

SURPRISE

By
John P. Seiler

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He walked into the room and sat down at his massive desk. At the end was a oval shaped pipe rack full of various pipes from his collection. Old Earth pipes and pipes from the current age. Two tobacco jars were in the center, each with ornately carved lids from the First Age of Man. He glanced at the heavy brown glass ashtray sitting on the right side of his desk. His latest 'find' was sitting in the bowl of the ash tray. The pipe had come to him yesterday in a most curious fashion. It was made by an Old Earth pipe carver named Jess Chonowitsch. Jess was from the Old Earth political subdivision of Denmark, part of the European Union from the First Age of Man. According to his research, by some of that time period, he was considered to be one of the four top pipe carvers. The pipe was a sand blasted brandy shape with a bamboo stem. The hard rubber stem had no markings as it could be inserted in the pipe either side up, one of the features of his pipes. Emperor Leopaldo knew that the pipe was valued very highly, both in terms of economics, and by the care in which previous owners had exercised in its preservation.

He had smoked the pipe the evening before with his friends Varten von Eckmann and Nick Reardon. Varten was his top adviser and weapons master while Nick, as a member of the Empire intelligence service, was one of his most competent operatives. The pipe had come in a nondescript package addressed to the Emperor. The packaging and routing information on the rfid tags indicated that its journey had started on the planet Rigella IX. There were no indications as to who had sent the pipe to the Emperor. It underwent standard scientific scannings to see if it had been tampered with, or any hazardous substances introduced into the structure of the pipe. Varten's people were very thorough in checking it out. Despite all the examination, the pipe was clean, and was just what it appeared to be, a very valuable pipe from the First Age of Man.

As they sat around the small conference table in his private office, they had speculated where the pipe had come from, reaching no conclusion. Leo had filled the bowl of the pipe with his favorite McClelland number 5100 'Red Kake' pipe from the vintage #5100 Tin he had opened. The tobacco was a special tinning from the old Pipe Collectors' Club of America (PCCA), another late First

Age pipe collectors organization. Varten and Nick had filled their pipes from the tin and were lighting their pipes. Varten was smoking a Castello #65 Old Sea Rock while Nick was lighting up his Jim Cooke sand blasted apple shaped pipe. Both were Old Earth pipes.

"First rate pipe with first rate tobacco" Leo said.

"I think Varten and I will agree on the excellence of this tobacco", Nick replied "but we both would like to know where the pipe came from. Who sent it to me? Whoever it was has great taste."

"Yes, I am not entirely comfortable about that pipe, Leo. Somehow I think it was sent to you for a reason. Our best laboratory people have subjected it to all the standard tests, but have found nothing. It is just a pipe, all be it, a very expensive and a fine example of Old Earth pipe making." Varten said with a look of concern on his face as the tendrils of smoke streamed from the bowl of his Castello pipe.

"Jess Chonowitch was a well respected pipe maker. As you can see this pipe is quite well made. The blast and finish are superb. The bamboo is exquisite. You can see the clear epoxy used to seal the edges of the bamboo. I believe I showed you the stainless steel tube that goes from the stem through the bamboo which provides a constant air flow. It is truly a very well made pipe, and I can assure you that it smokes as well as it looks!"

"Leo, it might be worth our taking a look to try to ascertain the origins of the pipe and see if we can learn how it got into your hands. We can have the Castle Pesaro computer systems check the historical records. We can see if our agents can turn up anything." Nick responded as he puffed on his Jim Cooke pipe.

"Yes, of course. See what you can turn up." Leo replied, "But I am going to enjoy the pipe anyway."

"Too bad Helen and Lu Jo are not here to see the pipe" Nick stated. "They will not be back to the castle until Thursday" he said to Leo.

"They will see it when they get back." He responded "I just hope all goes well with their visit to PittPenn University. Helen is conducting some research into some genetic aspects of the tobacco plant while Lu Jo is investigating a theft of some old documents from their Tobacciana collection."

They had spent the rest of the night smoking their pipes and discussing other issues involved in running an Empire.

As he recalled the previous evening's activities, his attention became focused on his computer's annunciator which was flashing. He activated the screen and read the message. It was from Nick who said that he was looking into the pipe, had left a search enquiry with the Castle IT manager, and was taking an ultra fast needle ship to Victoria VI to consult with contacts that may be able to help him. He indicated that he would keep him and Varten apprised of his activities.

He suddenly realized that he missed Helen and his friends Nick and Lu Jo. He was finding out lately that he was missing Helen more and more when she was away.

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Four people were sitting around the table, chatting, at the PittPenn University Dean's patio. They had finished breakfast and were enjoying pipes with their morning coffee on the warm, summer morning. They were all friends of the Emperor. Helen Chamberlain was the widow of one of Leo's chief advisors, Robert Chamberlain, who had been murdered several years before and who was residing at Castle Pesaro along with Lu Jo, the EIS operative. Sam Korson was the Dean of PittPenn University and Ike McCane was a member of the PittPenn faculty and chief conservator of the Emperor's pipe collection. Dean Korson had brought some new pseudo-Wexel Virginia tobacco for them to try which had been artificially produced in the University's research laboratory. It was an attempt to develop a mature Wexel Virginia tobacco from purely chemo/biological means, never being grown from seed stock. A large plume of smoke erupted from the bowl of Ike McCane's Castello #84 pipe as he placed the match over the top of the bowl and lit his pipe. More delicate plumes arose from the bowl of Helen's Charatan pipe and Lu Jo's small Dunhill Old Earth pipe.

Dean Korson was talking as he lit his Old Earth Ashton pebblegrain pipe "The University is honored to have you here. Our research biology department will help you out with your genetic research" he told Helen. "However, I am concerned with this theft." He told Lu Jo. "As you know, we have an extensive collection of Old Earth books that deal with pipes, pipe collecting, and pipe smoking. These are all kept in the Dunn Collection room of Herment Building. There is heavy security in the room consisting of motion sensors and infrared beams which trigger alarms and the valuable materials are kept in climate controlled glass cases. Sometime last Wednesday night, someone broke into the Dunn Collection room. No alarms were triggered, but on Thursday morning, the collection curator, Dr. Melanie Caron, noticed that one of the glass cases was broken and the contents were missing. The contents of the case were the valuable university holding of the Pipe Smoker's Ephemeris. There were 2

bound original volumes of the Pipe Smoker's Ephemeris, along with loose copies of the non-bound issues. Also, a copy of the book "My Lady Nicotinna" by Barre, a copy of the book "The Pipe" by Georges Herment, and a copy of the book "Donkeynuts: an Exposition of a Uniquely Shaped Pipe" by Davis and McCain were missing. Ike, of course, is familiar with all of these tomes. He can explain the books if you have any questions." He concluded as he relit his pipe which had gone out during his exposition.

