

THE BROKEN PIPE

By
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Emperor Leopaldo was enjoying his breakfast, alone at Castle Pesaro. Varten von Eckman, his chief advisor would soon arrive for their customary 1st pipe of the day while briefing the Emperor regarding the events transpiring in the empire. This briefing over pipes was usually the calm before the storm of running an empire. It was a meeting that he looked forward to each day.

There was a knock at the door. Varten was announced by Helmsford and entered the room. Leo motioned for Varten to sit in the two large overstuffed chairs with a smoking stand between them. A large pipe tobacco jar and ashtray were set atop the smoking stand.

"Good morning Varten." Leo said.

"And a good morning to you sire", he replied, "looks like weather control is going to produce another beautiful, sunny day for us."

"Yes, I never tire of weather like this", he said as they sat down and began to fill their pipes with the neer-virginian tobacco in the jar. Leo was smoking his Old Earth Ser Jacopo briar calabash and Varten his Old Earth GBD Prehistoric bulldog.

Varten began telling Leo about the progress in locating the Utopia Terrorists on New Florida. The military actions had been successful and the insurgents eliminated.

"Leo, we have received a minor report on the Waste, Fraud, and Abuse hotline. It seems that an unsigned message was left regarding inappropriate activities of empire governmental officials on Herment IV. According to the complaint, government officials are pressuring a local business group, headed by Robert Hamlind. They are throwing up road blocks and red tape to prevent them from starting a pipe and tobacco sale business called the Pipe Collectors' Club of Herment (PCCH). Separately, we also have a signed complaint from Robert Hamlind to much of the same effect. The complaint identified Robert Thexton as the official involved." Varten reported.

"I know Robert Hamlind of the PCCH, and I do recall Robert Thexton. Robert Hamlind is a respected member of the Reichstagen and represents Herment IV. He is a wealthy landowner and shrewd businessman. He also is an accomplished pipe collector. Robert

Thexton was involved in that tobacco tax scandal on RatoII several years ago. As I recall, he was implicated, but nothing was ever proven.” Leo said.

“Yes, he was implicated, but no charges could be substantiated after the mysterious death of the other two co-conspirators. They died in a very unusual manner” Varten said “ You will recall that the other two associates were found hung in a locked room with a broken pipe, connecting the stem and bowl, hung around their neck. The case was never solved and remains open to this day.”

“Thexton was subsequently transferred to Herment IV. The planet and he have remained relatively quiet, at least up to now. What do suggest, Varten?” Leo asked.

“I think we should have Nick Reardon stop in at Herment IV and do a little investigating. Nick will keep a low profile. We will not let the local authorities know he is arriving.” Varten replied as pipe smoke encircled his head.

“Yes, keep it very low key. If Thexton is involved, we want to nail him this time. Tell Nick to keep us informed and that we have full confidence in him.” Leo said “What’s next on the agenda?”

The two men smoked another pipe that morning while they went on to discuss more of the Empire’s happenings for the next hour or so. Thus, is the ins and outs of governing an empire.

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Nick Reardon was lounging in the small cabin of his needleship plunging through space. He was smoking his bent Larenzetti pipe, enjoying a bowl of Gorag Paese’s Old London Dock pipe tobacco. It is a blend of pseudo-virginias with a touch of neer-perique tobaccos; very reminiscent of a genuine tobacco blend from Old Earth. He had received a communications from Varten von Eckman at Castle Pesaro. It was short and to the point:

Nick,

Proceed to Herment IV. Snoop around and find out the involvement of Robert Thexton in the affairs of Robert Hamlind and the Pipe Collectors’ Club of Herment. Report directly to us and do not get the local authorities involved at this time. You have our full confidence and the resources of Castle Pesaro are at your disposal.

Varten

Two reports were also sent and were sitting on the small table. They were forwarded with the directive and were from the Empire Intelligence Service (EIS) computer data

bases and their analysts. The first report was about Robert Thexton and the affair d' Rato II. At the conclusion of the affair, Robert Thexton was transferred to the Empire Administrative Office on Herment IV, in charge of the Empire Economic Affairs Office.

The second report indicated that Robert Hamlin was a very wealthy individual, a power to be reckoned with on Herment IV. He was a very well known and respected citizen. Hamlin also was powerful in the Reischstagen, and was one of the Emperor's supporters. He was a sponsor of a group called "The Pipe Collectors' Club of Herment", or PCCH. This informal group consisted of about twenty pipe smokers/collectors on the planet. They had a shared interest in pipes and tobacco. A core group of four individuals, Hamlin, Mike Mc Pain, John Unlawly, and Dave Polbar decided to become partners in opening a full time, brick and mortar pipe and tobacco shop with an internet sidelight. They had rented a shop in Herment's capital city of St. Georges, and announced the new business in the media, but it had not yet officially opened for business. The report indicated that Robert had a sizeable private collection of Old Earth pipes and tobacco, and had traded with the Emperor on occasion.

The smoke from the Old London Dock blend became a cloud in the cabin as he read the reports. As he watched the tendrils of smoke rise, he thought of how much he enjoyed the Larenzetti pipe and pipe smoking in general.

He had been a pipe smoker for a number of years. He found that it helped while away the hours spent traveling among the stars. A good pipe was like a good friend, dependable, and his Old Earth Larenzetti pipe was just that. It was always dependable. He could count on it always providing a great smoker, regardless of the tobacco that was used. Pipes made from neer-briar and synthetic-briar, although good, just did not smoke as consistently well as the Old Earth genuine briar pipes.

Nick broke out of his train of thought when he realized he was day dreaming. 'Back to the present and my mission' he thought. He set the needleship's controls to "jump" to the vicinity of the Herment star system. He would land, locate some EIS contacts, and do a little snooping.

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His trip and arrival at Herment IV had been uneventful. He breezed through planetary customs. An aircar taxi transported him to his hotel. He was booked into the Empire Hotel since he enjoyed the chain. Empire Hotels were to be found on most of the more economically important planets. They prided themselves in service and quality. After checkin, he was informed of a message. The message the desk clerk had handed him was short and to the point; 'Call 9-1-824-596-4837.'

