittsburgh. Whenever he visited a new world, he tried to check out pipe/tobacco shops and bookshops. He found the "yellow pages" for New Pittsburgh and enquired about bookshops and tobacconists. The amount of information returned was not promising, however there were a couple of bookshops and one very promising tobacco merchant. He made a mental note to visit them both.

As his pipe full of tobacco was approaching an end, he placed the pipe into the ornate ash tray on

his desk. He decided that he would travel to Capella II with Nick Reardon, one of his Empire Intelligence Service best operatives, and a fellow brother of the briar. They would travel on a ring-drive space liner taking about four days to get to Capella II. The trip would give him a chance to relax and catch up on his pleasure reading. Recently, he had been reading some original Old Earth books dealing with Sherlock Holmes. His agents had unearthed four books for his collection including two copies of "The Sherlock Holmes Adventure" by Regis MaCafferty, and two books about Sherlock's brother Mycroft by Quinn Fawcett entitled "Against the Brotherhood", and "The Flying Scotsman". He received great enjoyment by reading stories from original books, a thing few people did in his time period. A genuine hardback book was difficult to find. Imitations were made, but could easily be detected. Books had long ago been replaced with visiscreen, personal electronic readers, and hypno-learning.

He placed the RSVP reply in the outgoing mail slot. His immediate problem was what to give the new couple for a wedding present. He had two weeks until departure. The gift would be something that he would have to ponder on his trip.

-2-

Emperor Leopaldo's and Nick's trip to Capella II via the space liner "Corithian" was uneventful, as far as these trips went. They spent four days relaxing, smoking pipes, reading, and whatever they felt like doing. You would be surprised how little it took to run an Empire from day-to-day, and most of that was done by his functionaries at Castle Pesaro. As a result, he only had one or two communications a day that required his direct attention.

The space liner landed at the Capella II spaceport. They took ground transportation to the capital city, New Pittsburgh. Prior to departing the ship, he dispatched messages to Varten von Eckman alerting him to his arrival. He also communicated with Castle Pesario and left contact information.

As Emperor, even though he was visiting Capella II on a social basis, his presence still had political overtones. He had been met by local security people. He, Nick, and the security people had a scheduled meeting with Leopaldo's appointed governor, Herman Heissmann. The governor had done an excellent job in administering the Emperor's will, collecting taxes, and keeping the planet secure. Leopaldo was quite happy with his selection. He and Nick met with Governor Heissmann in his private study.

"Good day to you Herman. I am very glad to see you. You have done an excellent job governing your home planet. I am quite pleased!"

"Thanks, your majesty. I am very glad to be of service."

"You probably do not remember Nick Reardon from your last visit to Castle Pesaro. I believe he was away on a mission. He is one of my best EIS operatives. You may both address me as Leo here in private. Do you mind if we smoke?"

“No, I do not remember meeting Mr. Reardon and of course you may smoke. As you know, I also like to smoke my pipes! I have some tobacco here from Old Earth. It is called ‘Ten Russians’ and was tinned by the Hermit Tobacco Company”. The governor offered Leo and Nick a tin of tobacco after he had popped the lid.

Leo filled up and lit his von Erck pipe. Nick lit up his Larenzetti pipe. Herman lit up a GBD Unique.

As Leo puffed on his pipe he said, “I can give you some information about Hermit Tobacco. I recently gifted a special friend with a pipe that belonged to one of the principals of the company. Hermit Tobacco operated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century on Old Earth. They were one of the largest dealers in new and estate pipes and smoking paraphernalia in the political subdivision known as the United States. They heavily supported the pipe and tobacco scene in the United States through attending all the pipe and tobacco collector shows each year. The company was operated by Jay and Louise Jones. They were both very knowledgeable people. Both had extensive collections of ultra high grade pipes. Hermit Tobacco also marketed a Hermit line of tobaccos which were primary of the English Style. Their tobaccos are becoming very difficult to obtain. I thank you very much for allowing us to sample this blend.”

“I am not quite the connoisseur of pipes and tobacco that you are. I appreciate the information. In return, I will tell you that Simeon Tanner, at the Capella Tobacconist Shop, supplied me with the tobacco. He found a small cache and a couple Captain Earle pipes. You may wish to visit him while you are here, time permitting of course.”

“You can be sure that I will make time for a visit. I also would like to visit some bookshops, if possible. I am always looking for old books to fill holes in my collection. Books are getting harder to find every day, especially since everything went electronic many centuries ago.”

“We don’t have any bookshops; however there is a flea market that you may wish to check out. It is about six blocks from your hotel. I will send directions over to you at the New Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel.”

“Thanks, Nick and I will definitely check out these items. How is security here on Capella II?”

“You should not have any problem. The streets are secure both day and night. I am sure that Nick will be ever at your side. I will have a couple security people shadow you in an unobtrusive way. You won’t even know they are there.”

“Again, thanks for your hospitality. Nick, are you still with us?”

“Yes sir, Yours truly is just sitting here, listening to the conversation, and enjoying this fine tobacco. I saw no need to intrude”

They discussed Empire matters for about a half-hour until their pipes were finished. When the

meeting was ended, Leo and Nick bid the governor a fond farewell and were taken to the New Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel where they checked into the Emperor Suite.

-3-

After unpacking, Leo and Nick decided to take a short walk to the Capella Tobacconist Shop, a short distance from the hotel. They walked up to a very nice shop that was reminiscent of a tobacco shop from the 1890's, First Age. The architecture of the shop and the design of the store front made it look like it had been located in London, England. The glass panel in the front door was lettered in gold leaf and told them they were at the Capella Tobacconist Shop and the proprietor was Mr. Simeon Tanner. They opened the door and went inside. To the left and right were large windows. Every other place in the shop was covered in a dark walnut finished wood. On the left was a sitting/smoking area with a large visiscreen on the wall. In the middle of the store was a large display case. On the right parallel to the wall and along the back was a large counter with a glass display case. Behind the counter on the back wall was display after display of pipes. The wall on the right held shelves with probably 200 different varieties of Empire pseudo-tobacco and neer-tobacco tins plus about two dozen jars holding loose tobacco of all types. In the middle of the back wall was a curtained door that led to the back room. The aroma of tobacco pervaded the shop.

A small wizened man came out of the back room and addressed his visitors. "Are you Emperor Leopaldo?" he asked.

"Yes I am and this is my good friend Nick Reardon. I take it that you are Simeon Tanner, the proprietor, whom I have heard many good things from the governor."

"Yes, I am he. Governor Heissmann called and told me you might be by. I am much honored to have you visit my humble shop. How may I serve you?"

"From what I see, you must have one of the finest establishments in the Empire. I understand from the governor that you may have some Old Earth Tins of tobacco available, and I would certainly like to see your pipes. Nick and I would like to share a pipe with you, if you don't mind."

"I would be honored." He said as he went and placed the CLOSED sign on the door. "I don't think we want to be disturbed. Your majesty, I do have a couple of tins of Hermit Tobacco that I have recently received from one of my contacts. Before I bring it out, I would like you to try this tobacco." He said as he reached under the counter and took out a jar. "This is a mature Virginia like neer-tobacco that was grown locally. It has been aged for over twenty-five years. It is very similar to the Old Earth McClelland's 5100 bulk tobacco."

They all took out pipes. The Emperor had an Old Earth pipe made by an American carver named Sam Learned that had stag horn on the shank. Nick took out his Dunhill RTDA 2000 black shell briar pipe. Simeon Tanner showed Leo and Nick his pipe which had been carved by an Old Earth carver named Tim Wiener, a carved black bent pipe with a white ring insert in the

stem. They all admired the pipes that they each were smoking. They filled their pipes and lit them. Smoke rings lifted towards the ceiling of the shop.

“You may not be aware, your majesty, that this is one of the few shops left that makes custom blends. I don’t mean to brag, but I can blend almost anything using either new neer- or pseudo-tobacco or I can add a small amount of Old Earth tobacco from bulks that I have.”

“I am quite impressed. I have read about an Old Earth Blend called Matt’s Red and Black from the J.C. Nays tobacco Co. Would you be able to produce it?”

He consulted an old ragged notebook that he took out of one of the drawers. “I have heard that the blend is a very nice one with a mature Virginia and a Black Virginia tobacco. An approximation was 60% McClelland #5100 and 40% McClelland 5105, all of which are difficult to find. I can make a close version out of wexel-virginias. The two parts made up from different blends of wexel-virginias. How much do you want?”

“I would like a pound of this mixture. I also would like two tins each of the Vintage Flake and the Brown Flake. Give me three tins of the Cut Virginia Plug, if you have enough. That looks to me to be similar to the Old Earth Fribourg & Treyer flakes. I have some of the original Old Earth tins in my tobacco collection. Look, the manufacturer has even used tins that match the Old Earth tins. What Old Earth pipes do you have?”

“One pound to be sure, your majesty. Yes, the new F&T tobacco company is doing a good job in re-creating the blends from the Old Earth firm of many years ago. I do have plenty of stock to fill your order. I only have six Old Earth pipes at the present time. I have one by Clarence Mickles, one Ser Jacopo Double Maxima, One Dunhill, One Comoy, one Charatan, and one Tim Wiener. I hope you will find something here to suit your taste.”

The pipes were estate and reconditioned very carefully. After Leo examined the six pipes, he decided to purchase two; a Ser Jacopo Double Maxima large 1/8 bent apple and a Clarence Mickles blasted prince. How much do you want for the pipes?”

“One-hundred solaris each.” He replied.

“Reasonable” Leo responded “I’ll take them both.”

Nick picked up a tin of McNay’s “Red Ribbon Flake. “A fine selection Mr. Reardon”, Simeon said.

Leo charged the entire order, 220 solaris, to his Empire Express Card, drawn on the Empire Treasury. “A justifiable expense when on Empire business”, he said.

After praising Simeon Tanner’s shop, they left and continued walking down the street to the flea market.

The building in which the flea market was held was an old converted warehouse. There were two floors. Each floor held around fifty stalls or booths. He and Nick made a quick walk-through then decided to stop at a stall filled with old books and videos. He was reading through a bunch of titles he found in an old crate when he spied an interesting title. He took out the book and showed it to Nick.

“Nick, this book was written by a Frenchman named Georges Herment. The book is entitled “The Pipe” Look what it says on the cover ‘A serious yet diverting treatise on the history of the pipe and all its appurtenances, as well as a factual withal philosophical discussion on the pleasurable art of selecting pipes, smoking, and caring for them. With special illustrations.’ Let’s see, it was originally published by Simon and Schuster in 1954, First Age. This book is one of the first books I ever read when I took up pipes and tobacco. It is a fantastic book. I wonder what the dealer wants for it.

He found the flea market dealer for the stall who had been having a lite lunch. The dealer asked them if he could be of assistance. “What is the price on this book?” Leo asked.

“Oh that one, well, you know that books on pipes and tobacco are very rare. Books are rare, period! The newfangled computers, electronics, and psyco-teaching systems make them more of a thing of the past. I would like 20 solaris for the book.”

“Books may be rare, but not that rare! I can just call up the book on my visiscreen if all I wanted to do was read it. I’ll give you 10 solaris for it and you can consider yourself lucky.” Leo replied.

“Ten solaris”, he mumbled, “Can you make it twelve?”

“Done!” Leo said “ You drive a hard bargain, Mr...”

“Arthur Bernat and do I know you?” he asked

“Fine Arthur, and I don’t think you do.”

He paid the dealer. Nick and Leo left the flea market making only one other purchase. Nick purchased an Old Earth pocket book entitled “Secret Agent Girl”. He paid less than a quarter-solaris for the book. He told Leo that he was going to send it to Lu Jo who was at the EIS Academy undergoing new agent training.

“You know, Nick, Lu Jo is going to kill you when she gets this book from you. You should send it inside a Puzzle box. She would have to discover the secret code to open the box. Then she would find a most appropriate present.” Leo exclaimed.”

Nick just laughed.

They headed back to the New Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel, enjoying the very fine Capella II day.

Nick was sitting in the study of the Emperor Suite when Leo burst in. “Oh Satan’s Fanny” he yelled “I must have left my bag with the two new pipes at the flea market. I have the tobacco, but must have set the other bag down. How about you taking a jaunt back and see if the bag is in Mr. Bernat’s stall.”

Nick immediately left but came back empty handed about 30 minutes later. While he was explaining to Leo that the stall had closed for the day, the communicator rang. Leo picked up the communicator “This is the front desk, sir. There is a Mr. Arthur Bernat here who says that he has some urgent business with you.” “Send him up.” Leo replied.

The door chimes rang. Nick opened the door and let Mr. Bernat into the room. He addressed Leo and Nick. “Sir, you know I mentioned I thought I knew you, well it came to me after I found the bag with the two pipes you left in my stall. I finally realized that you are Emperor Leopaldo. It should have come to me sooner. Well, anyways, I am here with the pipes you left. I came to return them and ask a favor.”

“Thanks Arthur, it is always nice to meet an honest man. These pipes could have gotten you several hundred solaris, probably a large sum to you.”

“Yes sir, they could have. I do know the value of genuine Old Earth pipes, but, I would have had to live with my conscience. As I said, I do have a favor to ask of you.”

“Please, sit down. We have plenty of time. Would you like to smoke? Do you mind if we do?” Leo stated.

“No, I don’t mind”, Arthur took out a rather large imitation GBD Unique. “Not real Old Earth, but a nice pipe, none the less.

Leo opened a tin of the new Fribourg & Treyer “Cut Virginia Plug” and said “fill up your pipe and take your time with the story. I am going to try this new Ser Jacopo Double Maxima pipe.” As he filled up his pipe, Nick did likewise. “Nick, please take notes”, Leo asked.

Arthur Began “Forty years ago, when I was a young man, I enlisted and served in the Empire Navy. This was during the rule of your father. I was trained as a medic and served on the space navy cruiser, Jerry Ford. We had been assigned to the fleet charged with ending the revolt in the star system Venus IX. It had to do with group of insurgents that had taken over the government and were trying to spread their doctrine of running a planet by computer and achieving a utopia. I thought that mankind had gotten rid of utopia thinking at the end of the Second Age. Well I was wrong.

I had been detached from the Jerry Ford in a small, medical ambulance ship, (MAS) no. 41. The

ship had a pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator, a space marine, me, and a nurse. The mission was commanded by Lt. Jones, the pilot. We were traveling through the space between the 2<sup>nd</sup> moon and the third planet of the Venus IX system. The battle was over. The fleet was rounding up stragglers and we were out trying to find any medical cases. We found a drifting hulk of what had once been a Venus IX battle cruiser. It appeared quite dead. We picked up a weak signal from a distress beacon located on the underside of the hulk. The co-pilot took us in close. We stood off an airlock. Lt. Jones and Sgt. Wilson, the space marine, suited up. They left the ambulance through the air lock and jetted over to the hulk's air lock through free space. When they got to the air lock, they opened it and went inside. At that time we lost communications.

A half an hour went by and we heard nothing. We were ready to leave, fearing that something bad had happened to the boarding crew, when we saw the air lock open. It was Jones and Wilson. They were followed by ten other men in old space suits. Lt. Jones jetted over to the ambulance with a line which he attached to a mooring ring. Sgt. Wilson and the ten men came over pulling on the line. They carefully came on board two at a time through the ambulance's small air lock. As they came in, I examined the men that were on the hulk. They were in average to poor shape with mostly minor injuries. Lt. Jones was the last one to come on board and told us to get the Hades out of there. We immediately left. About two minutes after we left, the hulk blew up in a tremendous explosion.

It seems that the ten men had been held captive. When the crew of the hulk had left several hours earlier, they had set the atomic pile on the ship to blow. The trigger was when the beacon's batteries finally died. They had hoped that a large Empire ship would be docked with the hulk. The ten men, all Empire soldiers had been left on the hulk as bait. It was a bit of luck, and the skill and determination of Jones and Wilson that saved the Empire soldiers, themselves, and us on the ambulance.

The reason I am telling you this story is that there were never any mention, medals, or honors, for at least Jones and Wilson. Not that any was expected, since we all felt that we were just doing our jobs. However, Wilson and Jones are now up in years, and I don't expect either to be around much longer. I would like to see them get some recognition. I think that the effort they showed went well and above the norm."

They had long finished their pipes which were sitting in the ash trays. Leo took his pipe and started to empty out the ash with his Pipester Tamper. "Arthur, I notice that you do not ask anything for yourself?"

"I, I did not do anything. All the credit belongs to Lt. Jones and Sgt. Wilson." He replied.

"OK, I can't promise you anything, but I will look into it. Will you please give Nick the necessary information to contact all of the crew of MAS 41. I assume that you all keep in contact."

"Yes we do, although I am not sure I have all the addresses. I will provide what I can."

“It has been a pleasure talking with you today, Arthur. I do want to thank you for returning my new pipes to me and in having a most enjoyable smoke with us.”

Nick and Arthur left Leo.

Leo thought to himself “I like honest men, they are so hard to find among the people I deal with in the upper end of the Empire. I wonder how I can help him. I must be cautious in that I to verify Arthur’s story. I don’t doubt that the story is true, but I cannot afford haste.”

A short while later Nick rejoined Leo. “A most remarkable man is Mr. Arthur Bernat.” Nick said.

“Yes he is. Honest to the core. I want you to contact Vice-Admiral Hanie in the Space Navy Archives to see if he has any information. I want you to have some Empire Intelligence Service people trace down the crew of MAS 41 and interview them. Tell them it is for a documentary on the Space Navy and obtain their stories. Get hold of the officer who was the commander of the Jerry Ford and get his story. Find out why these men were not put into for awards. Try to have all the information funneled to us within 24 hours. If we are to do anything, it will have to be right after the wedding”

“Anything else you want me to do?” Nick asked.

“No, but you may find it interesting to know that Jerry Ford, or President Gerald Ford was a President of the Old Earth political subdivision United States of America. He also was a pipe smoker at one point in his lifetime. Supposedly, he smoked in the oval office inside the White House which was their equivalent to Castle Pesaro. I guess he gave it up when it became politically incorrect to smoke.”

-5-

The morning of the wedding came. Emperor Leopaldo was decked out in his Imperial finest. Nick joined him in the uniform of an Empire Captain. They traveled to the old Capella II Cathedral. They arrived two hours before the wedding was to start. Upon arriving, they were ushered into a private room where they were met by their old friend Varten von Eckman. “Sire, I am glad you could make it.” he said “Any problems with the trip?”

“No, Varten. It was a very smooth trip. We ran into a couple of small problems in New Pittsburgh. Are you ready for the wedding? It seems like only yesterday that Lynda was a young girl sitting on my lap. It appears that she has grown into a fine young lady. You should be very proud”

“She most certainly has grown into a fine young lady, and I am proud. She reminds me of her mother. Good thing she does not take after her father!” Varten said.

“I am looking forward to seeing her again, Varten. If possible, I would like a couple of minutes

with her and her new husband after the ceremony, before the formal reception. Please also alert your staff that I am expecting a couple messages and have them brought to me as soon as possible.” Leo asked.

The Majordomo entered the room and escorted Emperor Leopoldo and Nick into the main sanctuary of the cathedral. There they found that many nobles from the top Houses of the Empire had gathered for the event. Leo and Nick found themselves right behind the immediate families, on the bride’s side of the altar. Leo turned to Nick and whispered “Boy could I go for a pipe now. Guess I will have to wait until the reception. I feel so tight in this royal monkey suit.”

Nick responded “It should not be too long a ceremony. You know, Leo, I find that it is easier to be in a wedding than to watch one.”

“Well Nick, it has been a long time since I was married. You did not know my wife, Princess Karina. She passed away while giving birth to Prince Kyle. She had a very difficult pregnancy. It has been a long time getting over her passing. This is the first wedding I have attended in many years. I understand that Lynda and Robert have prepared an Old Earth style wedding. It should be very nice.”

As he concluded his remarks, the musical prelude began. Leo looked around the Cathedral from the ornate altar, to the vaulted ceilings, and the beautiful stained glass windows. “Nick, did you know that the stained glass windows were made to be a duplicate of those found in the Cathedral de Notre Dame in Paris, France during the First Age of Old Earth. They are very beautiful. Some of the statuary was designed from other pieces from that era.”

“The windows are most beautiful, indeed. The colors are very vivid. They have reproduced a very beautiful cathedral from Old Earth here on Capella II.” Nick responded.

The Majordomo escorted Martha von Eckman down the main isle and to her seat. A few seconds later the entrance march began. The groom and groomsmen entered and stood parallel to the altar on the right, perpendicular to the main aisle. The bridesmaids, wearing a long flowing white gown with a pink sash carrying a small bouquet of roses, entered one-at-a-time they walked down the long aisle, made a left turn at the altar and stopped at their designated position. Suddenly the carillon became very loud. Everyone turned around and looked down the aisle. At the far end stood Varten von Eckman and on his arm was his daughter Lynda. They started to process down the aisle. When they reached Emperor Leopold, they turned towards him and bowed. They then continued to the altar. Varten said a few words to Robert, kissed his daughter, and gave her hand to Robert. Varten joined his wife in the pew. Robert and Lynda turned and faced the celebrant of the wedding service. As they knelt at the altar, there was a slight ripple of laughter in the audience. On the bottom of Robert’s shoes, someone had written the word “HELP” on the sole of his left boot, and “ME!” on the bottom of the sole on his right boot!

The wedding service continued for about an hour and a half. At the end, the celebrant stood in front of the couple and said “Ladies and gentlemen. Please let me be the first to introduce to you

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Kostik of the House of Hanover!” The audience all arose as one and clapped this announcement. The wedding party processed down the aisle, after stopping to acknowledge the presence of their Emperor.

After the wedding party got past them, Leo and Nick were led back to the private room. Leo said “I guess we can light up now, Nick.” They lit their pipes. One of Varten’s assistants brought a couple of dispatches to Leo. He read them with great interest. He scribbled a few short lines on one of them and told the assistant to send the reply. “Nick, shortly Varten and his wife, daughter, and new son-in-law will be meeting with us as soon as they finish dealing with the rather long reception line in the Cathedral. After we meet with them we will be returning to the New Pittsburgh Hilton for some important business. We are not going to attend the wedding reception which will allow the bride and groom to have a good time without our presence being a distraction. However, I think the little job we have yet to perform will be of interest to you.”

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock on the door. Varten and Martha von Eckman entered with Lynda and Robert Kostik. Robert addressed Leo “My Lord, my wife and I greatly appreciate the honor you have bestowed upon us by attending the wedding. We are very pleased that you could attend.”

“Attend” he laughed “I could not possibly have missed the social event of the season, and to see my favorite young lady on this most propitious occasion. Please call me Leo, here in private.” He turned to Lynda and said “You know, young lady, that you have always been one of my favorites since you were a little girl. You were always a joy to me and never were overawed in my presence. Nick and I have to get back to the Capital and we will be leaving the planet tomorrow on a military ship that is arriving tonight. We have some unfinished business in New Pittsburgh tonight, so we will be unable to attend the reception.”

“Grandfather, oops, I mean Leo, I am thrilled that you could be with us today. Robert, I should explain, that as a child I always called Leo ‘Grandfather’, but as you can see, I am a child no longer.”

“A child, you are no longer, Lynda. I am happy for all of you. Lynda, you have made a fine choice, and I am very happy. I have some gifts for you.” He said. He gave a package to Lynda. “Here is your wedding gift Lynda. I am going to spill the beans to you regarding the gifts. I was quite taken when I found out that you enjoyed pipes and tobacco. In your package is a fine Old Earth pipe. It is a very nice smooth bent pipe that is almost in a hawkbill shape. It was made by a carver named Michael Parks from the Old Earth political subdivision of Canada. According to the research I have done, I have found that this pipe was the first hawkbill shape he carved and was commissioned by a pipe collector named John Seiler. Michael Parks went on to have a fine career carving many a nice pipes. I know that you have a taste for latakia based blends, so there is also two tins of a Hermit Tobacco named ‘Midnight Lace’.”

“Robert, I know that you are not a pipe collector or smoker, but do collect books. In your package is a rare volume from Old Earth entitled ‘The Sherlock Holmes Adventure’ by Regis McCafferty. Mr. McCafferty was a well known author and pipe smoker. I am going to try to

convert you, Robert, and keep harmony in the family, so I also have included a rare Old Earth book entitled “The Pipe” by Georges Herment. This book is one that had a real impact on me when I took up the pipe. I hope you will enjoy the book and add it to your collection. I also have included an Il Ceppo horn pipe, manufactured in the Old Earth political subdivision called Italy, and a tin of fine wexel-virginia which is a good tobacco for a new pipe smoker.”

“Very fine gifts, indeed!” said Varten who knew the values of the gifts.”

The bride and groom profusely thanked Leo. “Please give my regards to your guests, but we do have to leave. When you get to Castle Pesaro, please plan to be my guest for an extended stay.”

A short time later, they left to return to the wedding festivities. Leo and Nick departed to the New Pittsburgh Hilton Hotel.

During the ride back to New Pittsburgh, Leo unbuttoned his jacket and lit his pipe. “Nick, I received some interesting information. It turns out that the story told to us by Arthur Bernat was accurate. It seems that his commander had put the crew of the ambulance ship in for awards, but that the paperwork somehow got lost in the bureaucratic mess following the revolt. Tonight we are going to make amends to a group of very brave men!”

-6-

They arrived back at the hotel and changed into less formal attire. A short time later, there was a knock at the door. Nick admitted Arthur Bernat into the room.

“Your majesty, I did not expect to see you again so soon. I must admit that I was quite surprised to receive your summons.” he said.

“You were not the only one amazed.” He said. “I want you to dine with Nick and me tonight. I am very pleased to find an honest man, one who expects little in return. You would be surprised at some of the people that I meet.”

Leo, Nick and Arthur left the room and walked to a private room in the hotel. They opened a closed door and entered a private dining room. Inside the room was a group of approximately one hundred military officers in navy and marine uniforms. At the head table was the Governor, and senior officers representing the Empire military services stationed on Capella II. At a table in the center of the room were about ten people in civilian clothes.

Arthur was stunned. Sitting at the table in the middle of the room were the men from medical ambulance ship no. 41, Captain Thomas Jones (ret.), Lt. Winston Newberry the navigator (ret.), Master Sergeant George Wilson (ret.), and Nurse Jim Lamet. He recognized the others at the table as being the men that had been rescued from the drifting hulk.

Leo approached the dais and asked that Thomas Jones and George Wilson join Arthur and him at the head table. Leo addressed the assembled group “Several days ago, I came to your lovely

planet to attend the wedding of a dear friend of mine. During the course of my stay, I met a most remarkable man, Mr. Arthur Bernat, who is here at the head table. He proceeded to tell me the story about a daring rescue mission. One exhibiting heroism and daring that has been shamefully overlooked for over forty years.” He then related the story of the rescue mission to the audience. “Six of the men ten men that were rescued are with us tonight. The other four are no longer with us. I would ask that you all give a hand to both the crew of Medical Ambulance Ship No. 41 and the valiant men they rescued that fateful day.”

The audience gave them a standing ovation. The crew and rescued men were awed and began to blush.

He continued “I have come today to honor you men and your accomplishment. This was a true act of courage by all of you. In recognition of your bravery, I am bestowing on you all the Empire Order of the Silver Star.”

Another standing ovation was given.

“With the Empire Order of the Silver Star goes a small lifetime pension, which will be backdated to the day of the rescue. This is a small token of my thanks. Let’s all enjoy the fine repast which has been prepared.”

Leo took his seat at the head table sitting between Arthur Bernat and Captain Jones. He could see that Arthur Bernat was quite emotional over the event and speechless. Finally he addressed Leo “Your majesty, I am quite overwhelmed. In my wildest fantasies I never expected this result from my story to you yesterday. I just never thought that with all you worry about, my little tale would have such an impact on you. I honestly thought it would have been forgotten once I left you.”

“Arthur, as I said, your pure honesty impressed me very much. When needed, I can get the Empire administration to move. Sometimes it moves very slowly, sometimes when I kick it very fast. Let me assure you, I gave it one heck of a swift kick in its behind! All of you performed a valiant act of service to the Empire, one that should be rewarded and not forgotten. A message that will go out tonight regarding my concept of loyalty and bravery to all of the people on which I depend.”

Arthur said “This is all way beyond me, but thanks just the same.”

After dinner there was an open bar, cigars and pipe tobacco was placed out for those that wanted it. There was many a war stories told which sometimes get a little larger than life the older one get. The celebration went well into the night. Leo and Nick retired to the Emperor Suite about midnight.

-7-

Leo and Nick were ending the night with cognac and pipes while lounging in two large

comfortable chairs. “Tomorrow we embark for our return to Castle Pesaro” Leo remarked. “A very good trip we had indeed. We attended a remarkable wedding of the daughter of a good friend and had the opportunity to correct a wrong. We met a scarcity in our age, an honest man.”

“Not only that.” Nick responded. “We actually picked up some new pipes and tobacco and met one remarkable tobacconist. Too bad that a good tobacconist is a rare thing these days. I wonder if we could talk him into moving to Castle Pesaro?”

“I doubt it Nick, but we can always have him ship some of his blends to us. By the way, Nick, did you finally decide what to do with the “Secret Agent Girl” paperback you were going to send to Lu Jo up?”

“You did suggest that I send it to Lu Jo. I think it is a good idea, but who said it was coming from me? I am going to send it to her as a gift from you!” Nick said with a grin.

-END-

## ONE DAY IN THE LIFE

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright © 2004, ONE DAY IN THE LIFE, All Rights Reserved

This story may not be reproduced in any form for profit, or on another website without written permission of the author. The author may be contacted by e-mail at: [seilerjp@telerama.lm.com](mailto:seilerjp@telerama.lm.com)

-1-

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

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

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

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

Varten arrived in the sunroom about 5 minutes early. He always arrived before the Emperor. He felt that it was a sign of respect; after all, it was his duty to wait upon the Emperor, not the other way around. Leopaldo, Leo to his intimates in private, arrived precisely at 6:30 A.M. He greeted Varten. They sat down at the table on the far side of the room, having the glass walls, and the panoramic view down the valley. They always sat at the same table since Leo enjoyed

watching the rising sun each morning. Leo nodded to the waiter and asked that their breakfast be served. The waiters brought them their drinks and meal. It varied little from day-to-day. Juice, coffee, fresh fruit, cereals, eggs, and meats were brought in succession for their enjoyment. After the meal was consumed, they were served more coffee. During the course of the meal, they talked over small items of news. When the dishes were cleared, the coffee poured, and the servants departed, the pipes were taken out, filled, and lit. Leo was smoking an exquisite Old Earth Dunhill shell bulldog shaped pipe, Group 4. Varten was smoking his favorite Cooke stacked chimney with a saddle stem. They both were smoking a light pseudo-tobacco from Varcania. Then, and only after the pipes were alight and smoke lifted towards the ceiling, did the morning briefing begin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“During your luncheon with Ambassador Parzelnitsky, it is expected that he will request that you travel to the Loimar star system and visit the chief planet, Loimar. It is their 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

joining the Empire. If I may suggest, it would be a good idea to accept the invitation. They have a nice world, in a strategic defensive location. Your attendance at the celebration would enhance the Imperial presence in the sector. There have been some reports of finds of crashed First and Second Age ships containing rare artifacts. I think some could be nice additions to your collections.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes sir, I will take these instructions back to our faction in the Reichstagen. I do not think this problem will bother you anymore. The final issue is the extensive storms on the planet New Florida. You will recall that the small terrorist cell there was able to blow up the planetary weather control system. As a result, there has been a weather nightmare on the planet. Hurricanes, tornados, and floods are the order of the day. We ordered a military squadron to assist the local governmental organizations. We have been successful in restoring the weather control with our military intervention and our engineers. However, there has been much suffering among the populace. Govenor Bush reports that approximately 10% of the population

is gone, and the manufacturing and farming is in shambles.”

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

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

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

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

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

-2-

The morning’s business pretty much went the way that Leo and Varten had planned. He had a good meeting with Governor Hamford and was well pleased with his report. He commended the governor for the high quality of his administrative duties. The governor requested that he be allowed another five years at his post on on planet Carstello, which Leo granted.

Leo had a most enjoyable lunch with Ambassador Parzelnitsky. The Ambassador was very pleased that Leo would attend the celebration on Loimar. His staff and Leo’s staff would proceed in working out the details of Leo’s visit. During his visit, Ambassador Parzelnitsky presented Leo with an Old Earth hardback book entitled “My Lady Nicotine”, by J.M. Barrie. This book was a classic on smoking originally published at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, First

Age, on Old Earth. He did not let on that he already had several copies in his extensive collection on pipe related books, but accepted the gift graciously. The Ambassador intimated that there were other artifacts that Leo could examine once he was on Loimar.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-3-

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

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

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

“Isn’t it true that you are having a small cash flow problem at the current time? I believe you

overextended your credit when you purchased those rare first edition Sherlock Holmes books, and the matched set of Old Earth Castello #65 shape pipes. The Emperor knows about the books, but not the pipes. I just found that out by going through your bank records.”

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

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

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

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

-4-

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

“Very interesting”, Leo replied “‘The Pipe Smokers’ Ephemeris’ is a very rare set of newsletters that were sent out during the First Age of Old Earth to pipe collectors. A gentleman named Tom Dunn was the editor and publisher. He sent out the irregular newsletter/magazine several times a year at no charge, just accepting contributions. The first 10, 20, and 30-year sets were bound on a limited edition basis. I have a complete set of the bound editions and a complete set of the loose newsletters. Some individual issues were over 100 pages in length. You should read them sometime, they are in the castle library databank.”

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

“I guess it is time for us to make our grand entrance”. He said as they left his rooms and headed to the grand ballroom. As they approached his private entrance, two footmen opened the massive double doors. They walked into a huge cavernous ball room. There were very high

ceiling with about 20 grand candelabras suspended from the ceiling. The far wall was totally made up of glass panels which displayed the magnificent view from Castle Pesaro looking down the valley. The wall to the right was totally mirrored which made the ballroom look larger than its true size. The room was divided into two areas. One half was comprised of dining tables; the remainder of the room was set up for dancing. A musical quartet was set up on the far side of the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leo placed the Cooke pipes in his jacket pocket. They left the room and rejoined the group. Most of the guests were chatting near the tables, enjoying drinks near the bar, or dancing to the

quartet. Leo was circulating among the guests making small talk. He noted a number of the castle functionaries in attendance. He also noted a couple of the EIS agents circulating.

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

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

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

They entered the lower garden and were directed by one of Varten's men to the temple in the center. Entering the small temple they saw the body on the floor. Varten was assured that the body had not been moved nor anything touched. The body was face down in a pool of blood. "It looks like a professional job, Varten" Leo said "His throat was cut by a lazknife. Notice the small incision. Only a professional would have done that. It does not appear like there was a struggle. Note that the dust has not been disturbed. I believe that he knew his killer. Seeing as how remote this spot is, I wonder if he was here to meet someone. I also wonder if there is a connection between his death and the missing money from the household accounts."

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

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

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

-5-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-6-

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

Leo told Varten that they would start with Mr. Feelds. Leo closely read his file. Kenneth Feelds graduated from the University of New Virginia with a degree in animal husbandry. He had

worked for Pirema Animal Foods for five years. He came to Castle Pesaro from there. He had outstanding reviews from his supervisors.

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

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

“Where were you this evening, Ken?” Varten asked.

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

“Did anyone see you or talk with you?”

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

“Don’t get impudent!” Varten replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh what’s the point? Yes, I know Samantha Stone and Yes, I know Roberto Hamlino, and yes, he was blackmailing me. It seems that he learned that Samantha and I were on extremely intimate terms. Samantha is from one of the ruling families on Hayden. Her father works directly under the Hayden administrator. It would create a scandal if I, a common worker in the

Emperor's stable would marry a woman of her lineage. It matters little that I am in charge of the horse stables. We love each other very much. Roberto threatened to expose us. I was paying him 20 solaris every month to keep his mouth shut. But I did not kill him!"

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

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

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

"I saw from your service record that you had an honorable discharge." Leo said "Do you know why you are here? They found the body of Roberto Hamlino in the lower garden. He was quite dead. A search of his room was conducted and a small coded notebook was found hidden among his personal effects. It seems that he had the predilection to blackmail people. Your name was in his book. Is there something you want to tell us about?"

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

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

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

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

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

"It is a mighty fine looking pipe" Leo said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-7-

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

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

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

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

“What do you mean?” Craig asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hence the connection to William Reston." Varten added

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

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

"What choice do I have?" Craig asked "Of course I agree"

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

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

-8-

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

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

Leo and Varten poured cups of coffee. They took out their pipes and filled it with the last of the Dark Stoved Virginia tobacco. The pipes were lit when Leo said "Varten, I am willing to wager that if you do a fresh audit of the household accounts you will find that there is no shortage. I

think that it was Telix's way to bring Robertos blackmail operation to our attention. I do not want you to take any action regarding Telix, however, I think it would be wise to move him to a less important position. We cannot fully trust him anymore. I don't blame him, but he could have come to us a long time ago. Maybe a quiet retirement should be suggested to him."

"I quite agree", Varten said.

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

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

"I can't accept."

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

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

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

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

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

-END-

## HAWKBILLS IN SPACE

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 10/2004, HAWKBILLS IN SPACE, All Rights Reserved

-1-

The Empire Cruiser “Dark Star” had dropped out of hyperspace to make repairs on its ring drive. Commanding the ship was Captain Helmut Kram. Captain Kram was on the bridge of the Dark Star. Lt. Kordson, the ships navigator, examined the navigation equipment. “Best I can tell, we are between the star system Alpha Centuri and Vesta.”

“Ok, now that we know where we are, I want you to scan the local space for a distance of 0.5 light years and let me know if there are any objects that may be a threat to us when we conduct the repairs to our ring drive.”

Lt. Kordson changed consol and examined the particulate scanners. The device, much like Old Earth Radar, scanned the local area using multiple frequencies searching for masses of any appreciable sizes. The computer then calculated the orbits of the masses ensuring that none would intersect with the Dark Star which could cause problems if there was a collision. Although the Dark Star could maneuver in local space, it could not enter hyper space and “jump” between star systems until the ring drive was repaired.

“Everything seems to be OK” Lt. Kordson replied “Wait a minute. There seems to be one mass about 500 kilometers away that is not in a normal orbit. Its orbit seems to be artificial. There does not seem to be any major power being radiated from it, however, there is some power being consumed, in the milliwatts range.”

“Set an intersecting course towards the object. Let’s go investigate.”

The Dark Star approached the object slowly. Hyperwave signals were sent to attempt communications. On the visiscreen the shape of an ancient one man starship began to take form.

“It looks like a starship from late in the First Age of Old Earth. There is no sign of life, or power. It is just floating in free space” commented Captain Kram.