As she puffed on her Charatan, Helen replied "Lu Jo and I are both well versed on this literature. The Emperor either has copies or originals of all of this material in his collection. Is that not correct, Ike?"

"It is." He replied "In fact, his collection of materials is probably more extensive than the university holdings."

"I wonder how it was that none of the alarms were activated." Lu Jo asked as she used her Dunhill pipe as a pointer to make her point.

"We don't know" Ike replied "But they were found to be functional when we arrived on Thursday morning. The only people that have access to the alarm system are Ms. Caron and the University Security Staff."

"I will want to interview your security officer and Dr. Caron" Lu Jo stated.

Puffing his pipe, Dr. Korson answered "That will be arranged. Do you wish to meet with Dr. Swanson the director of the biological/genetics program Ms. Chamberlain?"

Using a pipe tool to empty the bowl of her pipe into the ash tray, she said "Yes I would. Is Dr. Alwin Berk still with the University? Dr. Sohei Witz, of the Castle Pesaro Medical Staff said that I should talk with him. I would like to meet with him as well."

"I will arrange for you to meet with Dr. Swanson and his staff. Dr. Berk is still with us, but I do not know for how long. His disease mutagenic theory has been discredited by the scientific community and he has been dismissed by the University. He has been offered a small position by a backwater school and has accepted, but I do not believe he has left yet. I will find out and let you know if an appointment can be made."

"When you talk with Dr. Swanson, please tell him that his new pseudo-wexel virginia tobacco is excellent. It is a very good reproduction of the old matured virginia tobaccos." Lu Jo said.

Dean Korson excused himself from the group to set up the interviews.

After he left, Ike asked the ladies what they suspected.

"It sounds to me that the theft was an inside job" Lu Jo replied

"I agree" Helen added "I also think that between Dr. Berk and Dr. Swanson I hope to find out more about the mysterious genetic disease that is destroying the tobacco crop in the Sansom star system. I didn't think Dr. Korson was too happy with me talking with Dr. Berk."

"Dr. Berk's theories on plant disease mutagenesis have generally been discredited by the scientific community. Following full academic procedures, he was dismissed from PittPenn Univeristy. He did find a position at the Univeristy of Trantor in the Statin Star System. Statin is in the same star cluster as the Sansom star system. It is a small school with a minor program in plant biology. He is not a very happy person right now. In fact, Dr. Swanson was one of his chief opponents in their technical field." Ike replied as his pipe went out.

Helen's communicator buzzed. Dr. Korson's secretary told her that she had a 10:00 AM appointment with Dr. Swanson in his office, and a 1:00 PM with Dr. Berk at the University Club. She also informed Helen that Lu Jo had a 10:00 AM appointment with Ms. Caron at the Herment Building and a 1:00 PM with Captain Hansen of the PittPenn Security Department, also at the University Club.

Helen informed Lu Jo of the appointments.

"I will meet you at the University Club, 1:00 PM" Helen told Lu Jo.

"1:00 PM it is Helen" Lu Jo said as she and Ike headed off towards the Herment Building after putting their pipes away.

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VictoriaVI was a simple jump for Nick from the Castle Pesaro spaceport on Planet Hayden. It was a relatively quick trip in his ultra fast needle ship. Once he was on the ground, he sent a message to Hubert Poge asking him to meet at the Dark Shag Tavern. Poge was a contact that he had used in the past. Although he was a minor player in the Empire underground, he kept his ear to

the ground, had many valuable contacts and had often been a useful source of information. Hubert was also a very knowledgeable pipe person, having a minor collection himself.

Victoria VI was a 'theme' planet. A 'theme' planet was one that was setup to portray an Old Earth period of history or lifestyle. Although the most current technology was available, it was not in general use or display. Theme planets were one huge tourist trap and they supported themselves on the tourist traffic. The theme for Victoria VI was the late 1800's Victorian Age. The architecture and dress of the local inhabitants were an expression of the Victorian Age.

A hansom cab transported Nick to the Dark Shag Tavern. Upon entering the dimly lit room, he spotted Hubert at a table in the corner smoking a pipe and drinking a pint. As he got closer, he saw that the pipe was either an Old Earth Dunhill or else a very good reproduction. The tobacco's aroma led him to believe that it was an aromatic tobacco blend.

He sat down at the table and took out one of his Steve Weiner pipes. It was an Old Earth pipe carved in the early 21st Century, a black blasted full bent with a saddle stem. Hubert offered him a tin of 'Sherlock's Blend'.

"Fill up! 'Sherlock's Blend' is comprised of neer-tobaccos that are locally grown. It has a touch of orientals and latakia with a Virginia base. A secret topping is lightly added to the blend. It smokes well, stays lit, and has a pleasant room note." Hubert told Nick.

Nick filled up his black craggy pipe and filled the bowl from the proffered tin. He lit the tobacco and savored the taste of the tobacco. "This is quite a unique blend. I can hardly taste the latakia, but it is there." He said as he puffed a smoke ring while he ordered a pint from the time-period dressed waitress.

"Yes, it is very nice, so what's up?" Hubert asked.

Nick replied "First, I need to know everything about Chonowitsch pipes, and second, if anything is shaking in the underground regarding them."

"I assume you are referring to Jess Chonowitsch, and not his father Emil. Jess was the son of the famous Old Earth Danish pipemaker Emil Chonowitsch. He made pipes for over 30years. He produced 100 - 200 pipes per year. He specialized in an exclusive freehand style, and he often used bamboo. In addition to smooth pipes, he created some beautiful sandblasted pipes. He was called one of the top 4 pipe carvers in the world during the late 20th and early 21st Century of Old Earth. His pipes were very expensive with retail prices for new pipes

between one- and two thousand dollars or more. With such a low production, they were hard to find then, and are almost impossible to find today. I have only ever seen one such pipe and that was in the collection of Chuck Stinyon, the editor of Empire Pipe Collectors Magazine.” Hubert answered.