As he went to his smoking room, he had the impression he was being watched. He threw his kitbag on the bed. He filled his travel pipe from his pouch and lit it. He took out his communicator, keyed in the access code and keyed in the number.

“Yes”, a female voice answered on the other end of the conversation.

“Nick Reardon, here”

“Ah, Mr. Reardon. Please follow these instructions exactly. At precisely 12:00 noon UCT, go to the air taxi stand at the side door of the Empire Hotel. Take the third taxi in line. It will be #221. The driver has his instructions. Do not talk to the driver as he is a mute.” The voice instructed him.

“But, but...” Nick said as the communicator went dead.

Nick finished his pipe. ‘Not bad. The tobacco was very ordinary, but enjoyable.’ he thought. It was 11:45 A.M. UCT. ‘I had better get going.’ He thought. He took the lift down to the first floor, got out and went to the side door. Again, he noted that he was being followed by the same person who observed him during registration. He went through the door into the bright sunlight of Herment IV. He walked to the airtaxi stand, and entered the third in line, #221. The stand attendant started to walk back to the third taxi while motioning him to go to the first taxi in line, but his airtaxi driver quickly pulled out from the taxi stand.

They spiraled up and around the tall building until they got into the high speed stream of traffic. Once they smoothly merged with the traffic stream, Nick took time to observe his surroundings. The back of the car was very comfortable albeit dark. The windows were darkly tinted on all sides. Although he could see outside, shapes were blurry. A plexan window was between the taxi operator and him. He saw two large ashtrays on each side of the compartment. He took out one of his lesser travel pipes, filled it with tobacco from his pouch, and lit it. A little yellow light came on above the window. No Smoking it said. He tamped his pipe out and returned it to his jacket pocket, and sat back to enjoy the ride in silence.

After twenty minutes, the taxi dropped out of the high speed traffic stream, through several lower speed streams, changing directions numerous times. Nick was thoroughly lost. Finally it settled down to the planetary surface. The door opened and Nick exited the airtaxi, which promptly took off again. As he stepped outside, he found himself in front of a large manor house type of building. The house was situated on a large estate complex surrounded by ancient pine trees with a large lake to the rear of the estate. A young lady dressed in the height of fashion skin-tight body suit was approaching him, coming down the well-worn gravel walkway from the mansion’s enormous front door. As she got closer, he noticed that she was a real ‘looker’.

“Mr. Reardon” she said “I am Cindi Cadego. Welcome to Rivendale, the home of Robert Hamlind. I am his aid. Mr. Hamlind has been expecting you. I hope you had a pleasant trip. All the security precautions are necessary as Mr. Hamlind will explain. Let’s go inside as it has been quite a hot and humid summer here on Herment IV.” She said as he was motioned towards the manor house.

Nick observed that security was indeed quite tight at the manor house. He noticed the security stations and communications arrays, the laser projectors hidden among the trees, and various other armaments located on and around the manor. He also thought to himself that Ms. Cadego could probably dismember a man if left to her own skills and devices.

The large, ornate manor door opened as if on its own accord as they approached the house. They entered into a vaulted reception room with a high ceiling and gothic windows. They crossed to the far side over polished pink marble floors. As they approached an ornately decorated carved wooden door Ms. Cadego knocked twice. A green light incorporated into the door frame's design of pipes and tobacco plants glowed and she opened the door. Nick was ushered into the library of a very wealthy man. The room had the same vaulted ceilings and gothic windows as the entrance hall. Amongst the many book cases, Nick saw a desk with a small light in the far corner of the room. A man of slightly average height, balding, and with a moustache smoking a pipe rose from behind the wood-carved desk. Nick could see that he was smoking a fine example of a Castello #84 pipe, commonly known as a donkeynut.

“Mr. Reardon, I am Bob Hamlind. Welcome to my home, Rivendale.”

Nick walked towards the desk as Ms. Cadego exited the room, closing the door behind her.

“I am glad that you are able to visit me. I have a little problem that I believe you can be of assistance. I know you have a number of questions which I hope to answer. Please, sit down. You may join me in a pipe if you so wish. The tobacco jar to the left of your chair contains an Old Earth tobacco called ‘Peter Stokkebye Luxury Twist’. I think you will enjoy it.” Robert Hamlind stated.

Nick sat down, took out a large Dunhill group 5 billiard pipe from his pocket. Robert Hamlind filled and lit another pipe, what looked to be a Castello GG #65 smooth pipe.

“That is a fine pipe, Mr. Reardon” Hamlind observed.

“A gift from the Emperor” Nick replied as he filled his pipe and lit it.

“Down to business.” Hamlind started “Varten von Eckman, and old friend of mine, informed me that you would be arriving on Herment IV. He asked me to explain the nature of our problem to you and to assist you in such a way that the local authorities would not be needed. As you can see, I am a very wealthy man. A wealthy man seems to acquire enemies whether on purpose or not. For several years, I and a group of friends have formed a group, the PCCH, or Pipe Collectors’ Club of Herment IV. I am the titular president of the club, but I and three other members form the core group. We, the core group, decided a year ago to go into business and establish a commercial arm of the club. It did not appear to be a difficult task. However, we have found to be stymied at every

step we take. Usually, the road block is in the form of one or another governmental official. I do not know for sure who is behind this harassment, but I believe it is Robert Thexton, the Empire Economics Affairs Officer for Herment IV. So that is the problem. I have no proof that it is Thexton, just my suspicions. My co-partners Messrs. Mc Pain, Unlawly, and Polbar agree with me, but we do not know why?"

"Have you discussed this with him?" Nick asked.

Yes we have, and he denies any involvement no does he claim he has a motive for interfering with our business venture" Bob replied "He got a little testy with us and we did not depart on good terms."