“The monitors indicate very little power being consumed. The power system for the ship must be atomic. The propulsion system is of very early starship design. It appears to be nuclear. It would take years and years for it to get anywhere. The scanner indicates low level life onboard. Note the ‘USA’ on the side, which stands for United States of America, a political subdivision from Old Earth.” Lt. Kordson pointed out “Look at the plate on the bow, in is marked ‘USS Donkeynut’.”

“Set up a boarding party. I want to see what is on that old hulk. Send a hyperwave message to the station in orbit around Vesta V that we are going to board. Following that, we should be able to repair the ring drive and continue our trip.”

The Dark Star came along side the derelict. A boarding party left the ship and approached the hulk and entered through the airlock. Once on board, they found a man inside a Stainless Chromalloy cylinder. The cylinder sat upon a box-like unit with many tubes and wires connecting the two. They could see a man inside the capsule through the small view window, It appeared that the man was in a state of suspended animation. Next to the cylinder were two large crates. One was marked “hawkbills” and the other “Tobacco”.

Captain Kram ordered the Donkeynut to be towed using a tractor beam. The boarding party returned to the Dark Star. Meanwhile, he dispatched a repair party to start repairing the Dark Star’s ring drive.

Several hours later the repairs were completed. The Dark Star, towing the Donkeynut, left local space, entered hyper space and proceeded to Vesta V. A message detailing the finding of the derelict ship was sent to the space station in orbit around Vesta V.

When Captain Kram’s message was received, Commander McClelland, the space station’s chief officer, dispatched a message to Castle Pesaro notifying them of the finding of the derelict. He also contacted the Empire Medical Service with a request for them to send a physician. He requested one that had experience in waking people from suspended animation be dispatched to his station. Commander McClelland puffed nervously on his Cavicchi Poker smoking a neer-latakia blend waiting for a response to his report and his request.

-2-

Varten von Eckman, Emperor Leopaldo’s security chief and weapons master, was sitting in his quarters at Castle Pesaro smoking his Jim Cooke straight sandblasted black billiard pipe when his communicator beeped. He answered. His communications officer told him about the message from Vesta V. He asked the communications officer to read the message. He told the communication officer to e-fax a copy to him and the Emperor. He rang the Emperor and told his secretary, Ms. Moneynickle, that the e-fax was on its way and that he would need a short meeting with Leopaldo. Ms. Moneynickle said that he would be free in approximately ten minutes and that he should come to the Emperor’s day office.

Varten arrived right on time, pipe in hand. The ever lovely and efficient Ms. Moneynickle informed Leopaldo that he had arrived, and then admitted him into the day office.

“Hi Varten” Leo greeted his security chief. “Quite an interesting message we have received from our friend Jim McClelland on Vesta V.”

“Yes, it seems that he and the cruiser Dark Star have hooked on to something. Something to my mind that is pipe-related. There has to be one heck of a story in this one.” Varten replied.

“Yes there does seem to be the promise of quite a tale . An unidentified man, in a state of suspended animation, on an Old Earth primitive starship dated to late in the First Age of Man is found floating among the stars. Also on board the ship are two crates, one stamped ‘hawkbills’, the other ‘tobaccos’. I hope you have told Jim that we are pleased that he is looking out for us and that he should impound the contents of the ship.”

“Yes I have already sent the message to Commander McClelland. I haven’t seen Jim McClelland since the meeting we attended of the Hayden Pipe Club several years ago when he was here on leave. At that time, Jim was looking forward to his new assignment on Vesta V. He was also pleased at obtaining his promotion and that Cavicchi poker pipe you gave him from that cache of Old Earth Pipes. Vesta V is an airless world chock full of ores and minerals. It is important to the economy of the sector. The space station is rather large, modern, with the latest technology. All of the mining on Vesta V is directed from the space station. We keep Empire forces attached to the space station. It is also a major docking center in that sector for the space naval forces.” Varten related.

As you well know, a hawkbill is a specific shape of a pipe. A donkeynut is a subset of the hawkbill shape. Specifically it is a Castello Shape #84. All donkeynuts are hawkbills, but not all hawkbills are donkeynuts. As an Old Earth pipe collector once said “That pipe looks like a donkey’s knut.” Hence the reference to the ship’s name ‘donkeynut’ and the crate stamped ‘hawkbills’.” Leo explained.

“Yes, I know, and I am also aware of the famous treaties on donkeynuts written by McCain and Davis, two eminent collectors of the Castello #84 shape from Old Earth.” Varten responded.

“Who are you going to send to Vesta V to take charge of the situation?” Leo enquired.

“I am sending Nick Reardon to take overall charge and Dr. Sohei Witz, an eminent physician and surgeon in the Empire Medical Service, to take charge of the medical aspect. Dr. Witz has a pretty good record performing these suspended animation revivals. He was the doctor that brought back that Old Earth tyrant, Adolph Hitler from suspended animation. He was in worse shape than the fellow on this ship. Hitler thought he was going to set up a Fourth Reich here, but in reality he was just an old foggy out of place, out of time. Too bad he had forgotten that his one tooth still contained cyanide when he ate the corn on the cob.”

“I have full confidence in both of your selections. Yes, too bad about that Hitler fellow. He was such a bad boy back on Old Earth in the First Age. I am sure they would have chuckled at his end if they only knew. Instruct Nick to keep us fully informed of the activities on Vesta V.”

“I will.” Varten replied “By the way, this new Jim Cooke pipe you ordered me to take is quite a good smoker. The taste of these neer-Virginia tobaccos is most excellent.”

The conversation between the two friends degenerated to pipe and tobacco related matters.

-3-

Three men met in a plush wood grained meeting room on the space station orbiting Vesta V. Commander McClelland was a large man with a towering presence and a full red beard. He welcomed Nick Reardon and Dr. Witz to the station.

“Please sit down and make yourselves comfortable. There is a tin of tobacco on the table for your enjoyment. It is from Old Earth and is called “Virginia Legends.” It is an extremely rare find, one of a limited number tinned for the Conclave of Richmond Pipe Smokers, otherwise known as ‘CORPS’. I believe it was their 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Blend from the year 2004, First Age. Emperor Leopaldo presented it to me when last I visited him at Castle Pesaro several years ago before I received this assignment.” Commander McClelland said to his visitors as he opened the tin and started to fill his Cavicchi Poker.

“Thanks” Nick Reardon said “I most certainly will try this one. This is a blend I have never had the good fortune to smoke.” He began filling his Dunhill San Antonio RTDA 2000 shell briar pipe.

“I also thank you, Commander” Responded the tall, thin Dr. Witz as he began to fill an old pipe.

Commander McClelland continued “I don’t know if you have any knowledge of CORPS. Its history is quite interesting. CORPS was a club centered in the Richmond, Virginia area of the political subdivision known as the United States in North America on Old Earth. It was one of the first clubs in the United States that started an annual pipe show. Each year the show had a different theme. The tobacco you are sampling was designed by G.L Pease, a noted Old Earth Tobacconist, and was tinned by Cornell & Diehl, Inc., a famous Old Earth Tobacco Manufacturer.”

“Excellent” both men said simultaneously as rings of smoke engulfed them.

“Now, let’s get down to matters at hand.” Commander McClelland said “The two crates are over in the corner, and we can open them in a while. The man in suspended animation is still in the capsule at the Station’s medical facilities. How do you think we should proceed?”

Nick responded “Dr. Witz, tell us about the process for reviving the gentleman in suspended animation. What are the risks? What are the chances for success?”

“Although difficult, my experience has been that the inhabitant can be brought back to life from the state of suspended animation with his memory intact and full use of his faculties. The older the case or the more time in suspended animation, the more difficult and the lower the chance of success. Since the suspended animation process from Old Earth was so antiquated and primitive, I would estimate a 10% chance of success. Don’t forget that this gentleman has been in suspended animation for over 50,000 years. However, all of the indications are favorable. It will

be difficult, and I don't want to make any promises, but I do think it can be accomplished." Dr. Witz explained.

"How long will the process take?" Nick asked.

"It should take between one and two days, once we start." Dr Witz replied.

"I think we should proceed with the revival. Send a message to the medical facility to start the necessary preparations" Nick said "But first, let's go examine these crates"

They opened the crate stamped 'hawkbills' and found a large display case containing approximately 100 hawkbill pipes.

"Look at these wonderful pipes" Nick said "Look, they are all hawkbills and the manufacturers and carvers; Castello, Ser Jacopo, Mickles, Weiner, Ascorti, Bonaquisti, Eels, Radici, Parks, Learned, Kiess, etc. There must be at least one from every manufacturer or carver from Old Earth here in this collection."

"I am no pipe collector, but this is fantastic" commented Commander McClelland.

"Just think of the historical value of this crate" said Dr. Witz.

They also found an unaddressed sealed envelope enclosed with the pipes.

"I think we should save this for the patient" commented Commander McClelland to which they agreed.

"I wonder what is in the other crate? Let's open it." said Nick.

They opened the other crate and found shrink wrapped tubes of tobacco. Each sealed tube contained 10 individual tins of tobacco. There were tubes of tobaccos with names like 'Early Morning Pipe', 'Best Brown', 'Deep Hollow', 'Old Dog', 'Frog Morton', and many, many more. In all there was close to 400 tins of tobacco.

"Phenomenal!" Nick stated "I have seen some Old Earth tobacco in my time, but never such a variety, and in such quantities in one place!"

They all agreed that this was a most unique find. "I will send a report to Castle Pesaro on the contents of the crates and will notify them that we will soon start the revival process." Commander McClelland said "I will also have an inventory of the contents of the crates conducted and place them under armed guard."

The Commander instructed his staff to assemble an inventory which was taken in their presence. The three of them signed the paperwork certifying to the accuracy of the inventory. They then proceeded to the medical facilities on the space station.

Commander McClelland, Nick Reardon, and Dr Witz walked into the anteroom of the special medical suite. They were in a sterile, chromalloy room. The far wall contained a window that looked down into a small surgical room. In the center of the room was the capsule. The capsule sat upon a box-like platform. Tubes were interconnected between the capsule and the platform. A man was visible through the single window pane in the capsule. The man in the capsule was very still as if he were sleeping. A bed was placed on one side of the capsule. On its right side was a table with monitoring equipment sitting on the tabletop.

Two nurse/technicians entered the room. They nodded to Dr. Witz and the observers.

“First, the capsule will be opened by the technicians. The lung connection will be moved from the capsule control box to the facility control. This will be followed by the blood circuit and finally the nervous system control. Once body control is moved from the capsule to the facility controls, the body will be removed from the capsule to the table. Sensors will be connected to the body to monitor all functions. Supersaturated oxygen will be supplied via the mask attached to his head. Very slowly, a fresh supply of blood will start flowing into his body to replace the suspended animation fluid. A supersucker will remove the suspended animation fluid in the lung and the breathing machine will slowly take over. Once he is on machine breathing and blood circulation, his heart will be started using electrical pulsation technology. He will remain connected to these machines until everything stabilizes. At the end of that time, we will inject a stimulant to start the heart/breathing function so that his body takes control. All the while, we will be using a cortico-stimulator to help the lower part of the brain take control over the automatic body functioning. This will activate the renal functions and other bodily functions and we will check for their proper operation. This should take approximately another four hours. At the end of this period, his body should be functioning; however he will still lack consciousness.” Dr. Witz informed McClelland and Reardon.

He continued “Tomorrow we will use a device that is derived from the mind probe to actuate the cells in the higher levels of the brain to bring back the voluntary functioning including memory. That procedure will take about three hours. At the end of that time period, a judgment will be made to proceed to the final stage, where a high dose of a drug combination will be given to him to jolt his system back to life. This is the most critical stage. If all goes well, he will come back with full recollection of his memories and will be fully functional. If things do not go well, he could be in a vegetative state until he dies.”

“Dr Witz, please indicate to the staff to proceed”, Nick informed the doctor.

Dr Witz instructed the staff to proceed and they started the process. At the end of two hours, the patient was off the capsule control and connected to the facility control. Several hours later he was successfully functioning on the breathing and heart circulation machines. His heart was successfully started and functioning. At this juncture Nick and Commander McClelland left for the night.

They returned to the medical facility early the next morning. Dr Witz reported that all had been going well. There were some minor setbacks encountered with which they had to deal in terms of some failures of the circulatory system, and some minor organ damage. However, they had taken appropriate action and all appeared to be going well.

They looked down on a man on the table that was obviously breathing, but appeared to be sleeping.

“The brain probe procedure went well. According to our metrics, all of his systems are functioning within allowable limits.” Dr Witz continued.

“You will note that the patient has been secured to the table. It is not uncommon that upon revival the patient may be a little unstable waking up in an unfamiliar environment.” Dr Witz informed the observers “We will soon be giving him his stimulant drug cocktail injection. I want you to try something for me. Please light up your pipes. I believe that the patient was a pipe smoker and collector. We will open the connecting window. As you know, the sense of smell is a very powerful. I think that if he sees that we are like him, smoking pipes, and he smells the aroma, then it will make his awakening a little less traumatic.”

They lit their pipes and started smoking. The connection window was lowered and the pipe smoke entered the patient’s room.

Dr Witz instructed the nurse/technicians to continue with the cocktail drug injection. They started the pump which would introduce the drug into the patient’s circulatory system.

At first, nothing happened. Very faintly they noticed some movement of the eyelids muscles and the fingers. The motions became stronger. Suddenly, the body convulsed and the eyes fully opened. A strange noise came from the patient’s throat. He blinked and slowly looked around and stared up at the three men.

From his mouth, in a weak but steady voice they heard him say “Hi, I’m Ike McCane and that tobacco smells great! By the way, where in seven hells am I?”

-5-

The three men had retired to the meeting room and had their pipes alight with the Commander’s Virginia Legends.

“Dr. Witz, I would like to congratulate you upon another successful revival.” Nick said “I am sure the Emperor will be pleased.”

“I too offer my congratulations.” Commander McClelland added.

“Thank you gentlemen, your congratulations are appreciated. We have Mr. McCane lightly

sedated for the night. He will waken tomorrow and have many questions.”

“I think that I can answer some of them” Nick replied “Perhaps we can have breakfast with him and help him on his way. It is probably quite traumatic waking up in a new world, in a new time.”

“I think that is doable” Dr Witz replied “I think that after breakfast you should join him in a pipe. It may tend to ground him, if you get my meaning. It usually helps if he can connect to something familiar, in his case the feel and smell of a pipe.”

“Well, he does have plenty of pipes. I seem to remember one that seemed to be well smoked. It was an old sea rock Castello donkeynut. Can you get me that pipe, Commander? I think I shall also open one of his tins of Early Morning Pipe.” Nick responded.

“Sure I can Nick. You are in charge of this operation. Do you wish for us to be present?” the Commander asked.

“No, I think I will meet with him alone. However, you two should be observing on a visiscreen in the next room. Doctor, I assume you and your staff will be monitoring his bodily functions in a non-invasive manner and can take prompt action if it is needed. It will be interesting to see how a man copes 50,000 years in his future.”

“Yes” Dr. Witz replied “We will be monitoring both the bodily function and a psychologist will be examining his mental state at all times. If action is warranted, we will be ready and able.”

“Gentlemen, what do you think of the Virginia Legends tobacco? I taste a hint of latakia in an otherwise good Virginia blend.” the Commander stated.

“I like it” Nick said “Almost as good as some of Emperor Leopoldo’s McClelland 5100 from Old Earth.”

“I also like it” Dr. Witz replied “I am not such a great connoisseur of pipes and tobacco as you guys, but I do know what I like, and I like this tobacco.”

The conversation continued well into the night on pipes and tobacco while they enjoyed the Commander’s liquor selection.

-6-

He slowly awoke. It was very quiet. It was dark. Through his closed eyes he could detect a slight brightness outside his eyes. He did not know if it were real or a dream. He recalled having a lot of dreams lately, nothing he could remember, just a lot of dreams. His ears detected the sound of breathing. Was it his or was it someone else? He did not know. He heard the puffing of a pipe. Now that was something to which he could relate. He was not smoking, so it had to be someone else. Did he want to open his eyes? He did not know. But why not? Slowly

he opened his eyes.

As he slowly opened his eyes, he saw a tremendous brightness. He quickly re-closed them.

“Ah, I see you have awakened. It will go much easier if you open your eyes a little at a time, very, very slowly.” the voice told him.

He could not recognize the heavy accent of the voice. It was not American he thought. He infinitely slowly opened his eyes. His eyes very slowly became use to the low level light that appeared very bright to him. As he opened his eyes he noticed a man sitting opposite of him in an unusual chair. He was in a very unusual room. The man was sitting and smoking a pipe. “If I did not know any better, I would say you are smoking a Dunhill shell briar pipe, however, I cannot identify the tobacco you are smoking.”

“You are correct on the pipe, Mr. McCane. I would expect the tobacco to be new to you. My name is Nick Reardon, please call me Nick.”

“Nice to meet you Nick, at least I hope it will be nice.” Ike replied.

“Oh, I am sure it will be, after all, I am quite a nice fellow. Let me tell you that you are in a hospital. You have had a unique experience. How do you feel? Would you like some breakfast?”

“I feel, ah, I feel remarkably fit. Yes, I would like some breakfast, but more importantly, I could go for a pipe.”

“I think we can manage both” Nick replied “What do you remember and what is the date?”

“I remember last being with an old friend, Jake Robinson and my wife, June. We were having drinks at Jake’s estate. It is the fourth of July, 2008. After that, I recall nothing, nothing until today.” he said.

“Well let me tell you what I can, however some of it may be a shock to you. We found you in a state of suspended animation inside a space ship. Our good Doctor Witz, who you will soon meet, has brought you from the land of nothingness back to the land of the living. Do you understand this?” Nick asked.

“Yes, I think I do. If I understand you, I have been unconscious for a long period of time. I guess a couple of years.”

“Try 50,000 years.”

“50,000 years, surely you are kidding” Ike asserted.

“No, I am not joking. It seems that you and your pipes and tobacco have been in interstellar

space for that amount of time. You are in a medical facility on a space station orbiting the planet Vesta V.”

“I wonder how I have gotten into this predicament.” He said “I guess that everyone I know is long gone. Ashes as it were.”

“Yes, that would be a good assumption. You could say that you have been given a second chance on life. Someone was good to you in that manner of speaking. It is a chance you should make every effort to make the best of. I see your breakfast has arrived. We have tried to make it appealing to someone from your time period. You are not the first person to have been revived, nor the last. May I join you for breakfast?” Nick asked.

“Sure. Grapefruit, ham, eggs, and hash browns with coffee is always a good breakfast. Please do join me.”

They ate in silence. There were many thoughts going through Ike’s head. Finally when they were done, Nick said “Ike, we are going to make this as easy for you as we can. Some of the information you are going to receive over the next few days will be difficult for you to understand. Dr. Witz and I will answer any questions you may have as truthfully as we know it. If we don’t have an answer we will tell you so. Before we start I have three things for you. Do you recognize this?” Nick reached into his pocket and took out a pipe and a tin of tobacco and gave it to Ike.

“It is my favorite Castello donkeynut and a tin of Dunhill Early Morning Pipe. Thank you. Will you join me in a pipe?”

“Sure Ike. I would love to.” Nick took out his pipe.

“Oh, he exclaimed, the Dunhill shell briar. That is a very nice pipe you have.”

Ike popped the lid on the tin and heard the swish of air. “I see the seal in the tin is intact. Here fill up you pipe.” Ike and Nick filled their pipes. Nick lit his and passed the wooden matches to Ike who lit his and began to puff on his pipe.

“Ike, we found this letter in the crate with your pipes. I do not know the contents, but I will say that whatever is in the letter happened a long time ago, so take the contents to heart with that in mind” He gave Ike the letter. Ike opened the letter and began reading aloud.

*Dear Ike,*

*Let me begin by saying that if you are reading this letter then my plan has worked. I am long gone and you are finding yourself in a new world full of new wonders. You were always the adventurous one and now you are embarking on a new adventure.*

*I think that you know in your heart that you placed your pipes, especially your prized hawkbill collection ahead of me. I must admit that I was very jealous of your priorities and did not enjoy second place. I have found another person to take your place as my lover. I tried to find a fair solution to the dilemma. Actually it was quite simple. I have gone off and began a new life. You have simply disappeared and are presumed to have been lost at sea. I have gone off with Jake Robinson. But then again, if things have worked out as planned, Jake and I have died a long time ago.*

*Jake has used his immense influence and riches to have you placed in a state of suspended animation, and launched into space. You will travel the roads of space until eventually found, and I sincerely hope brought back to life. Not knowing how things will go in the future, I have packed your prize collection of hawkbill pipes and tobaccos with you as a goodwill gesture.*

*I could have been done with you in a more direct fashion, but at one time I did love you. Therefore I chose this course, and I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me for doing this to you.*

*Good luck to you in the future from one who loved you in the past.*

*Yours,  
June*

He put the letter down, relit his pipe and pondered the letter.

“She was a good woman at heart, Nick. I guess that at times I, and my pipe collecting activities did get under her skin. In the end, I guess she did do me a favor by allowing me to live.” Ike said.

“Yes she did, Ike. Now it is up to you to make the most of it.

The door opened and a thin man walked in dressed in a long white labcoat also smoking a pipe.

“Ike, this is the man who revived you, Dr. Witz.”

“Hello, Dr. Witz.. Thanks for the great job bringing me back. I guess I am in your care for a while. What is in store for me in the near future?” He asked.

“Well Ike, we plan to monitor you for a few days to be sure that all has been successful and that there are no medical complications. You will need some physical therapy. You will be tired after this morning activities. When you rest, we will use some new sleep-learning techniques to bring you up-to-date regarding the history and the environment in which you now find yourself. As Nick told you, we will try to answer any questions you may have.”

“I just have one question. Does everyone in this age smoke pipes?” Ike asked incredulously.

Nick chuckled “No, not everyone. You will find that there is a totally different view on things like smoking in this time period. There are nonsmokers, pipe smokers, cigarette smokers, and cigar smokers. My good friend Leo is a noted pipe collector and smoker. There are many others like him. One big difference, between your time period and this time period, is that the positive aspects of pipes smoking have been re-learned by humanity. Stress relief has been found to be a very important life factor. One of the big factors about pipes and tobacco is the ability to reduce stress and medical advances have reduced some of the wrongly thought disadvantages of smoking to insignificance. Many of us thoroughly enjoy the finer aspects of pipe collecting and pipe smoking.”

“I concur with Nick’s comments. As you can see, we still have pipe smoking doctors that make house calls. You have a lot to learn, so let us begin. I hope that we do not give you too much of a headache with all the information we will be pumping into you!” Dr. Witz exclaimed.

“Nick, I think that you have given Ike a lot to think about. As his doctor, I think that it is time for him to reflect on all that has happened and it is time for his re-education to begin.” Dr. Witz observed.

“Ike, I wish you well and quite agree that it is time for you to start the educational process. By the way, your crate of pipes and crate of tobacco are here for you. I enjoyed the sample of the Early Morning Pipe tobacco and am sure we will have a chance to discuss things over pipes again.”

“Thanks Nick and thank you Doctor Witz for all your efforts. I agree it is time for me to start learning. I hope to see you soon.”

-7-

It was late in the evening at Castle Pesaro. Leo and Varten had been enjoying bowls of Ashton ‘Old Dog’; Leo in his Castello 4k shape #65 full bent with an old sea rock finish, Varten in his trusty Jim Cooke pipe. They had been discussing the late dispatches from all over the empire when the report came in from Nick Reardon on Vesta V. Nick had reported the successful revival of Ike McCane. His report was very detailed and complete.

“I am sure you realize Varten that Nick Reardon is one of our best agents. His attention to detail is phenomenal. He was a good choice for this mission.” Leo said between puffs.

“Yes, he does a very good job. He also gets along well with people. You do well to have your complete confidence in him. Did you read the inventory in pipes and tobacco that Ike McCane brought on the Donkeynut?” Leo asked Varten.

“Yes, I most certainly did go over it, Leo. The inventory contained a little over 100 pipes and

400 tins of Old Earth tobacco. Most of the pipes were hawkbills and donkeynuts, however, there were a few additional pipes from United States pipe carvers. Little does he realize how wealthy he is? I suppose you will let Nick inform him of his new found wealth.”

“I doubt if he realizes it. I am going to make an offer for one of his von Erck pipes and a couple of tins of tobacco which will hold him financially for a while. I think I will talk to my friend, Dean Korson, at PittPenn University. I am going to get Ike an appointment to the arts faculty. I am also going to see about an appointment here at the Castle.”

“You know Leo; we should take advantage of this intact collection before it gets broken up. What would you say to a pipe exhibition here at the castle? We could invite Ike McCane to exhibit his 20<sup>th</sup> Century First Age Old Earth pipe collection in the Great Hall. It would give him the chance to meet some of the foremost collectors in this sector. We could invite some of the top collectors and have it co-sponsored by the Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine. Chuck Stynon could do a feature article on Ike’s story and collection to go along with the exhibition.”

“I like the idea, Varten. I have some old tobacco in a bonded warehouse. It is a neer-Virginia. We could have 300 tins made up as a special tinning for the exhibition of hawkbills. Why don’t we call it ‘Old Donkeynut’?”

“That is a really great idea, Leo. I think we could get Gorag Paese to blend the tobacco and the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company to tin the tobacco. Jesper Reed, the noted artist, can make up the label with the name of the tobacco, and include a little about Ike and the exhibition on the back of the tin. Who knows, maybe 50,000 years from now these tins could be collectors’ items.” Varten exclaimed.

“Yes, that would be a bit funny. A tobacco we produce today being worth good money years from now. Just think how much money you could make if you developed a time machine, tinned tobacco today and transported it to the future and sold it. I wonder if it would be validly considered as an antique in the future.”

“Ok, I will send a hyperwave message to Nick outlining our plans. He can figure a way to present the idea to Ike McCane and get his cooperation. I hope that he may find the appointment at PittPenn University to his liking.”

“You know Varten, there are ways to make him an offer he can’t possibly refuse. You of all people should know that I have my ways and means.” Leo said with a wink.

“That I do. I am sure you will be able to convince him.” He said with a chuckle.

They finished their pipes and called it a night.

Dr. Witz and Nick Reardon entered Ike’s room early in the morning just as breakfast was being

cleared away. “Would you gentlemen like to join me in a pipe and some coffee?” Ike asked.

“Sure we would.” Nick replied. They sat down at the table, poured the coffee, and began to fill their pipes with the proffered Dunhill Early Morning Pipe.

“After yesterday’s physical therapy, the complete examination, and the sleep-learning treatment, I already feel like my brain is overfull. By the way Nick, you were a little untruthful yesterday.”

“What do you mean Ike?” Nick asked in an obviously offended tone.

“Well you forgot one little detail. You failed to mention that your noted pipe collecting friend, Leo, was the EMPEROR of the known universe!” Ike exclaimed.

“Ha, ha, ha Ike. Yes he is the Emperor, and if I may say, my friend and I hope he will be yours also. I guess you now understand the value of your pipes since they are from Old Earth. I also guess you now realize that there is no true tobacco in this time period since Old Earth was destroyed at the end of the First Age of Man, long ago. All we have is neer-tobacco which is a naturally grown product very similar to Old Earth tobacco and pseudo-tobacco which is entirely synthetic. Although you could probably tell no difference, to the true pipe collector genuine Old Earth tobacco is very valuable.” Nick explained.

“Yes, I now understand all that. I, we are smoking some very expensive pipes and the tobacco we are smoking is extremely valuable in and of itself.”

“Yes” Nick replied “I am no expert and Leo could give you a better estimate, but I would think your pipe, the Old Earth Castello #84 donkeynut, is worth several thousand solaris and the tobacco is equally valuable. In today’s economy, a person with a yearly income of 100 solaris would be considered well off.”

“So, with all my pipes and tobacco I am, ah, wealthy, Nick?”

“Yes, Ike, you are very wealthy. Even selling them off very slowly, I would think you would have more than enough funds. However, I don’t think you will have to worry about a job. Emperor Leopaldo has authorized me to offer you a position. He has secured a position for you as a professor at PittPenn University on the faculty in the Arts Department. You could teach students all you know about First Age history and also about pipe collecting and pipe smoking. You don’t have to answer me today on this proposition; however, you will need to have an answer when you meet the Emperor.”

“Meet the Emperor? Me? When?” Ike asked incredulously.

“Well, that gets me to the second part of the proposition to which I will need an answer. Dr. Witz, what is the status of Ike’s health and when can he travel?” Nick asked.

Dr Witz replied between puffs of his pipe “Ike is in excellent shape. I would say another week

here with the physical therapy and he will be able to travel.”

“That is about what I thought.” Nick said “Ike, part 2 is that you have been invited, maybe I should say by royal command, to a pipe show being held at Castle Pesaro, the Emperor’s home. The Emperor would like to see your fantastic collection of hawkbills and Old Earth tobacco. He would also enjoy showing you his collection. You will also have to make a presentation regarding collecting hawkbill pipes. Additionally, he will invite some of the premier pipe collectors in the universe and anyone else with interests in pipes and tobacco in the planet Hayden sector. There will also be media coverage of the event. Let me say, on my own, that this is quite an honor. I do not know of any pipe showing ever held at the Emperor’s home.”

Ike looked dazed “Of course I accept. How could I refuse, both the university appointment and the showing of my pipes. Please communicate my acceptance to the Emperor. I have to show some sort of appreciation and thanks for all that you have done for me. I realize that you could have just stolen my pipes and tobacco, and put me out of my misery. Instead you brought me back to life, as a wealthy person letting me keep my treasures. Please thank him for me also. Nick, Dr. Witz, I hope the two of you will honor me by attending the pipe showing.” Ike replied.

“I will attend, if my duties and Emperor permit.” Dr. Witz said.

“I also will try to get an invitation.” Nick replied “I will pass on your acceptance and gratitude to Emperor Leopaldo in my next report. As you no doubt have concluded, I am employed by Emperor Leopaldo.”

“Yes I did deduce the connection Nick. But that is OK, you all have treated me wonderfully.”

“You will find, Ike, that the Emperor and most of his associates are honorable men and women. The Emperor treasures honesty and character in people. He tends to bring out the noblest aspects of their character. We all feel a great sense of loyalty to Emperor Leopaldo and to his causes. If I may say, he also rewards faithful and efficient service. I think you will enjoy meeting both the Emperor and my boss, Varten von Eckman”

“What will I do? How will I act? You will all have to help me beyond just education” Ike asked.

“That we shall” Nick responded “I will tell the Emperor to schedule your visit to Castle Pesaro for two months from today. That will give the castle staff time to make preparations for the showing. You will arrive at the castle a few days earlier to oversee the event and to meet the Emperor. Prior to that, we will be providing you all the education you will need, both through the sleep-learning process and up close and personal. I think I will arrange a tour of PittPenn University for you prior to our traveling to Castle Pesaro.”

“And I, Ike, will tag along to monitor your health, although I am sure that there will be no complications and assist you in your acclimatization to this time period.” Dr. Witz said.

There was a knock on the door, and Commander Jim McClelland introduced himself to Ike.

“I guess I have to confess, Ike, that I am also a pipe smoker, and have been a party to all of these plans. I also am going to ask for an invite to this pipe affair. It is time for a little R&R for me and I have not seen my friend Emperor Leopaldo for several years. Oh, I have brought you something.”

He reached into a pocket and brought out a package which was given to Ike. “Ike, this is about a pound of some wexel-Virginia neer-tobacco. At the prices of Old Earth tobacco, you can’t be smoking it all the time. It is about time you try some of our local supply.” He said with a wink.

“Thanks, Commander I will give it a try over the next few weeks. It is hard to imagine smoking bowls of Old Earth tobacco when it is so valuable!” Ike replied.

“When I send my next report, I will put in a request that we all attend Castle Pesaro’s pipe event of the year.” Nick said “I am sure that the Emperor will accept my recommendation with respect to attending Ike’s debut to the pipe collecting fraternity.”

They all sat around for the next hour smoking pipes and educating Ike in a gentler manner than the sleep-learning process so that his headache would subside.

-9-

It was early in the morning of the day before the Castle Pesaro Pipe Showing. The hyper-drive ship containing Nick Reardon, Dr. Sohei Witz, Jim McClelland and Ike McCane had landed at the Samlis space port on planet Hayden an hour earlier. It would take them approximately two hours to clear customs, retrieve their baggage, and travel the 50 miles to Castle Pesaro. Varten von Eckman had been notified of their arrival. He had just joined Emperor Leopaldo in the sunroom for their customary breakfast.

“What’s happening in the Empire today, Varten?” Leo asked.

“All is quiet, sire.” He replied “Our visitors have landed and should be joining us after breakfast.”

“I am looking forward to meeting Ike McCane. From Nick’s reports, he appears to be quite a character. He seems to be adapting well to his new environment. Did our mystery guest arrive?” Leo asked.

“Yes, she is here. She got in late last night. She is probably still asleep. All that training and the trip here has tired her out.” Varten replied.

“Ok, we won’t mention her to Nick when we meet with them. Here have some breakfast and coffee.” Leo commanded.

They ate their breakfast and discussed the small matters that make up running a huge empire. The breakfast dishes were cleared. Urns of coffee were set out. A table containing Danishes was set up.

“I am anticipating that our guests will be a little hungry when they arrive. I have arranged for these sitting room chairs so that they will be comfortable.” Varten said.

“You always know how to create the setting and mood for meetings” Varten, “What tobacco have you chosen for us to sample from my stock?”

“I have chosen a tin of Esoterica Sweet Cavendish. It is a nice little tobacco from Old Earth, sort of as a dessert. I think everyone will enjoy it.” Varten replied “We will have to see how Ike rates it.”

The manservants entered and announced that the visitors had just reached the castle and were on their way to join them. Leo and Varten moved to the sitting chairs with their coffee.

The door opened and Nick Reardon, Jim McClelland, Dr. Witz, and Ike McCane entered the sunroom. Leo and Varten stood up to greet their guests.

“Emperor Leopaldo”, Nick said as he bowed.

“Commander!” Jim McClelland said as he stood at attention and saluted.

“My Emperor!” Dr Witz said as he bowed.

“Emperor Leopalso” Ike McCane said as he held out his hand to shake hands.

Leo grasped his hand and shook it. “I have heard many interesting things about you. Welcome to our and your new world. I would like you to meet my good friend Varten von Eckman. Varten is my security chief, weapons master, and fellow pipe smoker. I would like to dispense with formalities, please address me as Leo during our chat. Save the Emperor stuff for formal situations and public. Please have some coffee or the snacks setout over on the table. Then, come over and take a seat.”

They went over to the table, poured some coffee, ate a little, and joined Varten and Leo in the sitting area.

“Jim, Sohei, I just wanted to express my thanks for a job well-done. I think Ike would agree with me. Nick, likewise, you performed in your customary exemplary fashion. Ike, I am glad that you accepted my invitation to display your pipes here at Castle Pesaro. My staff has made all the arrangements. We expect several hundred people to come and meet you, view your collection, and listen to your lecture. My good friend Dean Samuel Korson at PittPenn University informed me that you have accepted the offer for an appointment to the faculty. He

also said that the lecture you presented on “Pipe Collecting in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century on Old Earth” was one of the most well attended and favorably commented guest lectures that has been given. Oh, before I forget, Varten has provided us with a tin of Esoterica Sweet Cavendish. Please open it and pass it around. Gentlemen, you may smoke.” He said as he took out his Castello GG #84 hawkbill.”

“Hmm”Ike said “That looks like one hawkbill that got away from me! Yes, Leo, I want to thank you and all these gentlemen for helping me acclimatize to this time period and my new life. I want to thank you again for finding me, providing for my revival, and permitting me to keep my pipes and tobacco. I also want to thank you for securing my new position. I hope I can live up to all of your expectations.”

“I do not doubt that you will” Leo replied “Oh, one additional item. Varten, you brought the document with you? Please give it to Mr. McCane so he can read it to us all.”

Varten removed a large envelop from his valise and gave it to Ike. Ike began to read:

*To whom this entire message comes, greetings.*

*Let it be known that I, Emperor Leopaldo XVI do hereby appoint Ike McCane to be the official curator of my Pipe and Tobacco Collection. He is charged by me to:*

- 1. Annually come to Castle Pesaro to inventory the collection;*
- 2. Annually perform any conservatory activities to the pipes and tobacco in my collection;*
- 3. To act as my agent on assignment to obtain additional antique pipes and tobaccos; and*
- 4. To advise the library on the arrangement and obtaining literature on the topics of pipes and tobacco.*

*For these tasks, he is to have access to the castle and to my person. Funding for acquisitions are to be made through normal channels, and he is granted an annual salary of two-hundred solaris from the household accounts.*

*This appointment is signed under my signature and sealed.*

“What does this all mean, in simple language please” Ike asked.

“It means”Varten replied “that you are now bound to the Emperor. You are his man in the areas of pipes and tobacco. You can act as his agent, and you have some assigned tasks here at the castle.”

“It is a singular honor” Nick replied.

“It means that Leo has hired a new pipe cleaner” Jim McClelland rejoined. “You get it, a new

pipe cleaner....”

They all laughed.

“Well let me just warn you sir. I am a better pipe smoker than pipe cleaner, but I guess I will be adequate to the task. I think that this Sweet Cavendish has indeed improved with age. It is much smoother than I remember.” Ike said.

They all agreed that the tobacco was very good.

“Varten, please tell the group what is in store for them two days hence.”

“I hope you find the arrangements satisfactory, Ike. First, Leo would like to show you his personal pipe and tobacco collection. With respect to the pipe show, we have set the display for the great ballroom. A quarter of the ballroom has been arranged with a podium and chairs. A quarter has been set aside for the display of your collection. Your collection will be placed into replicas of Old Earth display cases inside what can only be described as a mockup of an old tobacco shop, circa 1920. The display cases are all set with alarms due to the value of your pipes. The remaining half of the ballroom will be arranged for approximately 150 tables which collectors have been given to display, trade, and sell pipes, just like an Old Earth pipe show.”

“The arrangements sound fantastic. I hope I am not putting you out.” He said.

“No, you are not” Leo exclaimed. “An event of this magnitude has not been held here in many years.”

“Ike, we anticipate a large crowd. Since it was announced, most of the rooms that are available in the small town at the end of the valley and in Samlis have all been taken. A number of prominent collectors have been invited including Martin Davis a collector of hawkbills; John Lowlar, a collector of Old Earth Castello full bents; Dave Woblar, a collector of Old Earth calabash pipes; and Chuck Stinyon, the editor of the Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine. In terms of pipe carvers, Mark Tinsk, Bryan Rathenberg, Lee Kerk, Larry Rauch, Sam Learning, and other notables have promised to bring some of their latest works. Sim Gorwaith will be here from the Gorwaith Tobacco Company, representatives from the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company and Gorag Paese, one of the leading tobacconists from this time period are attending. Ike, you will find that you are quite a celebrity. You will be meeting Chuck Stinyon later today who will be interviewing you, Jim McClelland and Dr. Witz regarding your revival and pipe collection. Please, during your interviews, do not mention Nick Reardon, for reasons that must be obvious to you all. Chuck is going to do a feature article on you, your collection, and the Castle Pesaro pipe showing for the next issue of the Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine.”