He continued “As far as anymore appearing, there was a rumor going around about a year ago that one had been located in a cache of pipes found on a derelict starship from Old Earth. However, the rumor was never confirmed nor the cache put up for sale, either legitimately or on the black market. I have not seen anything from this supply source.”

“Can you get me any more information or check up on the cache of pipes?” Nick asked.

“I can try. If I come up with anything, I will send it to your communicator. While you are here, you should visit the Baker Street Tobacconist shop. They have the best pipes and tobaccos on Victoria. The owner, Jud Pearl, is also very knowledgeable. You should check them out.”

“I will” Nick replied as he emptied his pipe, pint, and left the Dark Shag Tavern. Another hansom transported him across the town to the Baker Street Tobacconist shop. From the outside, it looked like an ancient tobacco shop from the turn-of-the 19-20th century. As he entered, a door bell chimed. Nick walked into a well appointed pipe shop. The massive woodwork and cabinets were overpowering. There were huge glass front cabinets full of pipes. Large display cabinets with tins and jars of tobacco were behind the wall length counter. At the end of the counter was a roll top desk with a wizened old man smoking a pipe using a pen to make entries into an accounting ledger.

“Are you Mr. Pearl?” Nick enquired.

“Yeah, that’s me. What can I do for you?”

“A friend of mine let me try some of his ‘Sherlock’s Blend’ pipe tobacco. I believe it came from your shop. I would like to purchase some.” He answered.

“Yeah, yeah, Sherlock’s Blend is my creation. It is a rather nice smoke. I think I still have a pound in the jar. Why don’t you try some?” Pearl replied as he walked over to the counter full of tobacco jars. “Here it is, I told you about a pound. It will cost you three solaris. Have a bowl before I bag it. Anything else?”

Nick filled up his Weiner pipe from the proffered jar as Jud began to bag up his purchase.

"Nice pipe. Old Earth if I recall correctly", Pearl replied "looks like a Steve Weiner. Your selection in pipes is not shabby at all."

"You are correct on all accounts" Nick replied. "I am trying to find an Old Earth pipe for a friend of mine. The pipe was made by Jess Chonowitsch. Are you aware of anything available?" he asked as he lit his pipe.

Pearl looked at his pipe and responded "Pipes by that carver are almost impossible to obtain. Besides being rare and expensive, any that turn up are purchased immediately. It is just as it was when they were made. They were sold pretty much the day they were made, such was the demand. I heard of a pipe showing up several months ago, but it was sold to an unknown buyer immediately. I do have an equally rare pipe which is also Danish if you are interested. It was made by S.Bang. The "Bang Boys" were said to be the equal of Chonowitsch." He went back to his desk, opened a drawer and removed a small box. He gave the box to Nick who opened it and took a beautiful pipe out of the pipe bag. The pipe was definitely Danish, a black blasted brandy bowl with redish highlights and a curved saddle stem.

"Beautiful" Nick exclaimed "Definitely a very nice pipe. How much?"

"About 2,000 solaris" he replied "very nice, very rare, and very expensive!"

"But it is not a Chonowitsch" he said. "I'll take it" he said as he pulled out his Empire Express Card to pay for the purchase. The Empire treasury can pay for this one he thought to himself. It will be a gift anyways.

Jud Pearl charged his purchase and wrapped it up. "Thank you young man" he said.

"Thank you" Nick replied as he left the store. As he sat in the hansom to return to the spaceport to return home, Nick checked his e-mail on his communicator. He had received a message from Poge that he had no more information for him. He also sent a coded message to Helen, LuJo, and Varten. The message was "Gift found".

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At a few minutes before 10 AM, Lu Jo arrived at the Herment building and found the offices of Dr. Melanie Caron. Ike had returned to his office in another

building and promised to meet with her and Helen after their interviews. She was announced by the secretary and ushered into a rather ornate office. As she approached the desk at the far end of the room, she heard the secretary leave and the door close. Along both sides of the walls were large, massive wooden bookcases, filled with many old rare books. In the days of computerization, books had become a rarity. The desk in front of her was just as large and massive. She saw a pipe rack with tobacco jars in the front, center of the desk. A rather tall, but statuesque and stern looking woman sat behind it. At a distance of three feet from the desk, the impeccably well dressed lady stood and offered Lu Jo her hand.

"I am Dr. Melanie Caron, the curator of the Dunn Collection", she said.

"My name is Lu Jo. As you no doubt are aware, I have been asked to look into the theft of the documents from the Dunn collection the other night."

"Yes, Dean Korson told me that you would be interviewing me. He also said that you were from Castle Pesaro. Please sit down." She said as she indicated a plush leather chair. "I hope you will join me in a pipe?"

Lu Jo sat down and took out her pipe and pouch. As she did, Dr. Caron offered her one of the tobacco jars. "Please try this. It is a special blend of tobacco that I have had made for myself. It is similar to an Old Earth tobacco called "Old Glory" that was issued by the Pipe Collectors' Club of America. It is a Virginia with white burley, a touch of latakia, toasted cavendish, and a top note." She said as she took a pipe from the pipe rack and filled it.

"It's so nice to see another female pipe smoker" Lu Jo said "The tobacco is quite good, no bite, burns well, and tastes good".

"It would be a joke for the curator of the Dunn Collection not to be a pipe smoker. Since you are associated with Emperor Leopaldo, I will assume that you are well versed in pipe lore since he has a collection that is second to none in the Empire. Tom Dunn was one of the leading bibliophiles and collector of Tobicanna of the 20th Century. He published a rare tome entitled 'The Pipe Smokers Ephemeris' for over 30 years. Although they are available in a digital format, the original hardcopies are quite rare." Dr. Caron stated as she puffed on her pipe.

"This is a very nice office, and you are smoking a very nice pipe" Lu Jo commented "An Old Earth Brian Ruthenberg if I am correct."