"What types of problems have you encountered?" Nick enquired as he puffed on his pipe.

Ham lind tamped his pipe, re-lit it, and thought for a few seconds before replying "We tried to rent a store. The available ones we chose suddenly became unavailable. We had to settle for a non-prime location down by the river in the not-so ritzy part of St. Georges. We applied for tax collection licenses and the applications suddenly got lost. They were denied, we had to grease palms to obtain them. Banks lost or denied our applications for business loans or to establish accounts. Our software malfunctioned, our business was misrepresented. We setup a intergalactic website for orders, our page was hacked, our ISP was shutdown. It seemed like there was just one problem after another, all aimed at keeping us from opening our store. These are just a few examples of why we are not yet in business"

"A red light started blinking on Robert Ham lind's desk. "You will have to excuse me for a couple of minutes. Please make yourself at home. I have some business to take care of. You may enjoy my library and the Old Earth pipes in the display cases. Feel free to try any of the tobaccos in the jars." He said as he left the room.

Nick replied his travel pipe from a jar marked "Balkan Sobrannie, No. 759". He lit it and began to smoke it. While examining the books on Bob Ham lin's bookshelves, he stopped at the pipe section. He read some of the titles:

"The Pipe" by Georges Herment (there were several well read copies)

"Donkeynuts" by McCain & Davis (a famous treatise)

"The Leopaldo Saga" by John Seiler (a fantastic series of Pipe-relates short stories)

"The Pipe Smokers Empemeris, volumes 1 and 2" by Tom Dunn

Nick heard the door open and turned around. Cindi Cadego and Bob Ham lind entered the library. Bob spoke "I just had some terrible news. John Lurch, Dave Polbar's manservant has just phoned us. Dave Polbar has been found dead! He was found hanged from a beam in the library of his estate. The room was locked from the inside, and a broken pipe with the stem tied to the bowl by a small piece of twine was found tied around his neck!"

Dave Polbar's household staff had not yet alerted the local police, but had contacted Robert Ham lind's staff with the urgent news. A war party was convened. It was decided that Cindi and Nick would visit the scene of his death while Robert would contact the police so that they would have ample time to investigate before the arrival of the authorities. They would use one of the Rivendale estate aircars since the Polbar estate was only five minutes away by air. They agreed that, with the death of Dave Polbar, the local officials would have to be brought into the picture – somewhat.

They quickly left Rivendale for the Polbar estate, arriving there a short time later. Leaving the aircar, they approached an estate much like Rivendale, but with a castle motif. The drawbridge was lowered as they approached. A tall, thin man dressed in formal attire met them. He introduced himself as John Lurch, Mr. Polbar's assistant. He appeared to be beside himself with grief.

"We..We found him hung in the library. We were bringing him his lunch. The door was locked from the inside. We had to force entry. He was so still...and that damn pipe, busted in two, hanging around his neck!" he exclaimed.

They were led into the house and on to the library. They had not touched anything. The body was hanging from a rope tied to a chandelier hook into a ceiling beam. The body was a pasty blue and still. Two ends of a pipe were connected by a cord and hung around the victim's neck.

"We will not disturb anything until the authorities arrive!" Nick told the group now assembled at the entrance to the library.

Nick closely examined the body and the broken pipe. He studied the fibers below the corpse on the thick carpet, and the chair that was toppled over beside it.

"Without touching the pipe, can you tell me if this was one of Mr. Polbar's pipes?" Nick asked.

"It was", John Lurch replied.

"Does anything look out of place in the room?" he asked.

"No, nothing" Lurch replied.

The door suddenly opened. Four men rushed into the room with blasters drawn covering the group around the corpse. A fifth man dressed in a black trench coat deliberately cruised into the room. He walked up to Nick "Who are you and what do you have to do with this suicide?" he demanded to know.

"My name is Nick Reardon, this is Cindi Cadego. Ms. Cadego is an employee of Robert Ham lind. If I could have a word with you in private...?"

“Private! I am Inspector Renault. Let’s talk.” He said as they moved to a quiet corner in the library.

“I am Nick Reardon of the Empire Intelligence Service.” He took out an alcohol swab, and rubbed it on the palm of his hand. A spider tattoo slowly appeared.

“So?” Renault said “and what does that mean?”

“I believe that being of the EIS and an EMPIRE OFFICIAL, I take jurisdiction.” Nick replied.

“Look buddy,” Renault stated “We don’t take kindly to meddlers around here on Herment IV. I will take charge of this investigation. I really don’t see any reason to investigate an obvious suicide. You stay out of my way and I will stay out of yours. Don’t go making any trouble over a suicide.”

“You go look at the body and scene. It wasn’t suicide, it was murder! A cold, calculated, bloody murder was conducted.” Nick replied.

“It was obviously a suicide” Renault replied “and as such it will be reported and the book closed on the matter.”

“Ok have it your way. And THANKS for the cooperation.” Nick responded as he and Cindi arose to leave.

“Keep yourself available” Renault shouted as they began to walk out.

“I’m at the Empire Hotel in St. Georges, Room 417.” Nick retorted as they departed the manor house.

“The authorities seem to want this death as a suicide. How did you deduce murder, Nick?” she asked.

“It was the pipe, Cindi. The stem and bowl pieces are from two different pipes!”

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Nick decided that he wished to interview Robert Thexton. He used his communicator to contact the Empire Economics Affairs office and set up an appointment. His appointment was set for 5:00 P.M. UCT. Cindi dropped him off at the Herment Empire Administration Buildings Complex, but not before Nick had engineered a late evening dinner date.

As he was admitted to the office, Nick saw that Robert Thexton was a tall, thin, distinguished looking man with a full head of silver-grey hair. As was his appearance, so was his office, immaculate. Sitting off to the corner of his desk was a "No Smoking" sign. Several others were placed on shelves and the book cases which lined the walls of the room. Nick got the point, a person not friendly to tobacco.

