

THE DISAPPEARING CHARATANS

By
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The man was dressed totally in black. Only his eyes could be seen in the night. He had a difficult time opening the electro-combo lock on the door. It was one of the newer ones. They were generally thought to be fool-proof. In fact, they were not, that is, if you were a lock expert. He attached the device to the electro-combo lock's keypad. The black-box device generated all possible numerical combinations, used an R-F loop to introduce the signal into the lock's circuitry. It was only a matter of time until the correct combination was determined, and the lock opened.

This time, it had taken four minutes. The lock opened, and he gained open access into the old tobacco shop. The word on the street was that a rare shipment of Old Earth pipes had been received by the shop's owner earlier in the day. He carefully entered the shop's rear door. He had his night vision light in his hand, and the night vision glasses covered his eyes. The light was visually undetectable to the naked eye. He was able to see as if the room was bathed in sunlight.

Once inside, he came into the small stockroom. The rear room had cabinets on the right filled with excess boxes and tins of tobacco. There was a large glass humidor filled with plastic bags of bulks. This was the tobacco of today. It was mostly neer-, or pseudo-tobacco. Any Old Earth tobacco would be locked away. On the left side was the owner's desk. A rack of pipes were sitting on the desktop, along with several jars of tobacco. A large aluminum floor stand ash tray stood next to the chair. He knew that the eight pipes in the pipe rack were all first quality Krenellian B'iar and that there were one or two Old Earth pipes among them in the collection.

He walked over to the desk, putting a pair of latex gloves over his hands, and tried the desk drawers. They were locked. He reached into his pocket for the ring of lock-pick tools. The old-fashioned desk would be a snap to open. He tried various picks in the center drawer mechanical lock until he felt it release. He gingerly opened the center drawer. At the same time, he opened the long drawer on the right hand side. The drawer opened wide and he saw the items he had come for. There were six boxes were all marked 'Charatan Pipes, London, England'. He took the boxes out of the desk, slipped them into his small tool kit. He then closed the desk drawers and locked the desk.

He debated about taking some tobacco samples but decided not to tempt fate. He exited the backroom by the rear door, locking it as he silently left.

They had a wonderful vacation on the tropical planet Venusia. The beaches were pure white sands, the ocean was crystal blue. The private island, where they were staying was owned by a friend of the Emperor, Donald Trimp. It had been their normal two week vacation, anticipated all year long, formally scheduled, and now drawing to an end. The Emperor's immediate party consisted of Varten and Marth von Eckman, Nick Reardon, Lu Jo, and Helen Chamberlain. Varten von Eckman was Leo's weapons master and security chief. Nick Reardon and Lu Jo were both friends and agents of the Empire Intelligence Service. Helen Chamberlain was one of Leo's oldest friends who resided at Castle Pesaro.

They were sitting outdoors on the large vacation home's veranda. There was a slight breeze on a bright, sunny day. A pitcher of iced maronian tea was on the table, around which they were sitting. Each was in one stage or another either filling, tamping, or lighting a pipe. On the table were two 100g tins of McClelland Anniversary. Leo was filling an Old Earth Ser Jacopo hawkbill. Nick was filling his Dunhill 2000 RTDA black shell briar. Varten was lighting his favorite James Cooke pipe. The ladies were either filling or lighting up matched Rathenberg sandblasted pokers. Brian Rathenberg was one of the up and coming pipe carvers of this age. His stem work was immaculate. His carving techniques were unique. Leo had presented the three ladies with the pipes the night before. Six streams of pipe smoke rose to the sky.

"This Old Earth McClelland's Anniversary tobacco is better than I thought it would be" Varten said "The virginias are very nice and the latakia is not too strong. It makes for a very nice blend."

"Although I primarily like a strong, mature virginia tobacco, this one makes a nice switch off. I like it occasionally. Now, as far as a dessert tobacco, I like the McClelland Dark Star blend. It is sort of like a rich German chocolate cake after a full dinner." Leo remarked.

"I and the girls want to thank you for such a thoughtful gift to remember this fine vacation" Helen said "You know that Brian Rathenberg pipes are becoming hard to find. He is becoming one popular pipe carver. Adding the date to the nomenclature was a nice added touch."

"It was my pleasure, ladies. I hope you enjoy the pipes. The poker shaped pipes are nice sitters. You can set them down and not worry about them tipping over." Leo responded.