“You are quite correct. I assume that you are obviously referring that the pipe and style of the office is a bit above the means of a university curator. Once again, you are correct. Dr. William Caron, my father, was a member of the House of Reagan. He made his fortune in the geothermal energy industry and has several empire-wide patents on the technology. Before his death, he made a large grant to PittPenn University, which was his alma matter. With the funds, he established the Herment Building and much of the Dunn Collection. One of the stipulations was a position for myself which is why I am here, and I am quite independently wealthy, so I have my own means for my office and so-forth.”

“I see” said Lu Jo “but I pretty much already knew that from my briefing and the dossier on the theft. You have pretty much been cleared as you have no motive or need to have committed the theft. By the way, the pipe is quite beautiful. Brian Ruthenberg was a skilled Old Earth pipe craftsman.”

“I deduce that the Empire Intelligence Service is thorough in its briefings. Yes, the pipe smokes as well as it looks. I would guess that your pipe is a reproduction of an Old Earth GBD bulldog.”

“You would also be correct in your guess. When I travel I do not take an expensive pipe, although I did bring a small Dunhill with me on this trip. Besides the rarity of the documents that were taken, and they could not be easily fenced, why would anyone want to steal them and go to such trouble in such a secure location?” Lu Jo asked.

“That is a question I have been asking myself since the event. I have no answer, but let’s go look at the scene of the crime.” Dr. Caron replied as she rose to escort Lu Jo out of her office. They emptied their pipes, left the office, went down a long hallway and took an elevator to the first floor of the building. Passing through another long hallway, they headed towards the rear of the building.

“As you can see, the Herment Building is the main library facility for the University. However, there are several satellite locations on the campus. If you peer into some of these rooms, you will see terminals and computers since almost everything now is electronic. PittPenn University is known for several of its collections of Old Earth Books. Besides the Dunn Collection, we also have Empire Class collections of Old Earth books by Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, H.P. Lovecraft, and an especially well known collection of Occidental Books including the I Ching. Most of these collections are also housed here in the Herment Building.” She said as they finally approached a massive oak door. On a sign next to the door was stated ‘Dunn Collection’. “The collection has been closed since the theft.”

Dr Caron placed her hand on a biometric reader and the door opened. Glow bulbs lit up the room. The room was lined with book cases that were filled to overflowing. She saw several areas with plush chairs and six large flat glass display cases. They approached a case to the left of the door which was empty.

"This is the case that held the stolen documents. As you can see, there was no forced entry. Also, none of the alarms were activated."

Lu Jo studied the display case and then examined other ones. They also, held many Old Earth books on tobacciana. She recognized many of the titles having seen them in Emperor Leopaldo's collection.

"Do you have a list of people that have visited the collection in the month up to the theft?" she asked.

"I can get you that information. I will have it assembled and transmitted to your communicator." Dr. Caron replied.

"It has been a pleasure meeting you. I may call you if I have any more questions. I have a meeting at the University Club. Could you please give me directions?"

"Surely. It has been a pleasure meeting you. Oh, by the way. Do you know a Nick Reardon? I understand he also works at Castle Pesaro." Dr. Caron enquired.

"Why yes I do." Lu Jo replied.

"If you see him, please say hello and I still remember our meeting here several years ago. Tell him I well remember it."

"I shall do that when next I see him." Lu Jo responded as they headed towards the main entrance of the Herment Building.

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At 10:00 AM, Helen Chamberlain found herself ushered into a conference room. She could tell that a meeting had been going on prior to her arrival among three people. The two men were smoking pipes which were expensive, but were more of shapes in vogue in the Empire but were not Old Earth pipes. The young lady was not smoking. A tall, distinguished gentleman rose upon her entrance and approached her.

"I am Dr. John Swanson and with me are my associate Dr. William Jamison and his research assistant Dr. Lucy Linden. We are the kernel of the team that is looking into plant mutagenesis. I understand that you are with the biological team at Castle Pesaro."

"I am" she said "my formal training is as an officer in the Empire Fleet, however, I have been working for many years in this technical area. Emperor Leopaldo has asked me to meet with you and Dr. Berk to discuss a problem. Dr. Swanson, I hope to find out more about the mysterious genetic disease that is destroying the tobacco crop in the Sansom star system. As you may know, a rare type of neer-tobacco similar to the Old Earth type called Latakia is produced in the Sansom star system. Of all the planets in the empire on which neer-tobacco is grown, it is the only place where such a specialized tobacco strain is produced. The combination of weather, soil, and the tobacco processing yields a top notch product that is used in many of the more popular neer-tobacco blends found in the Empire. May I join you in a pipe?"

"Yes, please do" Dr Swanson replied "As a matter of fact, here is some 'Professors' Blend' which, if I am correct, contains a portion of the tobacco you are describing. It is several years old, but has matured well in the tin." He said as he passed an opened tin to Helen.

"You must enjoy working for the Emperor" Lucy stated.

As she filled up her Old Earth Dunhill lovat, tamped it, and lit it, Helen continued "Yes I do. I have known Emperor Leopaldo for many years. We were in the same class at the Academy and on the same ship while midshipmen. My late husband was one of his very close advisors."

"Is that an Old Earth pipe?" Jamison asked.

"It is. It was a wedding gift from the Emperor to me."

"I have never seen an Old Earth pipe before. It is beautiful, and very rare."

"It is indeed" Helen replied "But let's get back to the immediate problem".

"As you may know" Dr. Swanson began" the plant disease theory holds that viruses may attack plants like they do humans. They can cause a breakdown in the cellular structure. I believe that they do this by causing damage to the plant cellular DNA structure and that certain agents may cause a transmission from one plant to another. Dr. Berk believes that the damage is already inherent in the genetic structure and is just waiting for the appropriate trigger mechanism to

cause the damage and that it promulgates itself in the plant structure. It may seem a small difference to you, but is a big difference in scientific terms. The viral path we have seen, the trigger mechanism, we have not."

Drs. Swanson and Jamison proceeded to make a half hour presentation on the science behind their theory which was quite technical.

"So, if I understand correctly, you believe that the virus causes the damage and Dr. Berk believes that the damage conditions are there, just awaiting an agent to trigger it."