“Well, I have been back for two months now, and this all still amazes me. I guess I will be busy for a while, starting this afternoon.” Ike said

“Yes you will” Leo replied “I also have one more surprise for you, but that will have to wait until the pipe show. Don’t worry, you will find it most interesting.”

The continued their little get-together for another hour, relighting their pipes and discussing many different pipe-related topics.

-10-

Later that evening, a small group met in the Emperor's private study. Leo, Varten, and Nick Reardon sat down lighting up their pipes with a nice blend of neer-Virginia Tobaccos. Leo was smoking a pre-transition Barling Fossil with a stacked billiard bowl, Varten had one of his favorite Cookes, and Nick was smoking his Dunhill shell briar. They were chatting about the events of the day.

“Did you see Chuck Stinyon after his interview with Ike? I don't think he knew what hit him. I doubt if he has ever interviewed anyone quite like Ike. I about died when he told Chuck to smoke a real man's pipe, not one of those Danish spleens.” Varten exclaimed.

“Yes, that was quite good” Nick rejoined “but he did not quite understand Ike when he said that the tobacco he smoked must have been gunk left over from an automobile oil change. Chuck knows what a 20<sup>th</sup> century automobile is, but I don't think he realized that Ike was basically saying that his aromatic tobacco stunk.”

“Did you hear Ike's response when Chuck asked him if Mike McCain, one of the authors of the hawkbill treatise, was related? He told him that Mike McCain was from the orthodox side of the family since he only collected donkeynuts, and that his side of the family had changed the spelling of the name since Ike's side was the black sheep side of the family. He seemed to imply that the donkeynut collection was more specialized then the hawkbill collection.” Varten said.

“The best part”, Leo said “was when we took Chuck into the hall with Ike's 100 hawkbills displayed. I thought Chuck's eyes were going to fall out and he might trip over his tongue and the drool. He also commented that he had not seen so much Old Earth tobacco together in one place, at one time.”

“From the pictures we saw, I think he is going to assemble quite a nice article on Ike and his pipes. The interviews he conducted of Jim and Sohei were nice touches to Ike's story.” Varten added “Ike, Dr. Witz and Chuck went to Hayden for dinner, drinks, and some smoking with Chuck's friends. You want to bet they have headaches in the morning?”

“That they will” Leo said as there was a knock on the door. The door opened, and a beautiful young lady entered. “May I join you gents” she asked?

Leo turned to Nick and said “Surprise! Look who has come to Castle Pesaro and grace us with her presence. It is the almost newest graduate of the Empire Intelligence Service Academy, cadet Lu Jo!”

She pulled up a chair and joined the three men. She took out a small Dunhill group 2 pipe and began to fill it. "Are you surprised Nick? So am I, but you know how it goes. When the Emperor commands your presence, you obey, so here I am. I am just glad that I am able to attend the Castle Pesaro pipe show. Oh, by the way, I just want you to know that I learned a lot from that 'Secret Agent Girl' book you send me. Unfortunately, in my opinion, she had too many attributes from plastic surgery, and too many 'Hi-Tech' devices to really be an effective agent."

They all laughed.

"By all the accounts that I have heard, your record at the Academy has been most impressive. I must congratulate you. I understand that you only have to complete your solo assignment and then will graduate as a full fledged agent." Nick said.

"Yup, I just have to finish my solo. I must congratulate you too, Nick. The work on Vesta V seems to have gone very well."

"Ok you all, enough of this mutual admiration society. I have something here that I want you all to try" Leo took out a tin of tobacco from a drawer. "This is a tin of Old Donkeynut. It is the specially tinned tobacco for the Castle Pesaro show." He opened the tin and passed it around. This tin is for us to try. The rest is for the show on Saturday."

They all looked at the tin. The tin was numbered 300 out of 300. The label illustration was of an old, tired donkey puffing on a hawkbill pipe. They all agreed that it had a very nice tin aroma. They filled their pipes and lit them up.

"It sort of reminds me of McClelland 5100 from Old Earth", Varten said relighting his pipe.

"Yes, very nice" Leo replied "Gorag Paese and the Mortonfrog tobacco Company did a nice job in the tinning. Jesper Reed designed us a fine label. There are 299 tins remaining. I definitely think it will be a sellout at the show. This is the surprise I did not mention to Ike this morning. We will save this one for the show. We will all meet for breakfast on Saturday before the pipe show. I plan go let him try a tin after breakfast."

"I think it is a nice gesture, Leo" Lu Jo said as she blew a smoke ring "It is also a very fine tobacco for the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show. It will be a sellout."

They spent the rest of the evening talking pipes. About eleven P.M. Lu Jo and Nick left. Varten and Leo continued smoking and talking. If they had been followed, they would have been seen walking to Nick's rooms. As the door was closed, a "Do Not Disturb" sign was placed on the door knob.

Let the record show that on Friday morning, Ike and Dr. Witz had huge headaches due to the number of pipes and quantities of liquor consumed with Chuck Stinyon the night before.

People were arriving from all over the sector. Many of the invited guests had also arrived. Most were staying at hotels away from the castle. A quarter of the ballroom had been made accessible to the many people who were either showing their pipe collections or had pipes and tobacco products to show. Varten and his staff were busy making sure that people kept to their business and did not wander off into any unauthorized parts of the castle. The tables and displays could be set up on Friday, and there would be security provided overnight. Vendors and collectors having tables would be readmitted at 7:00 A.M. on Saturday morning to finish their displays. The show would open to the public at 9:00 A.M.

At 7:00 P.M. on Friday night, a small group assembled in one of the castle's private dining rooms. Leo had invited the select group consisting of Varten, Martin Davis, John Lowlar, and Dave Woblar to have a dinner with Ike McCane. The meeting started over cocktails.

Ike was telling the group about an incident that had happened at one of the meetings of the Conclave of Richmond Pipe Smokers around 1999, First Age. "You see, what happened was that one of the members of the '#Pipes' computer chat group with the nickname 'Old Sea Rock' had decided to play a practical joke. He and a couple others put together a large batch of tobacco which contained equal amounts of straight latakia tobacco and cherry blend. After blending, it was pressed. They bagged it and put a nicely designed label on it. It was named 'Chatsworth'. An announcement had gone out over the computer newsgroups and the Chat Channel concerning the availability of this 'NEW' blend at the show. They started passing it around the show as a new legitimate blend. Some people thought it was great. Others thought it was the worst tobacco they had ever tried. Some of the #Pipes people were passing it out as if it were a totally legitimate blend. Little did people know and find out after the show that it was just one big joke. It is amazing just what people will try and their reactions. Some were polite, some were not so polite. I wonder how much just ended up in the garbage."

They all laughed at the story. Ike was much the center of attention. He definitely had the gift of the gab, and the group was much entertained by his stories.

Martin Davis told Ike about his hawkbill collection. "I have about 20 hawkbills in my collection. I am looking forward to viewing your collection tomorrow. My collection represents only about a dozen companies and carvers. My largest pipe is one carved by Clarence Mickles. I will show it to you tomorrow."

"I have two Mickles pipes" Ike said "Clarence was one of the best carvers of the hawkbill shape. He really had a knack at drilling the pipe and was the closest in making his to the Castello #84 shape. I knew Clarence and he was a real gentleman. He passed too soon."

John Lowlar showed the groups two Old Earth Castello #65 pipes from his collection. One was a Castello Collection Grade, the other a Castello old searock finish. He proceeded to tell the

group about the time Emperor Leopoldo had out bid him on a matched set of 65s, having a natural vergin finish and an old searock finish. He joked that he had never forgiven him for beating him out in the bid. "I have a little something for us to try tonight. It is a bottle of screech from Old Earth. Skreech is rum based liquor from the eastern part of the Old Earth political subdivision of Canada. It was a very popular drink in the First Age." They all sampled the liquor with varying reactions.

Dave Woblar, a writer of mystery books, told the group about his collection of calabash pipes. They all admired his Ardor Brissie Calabash from Old Earth. Dave said that the pipe was the pride and joy of his collection that it had been passed down through his family over the centuries and had a high sentimental value.

The group sat down for dinner. Leo's chef had put out a very nice buffet.

Following dinner, they continued discussing their pipes and tobacco interests until the get together ended about 11 P.M. Everyone had a most enjoyable time, especially listening to Ike's reminiscences.

-12-

The day of the pipe show had arrived. Castle Pesaro was a buzz with activity. Breakfast was being served in the castle sunroom. Leo, Varten, Nick, Lu Jo, Jim McClelland, and Ike McCane had just finished a sumptuous breakfast. Coffee had been poured. Pipes were beginning to be taken out to be smoked.

"Ike, I promised you a little surprise. Here it is." Leo handed him a fresh tin of 'Old Donkeynut'. "Please, open it up and try some."

Ike opened the tin. He smelled the aroma eluting from the tin. "Un, ahh, this is a surprise! I haven't smelled tobacco this bad since Chatsworth!"

"What do you mean?" Leo said "Give me that tin!" Ike handed it to Leo. Leo inhaled the aroma from the tin. "I think we have a problem here. Varten, go get me another tin from the storage room." Varten left and came back a few minutes later with two additional tins. They opened them and had similar results.

"This is not the tobacco we had tinned by the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company. It is not the same tobacco we sampled the other night. Look at the label on this tin. It has the number '300' on it, and we smoked the #300 tin the other night. I think someone has replaced the original tins with some monstrosity of a tobacco blending. The labels are a pretty good match to the original, but now that I look closely, I can see that they are not originals but copies." Leo observed.

Varten replied "It would appear that someone has stolen the original tins of tobacco and replaced them with an imitation. I would think that this was done with malice aforethought and that the original tins have not been destroyed. You were not meant to find the switch before the show,

but we were lucky.”

“I quite agree” Nick said “I think that this would be a good solo for our secret agent girl. Perhaps she can investigate and find out who switched the tobacco, how it was done, and why? The icing on the cake would be if the remaining 299 tins could be recovered.”

“What do you think, Lu Jo? Do you accept this assignment as your solo? Varten’s staff will be available to assist you. I want the culprit of this dastardly deed found.” Leo said.

“Yes, I accept. I will start my investigation immediately. Don’t mention the Old Donkeynut tins to anyone. If asked, say that you expect to have them later in the show. It is time for me to get started. You guys go off and run your pipe show. Do have fun! I will keep you posted.”

Lu Jo left the room. The men filled their pipes up with some Early Morning Pipe that Ike still had left. Once the pipes got going, they proceeded to the ballroom.

-13-

They arrived at the ballroom. Many of the collectors with displays and wares to sell or trade were already inside. A mass of the public filled the anteroom and the overflow crowded the hall and went down the main steps of the castle. The crowd was in no way unruly. Castle security kept the group very calm. The strong odor of tobacco pervaded the entire space.

Emperor Leopaldo, Varten, and Ike approached the main door to the ballroom. The Emperor was given a large pair of shears. He cut the ribbon that went from one side to the other side of the doorway. “I now declare the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show to be officially opened!” They had very little time to get out of the way before the crowd surged into the ballroom.

Leo, Varten, and Ike went up a set of steps to a balcony that opened up into the ballroom. They stood above the facility and watched the action. On the left, there was about one hundred chairs set up in front of a podium. On the right, Ike’s hawkbill collection was on display. The rear half of the room contained over 150 tables filled with pipes and tobacco from all over the empire. Neer-tobacco, pseudo-tobacco, and even some Old Tobaccos were available. Genuine briar pipes from Old Earth, neer-briar pipes, and pipes of many other materials were seen on the tables. Pipe collections and displays abounded. They saw Dave John Lowlar’s collection of Castello #65s, Dave Woblar’s collection of calabashes, and Chuck Stinyon’s table for the Empire Pipe Collector’s Magazine. Although 150 tables were squeezed into half the ballroom, there was not an empty table to be found.

“Any estimate of the attendance, Varten?” Leo asked.

“Our estimate is 300 vendors, displays, and their help, plus approximately 600 people from the public. It is a nice size group for our first show.” Varten observed.

“Look over by the Mortonfrog tobacco table. Isn’t that Lu Jo?” Ike pointed out.

“Why yes it is. That is Lu Jo. I guess she is investigating. Ike, you only have a few minutes until your scheduled talk. I think we should be going down stairs.” Varten said.

They went down into the ballroom among the crowd and headed towards the lecture area. The seating area was rapidly filling up. Finally, Leo went up to the podium. “I wish to welcome you to the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show. Today, we have a truly honored guest speaker. To say that Mr. McCane has traveled for 50,000 years to get to this stage would not be an exaggeration. As most of you are aware, Ike McCane lived during the 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> century First Age. He and his collection of hawkbill pipes and tobacco were all placed in suspended animation. He was recently revived and has accepted a position on the faculty of PittPenn University. He has been named ‘Conservator of the Emperor’s Pipes’ by me. I am sure that his talk today will keep you enthralled, and once he has completed it, I recommend that you go and see his remarkable collection of Old Earth hawkbill pipes. Ladies, and gentlemen, I give you Mr. Ike McCane.”

The crowd arose with a standing ovation. Ike walked calmly up to the podium, shook the Emperor’s hand and stood before the crowd. As Leo left the stage, he could hear Ike’s opening remarks “ I am sure you know the old adage ‘If you have one pipe you are a pipe smoker, if you have two or more you are a pipe collector’, well I am both, a pipe smoker and a pipe collector. Never did I ever imagine that I would stand in front of a group in this place and time, a place and time I never would have conceived existed.....”

Ike continued with his talk as Leo spoke to Varten off to one side of the room. “Any report from Lu Jo yet?”

“She has reported just this information. She had found out that the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company had blended, tinned, labeled, and shipped the original tins of tobacco. It was no secret in the collecting community that you were tinning this special blend for the show. The shipment had gone from New Caledonia via Cairo II to Castle Pesaro. As we know, it was received here at the castle two days ago. Since we opened a tin, checked it, and found it to be good, the switch had to be made here at the castle. The tobacco had been stored in an unsecured storeroom the past two days. We did not think that anyone would have an interest in it.” Varten reported.

“Ok, sounds like she is making some progress. Let’s listen to the rest of Ike’s speech”

They listened to Ike’s talk. He told the group about the history of Castello pipes. How the hawkbill shape was originally an old French shape. Castello pipes had revived the shape. A group of American collectors increased the awareness of the hawkbill or donkeynut shape. Ser Jacopo came out, as did many other companies and individual pipe carvers with their versions of hawkbills. He told the crowd that the hawkbill shape was one of the hardest of shapes to correctly carve and drill. He mentioned the monograph on donkeynuts written by two of the most famous donkeynut collectors, Mike McCain and Michael Davis. He then discussed the variations that various carvers made to the hawkbill shape including bowl shape, shank cross-section, degree of arch, and style of the bit.

He concluded with the comment that you either loved the shape or hated it. There was no in-

between. Upon conclusion, he thanked the crowd and took questions.

As the questions ended, Leo joined Ike at the podium. He thanked Ike for the most informative presentation. He took a box out of his pocket. The box was opened and a pipe removed. He turned to Ike “Ike, I have a little present for you. This pipe was carved by Mick Tinsk out of Krenellian B’iar, which is similar to Old Earth briar. You can see it is in your favorite hawkbill shape. The titanium band has been inscribed ‘First Castle Pesaro Pipe Show’. I hope you will enjoy it and that it will become a welcome addition to your fine hawkbill collection.”

The attendees gave Emperor Leopaldo and Ike a standing ovation. Shortly thereafter, the audience departed to see Ike’s collection and get back to the pipe show.

Varten had a communication from his staff so left Ike and Leo. For security reasons, Leo was always shadowed by security people in the crowd. Although injury was a remote possibility, Leo always wore a protective shield, and security was nearby if needed.

Leo and Ike chatted as they went from table to table. Ike thanked him for the Mick Tinsk pipe. He said that it would be unique in his collection as he did not have any non-Old Earth hawkbill pipes. He had asked Leo about the proper break-in process. Leo told him that the pipe required virtually no break-in period.

They wandered through the pipe show looking at displays, talking with the collectors, and eyeing up possible purchases

-14-

Lu Jo was excited. She finally received her solo assignment. She had quickly concluded that the switching of the tins had taken place at the Castle. Once the pipe show opened, she had gone straight to the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company table. Craig Tattle, the chief tobacconist for the company was manning the table.

She had asked him about the shipping of the tobacco. He related the route and indicated who had custody of the shipment. Although Gorag Paese had made the original blend, and Jesper Reed had designed the label, the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company made the final 300 tins. “All 300 tins were assembled at our factory, or should I say 3005 tins.” Craig said “Two tins were sent to Gorag Paese and two tins to Jesper Reed for their final clearance. Gorag’s was sent to him for the blend approval and Jesper for the artwork. One tin is still in the factory museum.”

Lu Jo next went to Gorag Paese’s table. He was surrounded by his admirers as he had introduced a new latakia-like blend at the show. She introduced herself as Louise Reardon, a member of the Emperor’s staff. She asked him to join her in a pipe. He filled up a Krenellian B’iar pipe with some of his new blend entitled ‘Old English Silk’ and offered some to her. “You have a very nice pipe, Louise. A Dunhill group 2, if I am correct.”

“You are correct. It is, of course, from Old Earth. It was a gift from the Emperor. He asked me to find out from you if there was anything odd regarding the Old Donkeynut tobacco you designed for him. Do you still have your two tins.”

“That was a good job. Too bad it was an exclusive for Leopaldo. I could have made some money off of it. No, nothing unusual happened. I still have one sealed tin. I smoked the entire tin I opened. Wait, there was one thing unusual, after I received the sample, I had an enquiry from a pipe collector on New Winston asking if I would be interested in selling a tin. He said that he wanted to get a peek at the tobacco before it was introduced here at the show. I sent him a return message that it was not available and that he could get some here at the show. By the way, when is the Emperor going to have it available?”

“I don’t know. I think an announcement will be made after lunch. Do you know who sent the message?” Lu Jo asked.

“No, I don’t recall the name. I replied, and just tossed it off. I just remember that it went to the planet New Winston.”

“Thanks Gorag. I like your new blend and think that it will be a success.” She said as she got up to leave.

Lu Jo got on her communicator and called communications officer. She asked that a Priority One hyperwave communication be sent to Jesper Reed. The question was did he still have his two sample tins of Old Donkeynut, were there any inquiries in purchasing them, and if so, by whom. The communications officer said he would get the message off immediately and that there should be a reply in an hour or so.

She noticed that Ike’s lecture was getting started. She had wanted to hear it, but had more important things to do. She went to the table of John Lowlar. John was showing his collection of Old Earth Castello #65 pipes. He had about 40 pipes set out on the table in every size and finish. The full-bent pipes looked fantastic.

She introduced herself as Louise Reardon. “It seems that I have lost my tobacco pouch. Would you have anything I could try?” she asked John Lowlar.

“Sure, I have some nice mature Virginia here in my pouch.” He offered her his nice leather pouch. She filled her pipe, lit it, and returned the pouch to John.

“This is quite good” she said “It reminds me of an Old Earth tobacco, McClelland 5100.”

“Yes, it is quite good. A nice tobacco for a nice lady.” He said. “I don’t think it is much like the 5100, but do agree it is a nice Virginia tobacco.”

“I must say that you have a fine collection, and a fine tobacco. I have to run, but I may be back to make you an offer on one of your sale pipes.”

“That would be nice. While you are at it, why don’t you consider dinner tonight?” John Lowlar proposed.

“I will keep it in mind.” She said as she walked away.

She headed towards the lecture area when her communicator rang. The communications officer told her that Jesper Reed had told them that he had received his two tins of Old Donkeynut. He had approved the artwork. He also had an inquiry from a collector on New Winston regarding his tins. As he was not a pipe smoker, he had sold them to the collector, for a tidy sum. The collector was a Mr. J Rallow on New Winston. They had followed up trying to find such a person on New Winston, but thus far had no luck.

Lu Jo noted that Ike’s lecture was almost over. She left the show and headed for the security office. She had called Varten and asked him to meet her there. Anyone seeing her as she left would have noted a smile on her face.

-15-

Leo and Ike had been wandering about the show. Ike left to man the display of his hawkbills. Leo observed that Ike was mobbed by people asking many questions. Everyone said that his collection was fantastic. Ike was really eating up the comments and playing the crowd.

Leo walked over to Martin Davis’ table. Martin had displayed his collection of hawkbills. He was smoking a Ser Jacopo smooth apple. “Not quite like Ike’s collection, eh Leopaldo” he said to Leo as he approached.

“Not as large, but very nice”

“You are too kind” Martin replied “Ike really knows his 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> century Old Earth pipes, doesn’t he?”

“He sure does. I guess we would too, if we had lived then. He is also adapting very well in this time period.”

“He sure is. I do not think I would have survived if I had been in his shoes.” Martin observed.

“Martin, I would like to purchase that Ser Jacopo hawkbill that you have on your sale table. I see that you have it marked at 150 solaris. I think that the price is a bit steep. I will offer you 100.”

“What say you if we split the difference and agree at 125 solaris?” he asked Leo.

“Done. I think I can live with that.” Leo paid Martin for the pipe and put it in his pocket. His communicator rang. It was Varten. He asked Leo to meet him in the small conference room

below the entrance. Leo said he would be there shortly. He slowly left the display area and headed towards the room below the main entrance.

A security guard let him into the room. Inside were Nick Reardon and Varten von Eckmann. On a table set several boxes containing tins of tobacco.

“It looks like Lu Jo is going to pass her solo, Leo.” Varten said.

Leo walked over to the boxes. He took out a tin, examined the label and opened it. He smelled the tin for the tobacco’s tin aroma. He filled up his Peterson Sherlock Holmes Baskerville pipe and lit it. “The labels are genuine. It’s the real thing! She has found my lost tins of Old Donkeynut.! Where is Lu Jo?” he asked.

Nick Replied “She is out in the show area with a security team keeping one of the displays under observation. She wants us to take the tobacco into the show and start selling it. She expects to apprehend the culprit.”

“Ok, why don’t you each fill up you pipes, then we shall do as she asked.”

They filled their pipes from the open tin of Old Donkeynut and lit them. They returned to the show. Two of the security people carried the boxes behind them. Varten and Leo sat down at the Emperor’s table. Nick moved off to find Ike and have him go to the Emperor’s table, then went off to observe Lu Jo.

An announcement was made that the show tobacco “Old Donkeynut” was available at the Emperor’s table. A line quickly formed. They started selling the tobacco, limiting each person to a limit of two tins. A number of people opened a tin as they purchased their maximum. Some just purchased the tobacco and walked away. The people that opened the tin were amazed at the excellence of the tobacco. They all praised the Emperor at the nice job he had done in commissioning the special tinning. Many went off to praise Gorag Paese and the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company for such an excellent production.

Meanwhile, Lu Jo and the security team had John Lowlar’s table under observation. The announcement of the availability of the Old Donkeynut was made. John was nervous as they could see by him pacing at his table. When word filtered through out the show that the Old Donkeynut was truly an excellent tobacco he was confused.

Lu Jo approached his table “Hi John, I am back. I am going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

“Oh, regarding the pipe, dinner, or both?” he asked.

“Both I think. I think we can arrange dinner tonight. It won’t be with me, but rather will be with some of Leo’s staff. It will be with his security staff” she observed. She signaled the security men whose presence was now well established around John Lowlar. The men discreetly walked

away with John Lowlar in their midst.

“Nice job Lu Jo” Nick Reardon said as he came up behind her. “I knew you could do it.”

“Thanks, Nick. It was actually quite simple. I think a full explanation will be made later. Let’s go on and enjoy the rest of the show.” She said.

“Yes, let’s go enjoy this excellent show.

They went on and enjoyed the show the rest of the day making minor tobacco purchases.

-16-

The show continued until around 3:00 in afternoon. Finally, Leo went to the grand stage to make some announcements. “I would like to thank you all for attending the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show. I plan to make this an annual event. Next year’s show will be under the direction of Ike McCane, my pipe conservator.” A cheer went up in the crowd. “The proceeds from the sale of the Old Donkeynut show tobacco is being donated to the relief effort on New Florida. Many of you know the suffering due to the terrorist attack on the weather control station that took place. The monies will go to help in the relief effort.” Another cheer went up. “I now have a couple of awards to make. The award for the best new tobacco goes to Gorag Paese for his new blend Old English Silk. The award for best carver goes to Brian Rathenberg. The award for best collection goes to Martin Davis for his hawkbill collection. The award for best pipe in show goes to Dave Woblar for his Ardor Brissie calabash. I would like all of the award winners to come up to the stage to receive their awards, get their plaques, and have pictures taken. Again, I want to thank you all for attending and will you give all of the award winners a round of applause. Please get the next issue of Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine for coverage of the show”

The group applauded the award winners. Chuck Stinyon took pictures of the award winners being presented their awards by Emperor Leopaldo as the show came to an end.

Later in the evening, after a sumptuous dinner, a small group comprised of Varten, Leo, Ike, Leo, Jim, Nick, Lu Jo, and Sohei convened in Leo’s study. Each had lit their pipes. “This has been a very satisfying day.” Leo said “Lu Jo, I would like to congratulate you on the recovery of the Old Donkeynut tobacco. I think you have a story to tell us.”

“It was all very simple. I was told that there had been five additional tins of tobacco tinned. Two were sent to Gorag Paese for his approval of the blending. Two were sent to Jesper Reed for the approval of the artwork. The final tin was in the museum of the Mortonfrog Tobacco Company. Gorag had his two tins; however he had refused an offer from someone on New Winston to purchase them. Jesper Reed had sold his two tins to a collector named J. Rallow on New Winston. There was no J. Rallow to be found on New Winston. When I went to John Lowlar’s table, he gave me some tobacco from his pouch. When I smoked it, I recognized it for what it was, Old Donkeynut. I guess he just could not help himself. By the way, J. Rallow is an

anagram for J. Lowlar. I just put two and two together and got four. Varten and I searched his hotel suite of rooms and found the missing tins of tobacco.” Lu Jo said.

“It seems that the planet New Winston is nominally under the control of House Chesterfield. We all know how much they like Leo. You will all recall that John Lowlar told us of the time that Leo out bit him for a matched set of Castello #65s. He joked about it, however he never really got over it. He had plotted his revenge for a long time. He, with the cooperation of House Chesterfield, made the fake Chatsworth-like tobacco. They had copied the labels from the two samples they had purchased from Jesper Reed. The original tins were kept here at the castle in an unsecured storeroom. He made the switch prior to setting up his display. Plain and simply, it was an attempt to embarrass the Emperor. Fortunately, it was discovered and prevented. Lu Jo performed excellently in her solo.”

“That she did!” Leo exclaimed “She will now graduate as a full fledged member of the Empire Intelligence Service. Your identification tattooing will be done tomorrow. Congratulations Lu Jo.”

They all gave Lu Jo a standing ovation. She thanked them with tears in her eyes. “I appreciate this all coming from such an exalted group.”

They sat down, pipes sending smoke towards the ceiling. “Lu Jo, just one last thing” Leo said “I have a little presentation for you. I think you deserve this Ser Jacopo hawkbill and these two tins of Old Donkeynut to remember the First Castle Pesaro Pipe Show and your successful completion of your solo assignment.”

She thanked Leo and the group profusely.

“One last thing” Nick said “he reached in his pocket and took out a small wrapped package. “Here is a little present for you from me. It is volume 2 of the ‘Secret Agent Girl’ series. I hope you enjoy it!”

“You are a smart rear end of a donkey!” She said as she chuckled “I hope the author’s writings got better the longer he wrote, unlike the direction your long running joke is taking!”

They all laughed, repacked their pipes and smoked long into the night.

-END-

## How Emperor Leopaldo Achieves the Perfect Smoke

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 10/2004, How Emperor Leopaldo Achieves the Perfect Smoke, All Rights Reserved

(Excerpted from the Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine article by Chuck Stinyon)

*Note: The editor of Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine sent a representative to Castle Pesaro to answer reader's questions on the details of how Emperor Leopaldo smokes his pipes. The following short article is based on interview and observation. We wish to thank the Emperor for sharing with us his time and observations – editor.*

Emperor Leopaldo sits down at his desk in his den at Castle Pesaro. He glances at the pipes on his desk. There are several pipes sitting in full disarray on the desktop. He keeps many of his pipes in fine display cases around the room. His favorite smokers just lie on his working desk. Individual pipe stands are used for some but most of his favorite smokers just sit on the desk. He takes the large Ser Jacopo Double Maxima off the desktop. He inspects the pipe. It is a large pipe with a short 1/8 bent saddle stem. The dark vertical grain set against the dark red finish caused the long shank to appear like the striping on a zebra's back. The end of the shank disappears into the bottom of the bowl. The bottom of the bowl is a close-knit Birdseye finish with the grain rising like the flames out of a fire around the bowl until it meets the groove cut into the top of the pipe like a ring on the end of a finger. He knows that the pipe will last a good hour-and-a-half to two hours once it is filled and lit.

Although Emperor Leopaldo has several hundreds of tins of Old Earth tobacco, his favorite, when he can find it, is McClelland 5100. Recently, he purchased some large sealed bags of this fine matured Virginia tobacco. Sometimes, the tobacco can be found under the name "Red Kake". Usually he stores the bulk tobaccos in heat-sealed thick plastic bags. However, he smokes the McClelland 5100 quite often, so he stores it in self-closing plastic bags for easy dispensing. He opens the bag, and inhales the aroma of the bulk tobacco. It smells deeply like a fine wine.

He takes a pinch of the tobacco out of the bag and lets it fall into the bowl of the pipe. Holding the pipe in his left hand, he tamps it down with the long index finger of his right hand. When it felt firm, he reached into the bag and takes out another pinch. Again, he let it gravity feed into the bowl, then tamps it down with his index finger. He repeated this process another six times until the bowl was full. For the last two tamps, he used his right thumb, carefully adjusting the downward pressure so that the resistance of the tobacco felt just right. He puts the pipe stem between his teeth and tested the draw of air through the stem. It seemed right. It had taken many years of practice to be able to fill and tamp the tobacco in his pipe just right so that he gets the maximum amount of pleasure out of his pipe smoking.

He was observed carefully pressing the bag and tobacco so that there was as little free air inside the plastic bag containing the remaining McClelland 5100. Then he sealed the bag's closure. Emperor Leopaldo believes in keeping the bulk tobacco in a large bag. When the amount of tobacco gets below a half pound, he mixes in fresher McClelland 5100. He believes that by keeping a constant mixing of older and newer tobacco mixed resulted in a more consistent tobacco yielding a superior smoke.

Emperor Leopaldo believes that the only thing that should be used to light a pipe is wooden matches. He does not like the new autoigniters, butane lighters, or fluid lighters that were once used on Old Earth. He takes a box of 30 wooden 'strike on box' matches. He places the pipe in his mouth, firmly grasping the stem between his teeth. Holding the box of matches in his left hand, he takes a match in his right hand, strikes the side of the box and lights the match. He then holds the match one to two inches above the bowl of the pipe and moves it around in a circular motion, all the while puffing. He made sure that the entire top of the tobacco was lit. Then he blew out the match, and tamps the tobacco down to a flat surface. This was the charring light. He then lights a second match. Again, he holds the match above the bowl and draws the flame down into the tobacco, directing the location through combining movement of the pipe and match together. He continues this motion until the entire surface of the tobacco is ablaze. The tobacco had risen in the center so he tamps it down flat. He is a firm believer in always trying to maintain a flat burning surface.

He knows that, until the pipe is finished, there will be two acts he continues to perform; tamping the tobacco down to a flat surface as needed, and at the first sign of moisture coming through the stem, he uses a pipe cleaner. The continual use of the tamper is to optimize the burning properties. Emperor Leopaldo is a wet smoker, so he often uses two or three pipe cleaners while he smokes a pipe. Both of these practices prevent gurgling inside the bowl, and the latter prevents unpleasant surprises coming down the stem.

Emperor Leopaldo is a holder. The term means that he normally holds the bowl of the pipe in the palm of his hands, and then places the stem in his mouth when he puffs. The opposite of a holder is a biter. A biter keeps the pipe firmly clenched between his teeth the whole time he smokes. Thus the holder has something to do with his hands while the biter develops a strong set of teeth and jaw muscles. Most people tended to do both, but spend varying amounts of time between the two ends of the spectrum.

*Note: For the next hour, while smoking, Emperor Leopaldo and the interviewer chat about pipes and tobacco. The Emperor periodically tamps the surface of the tobacco, and often runs a pipe cleaner down the shank. He never empties the ash out of the pipe. He explains that the ash on top helps to keep the tobacco burning.*

The burning tobacco shows signs of approaching the bottom of the bowl. He tamps the tobacco and relights the tobacco. He knows that the smoke is almost over. He only allows one relight at the bottom. If the tobacco goes out midway, he will tamp and relight immediately. If the pipe sits for a period of time or goes completely out, he is finished; he will not relight under these

conditions.

The pipe is finished. Emperor Leopaldo sits the pipe down. He lets the pipe cool down and only when it is cool, he inserts the blade of a tamper-knife combination and scrapes out the bowl. The ash is emptied into an ashtray and the pipe returned to the desktop.

*Note: Emperor Leopaldo informs the editor that he always waits until the pipe cools down to remove any ash and dottle. He also allows at least a twenty-four hour rest period for a pipe before smoking it again. He also told us that he cleans his pipes approximately once-a-month. He believes that pipes should be disassembled as little as possible.*

*Once again, the editor of Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine thanks Emperor Leopaldo for sharing this intimate view of his pipe smoking practices with our readers.*

## THE DISAPPEARING CHARATANS

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 11/2004, THE DISAPPEARING CHARATANS, All Rights Reserved

-1-

The man was dressed totally in black. Only his eyes could be seen in the night. He had a difficult time opening the electro-combo lock on the door. It was one of the newer ones. They were generally thought to be fool-proof. In fact, they were not, that is, if you were a lock expert. He attached the device to the electro-combo lock's keypad. The black-box device generated all possible numerical combinations, used an R-F loop to introduce the signal into the lock's circuitry. It was only a matter of time until the correct combination was determined, and the lock opened.

This time, it had taken four minutes. The lock opened, and he gained open access into the old tobacco shop. The word on the street was that a rare shipment of Old Earth pipes had been received by the shop's owner earlier in the day. He carefully entered the shop's rear door. He had his night vision light in his hand, and the night vision glasses covered his eyes. The light was visually undetectable to the naked eye. He was able to see as if the room was bathed in sunlight.

Once inside, he came into the small stockroom. The rear room had cabinets on the right filled with excess boxes and tins of tobacco. There was a large glass humidor filled with plastic bags of bulks. This was the tobacco of today. It was mostly neer-, or pseudo-tobacco. Any Old Earth tobacco would be locked away. On the left side was the owner's desk. A rack of pipes were sitting on the desktop, along with several jars of tobacco. A large aluminum floor stand ash tray stood next to the chair. He knew that the eight pipes in the pipe rack were all first quality Krenellian B'iar and that there were one or two Old Earth pipes among them in the collection.

He walked over to the desk, putting a pair of latex gloves over his hands, and tried the desk drawers. They were locked. He reached into his pocket for the ring of lock-pick tools. The old-fashioned desk would be a snap to open. He tried various picks in the center drawer mechanical lock until he felt it release. He gingerly opened the center drawer. At the same time, he opened the long drawer on the right hand side. The drawer opened wide and he saw the items he had come for. There were six boxes were all marked 'Charatan Pipes, London, England'. He took the boxes out of the desk, slipped them into his small tool kit. He then closed the desk drawers and locked the desk.

He debated about taking some tobacco samples but decided not to tempt fate. He exited the backroom by the rear door, locking it as he silently left.

They had a wonderful vacation on the tropical planet Venusia. The beaches were pure white sands, the ocean was crystal blue. The private island, where they were staying was owned by a friend of the Emperor, Donald Trimp. It had been their normal two week vacation, anticipated all year long, formally scheduled, and now drawing to an end. The Emperor's immediate party consisted of Varten and Marth von Eckman, Nick Reardon, Lu Jo, and Helen Chamberlain. Varten von Eckman was Leo's weapons master and security chief. Nick Reardon and Lu Jo were both friends and agents of the Empire Intelligence Service. Helen Chamberlain was one of Leo's oldest friends who resided at Castle Pesaro.

They were sitting outdoors on the large vacation home's veranda. There was a slight breeze on a bright, sunny day. A pitcher of iced maronian tea was on the table, around which they were sitting. Each was in one stage or another either filling, tamping, or lighting a pipe. On the table were two 100g tins of McClelland Anniversary. Leo was filling an Old Earth Ser Jacopo hawkbill. Nick was filling his Dunhill 2000 RTDA black shell briar. Varten was lighting his favorite James Cooke pipe. The ladies were either filling or lighting up matched Rathenberg sandblasted pokers. Brian Rathenberg was one of the up and coming pipe carvers of this age. His stem work was immaculate. His carving techniques were unique. Leo had presented the three ladies with the pipes the night before. Six streams of pipe smoke rose to the sky.

"This Old Earth McClelland's Anniversary tobacco is better than I thought it would be" Varten said "The virginias are very nice and the latakia is not too strong. It makes for a very nice blend."

"Although I primarily like a strong, mature virginia tobacco, this one makes a nice switch off. I like it occasionally. Now, as far as a dessert tobacco, I like the McClelland Dark Star blend. It is sort of like a rich German chocolate cake after a full dinner." Leo remarked.

"I and the girls want to thank you for such a thoughtful gift to remember this fine vacation" Helen said "You know that Brian Rathenberg pipes are becoming hard to find. He is becoming one popular pipe carver. Adding the date to the nomenclature was a nice added touch."

"It was my pleasure, ladies. I hope you enjoy the pipes. The poker shaped pipes are nice sitters. You can set them down and not worry about them tipping over." Leo responded.

"Have you seen the newscast this morning?" Nick asked Leo "It seems that there was a break-in at the Freeport Tobacconist shop the night before last. The only thing that was taken was six Old Earth Charatan pipes. The pipes were unsmoked, and according to the newscast, had only been received earlier in the day."

"Yes, I saw that. item on the newscast." Leo replied "That will probably cost his insurance company a pretty penny. The value of four Old Earth Charatans will go several thousand solaris."