He introduced himself as being on special assignment from Castle Pesaro. He said that Thexton could contact the Castle which could vouch for his identity. He began questioning Robert Thexton, who appeared a little nervous.

"You are aware of the group of men that have formed the 'Pipe Collectors' Club of Hermit' and their desire to open a business." Nick asked.

"Yes I am aware of them and their desire." He replied, "and I have tried to help them develop their smoking business, however they have rebuffed any help from me!"

"In what manner have you tried to help them?" he asked.

"I have tried to help them obtain their tax license, their shop, and assistance on a business website. However, I don't have the power they think I have. When the group met with me, they became angry and abusive, so I stopped the meeting. Mr. Mc Pain and Mr. Polbar were excessively arrogant and troublesome."

"Mr Reardon, Hement is not like other planets in the Empire. Smoking is not generally accepted. Some people would like to see it made illegal." He said "Although I do not smoke, I can see the viewpoint of those that do. Smoking is quite a contentious public issue on Herment." He ended.

"You may not be aware, Mr. Thexton, that the planet Herment was named for Georges Herment, the author of the book "The Pipe", a noted Old Earth pipe smoker and author." Nick informed him.

"No, I was not aware, and I doubt that many of the citizens are. Ironic, isn't it." He replied.

"Since you met with the group, I take it you know Dave Polbar." Nick said.

"Yes, but only as one of the associates. I don't know him socially." He answered.

"He was found dead this afternoon., hanged in his library on his estate." Nick informed him.

"A suicide?" he asked.

"No, I believe he was murdered, although the local authorities do not agree." Nick answered.

“Well, I had nothing to do with it. I have been here all day.”

“One last thing, Polbar was found hung, but a broken pipe was tied to hang around his neck.” Nick stated.

“I have nothing more to say” Thexton responded.

Nick hailed an airtaxi to return to the Empire Hotel. He went up to his room. Tried the electronic key in room 417 and recalled he was in room 418 across the hall when the door did not open. His key admitted him to Room 418.

He had a message waiting on the room communicator from Cindi, which he returned, confirming their dinner for 9:00 P.M. at the dinner restaurant “The Water Gypsy”.

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She arrived right on time at the Empire Hotel’s front door in her shiny red aircar. Nick had come down from his room a few minutes earlier. He had the distinct feeling of being watched. A quick look in a mirror told him that he was indeed being observed by the same man he saw earlier at the registration desk, now smoking a bulldog shaped pipe.

Her bright red aircar was the latest model. She looked stunning in her fashionable outfit.

“Come on in” she said “It will only be a short trip.” He sat beside her.

The aircar lifted out of the Empire Hotel entrance.

“Any new developments?” she enquired.

“No, just a total denial of involvement by Robert Thexton, except that he was taken a little aback when I mentioned the manner of Dave Polbar’s death, and that it was not a suicide.”

“I never trusted Robert Thexton. I think it is his whole demeanor. He is so standoffish.” She stated.

“Yes, he does come off as a rather cold fish.” Nick replied.

Nick saw that they were now flying towards the outskirts of the city towards a large body of water.

“That is Lake Burley.” Cindi said “The Water Gypsy is a restaurant that is basically a converted houseboat. Originally, The Water Gypsy was A.P. Herbert’s home on Old Earth. Towards the end of his life, Georges Herment lived there. Sort of an appropriate to name a restaurant for the namesake of the planet.”

The aircar landed in the parking lot. They walked across a short bridge, on to the deck of the houseboat. They were admitted and quickly seated near a corner window. The view out the window of Lake Burley was stunning. They watched some of the pleasure craft. They ordered drinks and an appetizer.

Nick surveyed the room and other customers. A full service bar was along the left wall. A door at the far end opened into a smoking lounge. He made a note that they would have to visit it after dinner.

Their drinks were served when Nick enquired “What do you do for Robert Hamlind?”

“Oh, nothing special, I am his girl Friday. I was a orphan. He took me in as a child, raised me, provided for my education, college, post-graduate work, physical training, and so-on. He sort of created a ‘supergirl’ in me” she answered.

“Well, he did a very fine job” he replied “I wouldn’t want to get on your bad side.”

“Well, thus far you haven’t, but you better provide me with a good dinner tonight!” she said with a laugh “You are aware that I am to spy on you and report back to Robert.” She said.

“I am” he said “and I need to learn as much from you about Robert, his partners, Thexton, and the entire situation.” He replied.

“Of course” she replied and began a long explanation on how the partnership came into being, their attempt to setup business, their problems, etc.

They had a very pleasant dinner consisting of local seafood and a very nice white wine. The conversation over dinner dealt with the principal players in the case and the political situation on Herment IV. Nick learned that the local politicians, while generally loyal to the Empire, did not let that loyalty stand in the way of turning a profit, in other words, they could be bought for the right amount of money. He also learned that if you were part of the in-group, you were OK, but if you were not, you better be able to protect yourself. Bob Hamlind and his associates were not part of the current political regime in-group, hence their well protected estates.

Following dinner, they relocated to the smoking lounge for an after dinner drink and a pipe for Nick. Nick took out an Old Earth Dunhill group 6 slightly bent black blasted billiard with a silver band and started to fill it up. To his surprise, Cindi removed an Old Earth group 3 Dunhill shell briar billiard from her bag. She told Nick to stop filling his pipe and dump the tobacco back into his pouch.

“I have something special for you to try. It is from Robert’s special stock. It is fitting for our Dunhill pipes. It is a tin of Old Earth Dunhill No. 965. I have had it before, and it is excellent.” She exclaimed.

They filled up their pipes and lit them. The latakia smelling smoke arose from their pipes until it was captured by the Water Gypsy's ventilation system. "The finer art of pipe smoking was one, among several, of the topics Robert personally taught me. Therefore, I have a preference for Old Earth Castello and Dunhill pipes and very high class tobaccos. I can live with the neer- and pseudo-tobaccos, but nothing beats the Old Earth tobaccos." Cindi explained.