"You are essentially correct" Dr Swanson replied "I would recommend you go to the Sansom star system and look for an organic cause to the problem."

"I will have an Empire Ship go investigate and look for an organic cause to the problem." Helen replied. "I must go soon as I have a 1:00 PM appointment at the University Club. Could you please give me directions?"

"I can do better than that" Dr. Swanson replied "Lucy will escort you to the club."

"Well, thank you for your time. I think I understand your advice and I really enjoyed the tobacco."

Lucy and Helen left the building and headed, under Lucy's direction towards the University Club. As they walked across the campus on the sunny, warm day, Lucy told her about being a research assistant.

"Although I have my PhD and am a research assistant, there is still quite a career ladder to climb to become a full researcher with tenure. Having Dr. Berk on my review committee has not seemed to hurt my career, but one never knows. As you are probably aware, Dr. Swanson and Dr. Berk do not see eye-to-eye, and there is much animosity between them."

"I am aware of that Lucy and I am having lunch with Dr. Berk. When I report to the Emperor, I have to be fair and impartial, present both viewpoints, and make my recommendation."

"You must have had an exciting life Ms. Chamberlain" Lucy stated.

"Yes I have and it keeps getting more exciting."

As Lucy and Helen approached the University Club, Helen told Lucy "If you ever visit Castle Pesaro, please look me up. I would like to have a chance to talk with you at greater lengths."

"That I shall, and good luck in your investigation." Lucy said and left.

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The University Club was one of the social centers for PittPenn University. It was a large structure with full a full gym and sports facilities. The third floor was a very modern large dining facility with side rooms for small group meetings. Membership was for the University staff and faculty. It was very expensive. Members were primarily the upper crust of the university society.

When Lu Jo walked in to the dining room, she saw that it was very busy. There were many discussions going on. She saw Helen on the opposite side of the room talking with a short older man. Their drinks had arrived as they were talking.

She walked up to the Maitre D and asked for Captain Hansen. He led her to a corner table to the right of the main entrance. A thin man was sitting at the table with a drink and smoking a long stemmed Canadian pipe. "Captain Hansen?" she asked.

"I am he" he said "Please sit down. What would you like to drink?"

"Bourbon and ginger, please." The waiter left to fill the order.

"I have been contacted by Varten von Eckmann and asked to provide you with full support. I do not have much to add to the report we telefaxed to you. I have no idea why the documents were stolen other than that they were rare and expensive being from Old Earth."

Lu Jo's drink arrived. She took out a pipe and pouch and joined the Captain in a pipe. "I always enjoy a pipe before and after lunch" she said as she lit the pipe.

"I like your pipe. Old Earth Ascorti, I believe"

"Yes it is, one of the maritime series." Lu Jo answered "All of your locks and alarms are computer controlled, are they not?"

"Why yes they are. It is all run by the central computer system. The library contains the main PittPenn computer. There are other branch servers at various locations across the campus. Why do you ask?"

"I have a working theory, but there is much information I need to get confirmed. I have asked Dr. Caron to provide me with a listing of all the people that have visited the Dunn Collection in the last month. I would like you to provide me with names and companies that worked on the Herment Building and the Building's computer system. It is very curious that the alarms did not activate and that the thief even got into the Dunn Collection room."

As they were about to order lunch, Captain Hansen's communicator alarmed. He answered the communicator. "Duty calls. I have to go across the campus to attend a meeting with the administration. I would like to have lunch with you, but perhaps some other time?"

"Perhaps. Please send me the information I requested to my communicator and thanks for your help."

Lu Jo looked across the room and saw that Helen was still deep in her luncheon engagement. She signaled for the waiter and ordered lunch.

'Damn, stood up for lunch again! Where is Nick when you need him? Speaking of Nick, I wonder what he has on Melinda Caron?' she thought to herself.

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The luncheon engagement with Dr. Alwin Berk was indeed interesting. Dr. Alwin Berk was a small man, barely five foot six. He was about sixty years of age. He was discussing his plant disease mutagenesis theory. "You have to look for the causative trigger" he stated "Something happened to trigger the disease process in the tobacco plants. It has always been there in the genetic code, but something triggered it! If the trigger goes away, the disease will revert to a dormant state."

"I understand what you are saying, Dr. Berk. I am going to have an Empire ship go to the star system and investigate. They will look for the triggering agent. The question I have for you is if we find the trigger, we can reverse the process?"

"Yes, remove the trigger, the disease goes away"

Helen and Dr. Berk had finished their lunch. Helen asked Dr. Berk if he wanted to join her in a pipe. She took a small Rinaldo pipe out and filled it from a pouch

of McClelland 5100 Red Kake, a fine Old Earth tobacco gifted to her by Emperor Leopaldo. "Would you like to try some Old Earth tobacco Dr. Berk?"

"Sure would. I don't think I have ever tried any real Old Earth tobacco." He took out of his jacket a solid state carbonized smoking pipe. "Not quite worthy for real Old Earth tobacco" he said "but it will have to do." He filled his pipe from Helen's pouch. "This is way above university pay" he said as he lit the pipe.

"I understand that there is quite a bit of animosity between you and Dr. Swanson" she said.

"You are so right on that point. John Swanson was a graduate student of mine many years ago. Originally, he was a geothermal engineer, but as the story goes, he was involved in a scandal and was fired from the company that had employed him. He tried several professions, but ended up in plant physiology. I'm not saying he is not a genius, but we do not see eye-to-eye on an important theory, and I guess we never will. He ended up getting his doctorate, but not with me as part of his committee. We had words and he has never forgotten nor forgiven. Holds them against me to this day, he does. Now, he has won. I am leaving next week for my retirement position, teaching plant physiology 101 to undergraduates at a Podunk university. I guess I will survive." He said rather wistfully as he stared at the smoke rising from the bowl of his pipe.

He looked at his watch "Speaking of which, I have to go and attend a class myself. It has been many years since I have taught undergraduates. I need to update myself for my new position. I have much to catch up on. Thanks for the lunch, and good luck on your investigation" he said.

He got up and left. Helen sat at the table smoking her pipe. She saw Lu Jo across the dining room and signaled for her to join her.