“I don’t think so” Nick replied “It seems that he had not notified his insurance company of the presence of the pipes, their value, or risk. He may not have been covered under his policy.”

“I have know Tom Coltwell, the shop’s owner, for many years. He has a quite nice pipe collection. He goes for the more esoteric and less expensive pipes. Old Earth Charatans appear to be a bit out of his line.” Leo remarked “What do you think about you and Lu Jo heading over to Freeport and see if you can assist the locals? I think it would be great if you can recover the missing pipes.”

“Sure Leo, put us back to work” Lu Jo said in a kidding tone of voice “We were just getting bored of the sand, surf, and such good companions. But more to the point, I think Nick and I would just love to see what we can come up with. The locals probably have their hands full. What do you think, Nick?”

“I think it will be a nice little break. Let’s get going. It should take us about an hour to get to Freeport in the hoverjet. Is there anything else you can tell us about Tom Coltwell, Leo?” Nick enquired.

Leo puffed on his pipe “Tom is a fine older gentleman. His tobacco shop in Freeport has been around for at least 30 years. He does a good business in custom blends. He carries a large selection of both neer- and pseudo-tobacco. He also has a limited amount of Old Earth tobaccos. There is a full line of pipes in his shop. He carries the usual low grade pipes plus newer high grades. He has a reputation as a ‘pipe detective’. If you want a rare Old Earth pipe for your collection, if it can be found in the known universe, he will find it. It may be quite expensive, but he can usually find a source for you. Sometimes, it is better just not to ask questions on how it was obtained. Over the years I have obtained a couple of pipes from him. He has always dealt fair and square with me. I have no cause to complain.”

“Leo, aren’t you forgetting that little matter several years ago? It seems that Tom had been tasked to find a rare pipe produced by an Old Earth mater carver named Kent Rasmussen. The pipe was a “Butterfly” Cobra. Supposedly, the assignment was given to him by Darius Dooking, a noted pipe collector, and one of the richest men in the Empire. Dooking, in his youth had been a professional ballplayer. This was the foundation to his fortune. He successfully invested in other sporting ventures. There were some rumors of dealings with an illegal sport-betting organization, but nothing of substance ever turned up to justify a prosecution. The way the story goes is that Tom had located the ultra rare pipe, and a meeting was set. It turned up that Darius was found dead. The liquid negotiable funding documents had been stolen. Upon questioning, it was found that Tom had not shown up at the meeting. He denied ever finding the pipe or setting up any meeting. He had a solid alibi. The murder is unsolved to this day. The pipe also has not been seen in private or public since that time.”

“Varten, how do you know all of this?” Leo asked.

“I heard about the theft on the newscast. The name was familiar. I just checked it out in the

criminal database system. I also had a special interest, at the time it happened, since it had involved two well known pipe collector personalities.” Varten responded.

“Thanks, gentlemen. I think you have given us plenty to think about. Let’s get going, Nick.”

“Yes, let’s get a move on it.” Nick replied.

They left the foursome sitting on the veranda smoking their pipes and just enjoying the fine day. Nick and Lu Jo headed for Freeport.

-3-

Freeport was a quaint old town, not what one would call a bustling city. It had a quiet, laid-back atmosphere. Although it did not have a spaceport, it could be reached via almost all means of transportation on the planet. It was the typical large city amidst a sprawling vacation area. There were no large multi-story buildings, rather plenty of white washed one and two storied buildings spread out over a large area. The harbor was on the north side of the town. The tube connecting it to the mainland one hundred miles away was on the south side. Warehousing and light construction was in the area towards the harbor. The main business district was in the center city, ‘Old Town’ as it was called.

Leo had informed the local authorities of Nick and Lu Jo’s impending arrival. He had been assured of their total cooperation, and in fact, they looked forward to assistance from the EIS. Nick and Lu Jo left the hoverjet at the harbor. They rented a groundcar since aircars were not permitted in the town of Freeport. They were to meet Lt. Petrie at the tobacconist’s shop. They admired the old ‘French Quarter’ style of architecture as they drove into town. Lt. Petrie had left given them excellent direction when he contacted them on Nick’s communicator and they soon pulled up at the tobacconist’s shop.

The shop was in a rather exclusive area of Old Town. It was housed in a more modern two-story building. The left and right sides were mainly multi-paned windows. An ornately carved wooden door with stained glass window sections was in the middle. Outside the main door stood a brightly painted wood-like American Indian holding a peace pipe in one hand and a bundle of cigars in the other. The left and right side windows announced that this was the ‘Freeport Tobacconist’ shop and that Tom Coltwell was the proprietor.

“Must be a new location” Nick said “The building does not look like it has been here more than ten years, not the thirty that Leo said Tom has been in business.”

“Yes, about ten years. Nice décor, note how the architectural style fits in with the older buildings.” Lu Jo said.

An older gentleman was standing outside the door. From the description they were given, it was Lt. Petrie. They introduced themselves and went inside the shop. Although quite modern on the outside, the inside was a different story. It had been designed to replicate an Old Earth 1920s

tobacco shop. Short display cases were beneath the windows. Along half the back wall and around the right side of the room was display cases and counter. The display cases were filled with all types of pipes. Behind the counter were shelving filled with tins of pipe tobacco. Glass jars holding tobacco sat on top of the counter. On the left side were a half-dozen over stuffed chairs set up amongst book cases and a visiscreen. On the back wall, across from the main door, was a doorway leading to the back room. They observed two men, on each side of the counter, talking. When they had walked into the shop, the customer completed his purchase, took his bag and left the store.

Lt. Petrie introduced Nick and Lu Jo to Tom Colwell. "A fine shop you have here, Tom" Nick said.

"Very nice" Lu Jo.stated.

"Thank you very much" Tom replied "So, you are friends of Emperor Leopaldo. I have provided him with a couple of nice pipes over the last 30 years. I enjoyed working with him. He is a pleasure to deal with. I understand that you are here to help find my stolen pipes."

"I have a special blend for you to try. I call it 'Old Freeport Blend'." He passed a jar containing his new blend of pipe tobacco around for them to fill their pipes. Lt. Petrie had a nice locally made full bent. Lu Jo filled up her small Dunhill, and Nick his old Larenzetti pipe from the jar. They lit their pipes and continued the discussion.

"Thanks for the very nice tobacco. I think I like it. It is quite pleasant. There is no tongue bite. It is quite mellow. We are going to try to find the missing pipes; if we can" Lu Jo replied "Can you show us around? How did you discover the pipes were missing?"

"The four missing pipes were a special order for one of my collectors. I received them two days ago. There were six pipes, all charlatans, two executives, two Supremes, one Coronation, and one Grand Coronation. They were the top of the top in terms of Charatan pipes. I locked them in the side door of my desk in the back room. When I came to the shop yesterday, I went into the desk late in the morning. I opened the side desk drawer and the pipes were gone. I had not seen anything out of place. The front door and windows are alarmed, and the alarm was ok. The back door has a new electro-combo lock, and it did not look like it was forced. I had to use my combination to open the door. I do not know why those specific pipes were taken, as you can see, there are some just as valuable in the display cases." Tom said in explanation.

Nick, Lu Jo, and Lt. Petrie examined the doors, windows and alarms. They were all intact. Both the entrances, front and rear, had sidewalks, so there had been no footprints.

"You saw no sign of forced entry" Nick asked.

"No, I saw nothing. Nothing, other than the pipes, is missing. There are no signs of forced entry. Is it possible the thief had a key?" Tom asked.

“Unlikely” Nick replied “Your rear door has a electro-combo lock. The front door is keyed, but also alarmed. Why did you not alarm the rear door?”

“We had a break-in about a year ago. They were after money. We keep no money overnight in the shop. However, we had the whole door replaced. I decided to go with an electro-combo lock as it is the most recent design, and is supposed to be pick proof.” Tom answered.

“No lock is pick proof” Lt. Petrie replied “You should get the door alarmed. Almost as soon as a new design lock is produced, someone finds a way to defeat it. Although there is no evidence, I am willing to bet the thief entered through the rear door. If you look real closely, you will see scratch marks on the lock mechanism on the center drawer of the desk. It looks relatively fresh, not old. I think the pipes were taken, by a very skilled thief.”

Lu Jo and Nick closely examined the desk drawer locking mechanism. “Do you have any enemies that may wish you harm or embarrassment?” Nick enquired.

“No, well, some people” Tom said as he eyed the Lieutenant “think I had something to do with the murder of Darius Dooking. The only involvement I had with Darius was in preparing his favorite tobacco blend for him. It was a blend of wexel-virginia tobacco laced with Knearian brandy. He and his old manservant Renton were the only people that smoked it. Renton still gets it from me on occasion. I assure you that I had no involvement, whatsoever with the death of Darius Dooking. However, there are those in his family who do not accept this fact. You may wish to start with Carl Dooking, his brother.”

“We will.” Nick noted “One final question, who was the principal in the order for the six Charatan pipes?”

Tom replied “I am not at liberty to say. I can say that it is someone that is known to you, but beyond that, I must hold my silence.”

Nick purchased a pound of the Old Freeport Blend, and some pipe cleaners. Tom measured out the tobacco, wrapped it in an autoseal plastic bag, and gave him two packages of Pill’s Pipe Cleaners.

They left the shop and went outside. “What do you think?” Lt. Petrie asked Nick and Lu Jo.

Nick replied “I agree with you on the entry into the shop. I think it was done professionally and the thief knew exactly what he was to steal.”

Lu Jo added “I agree, but I also think there is some significance in the stolen pipes. Not so much for the money, but to embarrass Tom Coltwell. There is more here than meets the eye.”

It was still early evening. Leo and Varten were sitting on the veranda, Leo smoking his Dunhill Group 6 Cumberland billiard, and Varten his Jim Cooke billiard. Martha and Helen had taken off for a walk down the beach.

“Martha and I have had a wonderful time here on Venusia. The house, beach and companions were great, not to mention the fantastic weather. Of course, you supplied some excellent tobacco, Leo.”

“Thanks Varten. I was glad that Martha could accompany us this year. I thought it would be good for her to come since Lynda got married this year and moved away. Helen also enjoyed her companionship. Lu Jo seemed to fit right in with the group, and Nick could easily become part of any group.”

“It is nice to see Helen get out and enjoy herself. She, you, and I go back a long time. You remember when we were all at the military academy. We were all so young and naïve. You became the Emperor, I became your helper, and Helen became Robert Chamberlain’s wife after she left the service. It was a shame when Robert was murdered by that Utopian terrorist group five years ago. Helen took it real hard. It was a generous offer you made to invite her to come and reside at Castle Pesaro after Robert’s death.” Varten said.

“It was the least I could do, Varten. Robert was one of my best officers and Helen was a good friend to both of us. I was glad she came to live at the Castle. It has been good for both her and I, especially since Princess Karina died so long ago. I know that you are a good observer. You must have observed that Helen and I have renewed a relationship that I thought had ended many years ago. We are becoming very close.” Leo stated.

“Yes, I think we all recognize that you and her are becoming very close.”

They observed that the ladies were coming back from their walk. The two of them were laughing while walking along the edge of the water on the white sandy beach. They saw Leo and Varten, waved, and walked up the short steps to join them on the veranda overlooking the beach.

“Did you have a nice walk?” Leo asked.

“Wonderful. You know Leo that this island is a regular paradise. It was nice of Donald to offer it to us for the vacation this year.”

“Yes, Donald was quite generous.” Leo replied.

They sat around the table. Helen and Martha took out their new Rathenberg pipes, filled them with a local tobacco, and lit them using the wooden matches set out on the table.

“Martha was telling me how well Lynda and her new husband, Robert, are doing. Robert enjoys his new assignment. Lynda just loves their new house.” Helen said.

“Yes” Martha replied “and the best think is that we now have an empty nest. It is just Varten and I.”

They all laughed.

“You know Leo, Varten, sitting out here and just enjoying ourselves in this paradise reminds me of our younger days. We had a lot of fun together until life caught up with us and made us meet our responsibilities head on. We have all grown a lot since then. For the better I think. After all these years, we are still together, and we still enjoy our pipes.” Helen observed.

“Good observation Helen” Varten said “Life is sure an interesting trip, and we never know the road ahead of us. Boy, aren’t we serious tonight”. Varten replied.

“Let’s talk pipes and tobacco.” Leo said “I wonder if Nick and Lu Jo are making any headway on finding the pipes? I will bet that Tom Coltwell made a fine impression on them.”

“I expect to hear from them later this evening. They will probably stay in Freeport tonight. Hey, the youngsters have to get away from us old fogies. In reality, we will be glad to get away from the youngsters. Their absence gives us a chance to let our hair down so to speak. We don’t have to set such good examples in front of them.” Varten observed.

“Sshh” Martha said as she lightly slapped Varten “At our age, the youngsters think we are not capable of having much fun on our own. If they only knew!”

They all laughed and sat out well into the evening. Nick and Lu Jo did communicate with them that they were making some progress, but would stay in Freeport overnight. They said they would ring back in the morning.

Around eleven P.M. they went up to the house. Varten and Martha headed off to their rooms. Leo and Helen headed off to Leo’s room. If anyone was watching, they were hand-in-hand as they headed into Leo’s rooms. The door re-opened a few seconds later and the “Do Not Disturb” sign was placed on the doorknob.

-5-

The Dooking family compound was in one of the wealthier residential sections of Freeport. Lt. Petrie, Nick, and Lu Jo all traveled in the lieutenant’s ground car. Carl Dooking had inherited the bulk of Darius’ estate as there had been no other family. Although Carl had been well off before his brother’s untimely death, his inheritance had made him even wealthier. According to Lt. Petrie, Carl blamed Tom Coltwell for Darius’ death.

They pulled up to the two story white mansion. They left the car and walked to the main entrance, rang the bell. They announced themselves to the man that answered the door. “I am Renton, Mr. Dooking’s butler.” They introduced themselves and then told Renton that they

wanted to interview Carl Dooking. He asked if it were about the break-in at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop. He said that he heard about it on the newscast. He then took them to the library. Mr. Dooking would be with them momentarily.

Carl Dooking came into the library shortly after Renton had left. He was a tall man in his early fifties. He was dressed in a dinner jacket. "I don't have much time to offer you. I have a charity event to attend tonight. However, how can I help you?"

Nick began "Mr. Dooking, Tom Coltwell had a break-in a two nights ago. Some very valuable merchandise was taken. He informs us that you are the only person he could recall that had any desire to do him harm. Do you know anything about this, and could you please tell us where you were two nights ago?"

"That old fool! I? I? Why would I have anything to do with him, or care what happened to him? Legally or not, he was responsible for my brother's death. But I am over that. I could care less what happens to him. Let me think. Two nights ago I was at my club until 2:00 AM. You can check at the club and they will verify my story." Carl replied.

"We shall check" Lt. Petrie replied.

"Tell me Mr. Dooking, are you a pipe collector? I see some very nice pipes over in the pipe rack along the wall." Lu Jo asked as she went over and inspected the glass encased pipe rack.

"No, no, I do not smoke or collect pipes. Those belonged to Darius. They were part of his collection and a lot of good they did him. All his pipe collecting obsession did was get him killed. I couldn't tell you the difference between one pipe and another. By-the-way, what happened at Tom Coltwell's shop? Did some collector break in and steal his prized pipes?"

"Probably something like that. We won't take any more of your time. Thanks for being helpful. We may get back in touch with you at a later time. If anything comes to you, please ring me up." Lt. Petrie informed Carl.

Once they got outside, Lu Jo turned to Lt. Petrie and Nick and said "Something is not quite right. The pipes that were in the glass encased rack were all Charatans. However, Varten told us that the pipe in question when Darius was killed was Danish, carved by Ken Rassmussen. Something does not quite add up.

"True, but wasn't Renton the man we saw at Tom Coltwell's shop this morning?"

"I believe he was" Lu Jo exclaimed.

"Could you put a tail on Carl Dooking? He needs to be watched for the next couple of days." Nick asked.

"That we can do" Lt. Petrie said.

Lt. Petrie took them back to the location where the rental ground car was parked. Nick and Lu Jo decided to get a room at a local hotel. They would have dinner, and then do some research. They would call Varten and let him know they were staying overnight in Freeport. Lt. Petrie told them he would get back with them in the morning. They exchanged communicator numbers.

Nick and Lu Jo got a suite of rooms at the Three Palms Resort Hotel. They went for a swim in the resort pool. Afterwards, then went and had dinner in the resort restaurant. Following dinner, they adjourned to the bar for cognac and pipes. Nick filled up his Larenzetti pipe with the Old Freeport Blend. Lu Jo filled up her Ser Jacopo Hawkbill with the Old Freeport Blend. They both lit their pipes, smoking up their corner of the bar.

“I am having a fantastic time on vacation” Lu Jo said “I and the other ladies enjoyed the Rathenberg pipes that Leo gave us.”

“I am having a great time too. Nice location, beautiful beaches, crystal clear ocean, great companions, and you” he said with a grin.

“I will take that as a compliment” Lu Jo said “I think everyone is having a great time. We all get along well together, even with the difference in ages. I have never seen Leo so carefree. I think there is a growing relationship between Leo and Helen. There is something there, but I am not sure what.”

“About all I know is that Leo, Varten, and Helen were all close friends in their younger days. It seems they all went their separate ways. Leo and Varten worked closely for many years. Helen came back to Castle Pesaro after the death of her husband five years ago. It has only been in the last year that Helen has come out of her shell, probably due to Leo’s care. But I agree, the care is blossoming into something more.”

Once their pipes had gone out, and the glasses drained, they went back to their suite to do some further research regarding the case. As the door to the suite closed, the “Do not disturb” sign was placed on the doorknob.

-6-

The meeting had been scheduled for midnight. He had arrived at the old warehouse in the harbor area early so as to scout out the conditions. Nothing appeared to be amiss. He entered the warehouse by the side door. He had been instructed to go to the set of offices in the rear where he would be met. He noticed a light turned on in one of the offices and approached the door. The aroma of pipe tobacco was in the air. He knocked on the door and entered. A man was sitting at the table.

“Did you bring the merchandise” the man asked.

“Yes, I have it with me.” He replied “Did you bring my payment?”

“Yes, I have the 200 solaris in this wallet.” He picked up the wallet and counted the money. “You know, the merchandise is worth well over 2000 solaris, and for the risk I took, you could be a little more generous.”

The man stood up tapped his pipe in the ash tray and said “A little more generous? We had an agreement. I have kept up my end of the agreement, and I expect you to keep up your end.”

“I shall. Here is the merchandise.” He said as he took the six boxes out of his valise. He laid each one on the table, took the top off the box, removed each pipe out of its glove, and placed the pipe in the box.”

“Beautiful” the man said. He stood back and raised his arm. A needle blaster fired from under his sleeve. The thief was hit between the eyes. He fell to the ground, dead before he hit the floor.

“I will take my money back” he said as he reclaimed the wallet, “and my new pipes.” He put the pipes in his own satchel. He turned off the light and left the room.

-7-

Nick and Lu Jo were up early. They met Lt. Petrie in the Three Palms Restaurant for breakfast. Lt. Petrie informed them that there had been at least two complaints of groundcar garage doors opening for some unknown reason on the night of the theft. The garages were located in the vicinity of the Freeport Tobacconist Shop. He also reported that he had gone over the records of the investigation of Darius Dooking’s death. He had found that Carl Dooking had been in some financial difficulty prior to his brother’s death. However, the inheritance of his brother’s estate had put an end to the difficulty. He also found out that there had been an unusually large amount of pipe tobacco ash on the body, more than would be found from one smoker. It had been determined that it was a special blend that Darius smoked.

Lt. Petrie’s communicator began to beep. He took it out and answered. “Yes, we will head over that way. Expect us in a half hour.” He said to the person on the other end. He ended the conversation. “I think we have half the answer to the missing pipes.” He said “A body has been found in one of the warehouses in the Harbor district. It belongs to Greg Kadir, a well known back door man. Let’s go check it out.”

They left the Three Palms Resort and headed towards the harbor area of Freeport. When they had arrived, they entered the warehouse and proceeded to the offices in the rear. They entered the middle office where they found a table, a chair, and a body on the floor. The aroma of stale tobacco smoke hung in the air.

“This is Greg Kadir. He is probably one of the most skillful thieves in the islands. His specialty is breaking and entering. I had thought he was still in jail on Macrana Island, but I am obviously wrong. We have found his empty valise. You can see the ashtray on the table. I will have an

analysis done on the ash and dottle contents in the ash tray. I don't believe that Greg was a smoker. It may give us a lead on the killer." Lt. Petrie reported.

"My theory" Nick said "is that this is the person that stole the pipes from Tom's shop. The merchandise was to be exchanged for payment. Something went wrong. All we have is a body and no pipes. I would suggest we go back to Tom Coltwell's shop. I have a couple of questions I wish to pose to him."

They left the harbor area and headed back to Old Town. Once they arrived at the tobacconist's shop, they went inside. Tom greeted them anxiously. He suggested they fill their pipes with Old Freeport Blend, which they did and sat down for a discussion among the streams of pipe smoke.

"Tom" Nick asked, "Was that Renton, Carl Dooking's butler that we saw in here the other day?"

"Yes it was." He said "Renton stops by at least once a week and purchases a pound of pipe tobacco at a time. He worked for Carl's brother Darius. As I told the investigating officers years ago, Darius purchased my wexel-virginia tobacco with a topping of Knearian brandy. It was a special blend that I made up for just him. He enjoyed it immensely. I sold it to no one else. However, it seems that Renton developed a taste for it. It isn't cheap. Knearian brandy is quite expensive; however, Renton does seem to like it." Tom explained.

"You told us that you had nothing to do with Darius Dooking's death. I believe you in this matter. Did he commission you to find the Kent Rasmussen pipe?" Lu Jo asked.

"Yes he did" Tom stated "but I was unsuccessful. I never came up with that one, despite all my contacts."

"One final question" Nick said "Regarding Darius' brother Carl, do you know if he has ever had any interests in pipes and tobacco?"

"Many years ago he had an interest in Old Earth English pipes. I believe he gave his pipes to his brother. I have not heard of him having any interests in pipes and tobacco in recent years." Tom answered.

Lt. Petrie's communicator beeped. He answered the call. He was on his communicator for several minutes. He rang off when he was done.

They left the tobacconist's shop. Lt. Petrie told Nick and Lu Jo that the lab report indicated that the tobacco was wexel-virginia mixed with an alcoholic liquor. The time of death was estimated to be a little after midnight. Death was due to the blast of a needle blaster. He also said that Carl Dooking had gone to a charity event at the Freeport Sheraton about 7:00 PM. He had last been seen at 11:00 PM after which he had lost his tail. His path was not picked up until 7:00 A.M. at his home. Last of all, informant sources indicate that Carl Dooking is still involved in an inter-island sports betting ring."

“Where is he now?” Nick enquired.

“He is at a coffee shop in Old Town.” Lt. Petrie replied.

“Let’s pick him up and have Renton brought in for some questioning. It is time for a little interrogation.” Nick said.

-8-

They arrived at the central headquarters of the Freeport police. Lt. Petrie ushered them into a small meeting room. “Carl Dooking has been picked up. He is sitting in an interrogation room down the hall. We put him in the interrogation room where the mindprobe sits. He is probably sweating gumdrops. We also have Renton sitting in another interrogation room.”

Nick said “Good, but let’s start with Renton. I have one question I want to put to him first. If I get the answer I am expecting, I think we will be in good shape with Carl.”

They went to the interrogation room holding Renton. They opened the door and went inside.

“Renton, I have one question I want to ask you.” Nick said “Yesterday at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop we saw you leave with an order of specially blended tobacco. It had a topping of Knearian Brandy. I also found out that you make a purchase of this blend on an almost weekly basis. A pound of tobacco a week is a large amount to smoke. Was the tobacco for you or someone else?”

Renton shifted his eyes around the room, anywhere except to look at Nick. “The tobacco was for someone else. I do not smoke.”

“Who?” Lu Jo asked.

“I pick up the tobacco for my employer.” Renton said in a low voice.

“Just as I expected” Nick said as they left the room.

They entered the second interrogation room. Carl Dooking was sitting in the chair on the far side of the naked table. Off to his right sat the mindprobe. He looked very uncomfortable.

Nick took the lead in the questioning “Carl, we know you have not been quite truthful with us. It seems to us that you do know the difference between a billiard and a hawkbill or a half bent pipe. We also are aware of your regular purchases at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop, made by your man Renton. I believe that you are a closet pipe smoker and pipe collector. It was you that commissioned Greg Kadir to steal the six Charatan Pipes from Tom Coltwell. They were for your pipe collection, a collection of Charatan pipes. A second sidelight was that if Tom Coltwell had six pipes stolen from him, it would cause him great embarrassment, something to which you

looked forward. Public ally you blamed him for your brother's death, and denigrating him could only benefit you. Oh, by-the-way, the pipe rack in your library with the Charatan Pipes is yours. It was not your brothers, as you explained to us. You met with Kadir to exchange the pipes for cash and something went wrong. I believe you just got greedy and murdered him. Since a needle blaster was used, it was premeditated. Your house is being searched by the police, as we speak, and I expect the missing pipes will turn up."

"I want my lawyer" was all Carl said.

"One more thing" Lu Jo added "We can now address the issue of your brother's murder. You will note that an excess amount of ash and tobacco was found on his body. At the time it could not be explained. We can explain it now. The ash and tobacco was from your brother's pipe and your own. It was identified as Darius' favorite blend, one which has become your favorite. You basically tried to get people to forget you smoked a pipe so that this fact would not come to light. It was actually you that was in debt, and by killing your brother, you found your way out of the problem."

Lt. Petrie's communicator beeped. He answered it, then rang off. "They found the missing pipes. I think that about wraps the case up. You will have a lot of time to talk to your lawyer, Carl, you will be charged with theft and two murders. I think you will have a long time."

Later in the day, they stopped by Tom Coltwell's shop to return the stolen pipes. The pipes had been duly recorded, analyzed, photographed, holographed, and sampled. They would not be needed for the trial, a short trial at that.

They walked into the pipe shop. "Here are the missing pipes, Tom" Lu Jo said excitedly.

"You found them!" Tom replied.

Lu Jo told Tom the story about the finding of the pipes, and the two deaths.

"Fine job young lady, and you too Nick" Tom said. "Could you contact the Emperor Leopaldo? I would like to visit with you all. I think you would find it very interesting."

They contacted Emperor Leopaldo on the island. He invited Tom Coltwell to accompany Nick and Lu Jo back to the island.

-9-

It was early in the evening when the hoverjet got back to Donald Tripm's private island. They had all enjoyed a fine dinner. They were sitting out on the veranda having after dinner drinks. Tom Coltwell had brought several pounds of Old Freeport Blend with him to share with his host and fellow guests.

“It became quite clear to me that Carl Dooking had multiple reasons for stealing the pipes” Nick said “Beside the embarrassment to Tom Coltwell, there had to be more. He was the one that setup the search for the Rasmussen pipe and set up his brother for murder. He did it himself. He just did not have the necessary skills for the break-in at Tom’s shop. He needed a specialist to obtain the six Old Earth Charatan Pipes. Also, he was a closet pipe collector. He was the Charatan collector, and thus the reason for the theft of the pipes. They were for him”.

“Nick, Lu Jo, a masterful job of detection” Leo said “The two of you, working together, make a good team.”

“Oh, I almost forgot” Tom said “I brought the Old Earth Charatans with me to show you.” He proceeded to lay out the pipes. First were the two executives, then two Supremes, one Coronation, and one Grand Coronation. All were free hands.

They all admired the pipes.

“You will recall Lu Jo, that I could not and did not tell you who the customer was that was seeking the pipes.” Tom said.

“Yes, I do recall that.”

“Well, I guess that I can now provide the missing information. You see, I am actually here to make delivery of the merchandise. It has already been paid for.” Tom said.

They all looked at each other.

Tom walked up to Helen Chamberlain. “Mrs. Chamberlain, here is your order of pipes. I am delivering them on time and in immaculate condition.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Coltwell. You have performed excellently. However, I would suggest that you improve the security at your shop.” She said.

“I agree.” Tom said.

“She turned to the others, I guess some explanation is in order. I was very happy when you all invited me to vacation with you on this beautiful island. I have been in the dumps the past few years, but with all of your patience and understanding have finally passed the dark night. I owe a special thanks to both Leo and Varten. As a token of our friendship, I placed an order with Tom several weeks ago. Little did I realize the adventure that Nick and Lu Jo would have over the pipes I had ordered. The two charlatan executives are a matched set of freehands with double comfort stems. They are for Nick and Lu Jo. The two Charatan Supremes are for Varten and Martha. They are a beautiful set of pipes, just like Varten and Martha. The Coronation is mine. The Grand Coronation is for Leo, he is the grandest light of my life. I hope you all will accept these pipes with my thanks.” Helen said with great emotion.

They all were speechless. Finally, Tom said “Let’s light up the pipes!” He passed around the Old Freeport Blend he had brought with him.

Finally Leo stood up at the table “Helen, I think I can speak on behalf of all of us. We thank you for such a magnificent gift. You have touched all of our lives, and especially mine. I will treasure this pipe as part of my collection as we treasure you as part of our family.”

They each thanked her profusely for such a generous gift.

Last of all was Lu Jo. “Helen, I want to thank you for becoming such a good friend to me. Your kindness means a lot to me especially since I am the newest member of this family. I want to thank you for such an exquisite pipe. I shall treasure it always. I must say that, as far as gifts go, it is a quantum leap over paperback copies of ‘Secret Agent Girl’.”

They all laughed, and the laughter and pipes continued long into the night.

-END-

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE AMAZING LIGHT AND THE BANK HEIST

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 11/2004, "THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE AMAZING LIGHT AND THE BANK HEIST", All Rights Reserved

-1-

The starship was coming into view on the War Bird's scanners. It was a lonely merchant ship, unarmed, unaware of their presence, and robotically operated. It had been traveling from Xonie to Alpha. Centuari II. Although it had good scanners, they did not have the range of the War Bird's. The robot operating the merchant ship could not detect their ship, and would not know what to do if it did.

"I want you to just disable the ring drive. Fire a lasbeam at the tail of the ship." The captain said "At the same time, fire a beam towards the bridge. I want them both to hit at the same time. I do not want any hyperspace messages sent."

"Aye" said the weapons officer as he depressed firing studs on his console."

"Sparks, monitor all hyperwave communications bands and let me know if any distress signals are sent."

They continued to watch the visiscreen. They could see the lasbeam hit the tail of the ship the same time the other beam hit the bridge. The merchant ship came to a dead stop in space. Their radio operator indicated that no transmissions had been sent from the merchant ship.

"Take a boarding party over to the merchant ship. See what this little darling has for us. I want to know the contents of the hold. Our information was that it was very valuable to the Emperor." the captain said as he puffed on his short black pipe.

The boarding party put on their spacesuits and left the War Bird. They boarded the crippled merchant ship. A few minutes later the word came back. It was just as they had been told. The hold of the ship contained close to a million pounds of Xonie's neer-tobacco. This neer-tobacco was a condiment tobacco used in many popular blends across the empire. It is very similar to a tobacco from Old Earth named "perique", which was a highly praised condiment tobacco. The loss would be a blow to the emperor, or at least so the representative from House Chesterfield had told them. They figured the emperor would go to any length to find the pirated tobacco.

The captain listened to the report. "Take the vessel in tow. We will return to our base. Let me know when you are ready for us to leave."

The captain decided to start composing his message to the emperor. It would be short, sweet, and simple.

*Emperor Leopaldo,  
I have taken the robotic merchant ship X2045 bound from Xonie to Alpha Centuri II. The contents of the hold are most delectable. You have two choices; either send me a ransom of 20,000 solaris or I will smoke all the tobacco myself.*

*If I keep this fine tobacco, then what will the rest of your empire smoke? You can contact me through the X-9J procedures.*

*Yours truly,*

*Captain Mondure*

He re-read the message and passed it over to his executive officer. “What do you think, Dirk? I think he will pay the ransom. It is a small price to pay. Xonie’s condimental tobacco is rare and I don’t think he will want to upset all the pipe smokers.”

“I think you are right sir. We have the ship in tow and are ready to depart.”

“Ok, send the message and let’s go. It will be a while until they can send someone to investigate.” The captain said as he tamped and relit hip pipe which had gone out.

-2-

Nick Reardon had been working at Castle Pesaro when he was called by Varten von Eckman. He had been told of the capture of the robotic merchant ship by the nefarious pirate, Captain Mondure. Varten and Emperor Leopaldo had decided to send in an Empire Intelligence Service (EIS) team to find the pirated tobacco, re-take it and dispose of the pirates. They would have backup from the Empire Naval Service. Nick was to head towards the Xonie sector in a needle drive ship. Once there, he would be the advance person to size up the situation.

Nick had headed to the spaceport on Hayden. He was to meet Doctor Paschak of the Bureau of Naval Ships. He had been told that the needle drive ship at his disposal was of a new design. Dr. Paschak met him when his aircar arrived.

“As I was telling you, this ship is a new version of the one you used before. You do not have to really do anything; the robot pilot does it all. The robot pilot will calculate all you jump times, velocities, and coordinates. It will watch after you, cook for you, and can even do your laundry.” Dr. Paschak said.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” Nick said “I don’t know if I like being left in the hands of a robot”

“You have nothing to fear. This robot, by the way, whose name is Phipps, was programmed by

one of our best, Swiftie Vann. She is at the forefront of biorobotic engineering. Phipps was specifically programmed to be compatible with you, Nick. If it were not for this emergency, you would be out on a test cruise for the ship.” Dr Paschak replied.

“I don’t have time to argue. I am going to go onboard and get going.” Nick said “If I have any problems, I will just have to do the best I can.”

“Good by Nick, and good luck. Give me a full report when you return.” Dr. Paschak said.

Nick boarded the needle drive ship. He tossed his meager kit bag in the sleeping area and headed forward. Conditions aboard a two-person needle ship were quite austere. He strapped himself into the pilot’s chair when suddenly he heard a voice “Hi Nick, welcome aboard.”

“Who is that?”

“It is I, Phipps, the robotic pilot of this heap, and you are Nick Reardon, my passenger.”

“Let’s get things straight, Phipps, I am the commander of this needle ship. You are the ship’s operating system. I tell you where we are to go, and you get us there. You got that?”

“Yes I do. By the way, Dr Swiftie said to say ‘hello’ to you when I meet you. She also said to tell you that she likes you very much, but you are now second place in her life to her husband, Gene.”

“Swiftie was a fine girl.” Nick said “I can’t believe that I am talking to a robot?”

“Well you are, and that is one way we communicate, beside my other sensory inputs. I have the jump information from the Hayden computer. We are heading to Xonie. I have the jump coordinates, so why don’t you just sit back and we will get going. We have the tower’s clearance to leave in five minutes. Once we get into space, it will take about 6 hours until we get out of the system and can make our first jump. So why don’t you sit back and relax.”

Nick strapped himself into the G-couch for liftoff. In five minutes they took off and were headed towards Xonie. Nick was sitting when Phipps informed him that he had some communications to read. “You know Nick, Dr. Swiftie told me a lot about you. I want to let you know that I like the aroma of a good pipe.”

“Perhaps I will have a pipe after dinner. We have about 5 hours until the first jump. I think I will take a short nap. Wake me two hours before jump time.”

Nick went to the sleeping area. He took out of his kit bag the only pipe he had packed, a common neer-briar hawkbill. He had also brought some pseudo-tobacco. He laid down and took a short nap.

The next thing he heard was an alarm. “ it is time to get up, Nick.”

“Hunh? Oh, it’s you, Phipps. Thanks for getting me up.”

“We have two hours until jump time. I have made a No. 3 Spacer meal for you. It is all set out on the bridge.”

“Uh, thanks Phipps. I am sure I will enjoy it.” He said as he thought pseudo-beef pot roast with fixings. It is just what I wanted. Oh well, It could be worse. He headed to the bridge where he ‘enjoyed’ his dinner.

He had disposed of the dinnerware when he sat back and took out his pipe. He filled it with his tobacco and began to light it. All of a sudden he heard “Hawkbills? I abhor soggy pipes!”

“What did you say Phipps?” Nick asked.

“I, I didn’t say anything, Nick” Phipps responded.

“Oh, I thought you said something about my hawkbill pipe.” Nick replied.

“Hawkbills! I wouldn’t have any such soggy pipes in my collection!” Phipps raved.

“What’s the problem with you and hawkbills, Phipps?”

“Hawkbill, I quite imagine that if you were to crush some Viagra tablets and sprinkle the dust into your favorite blend, the soggy pipe of yours would look like a billiard!” Phipps rejoined.

“Phipps, do you have something mental about these pipes?” Nick asked “I thought you liked pipes, or so you said.”

“I, uh…”

Suddenly the jump alarm went off, and the ship entered hyperspace. Nick fell onto the floor. All went blank.

He slowly became conscious. He was Nick Reardon. He was on a needle ship heading to Xonie. He started to move.

“Nick, Nick are you OK?” he heard the voice.

“Yes Phipps, I am OK, except for one broken pipe. But are you?” Nick asked.

“I think so. I just ran a diagnostic and debug routine. I found one back door virus, which I cleaned. It seems that Dr. Swiftie meant to play a little practical joke on you. I was to harass you about your hawkbill pipe until 8-hours elapsed, and then tell you it was her playing a practical joke on you.”

“Nice joke! I think something else has happened. It also affected you during your jump calculations. Obviously we made a jump. Where are we?” Nick asked.

“Well, er, I don’t know. We are in a small, unknown star system, somewhere on the rim of the galaxy. There are eight planets in this system. From here, I can detect life on the third planet.” Phipps replied.

“Why don’t we just jump to Xonie or back to where we came from?” Nick asked.

“We have two problems. First, we overloaded an inductor in the ship’s ring drive power supply, and second, I don’t have any relevant coordinates from this system in my computer database. It is going to take me time to recalculate the relevant coordinates relative to this system. You are going to have to find the inductor in the power supply control circuit, and repair it. If you can’t, then we are marooned.”

“Ok Phipps, we can work as a team. You start determining the correct jump coordinates, scan the third planet with your sensors, and get us moving towards it using the local drive power. I will go look at the ring drive power supply.” Nick said.

Nick headed towards the rear of the ship. He entered the ring drive section. He opened the ring drive control panel and could smell the odor of smoked electronics. He quickly found the burned inductor.

“Not too bad. It could have been worse. Looks like a manufacturing defect. The large inductor must have had a flaw in the coil. It can’t be patched, but it could be remade if I had some high purity gold or silver wire. I’ll bet there is none on the ship in the spare parts kit.” He said to himself.

He checked the spare parts kit and there was none to be found. He went back to the bridge.