"Oh, I quite agree" Nick responded "fortunately, my employer Emperor Leopaldo is very generous in terms of Old Earth pipes and tobaccos. I saw that Robert Hamlind's library had a copy of the 1954 FA book "The Pipe" by Georges Herment. That book was the foundation of my pipe smoking education, so being on this planet is a joy. Emperor Leopaldo lent me his copy of 'The Pipe' to read, one of the few times I have physically handled an Old Earth book."

"Herment's book 'The Pipe' is easily found here in electronic format. However, a paper copy from the First Age of man is a worthy addition to any library. I bet we can pick up a version in e-text at the Water Gypsy's gift shop on our way out.

As they were enjoying their drink and pipes, a man approached behind Nick and stopped. Cindi stood and greeted the visitor.

"Mike! How nice to see you. Won't you join us in smoking some of Bob's 965?" she asked the visitor.

The man sat down and started to fill a large Peterson bulldog shaped pipe. "Nick Reardon, this is Mike Mc Pain, one of Robert's partners."

Nick recognized Mike Mc Pain as being the man who had been observing him at the Empire Hotel!

"Mr. Mc Pain", Nick said "Cindi has told me so much about the Pipe Collectors' Club of Herment. I believe you and your new commercial venture will be a success." That is a fine pipe. An Old Earth Peterson, I believe?"

"Well thank you, and yes, the pipe is an Old Earth Peterson. It is the 'Watson' from the Sherlock Holmes series." He replied "Cindi, I just heard of Dave's death. The police have ruled it as a suicide. I can't believe that Dave would end it all in such a manner. And the pipe, it was so tacky, and a waste of one of his good pipes."

"Mike, we are all saddened at Dave's death. I do not believe the case is yet closed on the manner of the death. Mr. Reardon is involved in looking into the PCCH business venture adventure. You may be able to provide him with some information" she stated as she smoked the small Dunhill pipe.

“Tell Bob his tobacco is as good as ever, especially when it is free.” He replied as he puffed on his pipe “Ask away Mr. Reardon.”

Nick sipped on his brandy, tamped and re-lit his pipe while in deep thought for a moment and asked “Among the PCCH core group that partnered for the business arrangement, what was the financial agreement?”

Mc Pain thought for a moment and responded “We each would put up 25% of the necessary capital, about 200 solaris each. In terms of pipes and tobacco, we would buy, sell, or trade to our customers. If we purchased pipes, we would have the 1st option to privately purchase anything that became available before offering it to someone outside the core group, or the public. We also agreed that Bob Hamlind would take the lead in the business, John Unlawly would be our pipe and tobacco procurer, and Dave and I would be responsible for obtaining the space for the business and its renovations. To date, officially, not one pipe or one tin of tobacco has been sold since our shop has not opened due to lack of a business operation and tax permits. Unofficially, we each have acquired several nice pipes and a couple of tins of Old Earth tobaccos.”

“I think this Old Earth tin of Dunhill #965 is one of the tins Robert acquired.” Cindi chimed in.

“Thank you. Has the funding of the business caused a financial strain on any of the partners?”

“No.” Mc Pain replied “We are all wealthy men. Hamlind is a very astute business man in terms of buying and selling aircars, plus he has large investments in real estate on this planet and off-planet. Unlawly obtained his money through asteroid mining investments. I am a successful insurance solicitor and Plobar’s money was inherited.”

“What do you know of Robert Thexton?” Nick asked.

“Until our business started, very little. Hamlind believed he was the one obstructing us. I don’t know. I do know that Thexton was reassigned here and arrive with a cloud in his past. Hermit IV is not a plum job. It is one of the dumping places for used up beaucrats.” Mc Pain replied.

“My final question is “Why have you been following me since my arrival on Herment IV? I have observed you several times since I registered at the hotel. I know you did not get here tonight until after Cindi and I arrived.”

“Unh, well,.. Robert Hamlind mentioned to me that someone was coming to look into our little problem. I had placed an anonymous report on the Empire Administration Waste, Fraud, and Abuse Hotline. My contacts at the spaceport alerted me to your unusual arrival. I, ah, wanted to keep tabs on what was going on and where you were going.” He cautiously said “I followed you here from the Empire Hotel.”

“You can stop tailing me.” Nick said as he emptied his pipe. “Cindi, you can tell Robert that the Dunhill #965 is excellent. I think it is time to leave.”

Nick paid for the evening with his Empire Express Card as they were leaving and purchased an E-text version of Herment’s ‘The Pipe’ at the gift shop. Cindi flew Nick back to the Empire Hotel. As she landed the car, Nick invited her to his room for a nightcap. As they entered the hotel, an explosion shook it. Nick saw a bellboy and asked “What happened?”

“There has been an explosion, Room 417” he said.

“Room 417?? I am in room 418, just across the hall.” He said as they went up the stairwell.

Room 417 was totally destroyed. The hotel manager told Nick that the police were on their way.

Cindi pulled Nick aside “Nick, at Dave Polbar’s house today, didn’t you tell the staff and Police that your room was number 417?”

“Yes I did.”

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Two men sat smoking non-descript pipes. The stench of a cheap aromatic near-tobacco filled the darkened room. A small illumination globe sat on the old table around which they sat.

“We will now have to be more cautious than ever.” The short man said “We almost got the EIS agent tonight. We should have eliminated him at the hotel, but the explosives were in the wrong room and went off too early.”

After blowing a rather skilled smoke ring, the taller man replied “Next time. They must not know that House Chesterfield is involved. If our activities in supporting the Utopian Terrorists become known, the Emperor would be forced to take direct action and stop us.”

“Care and caution are the order of the day!” the short man replied.

Hundreds of parsecs, and many star systems away, at Castle Pesaro, two other men also sat smoking pipes and reviewing reports. Their pipes were as well as their tobacco was top shelf. Emperor Leopaldo and Varten von Eckman had just completed reading Nick Reardon’s report regarding the affairs on Herment IV.