Lu Jo walked across the crowded room, pipe and neer-coffee cup in hand, both with streamers arising from their top. As she walked across the room, Helen noticed a few male eyes following Lu Jo's bounce. She sat down at the table with Helen and briefed her on her interviews. Helen likewise told her about her meeting with Drs. Swanson and Berk. Lu Jo checked her communicator for messages and found one from Dr. Caron which contained the list of visitors for the previous month to the Dunn Collection. She also had a text message listing from Captain Hansen containing the names of people and companies that had worked on the Hermet Building and the computer systems.

"You know Helen, I wonder how Dr. Caron knew that I was EIS? I wonder if Dean Korson told her." Lu Jo thought out loud.

"He might have, you will have to ask him."

"I shall."

"I am going to send Varten a message to dispatch a cruiser to the Sansom system. They need to look for a viral agent or find whatever triggered the disease to activate in the neer-tobacco plant." Helen said.

"While you are at it, ask him to run a computer cross check on Dr. William Jamison, the Jamison Computer and Security Company, Dr. William Caron, and Dr. John Swanson." Lu Jo asked.

"OK, will do. I think that you believe there is a connection between all of them." Helen stated as she finished her pipe.

"I do. I think they are all some way connected, but I don't know how. However, we do need to get back to the hotel and freshen up. Dean Korson has invited us to a faculty reception this evening. Ike will be accompanying us to the affair."

Both of their communicators buzzed at the same time. They looked at the message on the screen and then at each other. It was from Nick. He had found the perfect gift.

-8-

The faculty reception had been a long affair, but it was finally over. Ike, Helen, and Lu Jo had finally returned to the hotel. Their drinks had arrived from room service. They sat down and filled their pipes. In their absence, a communication had been received from Varten von Eckmann at Castle Pesaro. It pretty much confirmed the information provided by all of the people that were interviewed. It did go on to say that Jamison Computer and Security Company were owned by Dr. William Jamison's older brother James. It also noted that Dr. John Swanson had been a geothermal engineer and had worked for Dr. William Caron before being fired.

"The net tightens" Lu Jo stated. "There is a connection, but we don't quite see it yet" she continued as she lit her pipe.

"No, it is not quite in our grasp." Helen replied lighting her Old Earth Dunhill lovat.

"Let's review what we know" Lu Jo said as she tamped and relit her GBD reproduction bulldog "One, there is animosity between Drs. Swanson and Berk over a scientific theory, and past bad blood between them. Two, Dr. Swanson once worked for Melanie Caron's father and they had a falling out. Three, Dr. Jamison works for Dr. Swanson, supports his theory, and his brother's company was involved in the construction of the Herment Building in which there was an unexplainable theft. Four, the alarms did not sound and they were operated by the computer system."

"You know, there is something else. All of the suspects you mentioned smoke pipes. From your descriptions, they all seem knowledgeable about them. Helen's problem pertains to pipe tobacco and a plant disease. Your problem involves the theft of pipe and tobacco related papers and documents. Is it possible that the two problems are connected and it is really one single problem dealing with tobacco?" Ike asked as he tamped lightly and relit his Old Earth Castello #84 donkeynut.

"I think you have hit on something Ike. I wonder if the thief was looking for something that may have been in one of the stolen documents which is related to the situation in the Sansom star system concerning the diseased tobacco." Lu Jo responded.

"I agree, Helen said. Look, let's send another message to Varten. Have his people back at the castle go through Leo's copies of the books and other documents that were taken. Let them see if they can find something that is relevant to the issue at hand. We are leaving to go back to Castle Pesaro tomorrow morning. I think Ike should go with us as he can shed a fresh light on our problem. It will be solved back home, not here."

"Great idea" Lu Jo said.

"Fine with me" Ike replied "I will meet you at the spaceport in the morning. Empire Cruiser I guess."

"Yup" Lu Jo responded "Nothing but the best for Leo's two favorite girls!"

"Yup" Helen replied, "Nothing but the best."

They finished the evening enjoying their pipes and chatting about the upcoming surprise birthday party for Emperor Leopaldo. Varten had mentioned in his communiqué that Leo was still unaware, and that he was happy Nick had found the perfect gift for them to give to their friend. They finally called it a night as

they had an early engagement with an Empire Space Cruiser to return them home.

-9-

They all had an uneventful trip to Planet Hayden in the Lynase Star System, home of Castle Pesaro, Emperor Leopaldo's nerve center of the Empire. Helen, Lu Jo, and Ike McCane had traveled in one of the fastest Empire Ring Drive Cruisers. It turned out that Nick Reardon had arrived slightly ahead of them in his Bureau of Naval Ships experimental needle ship. He met them as they disembarked at the spaceport with ground car transportation to Castle Pesaro. It was another beautiful day since that was the way the weather control people kept it.

Nick was not ecstatic over the completion of his mission as he really had nothing positive to report on the Chonowitsch pipe. However, he said nothing to the others.

On the other hand, the others talked about their theories on the happenings at PittPenn University. During the discussion, Lu Jo asked "Nick, do tell me about Dr. Melanie Caron."

"Who?"

"Melanie Caron! She told me, and I quote "If you see him, please say hello and I still remember our meeting here several years ago. Tell him I well remember it." She also seemed to believe that I was EIS."

"Hmm" Nick replied as he made a big deal scratching his head as if he was trying to recollect a long forgotten idea "Oh her. I taught her hand-to-hand combat several years ago. She would suspect you of being EIS, or recognize you as being such as she is probably our best agent at PittPenn University."

"EIS herself, I would have never have suspected. And to think, Varten never told me."

"I guess it is 'need to know' and you didn't need to know." Nick replied.

They arrived at Castle Pesaro. Their travel luggage was sent to their quarters as they went to meet Varten and Leo. Helmsford, Leo's manservant, admitted them to his spacious private office.

Helmsford served them all drinks and then left the group. Leo had located a tin of McNay's Red Ribbon Flake and passed the open tin around. Ike McCane filled up and lit his Old Earth Castello #84 Old Sea Rock. Nick Reardon filled his Dunhill Group 5 Sand Blasted Old Earth San Antonio '2000 RTDA' show pipe. Helen had retrieved her Rathenberg sitter and had lit it. Lu Jo was smoking her Ser Jacopo Hakbill pipe which had been a gift from Leo. Varten was smoking his Charatan Supreme which had been a gift from Leo to him and a matched pipe to his wife, Martha. For the occasion of his friends return, Leo had selected an Old Earth Jim Cooke straight black sand blasted billiard pipe.

