

THE COUNTDOWN

By
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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 19th and early 20th 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 Castelllos, 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.

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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 23rd 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 near-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.

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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.

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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.

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.

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.

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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.

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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.

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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 Affairs 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 rumor. 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.

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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.

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