“I think something very deep is taking place on Herment IV.” Leo said as he puffed on his bowl of Old Earth McClelland #5100 Virginia “You should probably send a naval vessel there to support Nick if he needs it.”

“I have already done that” Varten replied as he re-lit his JT Cooke blast pipe. “The Empire Space Navy Ring Drive Cruiser Magellan was dispatched when I saw the report Nick sent via Hyperwave Communications.”

Leo replied “I think the words of wisdom are ‘wait’ and ‘watch’. Let’s see how events transpire and Nick proceeds. Keep a close watch on him.”

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Nick had a very busy night. Due to the confusion that followed the explosion, he was moved to a new room. Cindi had left to report back to her employer. Over several pipefuls of tobacco, he had composed a detailed report on the events on Herment IV, encoded it and transmitted it to Castle Pesaro via the hyperwave communicator. He knew something was happening that was deeper than the superficial results he was seeing. It was very late before he went to bed, alone.

‘They almost got me last night.’ He thought while eating his very late morning breakfast. He was expecting a hyperwave communication from Castle Pesaro since he had requested more in-depth background information on each of the four PCCH principals, Thexton, and Cindi. He received the top secret report after his breakfast was finished, while he was smoking his first pipe of the day. From the reports, it became very evident that the stories of both Cindi and Robert Hamland were accurate. As for the others, the only bad note was the suggestion from the reports, that in their youth, Mc Pain, Polbar, and Thexton had briefly been involved with the Utopian Action Group (UAG). Over the years, this group had grown from an idealistic group seeking to establish a utopian society to one that used terror tactics to achieve its goal of enforced peace and tranquility. The Utopian Terrorists were a long-term antagonist to the Emperor, tying up much of the Empire’s resources. In fact, they were responsible for the death of Robert Chamberlain, one of Leopaldo’s most trusted associates, advisor, and husband to his old friend Helen Chamberlain. They also were responsible for the recent military actions on the planet of New Florida.

He filled his second cup of pseudo-coffee when the door prompt alerted him to a visitor.

He arose, went to the door and found Inspector Renault.

“I was just having coffee, would you like to join me?” Nick enquired.

“Yes I would.” The inspector replied.

They sat down at the table and Nick poured the inspector a cup of coffee.

Nick began to fill the neer-briar brandy shaped pipe sitting on the table. “May I join you in a pipe? The inspector asked.

“Sure” Nick replied “here is my pouch. It contains a fine wexel-virginia tobacco blend.”

“The inspector took out a small neer-briar pipe from the pocket of his jacket, filled it from Nick’s pseudo-leather tobacco pouch and passed it back. “I want to apologize for my attitude yesterday. I assure you that I want to fully cooperate with the Empire Authorities. You need to fully understand Herment IV politics and government. Although the top officials are appointed by the Emperor, a few families control the top positions. These families set the policies and tone of the planetary administration. Right now, the direction is non-cooperation with the Empire. There are people here that remember the days before we became part of the Empire.” He said as he belew a smoke ring towards the ceiling.

“Of course I realized that Dave Polbar’s death was not a suicide.” He continued “The word had reached me en-route to the scene that it would be considered a suicide. We are also always being watched. You could say that yesterday’s performance was for the men that were with me and those at the scene. Our meeting today is ostensibly for me to interview you regarding last night’s explosion in room 417. I will try to help you however, and whenever I can, but I have to protect myself.”

Nick took the pipe tamper, tamped his pipe “Thanks for your assistance. I understand the tight rope you are walking. I do have one question; have you seen any ativities of the Utopian Terrorists here on Herment IV?”

“Nothing directly attributed to them.” He replied “but there are rumors that they have cells here on the planet. We did find that the characteristics residue left in room 417 by the explosives matched plastique explosives that have been know to be used by the Utopian Terrorists.”

“Could you pleser put a tail on John Lurch and Mike Mc Pain. Oh, and also on Robert Hamlind and Robert Thexton.” He asked.

“Sure” he replied.

They finished their pipes discussing the various leads in the case. Inspector Renault had also noted that the pipe stem and bowl around Polbar’s neck were from two different pipes. Nick asked if Robert Hamlind was one of the families that ruled the planet and was told that he was not. Nick informed Inspector Renault that he was going to visit the current site of the unopened PCCH store. As Inspector Renault was leaving, Nick’s communicator rang. It was Cindi Cadego. He made plans to meet her ath the PCCH store.

An airtaxi had taken him to the address provided by Cindi. She was waiting for him at the door. The taxi departed.

“Robert gave me a key in case you want to go inside.” She said.

“We will” he said “but I want to check out the area first. Robert told me that they were blocked from obtaining prime real estate and had to accept this storefront location. Do you know which one of the partners found it?”

“I believe that the store was located by both Dave and Mike. They are the ones that negotiated the lease and oversaw the renovations. I don’t know if you will like the inside as it is rather modern.” She replied.

Nick looked around. The store had two large display windows facing the street. Across the street was an aircar parking lot. Between the two windows was the entrance with a cloth awning over the doorway that matched the green and gold trim cloth awnings above the windows. “Pipe Collectors’ Club of Herment” was stitched in gold lettering on the face of each of the awnings. Each of the windows had a crossed of crossed pipes logos with ‘PCCH’ in gold leaf centered on the windows. The window displays had several nice neer-briar pipes on display with tins of both neer- and pseudo-tobacco, but nothing of any special significance was in evidence.

Nick walked around the outside of the shop. Two large buildings were on each side. A small passage was on the right between the shop and the right-side building. The left-side building abutted the shop. He took the passage to the rear of the shop and found a small dock along the river. A door on the back opened on to a walkway that connected to the dock.

They returned to the front of the shop and used the key to let themselves inside. Cindi turned on the glow bulbs. The inside of the shop was unlike any smoke shop that Nick had ever seen. The walls were covered with a light reflecting combination of chromium panels, shelves, and mirrors. The display cases were chromium and glass with mirrored shelves.