After they had all started smoking, Leo welcomed them all back. He told them about the Chonowitsch pipe and how he did not know who sent it to him. Nick reported about the pipe and the fact that he had no new information, other than that rumor was that one had surfaced about a year ago, but it could not be confirmed.

Lu Jo gave a summary of her investigation as did Helen. "We both believe that the two investigations are connected." Helen agreed.

Varten said "I have some additional information for you. Nick is correct that Dr. Melanie Caron is our station agent at PittPenn University. That was a piece of information that you did not need to know Lu Jo. Dean Korson knows, but that is about the limit. We have established two facts that may help you out. The first is that William Jamison traveled to the Sansom Star System approximately a year ago, before the disease began. Secondly, he has done extensive research on the effects of viruses on the DNA structure of plants. Finally, our researchers have found a small article in the 2002 issue of the Pipe Smokers Ephemeris to the effect that some agent had caused a disease among the tobacco plants in the Old Earth Country of Rhodesia. It seems that the only thing that stopped the spread was the isolation of that part of the world. Once the plants were destroyed, the disease ended and did not spread."

Simultaneously, Helen and Lu Jo rose and exclaimed "Arrest Dr. William Jamison!"

Emperor Leopaldo smiled and looked at them "We already have. He is expected to join us shortly. He was arrested after you left and is being transported here by a hyper-drive Empire ship. They arrived right after you did and he is on his way."

Helmsford entered and with him came two of the Emperor's armed security guards and a prisoner. The prisoner was directed to a chair with the guards at his side. The prisoner was Dr. William Jamison.

“You know all the individuals that you are now before?”

“Yes, their names and positions have all been explained to me. I know Ike McCane, Lu Jo, and Ms. Chamberlain.”

“You know why you are here.”

“It is a surprise, I guess so, but I am not sure.”

“Well let me explain it all to you.” Emperor Leopaldo went on “You have performed extensive research in the area of viral effects on DNA structure. You are aware of the two theories on the interaction of virus and DNA causing plant disease and you have come to the conclusion that a designer virus can be used as the trigger that activates the disease in the plant’s DNA structure. You discovered such a viral trigger, traveled to the Sansom star system and initiated the destruction of the tobacco plants. You also found a description of such an occurrence in The Pipe Smokers Ephemeris and stole the tome and others from the Dunn Collection.”

“How did I do that?” Jamison asked.

“When your brother was working on the Herment Building and its computer security system, he implanted a backdoor to have a script that would recognize your biometric prints and admit you to the system where you opened the locks and disabled the alarm.” Leo continued.

“Pretty good, aren’t you?”

“Yes we are, and thorough. You wanted to be the top researcher at PittPenn University so you threw out the seeds of discord between Dr. Swanson and Dr. Berk. All you had to do was stoke the fire. You also knew that Dr. Swanson had bad blood with Dr. William Caron so that the theft of the Dunn Collection documents would make him a suspect in their theft. It was you who started the disease, and you that stole the documents. By the way, we did find them in your seasonal house at PittPenn University and they have been returned to Dr. Caron.”

“Yes, looks like you have got it all. If it weren’t due to your two investigators, I would have gotten away with it.” Jamison replied.

"Maybe you would have, maybe not." Leopaldo answered "but thanks to my friends, you didn't. Take him away. I know a nice penal institution where he can teach his knowledge to prisoners, let alone college students."

Jamison and the guards left the room.

"Pretty good deductions" Lu Jo said. They all agreed.

"So both Swanson and Berk were correct in their theories." Helen stated.

"Yes they are." Leo answered "Dean Korson is talking with Drs. Swanson and Berk. He is explaining how Jamison used both of them. Dr. Berk is being restored to full academic rank within the faculty of PittPenn University."

"A good ending to one of our problems" Varten said.

I would like us all to meet tonight at 8 PM for dinner. Meanwhile, let's adjourn. I would like to talk with Helen. See you all later.

They knew when they were excused. They rose to leave. As they left, you could overhear Lu Jo say to Nick "Hand-to-hand combat. Hah! I'll bet it was more than that!"

They all laughed.

-10-

The tropical gardens of Castle Pesaro were the most beautiful in the Empire. It was one of the favorite places that Leo and his deceased wife, Karina loved to visit, walk, and talk. Leo was smoking his favorite pipe made of Acatian wercarra wood while he walked with Helen who was smoking her Charatan Supreme, a pipe which had once belonged to her late husband. They slowly walked among the tropical plants as they smoked some Old Earth Crown Achievement.

"I am glad you are back" Leo said as he was feeling butterflies in the pit of his stomach "It seems that each time you are gone, I miss you more."

"I am glad to be back" Helen replied.

"You and Lu Jo did a most masterful job at PittPenn University and I am most grateful."

"It was Ike that tied the problems together" she responded.

"The tropical plants are very beautiful." Leo enjoined.

"Do you have something you want to say? Obviously, you separated me from our friends, and brought me out here, away from everyone. Quit stumbling and thinking, and say what you want to say!"

"Well darn it, Yes I do Lady!" Leo replied "You and I have known each other for many years. We were at the Academy together and on our first assignment together. Robert, you and I have always been good friends. I was deeply saddened by Robert's murder, besides losing a good advisor, I lost a good friend. It also affected you immensely. When I invited you to reside here at Castle Pesaro, it was out of sympathy. The sympathy disappeared long ago. You have become one of my most trusted friends and workmate. You have offered me both friendship and companionship."

"Yes?"

"Darn it, but you do make it difficult." Leo continued "I guess that what I want to say Helen, is would you marry me?"

"Geeze Leo, I thought you were never going to ask. Of course I will marry you silly! However, there is one issue to be resolved "What will Prince Kyle think."

"That is a non-issue. We discussed it when he was here on leave last week. He is the only one that knows I was going to propose. Like me, you won him over a long time ago. He is quite thrilled."