“I found the problem, Phipps. It was just as you indicated a fried inductor. Please check the inventory and see if there is any high purity gold or silver wire.”

“None Nick. I can’t help with that, and it is a crucial component. There is no way around it.” Phipps replied.

“Well, let’s just head to the third planet and see what we shall see. Use full optical and radiofrequency scan. I want to find out all I can about it before we go into orbit.”

They headed off towards the third planet.

-3-

Eight hours later they were in orbit around the third planet. There had been no radiofrequency

emissions from the planet. Optical scanning indicated one large city on the single continent. Environmental scanning indicated the planet was Old Earth-like. Temperature was 30 to 90-degrees Fahrenheit with a breathable atmosphere.

Telescopic scanning indicated that the inhabitants of the planet lived in a time period similar to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Old Earth, First Age. It was fossil fuel based, horse and buggy type economy. There were no signs of the development of internal combustion engines or gasoline fuels. With the exception of the one large city, the countryside was small villages and hamlets indicating a farming economy.

“It is going to be necessary for us to land in a secluded location, Phipps. I am going to have to find us some silver wire while you are going to continue to determine the new jump coordinates. I figure we will be here at least two standard days at a minimum.” Nick said

“That will be enough time.” Phipps said.

“When we land, I want you to activate your defensive screen so that no one can enter the ship but me. I also want you to use your invisi-shield so that you cannot be detected when we land and while we are on this planet. What have you found out about the inhabitants of this planet?

“Using my long-range scanners, I have found that the inhabitants speak Old Earth English, dated to the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a strong English accent.” Phipps replied.

“Well, that is good. There will be no language problem. I am going to sleep before we land. I want you to give me the sleep-learning program for the language, and Old Earth history. I am going to theorize that this is one of the lost colonies from Old Earth. It looks like they are in a time mode of 19<sup>th</sup> Century England.” Nick said

Nick slept restlessly. He got little sleep during the eight hours.

When he awoke, Phipps indicated that he was ready to land the ship. “There is a secluded glade near a series of foot hills about 50 miles from the large city. What I take to be an estate is several miles from the landing site. We will land using the new magneto-power system which will permit us to land silently and with no visible indication. This system is only good for takeoff and landings. We will be landing at night.”

“Good, I will have a little time to go and scout out the countryside.” Nick replied.

Nick strapped himself into the G-couch. The ship slowly left orbit and descended into the atmosphere, and headed towards the planetary surface. Nick almost fell asleep when Phipps announced they had landed.

“The invisi-shield is on. We cannot be seen or detected by instruments. You can now leave, Nick.” Phipps informed him.

“Good Phipps. Do not let anyone in the ship.” Nick ordered I am fully armed and shielded. I doubt that any harm can come to me in this age. I also have my communications systems. As you can see, I have put on clothing I have adapted to fit this time period.”

He left the ship. In the moonlight he could see a pastoral countryside. He also saw a building off in a distance. He also noted a road running about a mile away. He had to travel down the hill passing through a wooded area to reach the road.

As he reached the country lane, he saw a man walking towards him. The man was well dressed, in his early 50s and was smoking a pipe.

He approached Nick he said “Hullo, I don’t recall seeing you in these parts. Are you lost?”

“Yes, you might say I am lost. I have just arrived in this area. That is a mighty fine pipe you are smoking.” Nick said.

“Well thank you young man. The pipe is a Dinhill. I picked it up in Londonium about two months ago. It smokes quite decent. Do you need some tobacco?”

“Ah thanks, I have broken my only pipe. By the way, my name is Nick Reardon. I am from the south and seem to have lost my way. I was heading towards the city when I became lost. I take it that I am trespassing on your land and that the estate house in the distance is yours.”

“Yes, and Yes. I am Sir Arthur Doyle and that is my country home “Euston House”. But you are not trespassing. I always enjoy company. I do have a second pipe here in my pocket that I will loan you and here, have some tobacco.” He said as he took an old briar out of his pocket and gave it and his pouch to Nick.

Nick took the straight bulldog shaped pipe and thanked him for it. He filled the pipe and lit it, returning the pouch to Sir Arthur. “This is a fine tobacco” Nick said.

“It’s the best tobacco on Arth! I just got this Pembroke Blend at my tobacconist shop, Newgate Tobacconist, in Londonium. It is rather expensive, but well worth it.”

“I agree” Nick said “One of the best I have ever tried.”

They sat on a stone wall adjacent to the lane and talked while they smoked. Nick learned that Londonium was the capital city of the Blessed Isle, which they called the continent. He also learned that the people could only trace their history back several thousand years on Arth.

After their pipes go out, Nick goes to give his back to Sir Arthur, but he tells him to keep it. “I have really enjoyed talking to you this evening. If you are here tomorrow, come back early in the evening to this place and we can have another pipe. If not, I hope you have a safe trip to Londonium.” Sir Arthur said.

“I will meet you here tomorrow night during the early evening. I would like to continue this conversation. It has been most enjoyable. I will supply the tobacco tomorrow evening.”

Nick returned to the needle ship. Phipps was making good progress recalculating the jump coordinates. Nick told Phipps about Londonium, and Arth.

The next night Nick left the ship in the early evening. He went down the hill towards the road. A man sat on the wall. He rose when Nick approached. He said “Sir Arthur had pressing business in Londonium. He asked me to meet you tonight. I will tell you that I am armed, but I do not expect to be required to use it. My name is Sherlock Holmes!” he said.

“Sherlock Holmes? I seem to recall that name.” Nick said.

“ Hmm. I don’t know how you could. I deduce that you are not from this area, nor Londonium, nor of Arth. I would say that you are a visitor from another world.” Holmes said.

“That is ridiculous. I am from the south.”

“I think not. I can tell from the mud on your boots that you are staying around here. Speaking of your boots, although they appear to be leather, I can see they are not. Your clothes, although made to look like mine, are of a close material but just not the same. Although your language is good, it is not native and you do not have a southern accent. When you eliminate all the possible theories, you must settle on the impossible.” Holmes said. “Sir Arthur was quite right to be suspicious of you.”

“Let’s try a pipe. I have this one from Sir Arthur, and I have brought some of my tobacco.” Nick said. He filled and lit his pipe. He passed the tobacco to Mr. Holmes who did the same having a large wooden calabash pipe.

“Your powers of deduction and reasoning are very strong. You are, of course, correct. I am not of this world. I am from a society in a different part of the galaxy. You also could say of a different time. My ship is damaged. I need to find some high grade silver or gold wire to make the necessary repair. Can you help me? I can be most generous with you.” Nick stated.

“I will make you a bargain. If you help me solve a little mystery, I will obtain the wire for you and will keep your secret safe with me. What do you think?”

“I will assist you to whatever extent I am able, provided I don’t have to use any advanced technology”, Nick said.

“Let’s head back to Sir Arthur’s house and take a late train back to Londonium. Early in the morning we should be able to reach my rooms in Baker Street. I will introduce you to my fellow lodger and adventurer, Dr. John H. Watson. As far as he is concerned, you are my distant cousin, Nicholas Reardon from the Vernet side of the family.” Holmes explained.

“Ok, let’s go. You may find this hard to believe, but I have read, I think, some stories of your exploits. I have to contact my ship and my Watson, Phipps.” Nick replied.

Nick used his communicator to contact the ship and inform Phipps of his impending departure. He renewed his orders regarding security. He also told Phipps his locating system would be on as well as his autocommunicating system. Phipps was told to monitor at all times for distress and to come in aid at the first sign of a potentially life threatening situation or problem.

They lit their pipes again as they headed down the lane towards Euston House.

-4-

Once they got back to Euston House, they were driven by trap to the local train station. They took the old coal burning steam train to Londonium, arriving at the station well after midnight. A handsome transported them from the train station to 221b Baker Street. Nick studied the locale and local landmarks on the way to Baker Street. He found the lit gas lamps quite interesting. He could see bright, round multi-colored halos around the lights in the evening fog.

Holmes mentioned that his landlady was Mrs. Hudson. “She is a rare woman. I discovered a long time ago that she is a good housekeeper, and an excellent cook. You will probably meet her in the morning. Dr. Watson may be asleep, so I don’t know if you will meet him tonight or tomorrow.”

221b Baker Street was a typical English sandstone building. Homes and Nick finally got into the rooms very early in the morning. They went through the main door, up the stairs, and into a sitting room. The sitting room had several overstuffed chairs in front of and to the side of the fireplace. On the right, in front of the large windows was a dining table. In the corner was a desk with a ton of reading material on the desktop and piled to the side. There were numerous bookcases placed around the room so that there was no clear wall space. A door off to the left side opened and a man appeared holding a revolver. He looked at Holmes and the stranger.

“John Watson, may I present my cousin Nicholas Reardon. Nicholas is going to be spending a couple of days with us.” Holmes said.

“A pleasure sir” Nick said as he reached out to shake his hand, “I have heard so much about you.”

“I hope that all you have heard was all good. It is a pleasure to meet any friend of Holmes; however, I must say that he has not mentioned you before. But then again, he does not talk much about his immediate or extended family.” Watson replied.

“Come, come gentlemen. Sit down. There is tobacco in the slipper and cigars in the coal scuttle.”

They sat down in front of the fire place. Holmes lit up his briar calabash. Watson filled and lit

his full bent blast. Nick filled up and lit the small billiard that Sir Arthur had given him.

“Watson, Nicholas is going to help us solve the little matter of the bank theft.

Holmes began “There is an archeological site north of the city. Many experts believe that this is the spot where the first people on Arth originated. There are several interesting theories about the origins of life on Arth. One theory is of mankind being developed from lower life forms. One is that a universal God put us here. Another is that our ancestors had come from the stars. I am a believer in the third theory because of the scientific evidence. Over the years, several relics have been taken from the site. These are items that are way ahead of our technology.”

“Several weeks ago, the Tollie expedition had dug up a mysterious cylindrical device. The device seemed to do nothing. They had, by chance, left it in the sunlight. After being in the light several hours, they noticed that it provided a beam of illumination when a button was operated.” Holmes continued.

Nick had recognizes the device as a sun powered flash light having a power system that is recharged by photo cells. He told them about the flash light and the manner in which it worked. Holmes quite agreed with him.

“What is this?” Watson asked “How does he know what the device is and how it functions. Our best minds were not able to figure it out.”

“You have to remember; Watson that Nicholas and I are related. We both come from the same gene lines. My abilities are detection, his are in figuring out how things work.”

“Amazing” Watson observed.

Sherlock exclaimed “It seems that the device was stolen from the expedition’s tent. Two nights ago, there had been a robbery of the Londonium state bank.50,000 Uroes were stolen. Towards the end of the theft, an alarm was sounded, but the robbers escaped with the loot. On the bank floor, near the door in which they fled, the light device was found. I have been retained by the bank manager to locate the missing money.”

“This is a very strange story, Holmes” Watson said.

“Yes it is.” Nick replied “but I have every faith in you to that it can be solved.”

“Tomorrow morning we can visit the bank.” Sherlock said “I also have to visit my tobacconist. It has been a long day, and I think we should get some sleep. Nicholas, you can have the guest room. Good night, gentlemen.”

The small group broke up, going to their rooms and some well earned sleep. Before turning in, Nick contacted Phipps via his communicator. There had been nothing to report.

The next morning was dull and overcast. Nick, John Watson, and Sherlock Holmes met for breakfast. “You are right Holmes; Mrs. Hudson is an excellent cook. These eggs, kippers, and muffins are excellent!” Nick exclaimed

“Yes she is. Watson and I fell into these rooms. And Mrs. Hudson comes with them. She is an added bonus! Anyway, we need to get moving if anything is to be accomplished today.”

They left the Baker Street rooms and headed towards the center of Londonium. On the way, they stopped at the Newgate Tobacconist Shop. “Nicholas” Sherlock said “You need a new pipe. Please select one.”

Nick looked at the many nice pipes in the display case. He selected a full bent with a deep blasted finish. “Put it on my tab” Sherlock told the tobacconist. He added some bulk tobacco to his order. “Nicholas, you have selected a very nice pipe. It was made by Larry Rouch, one of Londonium’s best pipe makers.”

“Thanks Holmes. The pipe Sir Arthur gave me is nice, but just not my cup of tea.” Nick said.

They continued to the bank. When they arrived at the bank, the bank manager met them. Sherlock introduced Nick as his cousin who was assisting him in this matter. “When we arrived, there was the distinct aroma of pipe smoke in the air. We found the safe open. There were some shards of pipe tobacco and ash in an ashtray and the end of a rather small, dark cigar was found on the floor. The ash and cigar butt had to belong to the thieves since the bank had been cleaned before the robbery. Scratch marks indicated that the door in the back of the bank had been picked.

“I have an idea” Nick told Holmes and Watson. “We need to go back to the tobacconist. You did tell me that he was the largest one in Londonium did you not?”

“Yes, he is the largest tobacco establishment in Londonium” Watson said.

They returned to the Newgate Tobacconist Shop. The proprietor, upon seeing them, asked if something was wrong with Nick’s new pipe.

“No, nothing is wrong, it is an excellent piece.” Nick said “But I do have a question for you. Would you say that you stock all of the tin tobacco that would be available in Londonium?”

“Yes, I believe my stock of tinned tobacco is the most complete in Londonium. I stock over thirty different brands of tinned tobaccos, and have twenty bulks.” He said.

“Ok, we want to purchase one tin of each tinned blend, and two ounces of each of your bulks. Do you think your tab can take it Holmes?” Nick asked.

“Yes it can. I just wonder what you have in mind.”

Nick replied “The cigar butt is from a type known to me as a parodie. It was probably smoked by one of the thieves. I would hypothesize that one of the thieves was the ring leader, the pipe smoker, and the other an accomplice, the cheap cigar smoker. I am not familiar with the pipe tobacco. We are going to go back to Baker Street and smoke each of these tobacco samples. There are over fifty. When each sample is done, you are going to examine and catalog each of the ashes and dottles by studying them under the microscope. You will then compare the ash and dottle from the bank to those in your catalog of results. Hopefully there is a match. Knowing which tobacco the thief smokes may help in catching him or her.”

“That is a great idea Nicholas” Holmes said “You know it would make a great topic for a monograph that I may write when this is all over. Knowing what a criminal smokes can be a very important piece of information when performing detection work.”

They finished their business at the tobacco shop, and headed back to Baker Street. When they got back to the rooms, they started smoking their pipes. They each smoked a bowl, emptied the ash and Holmes examined it under a microscope, carefully recording his findings. They each had over fifteen bowls to smoke, with Holmes examining each one.

“You will notice the difference in the ash and dottle between those tobaccos that are ribbon cut, flake, or shag. There is also a difference between the blends based on the types of tobaccos that go into the blend’s composition.” As Holmes was talking, the door to the room opened and in rushed Mrs. Hudson with a bucket of water which she promptly dumped on Holmes table.

“Oh my gosh!” She exclaimed “I thought we had a fire going in here! I am sorry Mr. Holmes for the mess I have made.”

“Not to worry, Mrs. Hudson. We will take care of cleaning up. Don’t worry, there is no fire, just a little experiment.”

Holmes took out the sample of dottle and ash retrieved from the bank. He put it under the microscope. “Fine ribbon cut, light tobacco with about ten percent dark.” He looked at his notebook and the samples that were laid out on the desk. “Come here Watson. Take a look at this slide.” Watson did so. “Now look at this one” Watson did look after he changed the slide. “They seem to be the same.” Watson said.

“They are the same” Holmes said. “The blend is Summersville Blend, one made by Newgate Tobacconist and sold only in their establishment. Your idea Nicholas worked out very well.”

“Yes it did” Nick said “and my new pipe is now quite broken-in.”

Holmes left to go back to Newgate Tobacconists and find out who purchased the Summersville Blend. While he was gone, Nick and Watson sat down in the overstuffed chairs and were smoking the blend that each seemed to enjoy from the tasting.

“I take it John that you have been with Holmes on quite a few adventures.”

“Yes I have. Some of them have been quite interesting and unique.”

“Did you ever think about writing them up and presenting them to the public? You may make some money from it to supplement your income.”

“That is an excellent idea.” Watson said “I could probably get Sir Arthur Doyle to be my agent and have them published.”

“Yes you could, and I have faith that you would do very well at it and the public would just eat up the stories.”

“Holmes may not like the idea” Watson said.

“I don’t think you will have much of a problem on Holmes account. In case you did not notice, deep down, in his heart of hearts, he is a vain man. He would never admit it, but he is.”

They sat back, enjoyed their pipes and were off in their own little dreams.

-6-

About two hours later, Sherlock Holmes returned to Baker Street. “This has been a good afternoon Watson, Nicholas. The Summersville tobacco blend is quite exclusive and expensive. It is only sold to five customers: Robert Richen, a man in the financial business; John Siler, a noted experimentalist and engineer; Stanley Stormer, an actor; Bruce Logger, a civil servant; and Sir James Stoltzman, a member of the House of Lords.” Holmes reported.

“I then went to visit my friends on the Metropolitan Detective Force who told me that of the five, Richen and Stoltzman had been in some financial difficulties of late and that there were rumors that Stoltzman had contacts with the Londonium underworld. Stoltzman has been a legislative and financial supporter of the archeological work trying to determine our origins. I think we should arrange a meeting with both Richen and Stoltzman and see how things progress.” Holmes said.

“I think that would be a good idea.” Nick said.

Holmes took out his Eastern Union pad and wrote a message. “Watson, would you be so good as to take this to the postal office and have this message dispatched to Richen and Stoltzman. It invites them to a meeting tonight here at Baker Street. It also says that it is very important to them to attend. I think they will accept.”

“Sure Holmes. I will take it. Do you mind if I stop at the bookstore and check for the latest Lancet magazine?”

“No Watson we don’t mind. Take your time coming back.”

Watson left on his mission.

“Nick, you know Watson will be gone for at least two hours. He will probably stop at a pub. It is the sherry, you know.”

“Yes, that is not a problem.”

“Light up your pipe. Since I have you to myself for a period of time, I want you to tell me of your world.”

They sat and smoked their pipes while Nick answered all the questions that Holmes put to him. He told him about his great friends, Emperor Leopaldo, Varten von Eckman, and Lu Jo, and some of the mysteries he had solved.

“Your stories are most interesting” Holmes said “Most common people of this time on Arth would think you were a madman. I am glad I have had this chance to meet you. Now, Emperor Leopaldo, there is a man after my own heart.”

“He is one very accomplished person. He is quick of mind, loyal to his friends, and quite the consummate pipe smoker and collector.”

They discussed the finer points of the case and how they would proceed with the evening meeting. Watson finally returned with the replies that Richen and Stoltzman would be attending the evening meeting.

They had dinner and discussed the finer points of pipes and tobacco.

-7-

Promptly at 7:00 PM, Mrs. Hudson admitted two men to the study. Although both men were well dress, the two men were a study in contrast. Richen was tall, thin, and gaunt while Stoltzman was short, dumpy, and ruddy in complexion. The visitors entered the room. Holmes indicated that they should sit near the fireplace.

“As you know, I am Sherlock Holmes. These are my two associates, Dr. John Watson, and Mr. Nicholas Reardon. I have asked you to come here to discuss a matter that I am investigating. Please, let’s enjoy our pipes while we talk. Nicholas, do pass around some of that most excellent tobacco.”

Nick passed around the tobacco jar. They all filled up their pipes and lit them.

After a minute, Stoltzman exclaimed “Summerset Blend!”

“Yes it is. Which is one of the reasons you are here. You are all familiar with the theft that occurred at the Londonium state bank. 50,000 Uroes were stolen. The thieves were inside the bank for several hours. Towards the end of the theft, an alarm was sounded, but the robbers escaped with the loot.” Holmes said.

He continued “We know there were at least two thieves. One of the thieves smoked small parodie cigars. The other thief smoked a pipe. We have identified the pipe tobacco as being Summerset Blend.”

“There must be many people that smoke that blend” Reichen stated.

“No, not so” Homes replied “Summerset blend is only produced and found at the Newgate Tobacconist Shop. It is more exclusive than you may think. There are only five people that smoke it in Londonium. That gets us down to a group of five suspects. The two of you are known to have been having financial difficulty. The others have been thoroughly investigated and cleared. That is another reason why the two of you are here.”

“Further investigation indicates that Sir James has had some contacts with the underworld, and is a supporter of the archeological expedition, both important connections to the case.”

Both Richen and Stoltzman had finished their pipes. Nick, carefully looking over their shoulders, examined the ashtrays at the side of each man wherein they had dumped the ash from their pipe. Richen had smoked the Summerset blend down totally to ash. Stoltzman had smoked his pipe to the point of ash with an appreciable amount of dottle. Nick made a sign to Holmes pointing out Stoltzman.

“I think we can now conclude, Sir James that you were the ringleader of the bank theft.” Holmes stated.

“You can conclude what you wish, but it will never standup in court.” Stoltzman said.

“Oh, I think it will. If you examine your ashtray you will find that yours contains a mixture of shards of tobacco and ash, whereas Richen’s contains only straight ash with virtually no shards of tobacco. Robert Richen is a true pipe smoker, while you are just an amateur.”

Holmes went on “That coupled with the fact that you had the opportunity to steal the relic flashlight which was left at the scene of the crime, and I believe we can quickly come up with your accomplice. You needed your helper to pick the lock on the back door of the bank and open the safe. It won’t be long until we have a confession from him. Finally, now that we know where to look, we can follow the trail of the money. I think you are quite finished.”

At that time, there was a knock on the door. A large man entered with a uniformed policeman at his side.

“Ah, Inspector Lestrade, here is the man responsible for the bank robbery.”

The Inspector took Stoltzman into custody, placing handcuffs around his wrists.

“Watson! Why don’t you accompany the Inspector to the police station and fill him in on the details? You can stop and pick up that issue of Lancet on your way home that you forgot to get earlier today.” Holmes said.

“Good idea, Holmes” Watson said “Don’t stay up waiting for me.”

Lestrade, Watson, the uniformed policeman, and Stoltzman left. As Robert Richen was leaving, he thanked Holmes for a most enjoyable evening and a unique experience.

All that was left at 221b Baker Street were Sherlock Holmes and Nick Reardon. Nick used his communicator to contact Phipps. Phipps informed him that the new jump coordinates had been computed and they could leave once the new inductor had been wound and the repair made to the ring power supply.

“Watson will be out late. It’s the sherry, you know.” Holmes said “Mine is the 7% solution when I get bored. I don’t know which one is worse.”

Holmes had Nick sit down and light up his pipe.

“First, I want to thank you for helping me solve the bank theft case. I have enjoyed working with you. You know, you could stay and work with me.” Sherlock offered.

“Yes, I could, and we would make a good team. But you have Watson, and I would not want to impose. Beside, there are others that depend on me.” Nick replied.

“I quite understand. Here is a spool of 100% silver wire. I believe it is the diameter you specified. It should be enough.” Sherlock gave Nick the wire. He reached for his pipe rack and took down two wooden calabash pipes. “This is a matched set of calabash pipes made locally by David Wobler. Dave is considered one of Londonium’s best pipemakers. Note the “SH” stamping on the side of the pipe. I want you to keep one and I want you to give the other one to Emperor Leopaldo when next you see him.”

“I thank you and I am sure that I can say the same for Emperor Leopaldo. You know Holmes, you really need to have Watson start compiling your cases for publication. I am sure they will be a best seller.” Nick said.

“I will consider your thought. We shall see if there is any interest in the matter.” Holmes said “I suggest we get some sleep. I propose we leave early in the morning to take the steam train to the station near Euston House. We can be there by 9:00 A.M.”

“Sounds like a plan. We can leave before Watson gets up.”

As Holmes had suspected, Watson had not gotten back to the rooms until 2:00 A.M. He was still asleep when they arose at 6:00 A.M. They caught the early steam train and arrive at the station early in the morning. Holmes rented a trap to take them to Euston House.

Nick communicated with Phipps regarding their impending arrival. He and Holmes were smoking pipes as they approached the needle ship. Nick communicated with Phipps that he could put down the invisibility shield, which he did. The ship became visible in the glen.

“To paraphrase Watson, astounding. Absolutely astounding, Nick” Holmes said.

“Come on aboard and I will give you a tour. Phipps, this is Mr. Sherlock Holmes” Nick said.

“It is a pleasure to meet you Mr. Holme, one second. Hmmm, do you know a Dr. John Watson and a Sir Arthur Conan Doyle?” Phipps asked.

“Why yes I do. How did you know?” Holmes asked.

“Let me just say, it is those stories by Watson” Nick said “You will find out soon enough.”

They toured the ship. When they got to the power room, nick re-wound the inductor and tested it out. He put it back into the ring drive circuitry.

“You know Holmes, this ship can hold two people. You could come with me.” Nick said.

“Well, it is a tempting offer, Nick, but we both have our own place and time. Yours is to me the future, mine is to you the past. I think I will stay here on Arth with Watson.”

Holmes left the ship. Through the visiscreen, Nick could see him move some distance away from the ship.

“Let’s get out of here, Phipps”

The ship slowly began to ascend to the heavens. Holmes got smaller and smaller until he could no longer be seen. Nick’s last image of Sherlock Holmes was the great man, decked out in his overcoat and deerstalker hat smoking a wooden calabash pipe waving.

It took four hours until they were far enough away for the ring drive to be engaged.

“Well Phipps, do you think the drive will work and the coordinates are correct?” Nick asked.

“Both look good to me” Nick.

“Ok, let’s go”

Phipps engaged the hyperspace drive and they made the jump. When they came out of the jump, Phipps used his scanners to determine their location.

“Nick, we are coming into the Xonie solar system. There are a number of Empire vessels off in a distance. Actually, it’s quite a fleet.”

“Establish hyperwave communications with the command vessel.”

“Communications established Nick” Phipps replied.

The visicreen came on and Varten von Eckman was on the screen. Hi Nick, you are a little bit late. We are just mopping up this operation. I hope you have a good explanation.” He said a little impatiently.

“Oh I do” Nick replied “It all started as a practical joke by Dr. Swiftie Vann, and just got blown out of proportion to the point that I met Sherlock Holmes. I will tell you about it when I board. Bring me along side for boarding.”

Nick directed Phipps to bring the ship along side the much larger Empire Cruiser. The needle ship was pulled up inside the ship. As Nick left the ship, he said “Phipps, you were a pain in the rear to me this trip. You totally screwed up my assignment. However, you gave me the opportunity to work with Sherlock Holmes and Watson. For that I am grateful. I am also thankful that you got my skin back here. Once you are fully operational, and not experimental, I hope to get the chance to fly with you again.”

“It has been a pleasure Nick. I hope we meet again.”

Nick grabbed his kit bag and then left the needle ship and headed to the Cruiser’s main conference room.

-9-

Nick found the conference room to be quite full. Inside the room were the cruiser’s officers, Varten von Eckman, Emperor Leopaldo, Lu Jo, and Dr. Paschak. They welcomed Nick but all kidded him about being late for the operation. The aroma of pipe smoke pervaded the room as almost everyone was smoking.

“Better late than never” Lu Jo said kidding Nick “It’s good that the Empire Intelligence Service has at least one operative on which they can depend, and it isn’t you! You can always send a woman to do a man’s job, and be sure the job gets done!”

“Welcome back Nick” Leo said “Sherlock Holmes eh? This has to be a good story.”

“We are glad you got back to us. We thought you and the ship were lost.” Varten commented.

“Guess we need some further work on the robotic driven needle ship.” Dr. Paschak stammered.

Lu Jo said that when they had not heard from Nick, and they could not trace him, she had been sent in to Xonie undercover to infiltrate the pirates. Through various contacts the EIS had made, this was quickly accomplished. Once they had learned the location of the pirate stronghold, the fleet was brought in to recover the merchant ship, wipe out the pirate stronghold, and capture the ragtag fleet. This operation had just been completed. Captain Mondure had escaped capture.

Nick then told his story. When he got to the part about Phipps malfunction, Dr Paschak asked for a pause, got on his communicator, and gave instructions for some tests to be run on Phipps and the needle ship.

Nick then continued his story. As evidence, he produced several pipes; the small billiard that he had been given by Sir Arthur Doyle, the full bent that Sherlock Holmes had purchased for him at the Newgate Tobacconists Shop, and the two briar calabashes that Holmes had given him. He also told the group that the video/audio monitors that he had carried and the ship’s records could also be checked. They could also check the wonderful job he did in repairing the ring drive power controls.

“Emperor Leopaldo. Sherlock Holmes asked me to give you one of these pipes. He said that my pipe was in remembrance of our meeting, and yours was because he felt that you were one person he very much would want to meet.” Nick said.

“Well Nick, He is one person I hope to meet. I will treasure this pipe in my collection. Based on your jump coordinates, I hope to meet with him in the future. Your story is very interesting. Did you bring home any of the Summerville or Pembroke Blend?” Leo asked.

“Yes I do have some in my kit bag for us to try later.”

Dr. Paschak’s communicator went off. He answered. When the conversation was over he reported to the assembled group “I have some good news and some bad news. We have gone over Phipps programming. It seems that he had the Pierce Virus. It was introduced into his computer programming, I expect, by Dr. Swiftie Vann. I don’t know what you did to her, Nick, but you must have pissed her off. It was triggered by your presence, and mention of hawkbill pipes. For a short period of time, Phipps became Pierce, who had an innate dislike of hawkbill pipes. Pierce was to harass you unceasingly for a fixed amount of time. When the time limit expired, Pierce would disappear and Phipps would become himself again. However, when Phipps was Pierce, you had a scheduled jump. Pierce did not know what to do, so he performed a random jump, hence you ending up where you did. Phipps is now back to himself, and Pierce is gone forever. We have improved Phipps so that he actually adores hawkbill pipes. That is the good news.”

He continued “The bad news is that although your story is confirmed in the ship’s databank,

there is no record of the jump coordinates. This means there is no way for us to ever find Arth again. I am not sure, but I have a theory that I will explore. I believe your jump was not just a normal, everyday, jump in space and location, but may have included a component that was a jump in time.”

“Well, I guess there goes my chance of meeting Sherlock Holmes” Emperor Leopaldo said “I guess this pipe is now beyond value. Nick, look closely at those pipes. They are not neer-briar, or pseudo-briar, but are genuine Old Earth briar.”

“I am confused” Nick said “You are right. All these pipes are genuine briar. The philosophers and mathematicians are going to have to sort out this story.”

The meeting was adjourned.

As they were leaving, Lu Jo turned to Nick and showed him a book she was carrying. She had it opened to a story.

“Look at this Nick. The story is entitled “The Curious Case of the Amazing Light and the Bank Heist” by John H. Watson. In this story, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson are assisted by Sherlock’s cousin Nicholas. The book was written by Sir Arthur Doyle. I wonder if it is genuine or a knock off”

“I guess it is like reading a copy of ‘Secret Agent Girl’ and finding the main character’s name is Lu Jo” Nick commented.

She gently punched him in the ribs as they left the room.

-END-

## THE COUNTDOWN

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 12/2004, "THE COUNTDOWN", All Rights Reserved

-1-

Emperor Leopaldo was sitting in a chair inside his den on the Empire Cruiser Hypernia smoking his favorite Acatian wercarra wood pipe when he received the message. Varten von Eckman, Leo's weapons master and chief of security had brought it to him. It had been sent over clear channel on the E-net. The message was short and simple:

*You have five days.*

*Pipester*

"Five days" Leo said "I wonder what the message means? Is it a threat? Is something going to happen? The last message we received was five days ago, letting me know I had ten days left. What do you think, Varten?"

As smoke billowed from his Cooke pipe, Varten replied "I don't know. For the last five days, we have traced the E-message over the E-net and have had no results. All digital routing and identification codes have been stripped from the message. I have no idea where it comes from, let alone what it means. Does five days from now have any significance to you? Maybe it refers to something from your past?"

Leo thought long and hard. "Five days from now is November 25. I just can't think of anything related to it. I don't even know who this 'Pipester' person is. You performed a CompNet search and all you came up with was that a character named 'Pipester' existed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century on Old Earth. He was a pipe collector and wrote some pipe-related sci-fi. He was noted for his hawkbill collection, not just Castellos, but hawkbills from many different carvers. He was also listed on the ASP newsgroup and the #Pipes Chat Channel."

"Well Leo, until this all blows over, we are going to watch you like a hawk. You will be plenty safe here on the Hypernia. If it is from one our enemies, it will be very difficult for them to get at you in space. We are off the planet Isel in the Archtus system. The planet is earth-like. There is a small agriculture research colony near the equator. We were not able to contact them on Hyperwave communicator. The long range scanners did not indicate any problems. Everything was in order. Nick Reardon and Lu Jo have gone down on the surface for a first-hand look-see." Varten said.

“I hope they are very careful, I don’t want anything happening to them.” Leo said “I tend to worry about our young friends. How has the research on the new tobacco plant progressed?”

Varten tamped his pipe and relit it before replying “There are about fifty people at the research dome. It was reported that they had found some new strains of tobacco on the planet. I have heard that it is very close to Old Earth tobacco. All indications are that it is very good. They are trying to apply standard methods of growing and curing the tobacco. The scientists have even rediscovered some Old Earth books on tobacco cultivating, whose methods were being employed.”

“Ok Varten, I want you to pursue the matter on the messages, and find out who or what this ‘Pipester’ is and what he has to do with me. Let’s wait and see what Nick and Lu Jo come up with. We can then decide when we want to pay a visit to the research station.”

They continued to smoke their pipes as their discussion moved to other matters that occupy the top administrators of the Empire.

-2-

Nick and Lu Jo had taken the jumpship from the Hypernia to the planet surface. They had tried to use the ship communication system to contact the research dome, but had no success. They knew the coordinates of the dome so the jumpship headed towards it. The research dome was on the main continent, located at the 23<sup>rd</sup> latitude, north. They remarked on the beauty of the planet and the warm temperature, perfect climate for tobacco production.

From a distance of ten miles from the dome, they could see field upon field of cultivated tobacco radiating out from the dome. Next to the dome was a small landing field. They landed the jumpship. There were no communications at their approach. They had not seen anyone at their approach, and no one was coming out to meet them. They communicated with the Hypernia to monitor, but not to follow.

The quiet was deafening. They left the jumpship armed and headed down the communicating corridor towards the dome. Not a person was to be seen. They entered the sidewall of the dome. Inside the dome were a number of the administrative buildings plus the quarters for the inhabitants. All they saw was emptiness. They walked by a small eatery.

“Look” Lu Jo said to Nick, “It looks like the locals just got up and left. The food is still on the table”

”I just don’t get it” Nick said “It is almost as if something instantaneously happened and wiped out the colonists.”

Nick heard something off to his right. It turned out to be a small two-person cart, running in circles. He walked over, jumped on the cart and turned off the electrical ignition.

“Still warm. I wonder how long it has been running in circles. I wonder where the driver went? Come on, get in and let’s go for a ride outside the dome. Maybe we can find someone out in the fields.”

Lu Jo joined Nick on the cart as they headed off to one of the dome exits. They passed through the exit into the tobacco fields.

“See the tobacco plants” Nick said “They are quite a bit different from any other neer-tobacco plant found in the universe. They are rather squat, bush-like, low to the ground and more a yellow-brown color than green. When they mature, they only get to a height of five feet. The tobacco is harvested. There is a native tree on this planet. I believe it is called a hoakerry tree which they use to smoke cure the harvested tobacco. Last year, Leo had a sample of a blend containing this tobacco as a condiment. He said that the burning qualities and the taste gave it the potential to revolutionize tobacco blending. He compared it to a tobacco named perique, found on Old Earth. Perique was a condiment tobacco used in many Old Earth tobaccos which has been long lost. He thinks it has a very high potential. This is one of the reason he and Varten decided to stop at this system while they were in space.”

Nick drove the cart past rows upon rows of cultivated tobacco plants. They encountered no one. He headed towards the end of a field that abutted some low hills. Suddenly the cart stopped on its own accord. Nick turned to Lu Jo when things suddenly went dark and he remembered no more.

-3-

Late in the evening, Varten entered Leo’s den on the Hypernia. Leo was smoking his pipe. The tobacco smoke had a slightly pungent aroma. He could not identify it although he knew that it was not Leo’s usual blend.

“Do you have any word from our planetary scout team?” Leo asked Varten as he puffed on his von Erck pipe.

“There is nothing of any significance to report. The last communications said they had landed. There had been no communications between the jumpship and the planetary dome. They asked us to standoff. Nick and Lu Jo were going to disembark and investigate.”

Leo handed Varten a tin of loose ribbon cut tobacco. “Varten, I want you to take a look at this tobacco. Notice the dark shards of tobacco in the blend. Smell it for the tin aroma.”

Varten took the tin of tobacco, examined it closely, and inhaled the aroma.

“Quite nice. I detect something in the aroma, but cannot identify it. It reminds me of some Old Earth tobacco you gave me to try.”

“You are almost correct. The dark tobacco is cured tobacco from the planet below, Isel. It

reminds you of the perique tobacco found in some Old Earth blends. Perique was a smoke-cured tobacco that was made in the St. James parish in the state of Louisiana, in the Old Earth political subdivision of the United States. It was a condiment tobacco made only in that one small area. It adds a spiciness to the tobacco blend. People either love it or hate it. Personally, I love it. I think that if we can get the inside track on this Isel tobacco, we could make some good money for the treasury while doing something for the pipe and tobacco smokers.” Leo replied.

“Do you mind if I try some?” Varten asked.

“No, go quite ahead.”

Varten took out his old James Cooke pipe, filled it from the opened tin, tamped it, and lit it. Clouds of smoke enveloped him. “I like this blend.” He said “It has quite an interesting taste to it.”

“Yes it does “Leo replied “Take a look at the six pipes laying on the table over there. I want you to arrange them in order based on your appraisal on their collectibility. You may examine them closely, do what ever, but put them in order of most valuable to least valuable or most desirable to least desirable.”

“Ok, but won’t it be subjective? It would be from my perspective.”

“True, but let’s see how you do.” Leo replied.

Varten walked over to the table. He picked up each pipe. He took out his magnifier, examined the nomenclature on the pipe, looked at it, felt its weight, tried it in his mouth and started to arrange them in order.

When he finished, Leo looked at the order he put them in. “Why did you put them in that order?”

“The James Cooke pipe is first because, as you well know, I tend to favor his pipes. The Charatan and Dunhill, in my book, are second and third because I prefer the shape of the Charatan over the Dunhill. The Von Erck is fourth. I like his pipes, but his shapes are a bit radical for me. The Tinsk wercarra wood pipe is fifth because it is of less value because it is of this age. The Graybow pipe is last because, even though it is of Old Earth, it was for its time a low grade pipe.” Varten replied.