“Can you cut down the light?” he asked Cindi.

She lowered the brightness of the glow bulbs. Nick still blinked his eyes “This is unlike any smoke shop I have ever seen. Usually they are done in browns or tobacco colored tints. This one is all shiny and modernistic. It comes off a little too cold for my liking”

“The interior décor of the shop was about the only point Robert disagreed with his partners, however, they outvoted him. He has not been here since the renovation work was finished.” Cindi reported.

Nick observed that the display cases were filled with fine specimens of commercially available pipes. One of the prominent cases contained some current offerings by Brian

Rathenberg and Mark Tinsk, two well know pipe carvers throughout the Empire. In terms of tinned tobaccos, there were tins of pseudo- and neer-tobacco, combinations, and special blends from Gorag Paese, the Sim Gorwaith tobacco company, and the full line of pipe tobacco from the Morton Frog Tobacco Co.

He walked up to the display case where approximately a dozen tobacco jars sat that was filled with bulk tobaccos. He removed the travel pipe from his pocket, opened one jar and began filling his pipe.

“McNay’s Red Ribbon Flake!” he said “I haven’t had any of this since I was on assignment with the Emperor.”

“I don’t think the store owners will mind you sampling their wares!” Cindi said with a wink.

Nick began walking around the shop. He took out a small instrument out of his pocket. It looked like a laser-type measuring tool with some odd components. The hum of a small pump could be heard when a trigger was depressed. “Measuring sniffer” he said to Cindi. He began using it to take measurements. He also periodically depressed a stud and either a red or green light would show on the display. He went over the entire shop and the rear storage area. Opening the back door, he used the device on the walkway and dock. As he re-entered the shop, he appeared to close and lock the rear door. He re-joined Cindi in the front of the store.

“What do you think, Nick? Did you find anything?” she enquired.

“I think there may be something going on here that is more than just selling pipes and tobacco, whether with or without a permit. Also, the measurements do not add up.” He replied.

He returned to the jar of McNay’s Red Ribbon Flake, took out his nearly empty pouch and filled it. He left a solaris on the register. They left the shop, Cindi closing and locking the front door behind them.

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Nick had Cindi fly him back to the Polbar estate. He told her that he wanted to re-examine the library. When they arrived, they were met by John Lurch and taken to the library. Once inside, Nick took out the sniffer instrument he had used at the PCCH smoke shop and began traversing the room. Again, measurements were taken and the red and green indicators were seen to glow occasionally, but ever so faintly.

Nick addressed Lurch “You told us that the library door was locked from the inside and you had to force entry.

“That is correct” he replied.

“Do you now if Dave purchased this estate or if the manor was built to his specifications?” he asked.

“Mr. Polbar purchased the estate, but the library and the rest of this wing was built to his specifications” Lurch replied.

“Do you smoke a pipe?” Nick asked.

“I do.” Lurch replied “Over my career with Mr. Polbar, he has given me many nice pipes, and a couple of Old Earth pipes.”

“Where were you prior to the discovery of the body?”

“I was in the wine cellar encoding the inventory into the household computer.” Lurch responded.

“Thank you John. I will contact you if I need any further information.” Nick ended the interview.

Using the aircar, Nick and Cindy flew back to the Empire Hotel. They went to Nick’s room. Nick put his pouch on the table and invited Cindi to join him in a pipe. She proceeded to fill her pipe with the McNay’s Red Ribbon Flake. Nick fired up his pipe as he connected his computer to his hyperwave communicator. He took out the instrument used at the PCCH smoke shop and at the Polbar estate connecting it to his computer.

“Cindi, this is what we call a ‘doxi’ like a daschund with its nose to the ground. The instrument measures out distances and locates shapes. It is a dimension rendering system and air sampling/analysis device. Via the computer and hyperwave interface, it will connect to the Castle Pesaro computer. It will tell me what it found in terms of trace residual materials, and the dimensional analysis will confirm several theories I have about the shop and the estate.

“I like this tobacco” Cindi told Nick “I haven’t nagged you, so what do you suspect? She asked.

“I will tell you but you can’t report it back, at least until the affair ends.” Nick said.

“Fair enough” she replied.

“I suspect several things. The shop has a secret room or entrance into the adjoining building. The library also has a secret room or a secret entrance. Both sites indicate residuals of illegal explosives. The common factor between the two is Dave Polbar and he is dead. He built the library and designed and directed the renovations to the PCCH shop. I also suspect a connection to the Utopian Terrorists. There are many loose ends to

the case. We need to await the response from Castle Pesaro with the analysis of the data.” Nick explained.

They did not have long to wait. As they were about to empty out their pipes, the analysis was confirmed. Not only did the sniffer detect Plastique explosives at the PCCH smoke shop and the Polbar estate, they were a match and also matched the residue from the Empire Room 417 explosion. The dimensional analysis also confirmed Nick’s suspicion about the secret entrance, rooms, or connection to the other building at the smoke shop and at the estate.

While reviewing this information, Nick’s communicator received a signal that the Magellan was in orbit around Herment IV and was at his disposal.

Inspector Renault phoned him to say that Hamlind was at his estate and Thexton was at his office. He also said that Mc Pain and Lurch had left their estates and were headed to St. Georges. Nick instructed him to let them proceed and keep at a distance, but to break off the tail once they entered the city limits.

Nick called Lt. Calhoun on the Magellan and asked her to have a squad of space marines transported on planet and ready at his call.

“The game is afoot, Cindi and I believe the end-game is ready to be played.” He said
“Time for us to go.”

“Go? Where?”She asked.

“Back to the PCCH smoke shop” he said.

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They parked the aircar several blocks away from the shop and proceeded on foot. The store appeared as vacant as when they left it earlier in the day. They snuck through the passage to behind the shop.

“But the key won’t open this door.” She protested.

“No problem” he replied as he turned on the knob. He pointed to the inside of the door jam “tape” he said “I never locked the door when we left earlier.”