"Ha, that's what you think. For the last six months, the castle staff and some of your chief officers and advisors have been running a pool as to when you would pop the question. I wonder who won." Helen replied.

"You know it will have to be a large wedding, a regular Empire media event. I would like to have Varten as my best man."

"It may be a media event, but it will be quite simple. Martha will be my matron of honor."

"What do you think our friends will say?" Leo asked.

"They will probably say 'What took so long?'"

They sat in the tropical garden finishing their pipes while the sun set off in the distance over Castle Pesaro on planet Hayden.

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The group of friends had all met in the main dining room for dinner. Martha von Eckmann, Varten's wife had joined them. They had done everything they could to keep Leo away. They had decorated the room for Leo's birthday. Helen and Leo were expected shortly.

"Do you think he suspects?" Lu Jo asked Varten

"Nah, he hasn't a clue. I know Leo well, and something has been on his mind lately beside his birthday."

"Do you think he has asked Helen?" Nick asked.

"I don't know" Varten replied "but he obviously did try to get away from us today rather quickly."

"I have a feeling he has" Martha interjected "Call it an old lady's intuition."

The signal light went off above the door alerting them to the arrival of Leo and Helen. The lights were dimmed down. The door opened and there was a shout of "SURPRISE" as the lights blazed, the balloons arose and the confetti went flying.

"Hunh" Leo said momentarily dazed.

Helen nudged him "Its your birthday, silly"

"So it is, and a fine one at that. I had forgotten with all that has been on my mind."

They all wished Leo happy birthday. "We have dispensed with dinner tonight Leo" Varten said "but we do have a rather large cake for you."

Helmsford brought out a cart holding a large birthday cake in the shape of a calabash pipe. The candles were placed along the edge of the 'meerschau' bowl. Leo blew out all the candles with one long breath. The guests clapped and wished him well.

They sat around the large circular table, Leo, Helen, Varten, Martha, Nick, Lu Jo, and Ike McCane.

“We all have a present for you Leo” Lu Jo said “Nick, please do the honor.”

Nick presented Leo with a wrapped box. Leo took the box and examined it.

“Its not going to explode is it?” he asked.

“No, it is not” Lu Jo laughed.

Leo opened the package and found a black blasted brandy bowled pipe with redish highlights and a curved saddle stem.

“Well it that don’t take all. An S.Bang pipe from Old Earth. How did you find that?”

Nick replied “Let’s say that it is all in a day’s work for an EIS agent. Speaking of work, it is on my expense account Varten so you will have to approve the expenditure!”

“Approved” Varten replied.

“Speech, Speech” they all shouted.

Leo stood up “I want to thank you all my good friends. Not just for being such good friends, but for being my helpers, my workmates in administering this Empire. You all really pulled one on me. But I have a little announcement for all of you. My good friend, companion, and workmate Helen Chamberlain has consented to wed with Leopaldo XVI of the House of Lineaus.”

As a group, they all stood up and offered their congratulations to Leo and Helen.

“You pulled one over on us Leo” Varten said.

Nick agreed

Lu Jo responded “Yeah, really pulled one over on us Leo, but what took so long?” She took out her communicator and checked the screen. “hmm” she said “looks like Helmsford wins the pool. He guessed today on your birthday.”

They sat down at the table. The ladies discussed the upcoming nuptials. Leo asked Varten to be the Best Man and Helen asked Martha to be the Matron of

Honor. Leo told them that they would all have a role in the event and he would ask Ms. Moneynickle, his secretary, to handle the arrangements.

Leo had Helmsford bring two boxes to the table. The first box contained the Chonowitsch pipe.

“Today has been a day full of surprises. I have a special surprise for you all tonight. My friend Commander Jim McClelland has sent me a tin of a very special tobacco.” He opened the box “Here is a tin of Old Earth Tobacco. In its day, it was considered to be one of the very best.” He took out the tin and placed it on the table. They saw a blue tin labeled “Butera’s Royal Vintage Golden Cake”.

“Mike Butera was an Old Earth pipe carver of high grade pipes and also blended a line of excellent tobaccos.” Leo continued “Although I have smoked some of his blends, I have never tried this one.”

He opened the tin and a fantastic aroma came from within.

They all took out their prized pipes and filled them. Leo filled the S. Bang pipe he had received for his birthday. As they lit their pipes, they commented on the smoothness of the tobacco and the great aroma and taste.

Helen stood up and addressed the group.

“I also have a surprise for you all tonight. I think I can solve the mystery of the Chonowitsch pipe. You see, I also noticed that Leo lately had a lot on his mind. After all, with all the cares of administering an empire on his shoulders, he has some pretty big burdens. Our dear friend Donald Trimp, another big pipe collector, approached me about a month ago. He told me the story of the finding of a cache of Old Earth pipes. Now Donald has been a friend of ours for a long time, and many years ago I got him out of a nasty situation while I was still an officer with the fleet. You could say he owed me one, and Donald being an honorable man, thought it was time to clear the debt. He made me an offer that I could not refuse, and a certain Chonowitsch pipe came into my hands. Now I could have just given it to Leo, but I thought he, and you all, needed a bit of a challenge, so I boxed it up and had one of my friends send it to Leo. My friend has her methods but did not know what was in the package, but I think she suspected. Didn’t you Lu Jo?”

Lu Jo blushed “I did suspect, but wasn’t certain and no one asked me.....”

It was Leo's turn to be surprised. "Thanks dear for such an excellent gift, but you really did not have to go to the trouble. You will see that Donald and his wife have a prominent seat at the wedding."

They all chuckled.

Nick finally stood up. There is one surprise left for the evening, at least I think it is the last surprise. I have a small gift for Lu Jo. He gave her a package. She tore off the cover and found an Old Earth paperback book entitled "Secret Agent Girl - Mission with the CIA".

They all laughed. "Just wanted to keep the joke running" Nick replied.

It was late and the group started breaking up. Varten and Martha retired first with Ike shortly thereafter. Finally, Nick and Lu Jo left Leo and Helen. As they left you could hear Lu Jo say "Time to go Nick. I want to learn some of this 'hand-to-hand combat you teach" and it better be more than just fisty cuffs!"

Leo and Helen laughed as they followed off into the night.

-END-