“Sound reasoning” Leo replied “I would probably make a small change, moving the Dunhill and Charatan to numbers one and two, but that is just my preference. The question before us is what makes a pipe collectable? In my way of thinking, not in any rank order, there are five factors:

1. Scarceness is the relative rareness of the pipe. A pipe that is hard to obtain, is of limited production, and for which many people are seeking adds to its collectibility.
2. Quality of the briar and/or other material is an important attribute. If the pipe is made of high quality briar it will rank higher in this category. There is good briar and bad briar.

A beautifully executed pipe with low quality briar may look bad and probably will smoke poorly.

3. Shape is the physical shape of the pipe. There are certain shapes that a pipe smoker/collector likes and others he does not.
4. Execution is how well the artist converts the design into reality in terms of the engineering artistic components.
5. Smokeability is important. The most beautiful and rarest of pipes, if it is not smokeable, is worthless. However, some of the best smoking pipes may be the ugliest, or of a shape not favored by the collector.

I have been fortunate in building my collection. Most of my pipes reflect all of these attributes. Those that don't, I trade away for something that pleases me. Of course, it is nice that cost is of no consideration."

"I see" Varten said "My collecting is much simpler. I purchase what I like, and I accept what you give me. Those are my two overriding principals. What do you think?"

"That is a simple philosophy to collect by." Leo said "You do like to keep things simple."

Varten just chuckled as they continued to smoke their pipes and discuss pipe collecting into the wee hours of the morning.

-4-

His head hurt. It was dark and he was woozy. He slowly awoke to the thumping in his head. He started making out blurry objects as his eyes focused. He smelled the oil of machinery in the air. His hands were bound behind his back.

"Easy. Take it easy!" Lu Jo said "The head will hurt less. They must have hit us with a paralysis beam. That's good; it means they did not want to kill us."

"Good?" He said with an effort as his eyes grew accustomed to the light "Yes, at least we are still alive. Where are we?"

"It looks like we are locked up in an old maintenance storage area in one of the administrative buildings." Lu Jo replied. "You will note that our pockets have been emptied; no pipe, no tobacco, no weapons, no communicators.

They heard footsteps in the hallway. Two guards entered the holding cell. They stood them up and left the holding cell. They went down the hallway and through some circuitous passages until they were outside a door marked "Chief Administrator". The guards pressed the intercom button and said something. The door was opened. The guards removed their wrist bindings and they were gently pushed into the office. The guards remained outside.

Inside the room, Nick and Lu Jo saw a man and a woman. They were dressed in conventional

clothing that gave nothing away of their background. Both were smoking two handsome pipes; the man a straight meerschaum bulldog, the woman a small canted billiard. The aroma of the pipe smoke was slightly pungent.

“Please sit down” the man said as he indicated two chairs in front of the desk. I am Winston Cornell and my associate is Mandi Diehl. Over on the table you will find the pipes you carried on your person. Let me get them for you.”

He walked over to the table and picked up the pipes. He handed them to Nick and Lu Jo as he returned behind the large desk. “I assume that the Larenzetti belongs to Mr. Reardon, and the small Dunhill belongs to Ms. Tolek. You may wish to see what this is all about. On the table between you is some of the local tobacco blended in with some standard “Empire’s Best” The ratio is about 5% of the locally grown and cured tobacco. There is also a pipe nail and matches for lighting your pipes.”

They packed their pipes while their hosts watched, tamped the tobacco, and lit their pipes. They could detect the aroma they noticed upon entering the room. They were both very familiar with “Empire’s Best” a very popular, and cheap neer-tobacco.

“If I did not know any better, I would think I was smoking one of the Emperor’s Old Earth tobaccos.” Nick said.

“I agree. This blend is excellent” Lu Jo added.

“I see you understand” Mandi Diehl said “The addition of this condiment tobacco has the potential to turn a mediocre tobacco into a top shelf blend. As you have probably surmised, your presence here has created a problem for us. You are too valuable to kill outright, especially with an Empire Cruiser in orbit.”

“I see that this does create a small problem. By the way, how did you know our names? We did not carry any identification.” Lu Jo asked.

“You will find out that we know quite a bit about you and the Emperor’s immediate staff. The Emperor and his immediate staff has been a focus of our attention for a long time. Why are you here on Isel? We did not expect your arrival.” Winston enquired.

“The Emperor has been receiving warning messages from someone named ‘Pipester’. Varten thought it would be best to get away from Castle Pesaro and into space. While we were in space, the Emperor decided to visit the agriculture experimental station here on Isel. That is all that I know.” Lu Jo responded “I would expect you to know quite a bit about us since, I believe, you are associated with House Chesterfield.”

“You are correct about the latter point” Winston replied “House Chesterfield has been interested in the work at this experimental station for a long time. We have had a number of informants placed on the administrative and technical staff. We are aware of the special properties the

locally grown tobacco has when combined with the curing method using the smoke from the hoakerry tree. My associate, Dr. Diehl, was one of our agents-in-place. We were in the process of a mopping up operation when your Empire Cruiser was detected. Our ship is slightly out of range of your cruiser's detection screens; however, we can still contact it with a coded ultrawave communications beam. As far as the messages that put you into space, I do not know anything about them."

"The inhabitants are pretty much all accounted for" Dr. Diehl replied, "We are holding them until we depart with the crop and seed for the tobacco and hoakerry tree. Only a couple of the colonists have escaped our net, and we expect to have them captured soon. Winston and I need to sit and discuss a win-win conclusion to this stalemate. At least the Empire Cruiser does not yet know we are here."

"Of course they will know something is amiss when we fail to report." Nick replied.

"That is true." Winston said "and that is why I want you to communicate with your ship and tell them that you are still searching for the colonists, but that everything is under control. I will assure you that we will try to get out of this incident with no one being hurt. Can you agree to that?"

"I guess I can." Nick said.

Winston gave Nick his communicator. Nick raised the communications officer on the Hypernia. He explained to him that he and Lu Jo were still searching for the colonists. Everything appeared to be copasetic and they would probably not get a chance to communicate with them until the next day. He ended the message.

"Thank you" Winston said as he reclaimed the communicator "Please leave your pipes here. You will be returning to a more comfortable room for the duration." He pressed a button and the guards entered the room. Nick and Lu Jo were escorted to what was once a guest apartment. The two rooms had unbreakable plexil-glas windows and one entrance closed off by a locked door.

"Fine mess you have gotten us into, Nick" Lu Jo exclaimed.

"Me, why is it always my fault" Nick asked the heavens, to which there was no reply.

-5-

Leo had been at lunch with Varten when the two messages were delivered. The first was the one from Nick regarding their investigation on the planet. Varten read the message to Leo.

"Copasetic" isn't that a keyword?" Leo asked.

“Yes it is.” Varten replied “Our EIS agents are all supplied with keywords to use for communications purposes. Simply it means that all is not right, but do not interfere at this point in time. Something is going on down on the planet, however Nick and Lu Jo are not in a position to let us know the exact story; however we are being advised not to interfere. Since the dome is one-way plexil-glas, we cannot see inside; however, we do know that some of the tobacco is being harvested. That, in and of itself, is not unusual since it is harvest time.”

“What about our other sensory detection screens?” Leo asked.

“There is not much with respect to emissions from the planet. However, our screen operators think, but cannot confirm, that there is a high degree of probability that a ring drive ship is staying out beyond the detection limits of our screens.”

“See if there is anything that can be done to expand the range of our detection screens. I want a constant visual and electromagnetic observation kept up on the dome below. Keep the cruiser’s crew on alert.” Leo said.

“Will do.” Varten replied “Don’t forget the second message”. He gave Leo the second message. It was a very simple one:

*You have four days.*

*Pipester*

“I guess it is untraceable” Leo said.

“Yes, it is just like the rest.. We have traced the E-message over the E-net and have had no results. All digital routing and identification codes have been stripped from the message.” Varten replied

“I wonder if it has anything to do with the goings on down on Isley? Come on Varten. There is not much we can do except to let the events play themselves out. Sit down and let’s enjoy this wonderful tobacco.”

Varten sat down, took out his pipe, filled it up with the local tobacco blend and lit it up. They continued discussing Empire affairs for the remainder of the evening.

-6-

Nick and Lu Jo spent a quiet evening. Most of the conversation was done in the EIS hand signaling language. They did not know if the rooms were bugged, but were not taking any chances. They did not come up with any means to get them out of their predicament. From what they could see, they were jailed quite securely.

Around 8:00 AM local time there was a rap at the door. A young man entered with a pipe in his

mouth and a large tray in his hands. “Breakfast” he said “Please be aware that there are guards outside when you are being fed.”

He put the tray down on the table and took off the cover. Two breakfasts came into view. “Please sit down and enjoy your meals. My name is Corneel Dirkmann. I guess I will be serving your meals.” He pointed to a pad of rice paper and a pencil. “I am one of the colonists here on Isel. I worked on the Administrator’s staff as a clerk.”

They sat down and started eating. Nick wrote on the pad ‘Is this room bugged?’ and showed it to Corneel. He nodded his head ‘yes’ and pointed to his mouth and ears. Nick then ate the rice paper.’

Nick then wrote another note “R U H C?”, then ate the paper.

Corneel shook his head ‘no’, then he took out a small packet out of his pocket. He opened it, took out a wipe and rubbed the bottom-side of his wrist. A small tattoo of Sherlock Holmes became visible. Nick and Lu Jo did the same with the same result. As the alcohol evaporated, the tattoos faded away. Nick felt better now knowing that there was an EIS agent in place.

“What is going on outside the dome?” Lu Jo asked.

“We have been given four days to harvest as much tobacco and hoakerry wood as we can.” He continued to write ‘There are guards set up at strategic locations. The people from House Chesterfield pretty much have control over the research station. There are only one or 2 people still at large.’

Lu Jo commented that the breakfast was excellent. Corneel replied that the administrator’s chef had personally made it.

Nick took the pad and wrote ‘Is there any way to get a message to the Empire Cruiser that is in orbit?’

Corneel shook his head no.

Nick and Lu Jo finished their breakfast and thanked Corneel for bringing it to them.

Nick said “Boy could I go for a pipe after breakfast”

Corneel replied “I will put in your request and see what I can do.”

Corneel packed up the dishes and left the room. He left the pad of rice paper and the pencil.

Lu Jo and Nick communicated using the rice paper. Neither of them had any great ideas, but by the time they were done, they both detested the taste of rice.

About an hour later, the door opened and the guards came and led Nick and Lu Jo back to the Administrator's office. Winston Cornell was in the office by himself puffing his meerschaum pipe.

"It has come to my attention that you have asked to get your pipes back. You will find them on the table with some of the local tobacco cut with the 'Empire Best' blend. I give you this as a token of my good will. Please sit down and light up your pipes. They took their pipes, began filling them up and sat down. Lu Jo and Nick both lit their pipes.

Winston continued "I have discussed our common plight with my associates. I want to try an idea on you and get your opinion. If we communicate with the Emperor and offer to exchange you two plus the people of the research station for the crop we came to get, and seeds for the tobacco and trees plus safe passage, would he agree?" Winston asked.

"Probably not" Nick replied "As you well know, we are all expendable. That goes without saying."

"That I know, but the population of the dome, our, err, hostages, are not expected to make such a sacrifice." He pointed out.

"I don't think we know what the Emperor will do in these conditions. He may let you go, or he may not. He has a lot of grievances with the House Chesterfield. This incident may be the one straw that breaks the camel's back. I don't think we can adequately advise you" Nick responded.

"I appreciate your honesty. We will have to continue our deliberations. I would appreciate you communicating with the cruiser and basically tell them that you are well, but that you have some leads, nothing concrete, and will get back to them tomorrow." Winston said as he gave Nick the communicator.

Nick contacted the cruiser and told them everything was copasetic. They had some leads and he would get back to them on the morrow. He returned the communicator.

They were marched back to the two-room apartment in which they were jailed. This time they had their pipes and tobacco, so passing the time would not be so difficult.

Meanwhile on the Hypernia, Nick's communication was relayed to Leo and Varten.

Same situation, eh, Varten?"

"Looks like it. All we see is tobacco being harvested. We have intermittently detected the mysterious ship staying beyond our screens. I think we are as blind to them as they are to us. By the way, the next message has been received. There was no change." Varten passed the message on to Leo:

*You have three days.*

*Pipester*

“Ok” Leo said “Keep monitoring the situation. Let me know if anything develops.

-7-

Corneel brought in their breakfast as usual. He was a little nervous and not very talkative. They ate in relative silence chit chatting about minor topics.

“Thanks for passing on our request for the tobacco and pipes.” Nick said “Our request was granted. It helped spend the time.

“I am glad I could help”. He motioned silence. He opened the door and looked outside. The guard was slumped against the door.

“Quick” he whispered “let’s get out of here.”

Since there was nothing to take, they quickly exited the room and headed down the corridor. Corneel directed them through a host of passage ways, up and down deserted stairs until finally they stopped to catch their breath.

“What happened?” Lu Jo asked.

“Cornell gave me some tobacco to pass on to you. Knowing that the tray would be inspected, I split the tobacco into two parts. The packet on the tray had a sleeping drug inserted. The other was plain tobacco. The HC people are not the most intelligent. As I expected, the guard impounded the tobacco meant for you, and you saw the result when he smoked it. I am going to get you to a safe place. Once they discover you missing, I expect all hell to break loose. Since I will be connected with the escape, there is no reason for me to stay around. My usefulness here has ended.” Corneel said.

They continued their trek through the passageways inside the dome. They finally came to a maintenance exit to the outside. Suddenly they heard the blaring of an alarm. The automatic doors began to close. They barely made it through the maintenance door until it closed. They were now on the outside of the dome.

“We will head through the field out to the foothills. There are some caves I have prepared for emergency purposes. I have plenty of food, and most importantly a communicator. We should be able to reach the cruiser and make appropriate plans. I think they will assume we are still in the dome. It will be a while until they start an outside search and by then we will be far away.” Corneel said.

They practically ran through the field of tobacco towards the foothills. Corneel led them into the

hilly area among the many passages. Finally they reached a nondescript cave. They went inside. Corneel went up to a boulder inside the entrance, reached around the back, and put his hand inside a hole. A passage way opened on the left side of the cave. “If you had bypassed the lock pad I just activated, you would now be swimming with the fish in an underground stream. The Emperor’s treasury funded me well here. Emperor Leopaldo really knew what he was getting on Isel, and that someday his investment would pay off. I will tell all when we get into the null-entropy room.” Corneel responded.

They entered the passage way of the left inside the cave. After they went through, Corneel activated another lock, and the door to the outside closed. He activated another lock and a door opened. They went inside. “Welcome to my home away from home” he said.

“Let’s take care of business first, then we can chat” Corneel said as he turned on all of the utilities “Nuclear fuel cell for power”. They walked into a small apartment like structure.

“Living room, communications room, two storage rooms, four bedrooms, entertainment center, and bathroom are all here. Not bad for an emergency EIS site.” He said.

“Of course the external antenna is camouflaged. Here is the communicator. I am sure you know your frequency and coding for the digital signaling. From the little I know, this communications system is non-detectable by the systems on the planet”

Nick contacted the Hypernia. Varten von Eckman got on directly with him. He explained the situation on Isel. They set their plans. Nothing today, everything would start the next day. Nick assured Varten that they were in good shape and doing well in Corneel’s care. He finally disconnected.

“Sit down and light up a pipe, I have a story to tell you. Here is some of my special tobacco. It is wexel-tobacco cut with the local tobacco. I am sure you will enjoy it.” Corneel told them.

He went on “About fifteen years ago, a lone navy scout ship found Isel during a sector survey. Samples of the flora and fauna were sent back to the laboratories. There was an avid pipe smoker that worked in the laboratory. He recognized the tobacco for what it was a new variety of the once genuine Old Earth tobacco. It was not a neer-tobacco, but the real thing. The word percolated secretly up the line until it reached the Emperor. Under his direction the research station was established to develop the tobacco and find a satisfactory means to cure it. Separate from the research effort, the EIS setup this safe site and planted agents into the research staff. The station became fully operational about ten years ago. Within the last two years, the effort was beginning to show signs of fruition. I have been here three years, working in the administrator’s office. We were unaware of the infiltration by the HC agents. Everything was going well until we were invaded four days ago. When you and the Empire ship showed up we thought we were rescued. Little did we know that the two events were unconnected.”

“An interesting story” Nick said as he smoked his pipe “Quite a cozy place the EIS budget has set you up with.”

“Yes, quite cozy” Lu Jo replied “By the way, do the bedrooms have ‘Do Not Disturb’ signs on the door?”

Corneel just chuckled “I don’t think so, but I can always make you one.”

They all chuckled as they smoked their pipes and reflected on the morrow’s activities.

-8-

Meanwhile on the Hypernia, Leo, Varten, and Colonel Davis were discussing the day’s events over pipes. They were smoking some of Leo’s Old Earth Balkan Saobrannie tobacco; Leo in his Von Erck pipe, Varten in his Cooke, and Davis in a Castello #84 natural vergin. Colonel Davis was to lead the assault by the marines. Leo was bemoaning the fact that he did not have much of the Old Earth Balkan Sobrannie left in his tobacco collection.

“Good, they escaped and are with our agent, Corneel Dirkman. I knew that someday the plans we made for Isel would pay off. Having an EIS agent in deep cover and a null-entropy facility was a stroke of genius. It is good that we don’t tell our agents everything, else they would not use their own faculties to the fullest.” Leo said.

Colonel Davis added “We have three of our best agents on the planet. Tomorrow we will launch a two prong attack. The cruiser’s marines will land in cover of night from the back side of the planet. They will enter the dome with the assistance of Corneel, Nick, and Lu Jo. Once inside the dome, the assault team will secure it with as little loss of life and property as possible. Surprise is the key element. Sparks was able to extend the range of our long-range detection screen. We now have a pretty good bearing on the HC ship. The Hypernia has the latest version of the ring drive. We do not need to be so far from the planet when we jump. The HC people are not aware of this new feature of the ring drive. After the marines depart, we will make a quick jump in the approximate position of the HC ship and get off a disabling shot. With the HC ship disabled, we can come back, clean up, and deal with the HC ship later at our leisure.”

“That sounds short, sweet, and simple. Just the way Varten likes it” Leo responded.

The communications officer brought a message to Varten who gave it to Leo. “Well, we received another message from the mysterious ‘Pipester’.” Varten said to Leo. There is no change to the form of the message:

*You have two days.*

*Pipester*

The operation commenced at 0330 Local Time. The marines disembarked and headed towards the reverse side of Isel. Shortly thereafter, the Hypernia made a short jump, and used a powerful lazergun to disabled the ring drive of the HC ship. With the mission accomplished, the Hypernia immediately returned into its orbit around Isel.

The marines had come in hard and fast. They met up with the three EIS operatives. Corneel gave them the codes to open three of the dome doors. They entered simultaneously from three directions. The dome was quickly secured without any loss of life. Approximately twenty HC people were now being held prisoner.

-9-

At noon, Leo and his entourage landed on Isel. They met in the administrator's conference room. In attendance were Emperor Leopaldo, Varten, Nick, Lu Jo, Corneel, Colonel Davis, and the former administrator Dr. Stromati. They were all smoking pipes containing various blends cut with the local cured Isel tobacco.

"Colonel Davis, I wish to congratulate you on the execution of this morning's action. The timing was perfect." Emperor Leopaldo said.

"Thank you sir. Your EIS agents were of immense help."

"Yes they were at that." Leo said "Fine job, Nick, Lu Jo, Corneel. But then again, I always expect superior effort from my EIS agents. Bring in the House Chesterfield ring leaders."

Under guard, Winston Cornell and Mandi Diehl were led into the room. They were quite demoralized seeing that their efforts had come to naught.

"I am not sure just what to do with you and to House Chesterfield." Emperor Leopaldo said "A mind probe would just turn you two into vegetables. According to Dr. Stromati, Dr Diehl developed the hoakerry tree curing process for the Isel tobacco. He believes that it is a shame to waste such a mind, even though she was a spy in their midst. As far as Winston Cornell is concerned, I think a penal colony would be very appropriate."

Nick got up to speak "I think it should be noted that there was no loss of life in this entire operation. These two also treated us well when they could have just done away with us. If I may suggest, the people at the research station are here on three-to-five year tours of duty. I think that Ms. Diehl should be sentenced to twenty-five years of straight time on Isel with a lessening of the penalty depending on her behavior and degree of rehabilitation. Winston Cornell is another story. I think that he has been long in House Chesterfield's service and he should be dealt with more severe fashion."

Emperor Leopaldo spoke "I have given quite a bit of thought on the topic of House Chesterfield. Although I cannot do anything overtly, there are a number of covert things I can and will do. First, Mr. Cornell seems to be an able person. He will be returned to Castle Pesaro where he will

be under Varten's eye. He will work in the Empire Affarirs office, specifically advising us on HC matters. If he screws up, it will be a penal colony for him. With respect to House Chesterfield, first, they will not get any of the Isel tobacco for the next ten years. Second, we will do nothing. Not one word of this operation will get back to them, except as roumor. We have their ship and people. The people will be resettled in a pleasant solar system."

"They will wonder what happened to their plans for quite some time." Varten said as he ended the meeting "Nick, Lu Jo, Corneel, please remain."

The others left the room as the communications officer entered with a message. He gave it to Varten who passed it on to Leo:

***You have one day.***

***Pipester***

"We still do not know what this message is all about. Anyway, I want to personally thank you for a job-well-done. You all performed admirably. I have something I want to give you" Leo said.

He opened his briefcase and took out three boxes. Inside each box was one Mark Tinsk full bent pipes made of wercarra-wood.

They each thanked Leo. "Corneel, I want you to know that your assignment here on Isel is done since your cover is now blown. Take a month of paid leave and then get back to Varten who will have a new assignment for you, if you so desire."

"I will sir, and thanks." Corneel said

"Thank you Corneel", Emperor Leopaldo said.

Subsequently, Emperor Leopaldo toured the Isel facility with Dr. Stromati and returned to the Hypernia.

-10-

Leo, Varten, Nick, and Lu Jo were at breakfast when the message was received. The communications officer brought it in, and gave it to Varten who promptly broke out in laughter. He passed the message around. It read:

***You have no days left!***

***Today is the DAY!***

***Now! Open on Vibre III, your total source for Pipes and Tobacco!***

***Pipester's Tobacco Shop***  
***(We only sell and deal with the Creme de la Creme of Collectors)***

“How dumb can we be?” Leo exclaimed “It was only an advertisement campaign.” I wonder how he stripped out the E-message tracking features? Varten, let's head to Vibre III. I want to check out this store, and you have an assignment to check out his communications systems.”

They all laughed, and smoked their pipes as the Hypernia left the orbit of Isel and headed to Vibre III.

-END-

## REPRODUCTION

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright ©12/2004, "REPRODUCTION", All Rights Reserved

-1-

The rumors were there. They had always been there, floating around the community of pipe collectors. They were quietly passed around, slightly above the babble and background noise at the pipe shows. Nothing solid, the rumors just made their way around. He first heard it lightly mentioned at the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show. It was nothing definite, just an allegation 'reproduction pipes were turning up at pipe shows and being passed as genuine Old Earth antique pipes'.

He was sitting in his office in the capital city of Rayleigh, on the planet Augary. As chief editor and publisher of the Empire Pipe Collectors' Magazine, Chuck Stinyon's office was quite opulent, vying with some of the largest heads of the business world. He was a force to be reckoned with in the pipe collecting circle of people. Chuck Stinyon was smoking a genuine Old Earth black blasted, slightly curved S. Bang pipe. He knew that the pipe was from the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century on Old Earth, handmade in the political subdivision called Denmark. He enjoyed his collection of Old Earth Danish pipes. However, the one sitting on the table was a puzzle. It was purported to be a Danish Old Earth pipe carved by Gunnar Rasmussen. It was also a bent blast in his famous Gollum shape. In its time, it probably could fetch a price in thousands of Old Earth dollars. Unfortunately, in his opinion, it was a fake.

Rasmussen had been a famous Danish pipe carver between 2003 - 2010 F.A. His pipes were superb and were highly sought after by many famous pipe collectors of that time period. The problem was that his production was very low. Although one of the best carvers on Old Earth, he was a man of many and varied interests. He only made pipes when he needed the money. During the seven years that he made and sold pipes, his total production was less than one hundred pipes. He stopped producing pipes in 2010 F.A. when the Anti-smoking factions took over control of the Old Earth governments which lasted until 2050 F.A. During that time period, if you made, sold, or used smoking materials you were considered a criminal and could be arrested and prosecuted.

The alleged Rasmussen Gollum pipe had been sent to him via courier from Donald Trimp, one of the richest men in the Empire and a noted pipe collector. He had purchased it through intermediaries from Robert von Metz. He had thought it to be genuine, as had a number of other collectors of Old Earth pipes, but the rumors had started. Mr. Trimp had requested Chuck to investigate the rumors, determine if the pipe was genuine, and if it was not, find out who is behind the scheme to defraud noted pipe collectors.

Chuck took out his high powered magnifying glass and began to examine the pipe. The briar was a perfect straight grain. The shape and carving of the lines and the stem work was perfect. He examined the nomenclature stamped on the pipe:

*G. Rasmussen  
Danmark, Handmade  
006, Silver*

According to his research, the nomenclature was correct. It indicated a Gunnar Rasmussen pipe, handmade in Denmark, 2006 F.A., and was of the 'silver' grade. Rasmussen had three grades; bronze, silver, and gold. According to the historical records, there were only 5 'gold' grade pipes ever made. Having seen a 'silver' grade pipe, he could only imagine what a 'gold' grade must be like.

The pipe was obviously true briar. All the supply of true briar ended when Earth was destroyed. Although there were many substitute materials that were close to it, true old earth briar could always be identified by the knowledgeable collector. There was not a flaw to be seen on the pipe. The draught hole was perfectly drilled. It met the bottom of the bowl at the proper angle.

Donald Trimp had told him that he could smoke the pipe. The pipe had been smoked by previous owners and had seen good care. He had previously smoked the pipe and found it to be an excellent smoke, just what he would have expected in a Rasmussen pipe.

In the end, he concluded that his gut feeling was that the pipe was not genuine. He could not say exactly why he felt that way. The rational part of his brain told him that it was genuine; however, he had learned a long time ago to trust his gut feelings. How could he get confirmation of his gut feelings?

He sat smoking the S.Bang pipe for a while until he hit on an idea. Emperor Leopaldo, 'Leo' to his friends when not in a formal setting, owed him a favor for the special coverage he provided on the first Castle Pesaro Pipe Show. He had devoted an entire issue of Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine to the show with a feature interview with Ike McCain, the man who had been brought back to life from a state of suspended animation. He would contact the Emperor and seek his assistance.

He wrote down a message and buzzed his secretary. "Have this message sent to Emperor Leopaldo at Castle Pesaro on the planet Hayden" he instructed her "and find out what passage is available to transport me to Castle Pesaro in the quickest manner."

After she left, he started thinking about his impending meeting. He felt better knowing he would be getting assistance from one of the most knowledgeable pipe collectors and most powerful men in the Empire.

He had boarded the ring drive spaceliner Cacophony a day earlier. The first jump towards the planet Hayden was uneventful. While eating dinner, he had thought he recognized one of his fellow passengers. He confirmed it later in the evening while he was having a pipe and a nightcap in the smoking lounge. The passenger was George Herment, a pipe smoker and minor writer. Chuck recalled that he had printed one or two of his articles in the Empire Pipe Collectors' Magazine.

The second day out he had spent in his cabin working on the layout and selection of articles for the next month's magazine. He had had a pretty enjoyable dinner and was sitting in the lounge smoking one of his traveling pipes, a Sam Learned full bent with a horn insert. He was enjoying his wexel-virginia neer-tobacco when he saw George enter the lounge. He walked up to Chuck's table and asked if he could join him. Although he would have preferred to be alone, he relented and invited him to join in a pipe.

George took out a rather plain Dunhill blasted bulldog, filled it and lit the pipe. They were discussing various pipe-related issues when George enquired if Chuck had heard anything about reproduction pipes filtering into the supply of Old Earth pipes.

"What do you mean, George?" Chuck asked.

"I have been hearing that a couple of pipe collectors have been taken with respect to the purchase, what they thought were true Old Earth pipes, but turned out to be fakes--- reproductions." George replied. "They have not come forward out of fearing the embarrassment that they would suffer."

"I have only heard rumors, and very faint ones at that." Chuck answered. "I have not heard or seen anything concrete."

"Well, why not? It is entirely possible to make reproductions of Old Earth pipes with today's technology. There are synthetic materials that are as good as Old Earth briar. Only an expert could tell the difference! The exacting electro-mechanical copying and duplicating equipment that we have can reproduce almost any shape from an original pipe or a pattern. The business of paints, varnishes, and coatings are so advanced that it would not surprise me, that any Old Earth finish could be reproduced including its aging attributes. I don't think that it would be hard to make a reproduction of an Old Earth pipe." George said.

"You may be correct, but I have not heard of nor seen any reproductions." Chuck responded. "I could be facetious and ask 'Why should one care if the pipe is genuine or a reproduction if it is a great smoker?' You would know the answer, besides the monetary value reason,"

"Yes, it has to do with the collectibility of the pipe, the prestige and other intangible benefits of owning a truly rare Old Earth pipe, and there is the idea that one was not being taken in a purchase or trade." George said.

“Those are all important factors. As you mentioned, it may be easy to produce reproductions, and it may be very difficult to detect them. However, most pipe collectors are honest and honorable people. If anyone was found fostering off reproductions, if such a scheme was discovered, they would quickly be railroaded out of the pipe collecting fraternity. I doubt if they would be able to do any business in the future. So you can see the returns would not be worth the risk.” Chuck elucidated.

“I would agree with all you said except for one point. When we are talking the large sums that Old Earth pipes command, it is worth the risk. One or two scores can make the perpetrator rich.” George responded.

“Perhaps you are right” Chuck replied “Regardless, I do not think it is happening, and if it is, it has not been discovered or made public.”

They had finished their pipes and drinks. George bid Chuck goodnight, Chuck was quite disturbed by the conversation with George Herment. Was George trying to tell him something? Was their chance encounter not purely by chance? Is he being followed? The Cacophony would land in the morning at Hayden’s spaceport. He had been offered rooms at Castle Pesaro and would be picked up at the spaceport. He would have to remember to recount this conversation with the Emperor when they met.

He picked up his pipe. Placed a rather generous tip on the table, and left the smoking lounge for his cabin. Unbeknown to him, a pair of eyes observed his departure from the smoking lounge.

-3-

The Cacophony had landed early in the morning on Hayden. Chuck had made it through customs without any problems. A young man about his age had flagged him down as he exited the door.

“Chuck Stinyon I believe? I am Nick Reardon.” He said “We met during your stay after the Castle Pesaro pipe show.”

“Yes, I remember Nick. You are on Leo’s staff.” Chuck replied.

“Yes I am, and also one of his good friends. Leo asked me to bring you back to the Castle. He is quite interested in the problem you have presented to him, as are we all. Most of his inner staff are pipe smokers or collectors. We have already begun making some discreet inquiries.”

They left the spaceport administration building. Nick directed him to an aircar that was parked in the garage. They were soon airborne heading towards the castle. “It will take about a half an hour to reach the castle. I like your magazine and am one of the original subscribers. I thought the issue dealing with the pipe show and Ike McCain was quite good. I also enjoyed the little article you did on how Leo achieves the ‘perfect’ smoke.” Nick said.

“You are too kind. Our surveys indicated that the Pipe Show issue was one of the most highly purchased and read issues we have ever produced. There is a lot of interest in the Emperor’s pipe collecting and his collection. From the tour he gave me I have to say that it is truly one of the best I have ever seen. He is a very discriminating collector and is very knowledgeable about the whole topic of pipe smoking and collecting. I look forward to meeting with him again. I am also relieved that he is going to look into this little matter. What is your take on it, Nick?”

“I don’t know that much. We have done an E-net computer search and have gone back through all the historical records regarding Gunnar Rasmussen. The biographical information you sent us is totally accurate, but I will let him relate our findings to you.”

The aircar was flying up the valley below Castle Pesaro. The castle sat on the high wall at the end of the long tree-covered valley. He piloted the aircar around the castle, while contacting the castle for landing privileges. They landed and parked the vehicle in the castle aircar garage. Nick informed Chuck that his luggage would be taken to his suite of rooms in the castle and that they would go straight to meet with the Emperor and his staff. He told Chuck to take any pipes or other material he would need for their meeting.

Nick took Chuck to the security office where Varten von Eckman was waiting. Chuck was put through the normal security verification procedures, ID check, retina and vocal scan with comparisons to the records on file.

“Although we know you, there are certain precautions we must take. It’s those damn shape changers, you know.”

“No problem Varten. I fully understand. You can’t be too careful.”

“Ok, you are cleared. Here are your castle credentials. This card will admit you those areas and rooms in the castle for which you are cleared. If any additional clearances are needed, you will have to contact me.” Varten replied.

“That is fine. I doubt that I will be going anywhere without someone from your staff.”

The three of them left the security office and headed to the Emperor’s private meeting room. After a five minute walk, they finally arrived before an impressive set of doors. Varten nodded to the guard who knocked on the door and they were admitted. They walked into a large comfortable room with a number of plush leather-like covered chairs formed into a circle. A small group of people were already sitting down smoking pipes. Chuck recognized Emperor Leopaldo but not the two ladies. Leo rose with the ladies.

“Chuck, it is so nice to see you again. That was a fine issue of your magazine dealing with the Castle Pesaro pipe show.” Leo said as he shook hands. I would like to introduce my friends Helen Chamberlain and Lu Jo to you.”

He shook their hands. “It is great to see ladies smoking pipes. I believe I may have met you Lu

Jo during my last visit. Ms. Chamberlain, it is a pleasure to meet you.” he said.

“Yes, we did meet briefly during your last visit as I recall.” Lu Jo said.

“I am pleased to meet such a distinguished editor and publisher” Helen Chamberlain said.

“Quite an interesting problem you have brought to us, Chuck.” Leo said. “Please, sit down; there is some fine tobacco in the jar. Please take some. It contains a blend of wexel-virginia cut with a new condiment tobacco from the planet Isel. The Isel tobacco is still under development, but I have high hopes that it will soon be a blending tobacco that will be available throughout the Empire. There are also some liquid refreshments on the table. Please take your choice, but I do recommend the bourbon.”

They all sat down, filled the pipes that were empty and selected their drink of choice. The pipes were lit.

Leo began “We have conducted a thorough search of the historical records. The information you provided was quite correct regarding Gunnar Rasmussen and his pipes. The historical records indicate that he only made two of the ‘Gollum’ shape. One is known to be owned by Jason Jones on Riegel IV, and the other by Donald Trimp. The Trimp pipe is the one that you have with you. Will you show it to us?”

Chuck opened his brief case and took out a box. He opened the box and passed it to Leo.

“Ah, this is a very nice pipe.” Leo said. He took it out of the box and spent a few minutes closely examining it. He took a red tag out of his pocket and attached it to the pipe before returning it back to the box. He then passed it around for the others to see.

“You may wonder why I attached the red tag to the pipe. That will become clear in a minute. As we both know, the records indicate that there were only two Gollum pipes made. They also indicate that they were quite expensive when they were made. I would expect that they would now sell for a quite significant sum of money.” Leo said. “Now, let me show you something”

He got up from his chair and walked over to a desk in the corner of the room. He opened a locked door using a security code and took out a small dilapidated box. Out of the box he removed a second box and walked back to the group.

“Chuck, I want you to open this box and tell what you find”

Chuck slowly opened the box and was speechless for a second. “What did you do? Have Jason Jones’ pipe sent here? It appears to be another Rasmussen Gollum pipe!”

Leo replied “No, Jason Jones still has his pipe, or at least he did when we contacted him yesterday. No, this Rasmussen Gollum pipe is from my collection. I have had it for the past two years. Now you can see why your little problem is of such high interest to me. Either the

historical records are wrong, or one of us has a fake pipe – a reproduction!”

Leo took the pipe from Chuck and put a green tag attached to his Rasmussen pipe and passed it around for all to see. The pipes appeared to be identical. The grain and stem work were superb.

They all agreed that the pipes appeared to be identical. “But how do we determine if they are the real thing? How do we determine that they are real Old Earth pipes carved by Gunnar Rasmussen?” Leo asked. “I guess there are a number of things we can do.

1. We can check the historical records for nomenclature and compare the pipe to the record.
2. We can see if there are any pictures in the historical record for comparison.
3. We can compare this pipe to other work that the carver performed, but in this case there are so few Rasmussen pipes that it would be difficult.
4. We can determine if the briar is true, Old Earth briar and not a synthetic through DNA testing, the downside is that a piece of the pipe would be needed, thus a portion of the pipe would be destroyed.
5. We can use non-invasive techniques such as Chronospectrometry to date the pipe, and Optical Spectrophotometric methods to check the finishing on the pipe.

The only problem with all of these methods is that a pipe could be re-carved from a lesser Old Earth briar pipe, duplicated into the newer pipe made by a more prominent carver.

However, we must learn what we can learn. Chuck, you, Nick and I have an appointment tomorrow with Dr. Maxim England, Director of Antiquities, Empire College. We will take both pipes and he will tell us what he can about these pipes.

They continued their discussions on pipes. In the evening, they all met for a dinner Leo held in Chuck’s honor. Following dinner, they adjourned for pipes and drinks. By the time Chuck made it to bed, he was one very tired puppy.

-4-

Morning came fast. A beautiful morning broke over Castle Pesaro. Of course, with climate control, every morning was beautiful. Leo, Chuck and Nick had an early breakfast after which they took an aircar to Empire College. Leo’s security team accompanied them on the visit in a separate car.

Dr. England met them in his office. He looked like the typical lab rat; thick glasses, smoking a full bent calabash, and wearing an immaculate white lab coat. “I am quite happy to have you here. The Department of Antiquities has quite an interest in pipe lore, especially since Emperor Leopaldo endows two fellowship chairs in our department through the college. He also support’s the research of Ike McCain who spends part of the year at PittPenn University and the remainder of the year here at Empire College. We have helped the Emperor a number of times in the past when questions regarding a pipe’s authenticity has been questioned.

We have also checked the historical records concerning Gunnar Rasmussen using Elsie, our Departmental E-Net Computer System. We have found, in the case of this carver, that he sometimes carved more pipes in a given shape or finish than he recorded. He did this to avoid tax payments. If he said he made two shape xyz pipes and sold them, but really made three, he avoided tax on 1/3 of his income. This was not a practice just for him, but was rather well known and followed by other pipe makers in that time period.

All of the historical information indicates that both of your Gunnar Rasmussen Gollum pipes are genuine. However, there are some tests we can perform without harming the pipes. Chronospectrometric techniques are used to date the pipe to the approximate time period when the pipe was made. Optical spectrophotometric techniques are used to date the finish and the aging of the pipes. If you will give me the pipes, we can start the testing.” Dr England said.