Nick turned on his every day carry (EDC) HDS-U400 pocket light set at low level illumination. The shop appeared much as it had earlier in the day. Walking from the back, he indicated to her to be quiet and approached a panel on the right side. He examined it closely and felt around the panel trim. “Got it” he whispered. He depressed a hidden button and the panel sprung open. He could see a short passage connected to the

adjoining building. Voices could be heard in the entry and a slight glow observed coming from the room at the end of the passage.

They cautiously walked through the passage and could smell the aroma of lousy pipe tobacco. They also recognized the voices of John Lurch and Mike Mc Pain.

“We have to get rid of Reardon, and it has to be soon. He is getting too close!” Mc Pain said.

“Plans are in operation. It will be soon.” Lurch said.

Nick took his needle blaster in hand and burst into the room “Not soon enough, gentlemen! You are under arrest!” he stated.

“For what?” Lurch asked.

“Murder for a start, trafficking with terrorists, illegal arms sales. I think that is a good start.” Nick replied.

Behind Nick, Cindi carefully took a mini-derringer blaster out of her pocket and pointed in Nick’s back. “Drop the blaster, Nick.”

“You too, Cindi?” Nick groaned as she nudged him farther into the room.

The blaster hit the floor and was retrieved by Lurch.

“How did you know it was us?” Mc Pain asked.

“It wasn’t too difficult” Nick replied “The explosives were all a match. I knew that you and Polbar had old connections to the Utopian Terrorists, so why not John? I thought that Thexton might have been involved, but I now see that he was just a dupe.

You and Dave got the explosives and weapons for the Utopian Terrorists. This location was needed for its access to the river and hence the spaceport. All the steel and chrome in the shop was for shielding and just to lower the chance of detection. I surmised that Polbar’s murder was done because he had gotten cold feet. You, John, killed him in a manner used in the past by the Utopian Terrorists to cast blame on Thexton. Too bad you lost his pipe stem and used one of yours instead. If you had used your bowl, it would have been a dead give away. But not too many people know the difference between a Dunhill stem and a Vauen pipe stem. Also, you were on Rato II when the other deaths occurred. I guess Robert Thexton was innocent after all.” Nick continued.

“You pretty much have it all, except for one piece of the puzzle, and that is Cindi.” Mc Pain said.

“You see, Nick, Mike Mc Pain is my father. No one really knew it until he told me. DNA analysis bears it out. Robert Ham lind had nothing to do with the weapons-explosives operation, just a necessary component. Oh well, we do have a problem, what will we do with you and the Magellan in orbit. I can’t let you put my father away.” She said.

“Lets take him outside, stun him and throw him in the river. By the time he comes around, we will be long gone. He will not be able to communicate with the Magellan until he comes too, and if he doesn’t, too bad.” John Lurch retorted.

The men put out their pipes. The four of them started back down the connecting passage, Lurch followed by Cindi, Nick, and Mc Pain. They entered the shop and sealed the passage entrance. AS they headed towards the rear of the building, all hell broke loose. The sight of needle blaster and stun beams could be seen. The last thing Nick later recalled, before passing out, was the sight of multi-colored blaster beams reflecting off the shop walls and mirrors.

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He slowly came back to the land of the living. It smelled antiseptic, like a hospital. He opened his eyes slowly. Two women were staring at him.

“Lu Jo?” he said.

“Yeah, it me.” She replied “You let yourself be bested by a woman.” She laughed.

She continued “May I introduce you to Lt. Calhoun of the Magellan. If it wasn’t for her initiative, you would have been a gonner.”

“Charmed, I’m sure” she said dressed in her combat fatigues.

The Lieutenant continued “you did not know it but your ‘doxi’ is also an encoding beaconing system. We were able to trace your movements. It looks like we arrived just in the nick – ‘NICK’ you get it, of time.”

“Very good, Lieutenant. I wanted to let them dump you into the river. Ha! Trying to get into that little girl’s pants, I bet! You would have deserved a good dunking! Lt. Calhoun talked me out of it so we and the marines rescued you.” Lu Jo chuckled.

“Mc Pain, Lurch and Cadego are all in jail and up for trial with major charges. As accessories to murder, it will not go well for the little lady. It turns out that you were correct in that Mc Pain had connections to the Utopian Terrorists, however, John Lurch was working for House Chesterfield, one of the Emperor’s old enemies.” Lt. Calhoun said.

“Ham lind and Thexton have sent cards and hope a speedy recovery for you.” Lu Jo said
“The doctor said you will be released in a day or so, once the slight burn on you buttocks
heals.

“I doubt you would have done much better, Lu Jo” Nick said”You would have had to
deal with that creepy John Lurch guy.” Nick laughed.

“You will know, Lieutenant Calhoun when Nick has fully recovered when starts making
‘secret agent girl’ jokes. Anyways, you are alive, the villains have been caught, the
Empire saved, and you will soon be back to your old self. Emperor Leopaldo will be
pleased.” Lu Jo announced.

“Please!” Nick said “He will be ecstatic to learn that one of his better agents got shot in
the a\$\$, and that I have given his ‘little secret agent girl’ volume no. 3 of the series” Nick
proclaimed.”

“Oh No!” she said “Time to go home! He is getting back to his old self.” She chuckled

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END NOTE

A month later, the Pipe Collector’s Club Smoke Shop on Herment IV opened to rave
reviews. The store decor had been toned down to look like a 20th century Old Earth pipe
shop. On-hand for the opening were Emperor Leopaldo, Varten von Eckman, Helen
Chamberlain, and others in the Emperor’s household staff. Nick Reardon and Lu Jo
attended but remained very low key in the background. Chuck Stinyon of the Empire
Pipe Collectors’ Magazine attend and wrote an article for the September issue. Robert
Ham lind was well pleased at the outcome of events.

Reportedly, the pipe tobacco flowed like a river. Geroges Herment would have been
proud.

-END-