Leo gave him both pipes and indicated the two colored tags. He did not tell him which pipe belonged to which individual.

“If you will go to the waiting room, we can begin the tests” Dr. England said “You can observe through the window. You may smoke, if you wish in the lounge. The testing will take about two hours.”

They went into the lounge adjacent to the testing laboratory. They could observe the different pieces of laboratory equipment, looking very complex and sophisticated.

“We might as well enjoy ourselves.” Leo said. He took out a Mickles blasted prince pipe. Chuck took out a small stanwell pipe. Nick took out his favorite Larenzetti pipe. Leo passed around a large tobacco pouch filled with McClelland #5100 red cake tobacco from Old Earth. They filled their pipes from the pouch and lit them. The smoke started rising from the pipes to the ceiling. “At least I don’t have to test this Old Earth tobacco to know it is genuine. My educated pallet tells me that it is good and genuine. You see, I am as good as all of this scientific equipment!” He said as he chuckled.

They all chuckled, and smoked their pipes while waiting for the tests to finish.

Almost two hours from when he left them, Dr. England returned. “I have some good news and some not-so-good news” he told them. “The good news is that the Chronospectrometry testing established that the pipes are of genuine briar dated to the time of Old Earth. The not-so-good news is that the Optical Spectrophotometric techniques seem to indicate that the green-tagged pipe is proper for Old Earth made pipes. However, the results for the red-tagged pipe are inconclusive. That does not mean that it is not Old Earth, or that it is fake, it just means that the test cannot firmly establish it being genuine with a high degree of certainty.” Dr England reported.

“So if I understand you correctly, Dr England, you are suggesting that the green-tagged pipe is firmly established as an Old Earth pipe, and that the red-tagged pipe may be from the same period and carved by the same carver, but you can not be as certain.” Leo reiterated.

“You would make a good scientist, my Emperor.” Dr England said “That is exactly what I mean.”

“Thank you very much” Leo said “I think we need to go back to Castle Pesaro for further discussions.”

They all thanked Dr. England and left the college campus, returning back to Castle Pesaro via aircar.

-5-

They all assembled in the castle conference room. The group consisted of Leo, Varten, Nick, Lu Jo, Chuck, and Helen Chamberlain. They were all sitting in comfortable chairs smoking their pipes. An aroma of gentile virginias filled the room. Leo told the rest of the group that the laboratory tests were quite conclusive that his Rasmussen was genuine, but they could not confirm that Donald Trimp’s Rasmussen was genuine. He then asked Chuck to relate the story of how Donald purchased the pipe.

Chuck began “Donald Trimp had been contacted through intermediaries purportedly from the noted pipe collector Robert von Metz, head of the rubber conglomerate. Due to fierce competition from synthetics, natural rubber has been a declining commodity the past five years. Robert’s fortune has also experienced a tremendous loss the past five years. It was general knowledge in financial circles that he had been selling off his holdings to obtain cash to pay off debts. It was also well known in the pipe collecting community that he was selling off some of his valuable pipes. Although not cheap, the purchase price for the Rasmussen was fair, set at 20,000 solaris.

The pipe was delivered to Donald Trump by courier. Payment was made 50% at time of delivery, and the remaining 50% within one week. Two weeks after the final payment was made, Robert von Metz committed suicide.”

Varten said “It will be very difficult to ascertain if the pipe really belonged to Robert von Metz. Too much time has passed. As a suicide, I am sure that an investigation was conducted.”

“I want you to send a message to the local authorities on New Berlin asking them to re-open the investigation regarding Robert von Metz’s suicide.” Leo instructed Varten.

“Now that I think of it, I probably should tell you about an event that took place during my trip to Castle Pesaro.” Chuck tells the group about his run in with George Herment on the starship and his unusual enquiry and discussion regarding reproduction pipes.

“I wondered when you would bring that up” Varten said “We had you under observation during your trip, and we were quite aware of Mr. Herment’s ‘chance’ encounter with you. You may find it interesting that he immediately returned to Augary on the next available ship. I think that the

whole purpose of his trip was to meet with you. I am not sure why?"

"I am not sure that I like the idea of being followed, by Hermet or your people, but it is too late now to do anything about it." Chuck said.

"Let's get back to the topic at hand." Leo advises "I think that Lu Jo should head off and investigate Robert von Metz alleged suicide. He resided on the planet Vulcania II. Nick, I want you to make a quick trip to Augary and check out George Herment. This should take the two of you less than a week. We will reconvene here a week from now. Chuck, I would like you to remain here at the castle as my guest. We can work on a few articles and you can take care of some of your business via the castle communications office. I want to tell you about my plans for this new Isel blending tobacco."

"That sounds like a good plan of action" Chuck replies "I think I can use a little working vacation away from the office. Your resources here give me a couple of ideas for the magazine. I think it would be a good idea to interview Dr. England and prepare an article on verifying the identification of Old Earth pipes."

"Fine" Leo says "We will meet back here in a week. Varten will also look into a couple of areas I want to explore. I am starting to see a way to resolve our uncertainty, but more on that later."

Varten left to make transportation arrangements for Nick and Lu Jo. Nick and Lu Jo left to plan their trips. Chuck, Helen, and Leo stayed behind to make plans for Helen to show Chuck the scenic wonders of planet Hayden.

-6-

It took Lu Jo two days to travel via needle ship to Vulcania II. She was ushered into the office of Thomas Wurst Sr. of Wurst, Wurst, and Schimmel, LLP, the attorneys that were handling the estate of Robert von Metz. Robert had died interstate that is without a will. A number of his relatives were squabbling over the remainder of the once large estate. With the losses he had encountered, the remaining value was only in the neighborhood of 50,000 solaris.

"Welcome to our small planet" Thomas Wurst said to Lu Jo "I see that you are here on behalf of Criminal Investigative Division of the Empire Police. Mr. Sexton of the planetary police department asked me to meet with you."

"Thank you for the fine welcome. I met with Mr. Sexton earlier this morning. He informed me about his investigation into the unfortunate death of Mr. von Metz. He is going to re-open his investigation. There are a few fine points that Castle Pesaro would like cleared up before the book is closed." She said.

"If there is anything I can do to help you, please do not hesitate to ask. Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked.

“Only if I can join you” She replied.

“Please do. I have a nice blend of a pseudo-tobacco here in the tobacco jar” he indicates as he begins to fill his pipe.

“Thank you “she begins to fill her Old Earth Ser Jacopo hawkbill pipe and lights it. “That is a very nice pipe you have. It reminds me of an Old Earth Dunhill shell briar.”

“I wish it were a genuine Old Earth Dunhill shell briar. Unfortunately, it is only a reproduction. If you examine it closely, it would not fool you for very long. However, it smokes very well and I enjoy it. I could never afford a true Old Earth Dunhill pipe, however, in my line of work it is important to keep up appearances, if you know what I mean.”

“I quite understand. In my opinion, the important factor is how a pipe smokes. Speaking of pipes, have you found any record of Robert von Metz ever owing a Gunnar Rasmussen Gollum pipe? Rasmussen, as you may or may not know was a Danish pipe carver from Old Earth. I have a hologram for you to examine.”

She gives him the hologram showing a three-dimensioned image of the pipe suspended in air.

“No, there is no record of this pipe” He replied.

“Do you know if Robert’s accounts indicate any deposits in the amount of 20,000 solaris? It would have probably been in two deposits within weeks of his death?”

He walks over to his E-computer visiscreen display and keys in some information. “No, the bank records do not indicate any such deposit. I do have to admit that I find your questions quite unusual.” Thomas replied.

“Why is that?” Lu Jo asked.

“Because, if you examine the detailed records of Robert’s pipe collection, one thing stands out; Robert von Metz only collected English-type pipes, all of standard shapes. He did not have a single Danish pipe nor a non-standard shape in his collection of Old Earth pipes!”

“That is most interesting” Lu Jo replied “You are sure?”

“Beside the documentation of his collection, and I have holos of every pipe he ever owned, he was a good friend of mine. We often enjoyed pipe smokes together and traded a couple of pipes over the years. I have never seen him smoke anything else.” Thomas replied.

“I have one last question. Do you know if a gentleman named George Herment was an acquaintance of Robert’s” she asked.

“I have never heard that name, but then again, I cannot say if Robert knew the man.” He replied.

By now Lu Jo's pipe had gone out. She carefully scraped out the bowl into the ash tray. She asked Mr. Wurst to send a duplicate set of the holos of Robert von Metz' pipe collection to Castle Pesaro. She thanked him for his assistance and left the offices of Wurst, Wurst, and Schimmel, LLP,

She returned to the small military base at the spaceport where she sent a report back to Varten at Castle Pesaro. She added a note about the attorney smoking a reproduction Dunhill shell briar pipe. She found lodgings for the night before returning to Hayden the next morning.

-7-

Nick Reardon had boarded his needle ship and piloted it at top speed to Augary. He had been there a number of years before. Varten had sent messages ahead to clear his arrival at the spaceport. He was met by Dennis Gardinia, one of the resident EIS operative. Following a fine dinner at a local restaurant, they visited one of the local pipe lounges. They sat at a corner table enjoying cognac and their pipes.

"As you are well aware, Nick, George Herment is a small time writer and author. He writes on a wide variety of topics. A couple of his articles on pipes have appeared in the Empire Pipe Collectors' Magazine. He has lived here on Augary all of his life. He often travels off-world and seems to have an extensive group of contacts in all economic levels on this planet and throughout the Empire. The most unusual contact, as far as you may be interested, is Robert Sontell. Mr. Sontell is a small time pipe collector and a noted furniture antiquarian. He also has the distinction of serving a small amount of time in prison, convicted for attempting to pass reproduction Louis XIV pieces of furniture as genuine."

"That is interesting. You would not know if he was into pipe reproductions, would you?" Nick asked.

"No, I do not know if he is into pipe reproductions. I do know that he is into furniture reproduction, but he is selling them legitimately as furniture reproductions for those that want to purchase such items. If you will give me a day or so I will make some inquiries of my contacts and try to find out."

"Fine, I am staying at the Rayleigh Hilton Hotel. You can reach me there." Nick replied.

They finished their pipes and split up for the night. Nick registered at his hotel. He worked late into the night, smoking several pipes, contacting undercover EIS covert agents. They were asked to make discreet inquiries into the affairs of Herment and Sontell.

The next morning the results of his inquiries began to filter back to him. He found out that Herment and Sontell both had hidden sources of income. In fact, both of the men were rather well off. His sources thought the income was from some illicit smuggling activities, but nothing was concrete.

Dennis finally got back to him about mid-day. He informed Nick that his contacts had not found anything substantial, other than the fact that Sontell had been acquiring a number of specimens of low-grade Old Earth pipes. The specimens included brands such as Graybow, Whitehall, and other lesser pipes. Supposedly, Sontell had acquired a small cache of Old Earth blocks of genuine briar.

Before his leaving Augary to return to Castle Pesaro, Nick prepared a report to be sent to Varten detailing his findings and some of his theories.

-8-

Exactly one week from their last meeting, the group reassembled over pipes in the conference room at Castle Pesaro. Leo thanked Nick and Lu Jo for their reports.

Varten summarized the findings “There appears to be no indication of Robert von Metz having owned the Rasmussen Gollum pipe. He did not tend towards including Danish pipes in his collection. There was also no indication of von Metz having received any money from selling such a pipe. Herment and Sontel seem to have the capabilities of producing some reproduction pipes. Both also have hidden sources of income. There also seems to be a thriving business in pipe reproductions, however, there is nothing illegitimate in it as long as they are clearly sold as reproductions. I think that is where we are at.”

“I think you are quite correct, Varten. If Herment is involved in the fostering of this Rasmussen pipe as genuine, it is time to set a little trap for him, or for who ever is behind this activity. We need to draw them out into the open.” Leo said.

“Helen has discussed with me an idea she has had. Helen, would you present it to the group and see what they think?” Chuck asked.

Helen stood up and said to the group “I am a little new to this level of intrigue, but I think we need to bait a little trap for Mr. Herment. I think we should put forth an offer he could not refuse. We should entice Mr. Herment to find us a pipe that is both rare and very difficult to find. If he can locate the pipe, we can find out if it is genuine or fake. If it is genuine, then our suspicions in his regard could be put to rest. He may be an honest businessman. If he comes up with the pipe and it is a reproduction, then it may suggest to us that he is involved in the illicit pipe reproduction business, and that there may be some question of the authenticity of the Rasmussen pipe. There are just too many unknowns about him. He may be on the level, or he may be deeply involved in the fostering of the reproduction pipes as genuine pipes.”

“I agree.” Leo said “and I have a plan. There was a well known pipe carver named Trever Talbert. Trever Talbert was an Old Earth pipe carver who made many one-of-a-kind briar pipes. The briar pipes he carved were very unique and popular to a segment of the Old Earth pipe collecting community. He made pipes themed around many different topics such as Halloween pipes, Christmas pipes and pipes centering on the Cthulhu mythos. The Cthulhu mythos was a

series of horror books written by an Old Earth writer named H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft and other writers produced many horror stories written around a staple theme about a series of evil gods. You can check H.P. Lovecraft and his stories out in the historical computerized records. Later in his career, Talbert crafted pipes from a substance called morta, a petrified bog material found in the Old Earth political subdivision called France. However, he never lost his love of crafting unique briar pipes, giving each one a unique name.

Anyways, his briar pipes were quite unique and his style is easily identifiable. One of the pipes he carved he named 'Daughter of Dagon', Dagon being one of the minor gods in the Cthulhu mythos. The Daughter of Dagon pipe is a black finished pipe illustrating a female in supplication to the god, Dagon. The bowl of the pipe is essentially a fish at a 90-degree angle to the shank. The tobacco chamber is the gaping mouth of the fish-god. Here is a holo of the pipe."

Leo passed the holo around for the group to see. The pipe had a slightly curved stem. Mounted near the end of the shank one could see a small female figure bowing down before the much larger, evil looking fish-god bowl.

Leo continued "We will put the word out to the pipe collecting community that I am searching for this very unique and rare pipe. The historical record is very clear that Talbert only carved one of these pipes near the end of his career. How do we know this? Because, strangely, after he made this pipe, he never carved another briar pipe. The historical record is unclear, but there are indications that he went mad after he carved the Daughter of Dagon pipe, and spent the last of his days in an insane asylum in the Old Earth town of Arkham, Massachusetts, a political subdivision of the Old Earth country the United States of America. The pipe dropped out of sight and has never again been seen again. The holo is a reconstruction from an old computer photograph that was posted on computers at the time. I had it made by Dr. England at the Empire College. What do you all think?"

"It might work" Nick replied "If George Herment takes the bait. It is strange enough that he may consider it a challenge. It could be reproduced, although it would be difficult. It could be copied using sophisticated equipment, but I doubt it could be reproduced without having an original. Who knows? He may even come up with the genuine item."

"I agree" Varten said "It could be very tempting."

"Let's pass the word to the pipe collecting community." Leo said "Chuck, I want you to pass the word to your contacts that I am seeking this pipe. Be sure to let them know that money is no object. Make sure that Herment finds out about our search."

"I can do that. Does it mean I get to enjoy your hospitality for a while longer?"

"It does. Beside, Ike McCain is going to pay us a visit. I want you to work with him on some articles for the magazine. He may have known Talbert. You will have to talk to him." Leo explained.

They continued discussing the plan and refining it on into the evening. After many bowls of pipe tobacco had been finished, they decided that any inquiries would be directed to Nick. He would be the agent assigned to deal with the project.

-9-

Several weeks go by. There have been a couple of bites on the offer to locate the Daughter of Dagon pipe. All turned out to be false leads. Ike McCain had joined the group at Castle Pesaro for his periodic review and conserving of the Emperor's extensive pipe collection. A small social had been planned with about one hundred invited guests. Nick made sure that George Herment had been sent an invitation. He had responded to the RSVP and was expected at the social.

During the course of the social, Chuck Stinyon approached Nick accompanied by a short, balding man. "Nick Reardon, I want you to meet Mr. George Herment. George is a freelance writer whose articles on pipe collecting have appeared in my magazine."

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Nick replied "I enjoyed your article on searching out old pipes in ancient ruins."

"It is also a pleasure to meet you. Yes, I have written a few minor articles on the locating of pipes. Speaking of which, Chuck has told me that you are looking for a certain special pipe for your employer. I believe it is the Daughter of Dagon pipe carved by an Old Earth carver named Trever Talbert. If you have the time, we can sit over there near the wall, light up, and I will tell you my story."

"I will let the two of you chat." Chuck says "I need to go and talk to Willem Ungar who is working on an article for the magazine on Old Earth meerschaum pipes." He heads off to the other side of the room.

"That would be fine." Nick said. They walk over to a secluded table, sit down, and take out their pipes. Nick offers his tobacco pouch to George. George fills his pipe and lights it. Nick does the same.

"I see that you have a liking for Old Earth Charatan pipes" Nick comments.

"Yes I do." George replies "I find their Double Comfort stem to be most comfortable. This is an excellent tobacco you have."

"Thanks, it is a plain virginia based tobacco blended with some Isel tobacco. The Isel tobacco is a new condimental tobacco that the Emperor is developing for market." Nick added.

I have a lead on the 'Daughter of Dagon' Talbert pipe and it may be available. One of the people I deal with is a rather strange chap named William Whatley. He is a minor member of the Reichstagen representing his home planet. William Whatley is from the town of Innyrmouth on the planet Arkhem. His family fortunes have been declining. Let's face it; there is not much of a market in whale oil and fur. He is down to the end of his financial resources. One of the items he still has is the 'Daughter of Dagon' pipe, which has been in his family for centuries, maybe since the days of Old Earth. I can obtain the pipe for the sum of 50,000 solaris for Whatley with a 10,000 solaris finding fee for me. I recognize that this is truly a large amount of money, but I think the rareness of the pipe speaks for itself."

"The Emperor is very interested in obtaining this specific pipe. I think that the arrangements are doable, however we need assurances that the pipe is genuine." Nick replies.

"I quite agree that this is a large sum of money and that assurances must be provided that the pipe is genuine." Herment counters "I would suggest that the two of us travel to Arkhem and meet with William Whatley. I think that he can provide the assurances you need as to the pipe's authenticity. He is a character I think you will find most interesting." George said.

"Let's meet at the spaceport tomorrow at 0700. I have a needle ship at my disposal that we can use for transportation. Please contact Mr. Whatley and let him know of our impending trip."

They finished their pipes and separated. Nick met with Leo and Varten. He told them of Hermet's discussion and their meeting to travel to Arkhem. He was instructed to offer them the money, with half on delivery and the remainder when the pipe was tested and proven to be genuine.

They wished Nick well on his assignment.

-10-

They had met at the spaceport early in the morning. Both had packed small travel bags. The needle ship had lifted off with no problem. Being of a new design, they only had to get a short distance away from Hayden before making the first jump. The trip to Arkhem was uneventful. They spent their time smoking and reading. Nick sought to draw George out, but had not learned more than that William Whatley had been a long-time acquaintance of George's and that he would find out that there was a certain strangeness about him. Herment explained that as they age, the native people develop a certain abnormality in their appearance, a strangeness, almost bachtrian appearance dubbed the 'Innyrmouth look'.

Two days later the needle ship sat down at the tiny Arkhem spaceport. The space port was just outside the planet's chief city, Innyrmouth. Even though it was late in the afternoon, the town was a dark, damp, dreary place. Nick was amazed that the spaceport was functional. The small military force stationed on Arkhem was hard to keep staffed. Military from off-world could only

endure short periods of time stationed on the planet. Eventually they learned to staff it with soldiers that were native to the planet since only they could bear the queerness of the planet and its people.

As they were leaving the ship, George said to Nick “As I have told you, there is strangeness about this planet and the people. You will not find any aircars here. You may not even see a ground car. This planet is one of the most backward in the universe. You do not judge these people by our standards. You will see a certain sameness in their appearance. They do not make friends easily. Most likely, they will not talk to you. You just have to accept the queerness and go on. Do not let their appearances put you off. It may seem fish-like to you, and it is. I suspect that there is a lot of in-breeding taking place on this planet.”

They were met at the gate of the spaceport by Crumb, Mr. Whatley’s butler in a dilapidated ground vehicle. The groundcar would have been considered an antique on any other planet in the empire. It was a miracle that they could find parts to keep it operational. There was a heavy fog throughout the city of Innyrmouth. They plodded through the dark, dank streets of Innyrmouth. After a while, the old car started to climb up the hill overlooking the ancient, rotting town. They finally reached the top of the overlooking hill and pulled in front of a gate in the wall surrounding a mansion of immeasurable age. The gate and walls were encrusted with heavy growths of eerie vines. Crumb got out of the car and opened the gate with a large iron key. They passed through, with him re-locking the gate once they were inside.

Crumb pulled up in front of the main portico of the mansion. They got out of the car and stood before two massive wooden doors. The panels of the doors were carved with grotesque figures. Nick recognized one of the carvings as being identical to the Daughter of Dagon pipe. Crumb showed them the way into the foyer. They removed their heavy coats. Crumb escorted them down a long hall. He knocked on the front of the large oak doors to the study/library. He opened the creaking door. They went inside to meet their host.

William Whatley was a tall, thin man in a long, black frock coat. He was smoking an old briar calabash pipe. He welcomed them to his home. Nick thought there was something odd about his appearance. He finally realized that it was his eyes. Besides being bulbous in nature, he noticed that the eyes never blinked. They just stared.

“Gentlemen, please sit down. I hope you have brought your pipes with you. I have some very old tobacco for you to try. It is an old blend named ‘Flower of the Miskatonic’” Whatley said “The Miskatonic River flows through Innyrmouth. Mr. Reardon, George informs me that you are interested in purchasing my ‘Daughter of Dagon’ pipe. I have a number of pipes that you may be more interested in purchasing instead of that pipe. We will take a look at them after dinner. Let me go check on the arrangements. Please sit and enjoy your pipes and tobacco. You may wish to take a look at some of the volumes on the shelves. Some are quite unique.” He added as he left the library.

Nick surveyed the surrounding furnishings of the library. There were hundreds of old volumes in neat rows on the shelves. He saw many strange books covering a wide range of esoteric

topics with titles such as “The Necronomicon”, “The Pnakotic Ms.”, “The Book of Nod”, “Cultes Des Goules” and authors such as “von Junst”, “Alhazard”, and “Mobed”. He knew that some of the books had been banned in earlier times. A number of the books appeared like they would disintegrate if they were opened.

“I have been here twice before” George stated “and this room, this planet still gives me the creeps”. I have never seen a sunny day on this planet.”

There host returned. “Dinner will be served in about a half hour. Crumb will show you to your room so that you may wash up and refresh yourselves. I will join you in the dining room promptly at 6:00 P.M.” Whatley said.

Crumb showed them their rooms. They cleaned up and headed back downstairs to the formal dining room. The dinner tasted very good. The three men enjoyed the conversation. Nick discovered that Whatley had grown up on Arkhem, the sole son of rich parents. His father was a Whatley, his mother a Waite from Innymouth. His education was off-world and he had been to a number of planets in the empire. Once he hit the age of thirty, his desire to travel off-world disappeared. He had not left Arkhem in the past fifteen years. His business arrangements and investments had taken a beating. There was very little for Arkhem to offer to the empire. Hence he was selling off some of his properties and personal property. Following dinner, they retired once, again to the library where they had drinks and pipes. Whatley was smoking a rather grotesque pipe shaped as a human skull carved to show bits of skin still attached. Each time he puffed, the eyes in the skull appeared to glow.

Whatley brought out a large rectangular case. He opened the case which held a number of pipes. Several of the pipes were very unusual. “Are you sure that you would not like to purchase one of these? Here is one of Talbert’s Halloween pipes. I can do better, price-wise on these pipes.”

Nick looked them over very closely. He knew that Leo would have loved to purchase the Halloween pipe, but that was not his assignment. “No, the Emperor has specifically sent me on a mission to purchase the Daughter of Dagon pipe.”

Whatley took a strange tamper out of his pocket and tamped the tobacco in his pipe.

“May I take a look at your pipe tamper” Nick asked. Whatley gave it to him to examine. Nick saw a strange octapoidal, tentacled shaped creature made out of an unknown substance. There was a largish head exhibiting an almost human intelligence. The tentacles ended at the bottom of the tamper standing on a flat surface. “What is it?” Nick asked.

“It is made to resemble Cthulhu, one of the elder gods. Cthulhu will be here when we are all gone.” He explained as he traced a strange sign with his hand and returned the tamper to his pocket.

“Well I guess you need to see the pipe you came to purchase.” Whatley said in a dejected voice. He walked over to the massive old desk. He took out a skeleton key and opened it, removing a

box from a drawer. “This is the pipe you are seeking. It is Talbert’s Daughter of Dagon pipe.” He gave the box to Nick.

Nick opened the box. Inside the box was the Daughter of Dagon pipe, exactly as it had been shown in the holo. “This is indeed the pipe I was sent to procure. You seem very reticent to part with this pipe. May I ask why?”

“The Daughter of Dagon pipe has been in my family for centuries, perhaps from the day it was carved on Old Earth. My forefather, Ephraim Waite, purchased the pipe from Trevor Talbert, the carver. Now I am an educated man, and I don’t believe in ghosts or curses, but there is a story that goes with the pipe. Supposedly the last Whatley will be the one to part the pipe from the family. That may well be the case as I have no living children.” He replied.

“The agreed upon sum was for 50,000 solaris to Mr. Whatley and 10,000 solaris to Mr. Hermet. That is a significant sum which may help rebuild your fortune, William. If you still wish to go through with it, I have the contract. Half of the funds will be paid now, and half upon the pipe passing the verification tests at Empire College.” Nick reminded him.

“What practical choice do I have? My options have about all run out. Give me the paper to sign. You can take the cursed pipe!”

William Whatley and George Herment signed the papers and accepted payment. Negotiable instruments of payment exchanged hands.

They celebrated the completion of the deal with a very old cognac and a fine old pipe tobacco. When the pipes had burned out and the cognac supply ran dry, the men quietly went to their beds.

During the night, Nick was awakened by a strange noise. He walked down the stairs. The massive oak library doors were locked and closed. He stood outside the heavy doors and heard strange noises from inside the room. It sounded like the voices of two men talking; one is William Whatley, the other was at times unintelligent and unidentifiable. An argument was taking place. He heard the other person berating Whatley for selling the Daughter of Dagon pipe, especially to Emperor Leopaldo. They could never get it back from such a powerful human. A struggle ensues. A muffled scream was heard, and then a strange sucking-like sound. Finally he heard the sound of a body falling into a chair. Since the library door was locked from the inside, Nick hurried upstairs and wakes Herment. They went back down the steps to the library. They forced the locked door and entered the darkened room. Inside they see no one. Nick uses a match to light one of the old fashion whale oil lamps. They find Whatley sitting still in his chair. As they turn around to face him, they look at a face, but it is not there. They can see clear through the skull to the back of the winged back leather chair. The horror of the sight draws a strange yell from their throats. They quickly got their belongings and ran out of the house, stealing the old dilapidated automobile.

They returned in haste to the Innyrmouth spaceport. Nick wrote up a report concerning the death

of William Whately. It was provided to the military officer in charge, who scoffed at it. Regardless, George and Nick boarded the needleship, and departed Arkhem, bound for Hayden.

-11-

Two days later the needle ship landed at Hayden in the early evening with its crew and valuable cargo. They were whisked through customs and Nick was taken by aircar to the Castle. George Hermet decided to visit the bank and take care of a financial matter. He wished Nick well.

The usual group, Leo, Varten, Nick, Lu Jo, Helen, and Chuck met over pipes in the castle conference room. Leo had decided to celebrate Nick's homecoming by opening a tin of McClelland 2004 Christmas Cheer. They were all glad to hear the pop when the tin was opened. They found the tin aroma to be quite enticing. They filled their pipes and lit them anxiously waiting for Nick's story to be told.

Nick did not disappoint them. He told them every detail including the depressing feeling he had while on Arkhem. Helen Chamberlain mentioned that it sounded like a dark Victorian novel to her. Lu Jo, who had read some of the H.P. Lovecraft stories while Nick was away, said that his experience sounded like it was out of one of his books.

Varten began "Nick, I have an interesting report from the Arkhem military base. They informed me that your report regarding the demise of William Whately was investigated. They believe you must have had something bad to eat or were sick and delirious. It seems that they report that Mr. William Whately is fine and that he sends Nick and Leo his regards. He hopes that the Emperor enjoys his new pipe. He also extends to you an invitation to visit him the next time you are in the sector. He also informs us that he looks forward to the completion of the verification tests and obtaining the final agreed upon payment.

"Look, I know what I saw and heard. I saw Whately stone cold dead, without the center of his head. There is something very weird taking place on that planet." Nick replied.

"Nick, Arkhem was always a strange planet. Leo said "Many strange things have taken place there that are quite unexplainable. The planet has some of the weirdest people that have ever been encountered. There are stories that the inhabitants relocated as a group from Arkham, Massachusetts prior to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Age of Man before the destruction of Old Earth. Their religious practices are quite unusual, and there are some unique physiological changes that take place to the inhabitants as they age. They are a pretty closed society. I have met William Whately, and from what I have been told, he is very unusual in that he functions in our world, and in the world of Innsmouth."

"Strange and unusual do not adequately describe that place and the people" Nick said.

Nick shows them the Daughter of Dagon pipe. All are amazed at the uniqueness, inventiveness, beauty, and yet grotesqueness of the pipe. Leo decides to send it to Dr. England at Empire

College for testing the next day. They spent the evening drinking fine cognac and smoking their pipes, filled with Leo's Christmas Cheer.

Late in the evening, Nick and Lu Jo got up to leave. You could hear Lu Jo teasing Nick as they were leaving the room "So, you are afraid of a couple of little ghosties and goblins. All you had to do was pretend it was Halloween." She said as she jabbed him in the side. They headed back to their quarters looking for the little "Do not disturb" sign to hang on the door.

-12-

A week later they again met in the Castle Pesaro conference room. Chuck Stinyon was in attendance since he had remained on Hayden to conduct business.

Varten began by reporting "A communications has been received from the New Berlin authorities. They reopened the investigation on the Robert von Metz suicide. Further investigation and forensic evidence still indicates that his death was a suicide. They have now closed the book on the matter."

Leo told the group "I have the report from the Empire College Dept. of Antiquities. They have also returned to me the box containing the Daughter of Dagon pipe. Dr. England's report indicates, with a 97% probability, that the Daughter of Dagon pipe is genuine. All the test results were positive. Send the remaining payment to Messrs. Whatley and Hement, Leo instructs Nick."

Leo continued "I guess that we can conclude that Donald Trimp's Rasmussen Gollum pipe is genuine, and that the historical record is just incomplete. There are now three of the Rasmussen Gollum shape pipes that are now known to exist. It also appears that the suspicion surrounding George Hement is unfounded and that the rumors regarding the pipe reproductions being fostered as genuine are just that, rumors. However, we have learned that there is a growing market for true Old Earth pipe reproductions."

Varten adds "This could create problems. We need to introduce a bill in the Reishstagen to require that any reproductions are to be clearly stamped with an "R" for reproduction, whether it is for pipes or furniture. Failure to meet this requirement will result in a penalty."

"I quite agree" Leo replied "Have our friends introduce the legislation."

For the last time, Chuck picks up the Gunnar Rasmussen pipe. "I guess it has to be returned to Donald Trimp as genuine. This will probably be the last time I may have a chance to smoke it."

"Light it up" Leo says as he proceeds to light up the Daughter of Dagon pipe. "If I start talking or babbling in strange languages, or doing anything unnatural, just take the pipe out of my mouth, call a shaman and say some esoteric chant."

They all chuckled at his little joke.

-END-

## THE THREE AMIGOS

By  
John P. Seiler

Copyright 12/2005, THE THREE AMIGOS, All rights reserved by the author.

-1-

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.”

-2-

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.

-3-

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.

-4-

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 beaconsed 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.

-5-

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 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 McBarens 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 beaconsed, 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.”

-6-

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.”

-7-

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 Governor 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.

-9-

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.

-10-

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.

-11-

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-

# The Scheme of Doctor Fu Manchu

By

John P. Seiler

Copyright © January, 2006, THE SCHEME OF DOCTOR FU MANCHU All Rights Reserved  
by the Author

## **-1- A Late Night Visit**

Nick Reardon had been dispatched to the planet New Anglica by Varten von Eckman to investigate the death or disappearance of prominent scientists working on research projects for Emperor Leopaldo. He was living in a town house in a prosperous suburb of the capital city of New London for the past two months.

It was late at night; a damp dreary New London evening. He had been smoking his pipe and catching up on his reading after a long day at the governmental offices. He was reading messages from Emperor Leopaldo sent from Castle Pesaro. His investigation of the disappearance of a number of prominent scientists was going nowhere. He thought he heard a soft knock on the front door. He sat his pipe in the ashtray, walked into the hall, and slowly opened the front door.

With a push, he went back as a tall man came in, muffled in a hat and greatcoat.

“Shhhh, agent Reardon and put out that damned light!” he said with a flourish as he removed his hat and coat after closing the door. “Let’s go into your study, and put out that lamp.”

We returned to the study when I turned out the lamp. He moved towards the window and opened the curtain slightly, peering outside.

“I was right, I have been followed. I don’t know if they know I am here, but your house is obviously being watched”, the mysterious man retorted.

“What is the meaning of this, I asked, “and who are you?”

“I will explain all, shortly” the man said “But first, contact your local police and have the two oriental/asian men watching this house picked up on some charge”

I called Detective Inspector Stanton of the New London police and transmitted my request. Within minutes, we heard several quick aircars light in front of the house and saw the uniformed police take two men into custody.

“Sit down; fill up your pipe, as I have quite an incredible story to tell you. Please pass the

tobacco jar over to me.’ He said. “As you light your pipe, Mr. Reardon, I will give you something to think about. My name is Sir Dennis Nayland Smith, I was born on Old Earth in the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and I am going to invite you to take part in one of the most exciting adventures in your short, young life”.

We both filled up our pipes. Smith’s pipe was a darkened, beat up old nondescript pipe. I filled up my Old Earth Dunhill Shell billard from the tobacco jar. We both lit our pipes.

“You are over 50,000 years old!” I said, “I don’t see how that is possible, and I don’t believe it.”

“Yes, it is very difficult to believe. I assume you have a secure hyperwave communications system here, please use it and contact Varten von Eckman, the Emperor’s weapons master. Let him know that I am here, and that you and I will be working together for a while. I am known to both him and Emperor Leopaldo. He will vouch for me.”

To say that I was stunned would be an understatement. I sent a message to Castle Pesaro. Within a short period of time, I received my reply:

*Nick,*

*Sir Dennis is fully authorized to officially operate on the Emperor’s behalf. He has our full confidence and full authority on his mission, of which you are to fully cooperate. Consider yourself at his disposal. His story, which you will find interesting, is on the up and up. Provide any and all assistance.*

*Varten von Eckman*

I looked at the reply to my message.

“Ok, you have been vouchsafed. I am informed that you will have quite a story to tell me and that I am to help you in any way I can.” I replied.

“The earliest way to start would be for me to ask you if you have ever heard of Dr. Fu Manchu.” He said while smoke from his pipe winded towards the ceiling.

“If I recall correctly, Fu Manchu was a character invented by an author named Sax Rohmer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He appeared in 13 stories as the evil, yellow peril. His archenemy was your namesake, Sir Dennis Nayland Smith and Doctor Petrie. But, it was all fiction, a figment of the author’s imagination.”

“What you say is true, except for one thing, it was not fiction, it was fact. Dr. Fu Manchu is Satan incarnate; a ruthless indestructible intelligence armed with knowledge undreamed of by the science of his time. Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Old Earth Eastern race, accumulated in

one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government--which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu-Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man. This is the Doctor's description from Old Earth, imagine him the same, except that he controls groups within the empire. There are groups, secret societies, planets and populations that do not have the same goals as Emperor Leopoldo."

Dr. Fu Manchu has not been heard of or seen since the late 1930's First Age, because he has not wished to have been. Everyone has assumed that he has died, just as he wished. However, I assure you he lives, as do I."

Our pipes had gone out. We both refilled them, and lit them. He continued.

"Good tobacco, Reardon. I would guess that it is Dunhill My Mixture from the Emperor's private stock. One of the things that Fu Manchu was searching for was the elixir of life. I can tell you that he did find it. That is the reason that both he and I are still alive. Fu Manchu injected his serum into me as a test subject before fully believing it and using it himself. There was just enough for two doses and he wanted to be sure. Surely, just my presence and his existence must impress you as to the state of his knowledge and cunning. This single achievement has never been duplicated. Although here in the future, lifetimes have tripled compared to my time, unending life has never been achieved by today's science, except by Doctor Fu Manchu."

"I observe that your pipe is an Old Earth Dunhill, please take a look at mine. It is also a Dunhill from Old Earth, one that I have smoked over my entire, long life."

He handed me his pipe. I could barely make out the white spot and the nomenclature due to its ancient age and constant use, but it was an Old Earth Dunhill. I observed a patent number which meant it was much older than the one in my possession. I gave it back and Sir Dennis relit it.

"I have been a member of the Empire Intelligence Service, on and off, for many years. My age and history is only known to a group of a select few, of which you are now one. Behind the scenes, I have been Fu Manchu's enemy, constantly combating his every move over the centuries. However, he comes out of hiding very rarely. His last appearance was 500 years ago, however, now I believe he is about to hatch one of his nefarious plans. Recently, a number of important scientists have been suddenly dying or disappearing. They are predominantly in the farming and biological fields of science. The most recent death was Doctor John Winston Barks, Ph.D., from the University of New London. He died earlier this evening, I had just left his home and was heading back to New Scotland Yard when I detected that I was being followed. I had meant to contact you and thought this was the perfect time. So, that is how I got here, and some background. I need your assistance to find out Fu Manchu's aims and stop them."

"I will do whatever I can to assist you, Sir Dennis." I replied "Where do we start?"

"In the morning, we will go to New London's Chinatown where we will meet with Yi Ching,

one of Fu Manchu's lieutenants. Although totally loyal to Fu Manchu, Yi Ching has been useful to me as a source of information. I have done some small services for him in the past and he is beholden to me. I hope you do not mind putting me up for the night. We can get an early start tomorrow."

"No problem" I replied.

We finished our pipes and went to bed for the night.

## **-2- Two Interviews**

When I finally arose at 7:00 A.M., I found that Sir Dennis had been up for a while, was dressed, and smoking an early morning pipe.

"What are you smoking?" I asked.

"A cheap English blend pseudo tobacco" he replied "but it reminds me of Dunhill Early Morning Pipe".

We finished breakfast and left for the Limehouse district of New London in our aircar. Limehouse is the Chinatown area of New London. It was a rather seedy area comprised of businesses, bars, and houses of ill repute, in all a good place for the criminal element to hide. It was located on the west bank, south of the Tower Bridge.

After parking our car, we walked down a road to the intersection of the main thoroughfare through Limehouse. We entered a small nondescript door located between two businesses, heading up a set of well-worn stairs. At the top of the stairs we entered a door marked Yi Ching Imports. An old Chinese man, wearing a padded silk jacket and a green mandarin hat, was sitting on top of a high stool behind a tall writing desk. A video display could be seen set into the desk. Along the walls were shelves holding all kinds of imported products, from small stuffed animals to fine works of art. Behind him was a rack of smoking products. He was smoking a small opium-type pipe, a small stream of smoke rising from the bowl. He looked up as we entered.

"Ah, Sir Dennis, how nice of you to visit my humble shop." The old man said.

"Yi Ching, may I introduce you to my friend Nick." He said to the old man.

"Ah, nice chow meet chu" he replied "What can I chow for chu Sir Dennis?"

"What have you heard of your master, the good Doctor?" he enquired.

"Ah, I not see him for long time" he said.

"I did not ask if you have seen him, Yi, just what kind of trouble he is brewing." Sir Dennis

asked.

“He is not brewing any mead, but I hear he is seeking knowledge about tobacco.”

“Tobacco? Why tobacco?” Sir Dennis thought out loud.

“I do not know, but one name I hear is Bruce Warren. Maybe you should talk with him.

“ I have heard of him, Sir Dennis” I said. He is the director of research for EDC Tobacco Products. They make a series of pseudo-tobaccos that are sold across the Empire.”

“We shall do that, Nick. Thanks for the tip, Yi, how is your daughter?” He asked.

“She is doing well. She studies nursing at the university.”

Sir Dennis and Nick said their good byes. As they left Yi Ching, he pressed a button on the display. He said two words “Smith, master”.

Smith and Nick strolled back to their aircar. “What was the bit about the china man’s daughter, Smith?”

“Oh, I saved her from being sold to a group of slavers several years ago. She is now enrolled at the University of New London’s School of Nursing, and is doing well. This is one of the reason’s that Yi provides some information, but never forget that he works for Fu Manchu. He has probably reported our visit already!” Sir Dennis replied.

They left Limehouse and headed back downtown. They parked their aircar outside a large new Plasplex skyscraper. Heading inside the main door, they saw that the EDC Tobacco Products Ltd. was located on the 132<sup>nd</sup> floor. They took the lift up to the 132<sup>nd</sup> floor where a pretty, young receptionist met them. Nick showed her his credentials and asked if they could meet with Bruce Warren. She rang his office. There was no response. They walked back to his office where they found it was locked. “I am sure he did not leave the office” told them. She took out a master key, and opened the door to a plush office, the back wall being a clear Plexiglas showing the skyline of the city. The aroma of pipe smoke was in the office. Suddenly, she screamed. They turned towards her and saw a man lying on the floor behind the desk.

“Bruce Warren, I presume” Sir Dennis said.

She nodded her head in the affirmative.

“Leave us alone, but call Inspector Weightmouth at New Scotland Yard” he instructed the secretary. She left the room to communicate with the Police. She also instructed the building security to look for any unusual persons.

“What do you see regarding the body?” Nick was asked.

“It looks to me like he died in great pain due to the contorted face. He was also smoking his pipe at the time. A fine old calabash.” He said as he picked the pipe off the floor.

“Put it down!” Smith commanded.

Nick put the pipe back down on the floor.

“Look, there are no marks on the body. His face is flushed and contorted. The room is sealed. I suspect that he may have been poisoned. Let the police check out the pipe and its contents.” Sir Dennis responded.

He walked over to the desk and studied it. On one of the files was a note written in block letters:

Bruce Warren,

You have 6 hours to comply with the demands of the Si Fan. If you fail, then your reward will be death.

Fu Manchu

“You see, Yi Ching knew something was going on. He could not tell us exactly what it was, however, he did point us in the right direction. We were too late. Always too late!” Smith said with a little dejection.

Inspector Weightmouth had arrived. His Crime Scene Investigators had taken over the investigation and taking of data.

“Mr. Reardon, Mr. Smith” Inspector Weightmouth acknowledged. “I have been instructed to cooperate with both of you and to follow any instructions that you may make.”

“We would like an autopsy performed on Bruce Warren, and a thorough analysis of his lunch on his desk, and the contents of his pipe.” Nick told the inspector.

“It will be done” I will communicate the results to your house, Mr. Reardon”, the inspector responded.

They left the skyscraper and returned to Nick’s comfortable home. Once back in his quarters, they retired to the smoking room where they filled up their pipes and lit them up. Streams of aromatic smoke rose to the ceiling of the room.

“Did you note the slight odor of almonds above the aroma of the tobacco smoke?” Smith asked Nick.

“Slight, I thought he was smoking an almond aromatic” he responded “I also thought that anyone who smoked an almond aromatic deserved to be punished by death!”

“Well, the tobacco was an English blend, but there was a hint of almond. It leads me to suspect that Warren was poisoned through the use of a cyanide compound. I also noted that he was working on a paper entitled “EDC Tobacco – A new product for a New World Order” It was a proposal to establish a new tobacco trading system throughout the Empire using their own new brand of leaf that grows twice as fast as any other type of tobacco, and makes an excellent pipe tobacco. I wonder if Fu Manchu murdered him to prevent the publication of the article, or his refusal to turn the plant over to the Si Fan”.

The communicator indicated reception of a message. It was from Inspector Weightmouth at New Scotland Yard. The autopsy had been completed and indicated death by cyanide poisoning. The contents of Bruce Warren’s pipe indicated traces of cyanide and also some unknown compounds. He also reported that there had been a false fire alarm on the 132<sup>nd</sup> floor of the building earlier in the morning. There was a missing section of video recording on the building security cameras, and that the grills had been removed from the ventilation system in Warren’s office and an empty office nearby. He also noted that people interviewed had noticed the presence of some strange foreigners of either Asiatic or Chinese descent.

“This provides us a lot to think about, Nick. We shall see what the morrow brings.” He told Nick.

They spend the evening discussing Fu Manchu, and Sir Dennis Nayland Smith’s old friends Dr. Petrie, Bart Kerrigan, Inspector Weymouth, all long dead, and his constant battle with Fu Manchu over the centuries.

### **-3- Terror in the Night**

Nick awakened with a startle. He heard a strange noise. It sounded like a long-low wail coming from outside the house. He reached next to the bed for a needle blaster. He slipped it into the pocket of his robe. He walked into the hall and peered into the room that Smith was using. The room was in disarray and Smith was gone. He headed to the stairwell that went down to the first floor. As he started to descend, he felt something behind him. He turned around, saw a huge hulking figure, smelled the scent of lotus, then remembered no more.

Slowly, he began to awaken. He had a monstrous headache reminiscent of a bad night’s drinking. He was in a large dark room with carpet on the floor and heavily curtained windows. He was all trussed up. He noted another tied up beside himself. He heard a whispered voice “Nick? Nick? I wondered how long it would take for you to awaken!”

“Sir Dennis?” He replied softly “What happened? Where are we?”

“I do not know where we are, but I suspect soon to be in the presence of Doctor Fu Manchu.”

The light slowly increased as a lamp was turned up. A person was observing them from the far end of the room, sitting in a high fan-backed chair on a dais.

“Ah, Sir Dennis and Mr. Reardon, awake I see! My preparation of Lotus and odorless chloroform does wonders. It incapacitates one for a short period of time, yet recalls them back to full consciousness in complete control of their faculties.” He said as he stood up. Doctor Fu Manchu was a tall, thin Chinese, wearing robes of green and gold silk which shimmered in the lamp’s light. His face was unlined, but his eyes were old with ancient wisdom, green, and seemed oddly veiled, like those of a drowsing cat. Above an imposing brow, he wore a green skullcap with a single coral bead which indicated the rank of Mandarin. He leaned on an ivory staff, the top being that of a white peacock.

“We meet again Sir Dennis. I see the elixir of life had done wonders for you.” He said.

“Yes it has, Doctor, as it has for you also.” He replied.

“Yes, and once again, you are disturbing my plans. You and Mr. Reardon are becoming a factor that I must deal with. But soon, my plans will be at a point where you cannot stop them. There is one more brain that I need and some rare information that I must obtain.” He said in a sinuous voice.

He motioned with his hands, and two large men came into the room and lifted Smith. They strapped him down to what appeared in the dim light to be an examination table. Above the table was a large apparatus, unknown to Nick.

“You have already heard and met my Dacoits. They did a fine job in introducing the cyanide into Bruce Warren’s pipe tobacco. They gained entrance to his office through the building ventilation system. One of my small pygmies crawled through the ventilation ducts and completed the job during the fake fire alarm. Mr. Warren had been warned not to publish his findings and to turn his research over to the Si Fan. He refused and suffered the consequences. Now, for you” he said.

“Sir Dennis, you will soon be totally immobile. You have heard of what is referred to as the Chinese Water Torture. Well I have made an improvement on it. Mr. Reardon, Smith’s head will not be able to move. Once fixed, his mouth is wide opened. You see the spout several feet above his head is aimed directly at his opened mouth. When I signal, a slow, drop by drop strong mixture of tobacco juice will flow down into his mouth. After a period of time, his choke reflex will activate, but he will be unable to expel it. The high nicotinic content will heighten the experience for him. Eventually, he will die, one could say, drowned in tobacco!”

“What do you want Fu Manchu?” Smith asked.

“In Emperor Leopaldo’s private collection is a book from Old Earth. It a rare book dealing with the cultivation of tobacco. It is called ‘Jahn’s Tobacciana’. Jahn wrote a Tobacco Dictionary,

but this is one of his books that was privately published in a limited edition. Jahn discovered a means to biologically stimulate the growth of the tobacco plant, but his methods have been hidden all these years. In return for your life, I want that rare book.”replied Fu Manchu.

“Don’t let him have it, Reardon!” Sir Dennis screamed as the Dacoits locked his head into position and put a device into his mouth to keep it opened.

“Look Mr. Reardon, you are an honorable man. If you will get me this book, Sir Dennis will avoid a very painful death.” Fu Manchu said without any emotion.

“How do you think I can get such a rare item from the Emperor? I do not even know him.” Nick replied.

“Do not consider me a fool!” Fu Manchu hissed.” I know the relationship between you, Varten von Eckman and Emperor Leopaldo! If you agree to obtain this small item for me, then I will accept your promise.”

“I cannot do as you wish” Nick replied.

“Then let it begin” Fu Manchu stated.

The dacoit pressed a button. Slowly, drop by slow drop, a small stream started to fall into Smith’s opened mouth.

All this time, Nick had not been idle. His EIS Academy training had paid off. He had found a knot in the rope of which he had been tied. He had started to work it free until his hands became unloosed. He found his needle blaster still in the pocket of his robe.

Nick could tell that the mixture dripping into Smith’s mouth was starting to affect him as a gurgling sound was coming from his throat. He knew that he did not have much time left. He took the needle blaster and fired quickly at the two dacoits. They fell down dead. He aimed and fired his last shot in the direction of the insidious Doctor. There was a flash in the direction of the chair. He quickly undid the rope at his feet and ran over to the examination table, pushed the spout away from above Smith’s mouth. He undid the band holding Smith’s head, tilted his head to the side and watched as the horrible mixture flowed out of Smith’s mouth.

Sir Dennis retched, and began breathing slowly. Nick began to remove the restraints holding Smith to the table. He got Smith up to a sitting position. “Thanks old man!” Smith said “I believe you saved my life,”

They looked around the room. No trace of Fu Manchu could be found!

“It looks like he has escaped again” Smith said.

They searched the room and found a hidden doorway behind the chair at the end of the room

behind Fu Manchu's seat. They continued looking for an exit when they found another behind where they had sat. They pushed a button and the door slid away opening into another room. They went through it and found themselves in another room.

"This is my basement" Nick exhorted.

"I can only guess that the room we were in was the townhouse that butted yours. They must have had you under observation for a considerable amount of time. You underestimate Fu Manchu at your peril!" Smith stated.

They contacted Inspector Weightmouth at New Scotland Yard. A group of officers arrived and searched the townhouse next to Nick's. They found no one.

#### **-4- War Council**

Sir Denis, Nick, and Inspector Weightmouth convened a council over coffee. "Fu Manchu stated that he needed the rare edition Jahn book and one more brain. Nick, I think you should contact Varten and ask him to examine the book. We also need to ascertain who the final brain or person that he needs and warn him." Smith said.

Nick sent a coded communication to Castle Pesaro requesting the needed information.

They sat down in Nick's library, took out their pipes, filled them and lit them. Very soon, a dense aromatic smoke filled the room. The inspector smoked a pseudo-briar pipe, while Nick and Sir Dennis smoked their Old Earth pipes. They were lost in thought.

"Who is the most knowledgeable person here in New London that has information on the cultivation of both Old Earth tobacco, neer-tobacco and pseudo-tobacco?" Smith asked.

"I think that would be either Doctor von Herder at the University, or Samantha McDonald. Von Herder is a professor that has done much research, some for the Emperor, on tobacco cultivation. He has developed some special strains and blends for the Emperor. Samantha McDonald is a well known pipe collector. She collects all kinds of pipes and has an extensive knowledge and collection of Old Earth tobaccos." Inspector Weightmouth replied.

"Well, we better warn both of them" Smith stated.

"I will do that now" the inspector said. He sent word to New Scotland Yard via his communicator.

"It seems to me that Fu Manchu is searching for expertise to develop a new strain of tobacco that is quick growing. If he could destroy the current tobacco economy and replace it with his own, the result would be immense. It would have a huge impact on the economy of the Empire. It could have major political consequences." Nick replied.

“I agree with you, Nick. Fu Manchu must be stopped in his devilish scheme!” Smith rejoined.

Nick’s communicator informed him that a message had been received from Castle Pesaro. Nick read the message. “They have the book. It appears that Fu Manchu’s description of its contents is accurate. It contains an ancient method to speed up the production of Old Earth tobacco. Varten and his staff believe that it could revolutionize the manner in which pseudo-tobacco is grown, halving the time, and doubling the production.”

The inspector’s communicator went off. He reported back “I have both good news and bad news. Von Herder has been warned. He is being guarded. Samantha McDonald does not answer. Aircars have been dispatched to her residence. An APB has been put out to locate her. We can only wait.”

“This tobacco is very good” Sir Dennis said “It reminds me of McClelland’s #5100, commonly referred to as Red Kake”

“That is exactly what it is” Nick replied “It came from Emperor Leopaldo’s private collection. He gifted me with a small quantity after our last case. Once it is gone, I have no more left.”

“I have never had the chance to smoke Old Earth tobacco” Inspector Weightmouth said “I thank you. This is truly excellent, a once in a lifetime event for me.”

“Yes, it is truly an excellent smoke. A real Old Earth mature Virginia tobacco” Sir Dennis said “Although I generally smoke an English blend, a straight Virginia is a treat indeed!”

Nick’s communicator again went off. A strange message came out in electronic text:

*The person you seek  
Is housed near a big creek  
The clock strikes loud  
Near the crowd  
Where the tobacco is sold.  
/////*

“What do you think it means, Sir Dennis?” Nick asked.

Smith smiled “I think we have a message from a so-called friend. The six parallel lines at the bottom represent the hexagram ‘khien’. Khien is the first hexagram in the I Ching, or Chinese Book of Changes, also known as the Yi King. I think it is from Yi Ching. Fire up your computer system, Nick and find us a location in New London. I believe it is a tobacco shop located near a crowded location, a creek, and within hearing distance of a clock, such as Big Ben.”

“There is such a shop!” Nick exclaimed “It is the Tompkins Smoke Shop, between Old Ben and the Thames, around the corner from Trafalgar Square. I have been there several times. Jack

Tompkins is the proprietor, a very knowledgeable tobbaconist.”

“Well, lets get a move on it. Inspector, send out your air cars. Instruct them to surround the area and wait for us to arrive.”

They immediately left the room and headed to the address in the inspector’s aircar in the dreary New London night.

### **-5- The White Room**

The aircar landed within minutes near a large public square. They left the vehicle and headed from Trafalgar Square towards the Thames River. “The shop is just up ahead. We have it surrounded.”The inspector informed them.

“Nick and I will go around to the rear of the store and obtain entry. You and your officers remain outside. Make sure no one leave the shop. If we are not out in one hour, then storm the building.” Sir Dennis ordered.

Through the thick fog, Sir Dennis and Nick approached the darkened building. There appeared to be heavily shuttered windows in the front. The faint dim of a light could be seen creeping through cracks in the darkened shutters. They slowly crept through the alleyway between the two buildings. Once in the rear, they spotted the door. Nick took his lock picks out of his pocket. Within seconds, the door was unlocked. They cautiously went inside.

Inside they saw a dim lit back room to the tobacco shop. There was a scent of incense in the air, mixed with the aroma of fresh tobacco. Around them were boxes and packages of tobacco and other smokers’ implements. They could see the curtained entrance to the front of the shop.

“So you will not work with me voluntarily, Ms. McDonald” they heard “There are ways to make you talk, and many of them are not pleasant”.

Smith whispered to Nick “Fu Manchu! We need to be extremely cautious!”

“No, I will not assist you in your schemes” she said with a quaking voice.

The sibilant voice continued “You have perhaps heard of Dr. John Lawlor, the noted botanist. He too chose not to work for me voluntarily. However, he now works in my laboratory in Chung King, maybe not voluntarily, and maybe not in full control of his faculties, but his brain...his brain is what is needed. You have perhaps heard of zombies? I perfected that technique many centuries ago. It turns one into an exemplary worker with no will of their own. He is my slave, a thinking soul-less hulk. The work is good, but the individual will does not exist. They become a slave to Doctor Fu Manchu, doing my bidding. He has almost discovered the secret of accelerating the growth of pseudo-tobacco. I am sure that with your assistance, the goal can be reached. You can either help us on your own accord, or else you can be made to

assist us.”

The quaking voice continued “I will not help you in your scheme. It would destroy the Empire.”

Then you must now depart New London with me. We shall travel this night using my Ring Drive Ship to Chung King. There, we shall work on the problem before us, of which, I am sure we will soon have a solution.”

Smith nudged Nick and whispered “On three, we rush the room. One, Two, Three”

They rushed into the front of the shop. They saw Samantha McDonald tied to a chair. But there was no one else in the white room!

“Ah, Sir Dennis and Mr. Reardon, I though you might show up at my meeting with Ms. McDonald. Do not go any further. I assure you that you will all die if you do.”

Nick pointed electrical wiring that ran along the floor towards the chair.

“The chair is a trap I see Fu Manchu” Smith exclaimed.

“So it is” he replied “My offer still stands, her life for the Jahn book. Your lives too, for that matter. If she gets off the chair, the explosives detonate. If you cut the wires, the explosives detonate.”

“I think we shall decline your offer. This is a problem we can solve.” Smith replied.

“Before you do, look on the table.” They saw a pipe being smoked with a pipe king device. They also saw wires connected to it. “When the pipe burns to the bottom, the wire is cut and the explosives detonate. You must decide now! You can see it is almost out.” said the voice of Fu Manchu.

Sir Dennis turned to Nick and said in a low voice “Look over at the wall. There is a junction box. All of the wires lead to it. When I give the signal, you must use your Lasgun to melt it. You only have one try. The wires in the box must fuse instantaneously; otherwise we are done for it.”

He slowly raised his hand and lowered it. Nick took aim at the junction box and fired. There was a bright flash of light, the sound of the discharge, then quiet. They breathed slowly.

“I guess you guessed correctly” Nick said. We are still here, and there was no detonation.”

“Guess nothing. The secret was that the device operated on an open circuit. If Ms. McDonald got up from the seat, a switch opened and boom. When the wire in the pipe opened, boom. If you blasted the wire, it would open and boom. The trick was to fuse the junction box so that there could be no open condition.”

They heard the now familiar voice “Very good Sir Dennis, but you are not yet out of the trap.” They heard the sound of a gas being released into the room.”

“Quick Nick, grab the girl and let’s get out of here!”

Smith took Nick’s gun and blasted the front door while Nick carried Samantha out the door. As they got outside, they could hear the sound of a launch heading away from the building down the Thames River.

“I guess Fu Manchu got away again” Nick mumbled.

“Looks that way, but he will be back. This was just a temporary setback to his plans.”

### **-6- The Two Sisters**

For several weeks there had been no news of Fu Manchu. Things had reverted back to a relative quiet in New London. Sir Dennis Nayland Smith had been in and out of Nick’s home a number of times while he was trying to locate Fu Manchu. Nick was following the book lead to see if there were any other copies of Jahn’s book in existence.

Sir Dennis, Nick and Samantha McDonald were sitting in the study, Smith smoking his decrepit Dunhill pipe, while Nick was smoking his large Old Earth Dunhill Shell with the silver band inscribed ‘2000 RTDA, San Antonio’. Samantha was smoking an Old Earth Peterson Sherlock Holmes series pipe. Sir Dennis’ true identity had been shared with Samantha.

“I have always wondered what ‘RTDA’ stood for as stamped on this pipe” Nick commented.

“As I recall, it stands for ‘Retail Tobacco Dealers Association’ a trade group in the United States for proprietors of tobacco shops. They held meetings and exhibits once a year. ‘San Antonio’ is a city in Texas where the meeting was held. Pipes and tobacco products would be sold from the wholesaler to the dealer at these shows.” Samantha responded.

“This is one of my favorite pipes” Nick replied “It smokes well every time, regardless of the tobacco. It smokes straight down to the heel with no dottle.”

Sir Dennis replied “It is a fine looking pipe also, and in remarkable condition. Down through the centuries, no one has ever found an exact replacement for the briar found and crafted during the First Age of Man. The golden age of pipes was before 2010 First Age, prior to the Anti-smokers taking over the reigns of government in most nations and turning smoking into a criminal activity. At the end of the First Age, Earth was destroyed as was all of the genuine briar. Briar was one of the few natural Old Earth plants that did not grow well when it was relocated to other ecosystems. Although there are many substitutes and replacements, none are as good as genuine Old Earth briar. It must have been the environmental conditions of soil, sun, water, air, etc.

Likewise, genuine tobacco also did not transfer well to other ecosystems. There besides the ones grown, pseudo-tobaccos that are chemically made are just not as good as Old Earth tobaccos. These days, only the true well-heeled pipe collector can afford both Old Earth pipes and tobaccos. And the discerning palate can discern the difference between today's products and those from long ago. Fu Manchu's plans ultimately will upset the economics of the Empire which is why he must be stopped. He would control the flow of tobacco through the Empire."

"Yes, the Old Earth pipes and tobaccos cannot be duplicated in this day and age." Nick said "I am most fortunate to have a friend that is interested in both and can afford such expensive tastes, and most importantly, he shares his interests with others. Speaking of the Emperor, how was it that you are known to him and Varten?"

"Back in my younger days, I had my battles with Fu Manchu. As I said, he had developed two doses of the elixir of life. Once when Petrie and I had fallen into his clutches, he forced Dr. Petrie to inject the substance in me to see if there were any dangerous side effects and if it worked. I was ill for a long period of time, but recovered. It seemed like time stopped. My friends grew older, but I remained the same as when I was injected, and thus you see me today."

He continued "Over the centuries, I have worked for those who fought Fu Manchu. It seems to be a constant waiting, fighting, and regrouping. There were periods when good ascended and periods when Fu Manchu's forces were in the ascendancy. It is sort of a constant struggle between right and wrong. I have been working in one capacity or another for the House Lineaus throughout its ascendancy to the throne of the Empire. Leopaldo's father was a fine man and I was honored to serve him as I am in serving Leo. Oh yes, I am also permitted to address him as 'Leo' in private. Few know my true identity and history. The elixir of life keeps me in good health, never aging one day. I am proof against any disease. I could be physically harmed, but unless it is a fatal blow, the elixir accelerates the re-growth of organs and cells. I have been examined by the best medical minds in the Empire and am a puzzle to them. Perpetual life is not perpetual boredom as I have my challenge in that some day there will be an ultimate defeating Fu Manchu."

"I hope that you can do that" Samantha replied as she tamped her Peterson "but it looks to be a never ending story".

"Like I said, he has been quiet for the last 500 years. For him to be active again, means that he has something very important in his scheming."

"I think that I may know someone that can help us. My sister, Haley McDonald also is a pipe smoker. She is also involved in the tobacco trade. I believe she has contacts on Chung King. She told me as story a while back. There is a planet in the star system next to Chung King. The planet is almost entirely devoted to the raising of neer-tobacco. Note that neer-tobacco is grown while pseudo-tobacco is made from chemicals. It seems that there was a sudden defoliation of the planet resulting in the entire tobacco crop being destroyed. No one was ever brought to account for the disaster. Planetary exobiologists felt that it was an invasion by an unknown viral element. Based on recent events, I believe that it was some activity of Fu Manchu's."

“It seems possible that Fu Manchu was testing part of his plan. If he could destroy a good portion of the tobacco production in the empire and replace it with his quick growing variety, he would become extremely rich and powerful. Is there a way to talk to Haley?” Smith asked.

“If I call her, she can be here in a half hour” Samantha replied.

A half hour later, Haley McDonald was admitted to Nick’s townhouse. She was just as attractive as her sister, but several years older. She was taken to the study and introductions were made. “May I join you in a pipe” she asked.

“Sure” they all said. She took a Castello Natural Vergin #65 full bent pipe out of her purse. It appeared to be well smoked. She took out a pouch of tobacco filled her pipe and passed it around.

“I stole this tobacco from my sister” she said with a wink of her eye “It is Balkan Sobrannie, a very ancient Old Earth tobacco. It is very hard to find.”

They all agreed that it was excellent as long, thin tendrils of smoke arose from their pipes toward the ceiling of the room. She repeated her story to the assembled group.

“Do you know if there were any strange ships in the quadrant at the time of the incident?” Sir Dennis asked.

“The investigation turned up an extensive number of ring drive ships. There are two in which you may be interested. The ring drive ship “Eternal Peace” and the ring drive ship “Fah Lao Sue” were both in the area. However Empire Authorities cleared both ships and their personnel.” She said.

“The investigators may have cleared the ships, however, bribes go quite a way, and, of course, Fu Manchu has other means of persuasion at his disposal. The Fah Lao Sue is the one that interests me as I doubt if anyone, other than me, would know that it is named after the daughter of Fu Manchu.”

“That is quite interesting Sir Dennis” said Samantha “maybe it would be worthwhile for a higher level of empire officials to re-examine the investigation.”

“I believe it would. Nick, could you contact Castle Pesaro and request an inquest into this matter.” Smith asked.

Nick sent a message to Varten von Eckman at Castle Pesaro requesting the review of the inquest.

It was several hours later that the McDonald sisters had finished their last pipe and went home for the evening. While locking up for the night, Smith had commented that it was uncharacteristic for Fu Manchu to lie low. He said that he thought something would break very

soon.

### **-7- En Route**

The communicator rang very early in the morning. Nick rolled over in his bed. The clock indicated 5:30 AM. It was a hyperwave transmission from space directly to Nick. The message was from Varten von Eckman.

*Nick,*

*I and a taskforce are heading towards the Chung King system. We have been in space for the last week. Based on the evidence that you and Sir Dennis have uncovered, we feel that our nemesis has already returned to the Chung King star system. The Fah Lao Sue has been located in that star quadrant. I have dispatched a cruiser to retrieve you and Sir Dennis. Be at the New London spaceport at 10:00 A.M.*

*Varten von Eckman*

Prior to waking Sir Dennis, Nick made a few well placed calls. He woke Sir Dennis around 6:30 AM and informed him about the communications.

“I had a feeling that the action would move from New London to Chung King. Have you ever been there?” he asked.

“No, I have not. The Galactic Guide indicates that the star system has 10 planets of which three are earth-like and inhabited. The three planets are said to be established in line with ancient Chinese civilization models.”

“That is all true.” Smith replied “The three planets in the Chung King star system are known as Heaven, Sky, and Earth. Except for the Imperial Government, the local governmental system is patterned after the Chinese Imperial System where a magistrate or mandarin is the local chief. He is administrator, judge, prosecutor, jury, and executioner. Of course, any execution must be approved by the Emperor after review by the Imperial Courts. Although common English language is spoken, Chinese is the official second language and is used in all but Imperial business. I would suggest that you learn both High Chinese and Cantonese by hypnoED while we travel to meet Varten and the fleet.

They arrived promptly at the spaceport. The Ring Star Cruiser ‘Pittsburgh’ was waiting their arrival for immediate takeoff. They were ushered into the wardroom to meet the Captain as the ship lifted off. As they entered the room, they saw two individuals.

Nick held his hand out to one as he immediately recognized him. “Hi Commander, you look like you are doing well. Sir Dennis Nayland Smith, may I introduce to you Commander Jim McClelland. The Commander and I were involved in a little matter a while back at the Vesta V Space Station.”

“And I would like to introduce you to Captain James Petrie, Captain of the Pittsburgh” he said.

Hands were shook all around. “Gentlemen, please sit down. You may light up if you wish. It will take us two days to catch up with the fleet.”stated Captain Petrie.

They took out their pipes and filled them with a neer-tobacco blend provided by the Commander. Nick recognized the Commander’s trusty Cavicchi Poker pipe. He enquired as to Ike McCane, the infamous hawkbill pipe collector from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. During the conversation he found that Sir Dennis and Ike had smoked many pipes together at PittPenn University discussing pipe lore.

“I think it is time we come to business” the Commander said “As you know, the Chung King system has three planets, Heaven, Sky, and Earth. Earth is primarily an agricultural planet. Eighty percent of the land mass is used to raise tobacco used in cigarette, cigar, and pipe tobacco blends. Two weeks ago, the entire crop of planted tobacco was wiped out within a 24-hour time period. As of two days ago, the crop had reappeared, but it was a new and different type of tobacco. Although still little more than seedlings, the tobacco is growing back at an immense speed. At the current rate, it will be full grown within a month.”

“This sounds like the work of Doctor Fu Manchu” said Sir Dennis.

“That is the conclusion we also came to” replied Captain Petrie.

“But nothing has been lost” said Nick

“On the contrary, our analysis of the new tobacco plants indicates that it is a mutation with one new side effect. The new tobacco is extremely addictive. Just one smoke and you are hooked to it. It is very powerful in that respect” explained the Commander.

“I now can see through Dr. Fu Manchu’s scheme. The addiction effect is most insidious. He must be stopped!” replied Sir Dennis.

“The entire star system has been placed under quarantine. We have found the Fah Lao Sue docked on the planet Heaven. We believe that Fu Manchu is in its capital city, Yangzee. He must be found and stopped” said the Captain.

“We have received a communication from the Doctor” said the Commander as he passed the message around:

*To: Emperor Leopaldo*

*By now you have seen my little demonstration of my latest discovery. I intend to introduce my little plant into the ecosystem of every star system in the Empire. You cannot stop it. My demand is that you abdicate your throne and name me as Emperor of the Universe. This is my first warning. You will only receive two more.*

*Fu Manchu*

“This message was received yesterday. Of course, we will not give in to his demands. We will stop him” stated the Commander “Varten is with the fleet in the Chung King system. Empire Intelligence Agents have infiltrated all of the planets. I believe Lu Jo is with the group on Sky. Our plan is to have you, Nick, and Sir Dennis land and operate in Yangzee. We believe we will only have a week to bring this affair to a successful conclusion. If we do not, we plan to destroy all three planets. We cannot let this abomination spread to any other star system.”

“It is quite a burden that has been placed on Nick and me. We hope that we can live up to the assignment” replied Sir Dennis.

“All I can say is that the Emperor believes that his team can find a solution to this problem. He hopes that the system does not need to be destroyed. I can say that he would feel the loss very deeply” said the Commander.

The Star Cruiser Pittsburgh strained its drive in traveling to the Chung King system. The four men spent hours discussing possibilities.

**-8- Into the Tower**

Nick and Sir Dennis eventually found themselves in the Empire Offices on the planet Heaven. After discussion with the locals, they scoured the town for possible hiding places for Doctor Fu Manchu. They had not any leads when Nick received a private message on his communicator:

It troubles me very much what is happening. Your friend saved my daughter years ago, and I am under obligation to him.

*The dragons no longer fly here  
The swans do not sing here  
The white peacock had come  
Look near the white tower  
The lidless green eyes are within  
/////*

“Look, Sir Dennis at this message. I believe it is from your friend.”

“Nick, I believe you are on to something. I wonder what is meant by the ‘white tower’. The rest, I believe I understand” replied Sir Dennis.

They studied the maps of the city. In the old section of town, they found an old building that resembled a white tower. It was in an old Buddhist monastery.

“We have nothing to lose in going there. Have the local security surround the area and cordon if

off to all traffic. Make sure no one goes in or out.” Sir Dennis said.

On their way to the monastery, they received a short communication from Varten von Eckman and the fleet. He indicated that a second message had been received from Doctor Fu Manchu. They had 24 hours to comply with his demands.

They arrived at the monastery in good order. It was a bad, stormy night. To all appearances, the monastery had been deserted for many years. The walls were in disrepair. Plants overgrew the crumbling walls. They decided that they would enter through one of the lower entrances. They gave instructions that if they did not return in twelve hours, the monastery should be destroyed.

After passing through a door in the lower level, they came to a courtyard. Ahead of them was a tower that rose about two hundred feet. They approached a side entrance very cautiously. Once inside, they came to the main room having vaulted ceilings.

They split up, Sir Dennis going around the circular room to the left, Nick to the right. Nick soon lost sight of Sir Dennis in the darkness. They did not want to risk a light. Nick thought that he had heard movement ahead of him. He cautiously moved forward. He heard a scream. Suddenly the floor under him gave way. He fell through it and all went black.

He awoke some time later and found himself securely tied to a chair. Another chair was next to him. He recognized its inhabitant as Sir Dennis. They were both stripped to the waist. A low light was ahead of him. Standing at the desk was a figure he recognized, Fu Manchu!

He heard a groan from the chair next to him.

“I see we meet again Mr. Reardon, Sir Dennis. This time, you will not interfere with my plans because I plan on doing away with both of you. Sir Dennis, you are very familiar with my poisonous snakes, spiders, and other assorted helpers. Above each of you is suspended a small hair-like filament. I have just released a drop of my strongest poison. It will travel down the hair, land on you and you will die in a most painful manner. My plans have been made. I will soon depart on the Fah Lao Sue to seed other new systems with my discovery. Soon all humankind will declare me Emperor! It has been a pleasure you being my foil all these years, Sir Dennis, but it must now come to an end. Mr. Reardon, I have enjoyed this little play with you.” He said in his sibilant voice.

Fu Manchu suddenly left the room!

They looked up. Slowly they saw the drops moving down the thread. Smith’s was traveling faster down the cord. Down and down the drops came. The one above Sir Dennis’ head jumped from the thread to his head. Nick heard a loud scream. The drop was about to breach the space to Nick’s head when there was a sudden blast of a Lasgun. It was a direct hit on the thread. The drop vaporized and was gone.

Lu Jo and several men dressed in the EIS uniform came running into the room.

“Good shot” Nick Shouted at Lu Jo. Quick, how is Smith?

Lu Jo released Nick from his restraints. They went over to Smith where he was laid on the floor by the other agents. His breathing was growing shallower and shallower. Suddenly, he took a deep breath and sat up.

“This elixir of life is quite good stuff. I believe that Fu Manchu is becoming a dotard in his old age. Obviously he forgot that it pretty much repairs any damage to the body. Quite quickly and quite effectively it works!” he said as he stood up.

“Where is Fu Manchu” Nick asked.

Lu Jo used her communicator to contact the fleet. She reported back “It seems that the Fah Lao Sue tried to lift off from the space port. It was destroyed on liftoff by one of the Empire Ships.”

“Let’s get out of this depressing place” Sir Dennis said.

They departed from the monastery.

### **-9- Reunions and a Message**

They all met back on the Ring Cruiser Pittsburgh and assembled in the wardroom. In attendance were Varten von Eckman, Nick, Sir Dennis, Commander McClelland, Captain Petrie, and Lu Jo. They had all just sat down and lit their pipes, filled with genuine Old Earth McClelland #27 Virginia, an excellent all day, indoor smoke comprised of a beautiful orange-red, shag-cut cake tobacco.

“This tobacco is quite mellow” stated Commander McClelland “my forbearers of this name made an excellent tobacco with a mellow flavor and a light, subtle aroma.

“Yes it is” replied Nick “Lu Jo, I see academy training paid off. You are quite a shot with a Lasgun”

“First in my class I would have you know. I took the Commandant’s Trophy” she replied.

“I guess Doctor Fu Manchu perished in the Fah Lao Sue” Varten said.

“Don’t be so sure. Many times I have thought he perished, but he seems to be like a cat with many lives” he replied.

“How did you know how to find us? I thought you were on planet Sky, Lu Jo” Nick asked.

“Well, we don’t tell you everything. You were of course being traced and monitored. Varten

would not send his best agent to a planet where nothing was happening, would he?”

“Best agent? I thought that was why I was on Heaven” Nick replied.

“You are both my best agents” Varten said “the Emperor needs both of you and both alive. We always keep our options open and never depend solely on just one course of action.”

“Well, it paid off in this case” Sir Dennis said.

A junior officer knocked on the door and came into the room. He passed a message to the Captain. Captain Petrie read it and passed it around.

*To: Sir Dennis Nayland Smith*

*By now you realize that I did not perish on the Fah Lao Sue. I also have many escape routes as part of my plans, after all Sir Dennis, have we not jousting for many years?*

*I regret the loss of my ship, but there are others. I also believe one of my servants to be a spy and he will be dealt with severely. I will assure you that my plans to destroy the tobacco economy have been put on a shelf. You are all good adversaries. Who knows, maybe in another five hundred years I shall return.*

*Sir Dennis, I did not forget the wonderful powers of my elixir of life. It works quite well does it not? However, there was always the chance that it would not, and I wanted to test it.*

*You can rest assured that there will be no retribution on my part.*

*Fu Manchu*

“Well, I guess we will not hear from him in my lifetime” Varten said.

“If I have learned anything about Doctor Fu Manchu, it is that in his own way, he is an honorable man. He will not trouble Emperor Leopaldo in his reign.”

“Well, I will end this discussion with a little doggerel from Old Earth that I found when researching the Doctor” Lu Jo said “It goes like this ‘Many man smoke, but Fu Manchu’”

They all laughed and kept on smoking their pipes as the Ring Cruiser Pittsburgh charted a course to Castle Pesaro.

-END-