"Have you seen the newscast this morning?" Nick asked Leo "It seems that there was a break-in at the Freeport Tobacconist shop the night before last. The only thing that was taken was six Old Earth Charatan pipes. The pipes were unsmoked, and according to the newscast, had only been received earlier in the day."

“Yes, I saw that. item on the newscast.” Leo replied “That will probably cost his insurance company a pretty penny. The value of four Old Earth Charatans will go several thousand solaris.”

“I don’t think so” Nick replied “It seems that he had not notified his insurance company of the presence of the pipes, their value, or risk. He may not have been covered under his policy.”

“I have know Tom Coltwell, the shop’s owner, for many years. He has a quite nice pipe collection. He goes for the more esoteric and less expensive pipes. Old Earth Charatans appear to be a bit out of his line.” Leo remarked “What do you think about you and Lu Jo heading over to Freeport and see if you can assist the locals? I think it would be great if you can recover the missing pipes.”

“Sure Leo, put us back to work” Lu Jo said in a kidding tone of voice “We were just getting bored of the sand, surf, and such good companions. But more to the point, I think Nick and I would just love to see what we can come up with. The locals probably have their hands full. What do you think, Nick?”

“I think it will be a nice little break. Let’s get going. It should take us about an hour to get to Freeport in the hoverjet. Is there anything else you can tell us about Tom Coltwell, Leo?” Nick enquired.

Leo puffed on his pipe “Tom is a fine older gentleman. His tobacco shop in Freeport has been around for at least 30 years. He does a good business in custom blends. He carries a large selection of both neer- and pseudo-tobacco. He also has a limited amount of Old Earth tobaccos. There is a full line of pipes in his shop. He carries the usual low grade pipes plus newer high grades. He has a reputation as a ‘pipe detective’. If you want a rare Old Earth pipe for your collection, if it can be found in the known universe, he will find it. It may be quite expensive, but he can usually find a source for you. Sometimes, it is better just not to ask questions on how it was obtained. Over the years I have obtained a couple of pipes from him. He has always dealt fair and square with me. I have no cause to complain.”

“Leo, aren’t you forgetting that little matter several years ago? It seems that Tom had been tasked to find a rare pipe produced by an Old Earth mater carver named Kent Rasmussen. The pipe was a “Butterfly” Cobra. Supposedly, the assignment was given to him by Darius Dooking, a noted pipe collector, and one of the richest men in the Empire. Dooking, in his youth had been a professional ballplayer. This was the foundation to his fortune. He successfully invested in other sporting ventures. There were some rumors of dealings with an illegal sport-betting organization, but nothing of substance ever turned up to justify a prosecution. The way the story goes is that Tom had located the ultra rare pipe, and a meeting was set. It turned up that Darius was found dead. The liquid negotiable funding documents had been stolen. Upon questioning, it was found that Tom had not shown up at the meeting. He denied ever finding the pipe or setting up any

meeting. He had a solid alibi. The murder is unsolved to this day. The pipe also has not been seen in private or public since that time.”

“Varten, how do you know all of this?” Leo asked.

“I heard about the theft on the newscast. The name was familiar. I just checked it out in the criminal database system. I also had a special interest, at the time it happened, since it had involved two well known pipe collector personalities.” Varten responded.

“Thanks, gentlemen. I think you have given us plenty to think about. Let’s get going, Nick.”

“Yes, let’s get a move on it.” Nick replied.

They left the foursome sitting on the veranda smoking their pipes and just enjoying the fine day. Nick and Lu Jo headed for Freeport.

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Freeport was a quaint old town, not what one would call a bustling city. It had a quiet, laid-back atmosphere. Although it did not have a spaceport, it could be reached via almost all means of transportation on the planet. It was the typical large city amidst a sprawling vacation area. There were no large multi-story buildings, rather plenty of white washed one and two storied buildings spread out over a large area. The harbor was on the north side of the town. The tube connecting it to the mainland one hundred miles away was on the south side. Warehousing and light construction was in the area towards the harbor. The main business district was in the center city, ‘Old Town’ as it was called.

Leo had informed the local authorities of Nick and Lu Jo’s impending arrival. He had been assured of their total cooperation, and in fact, they looked forward to assistance from the EIS. Nick and Lu Jo left the hoverjet at the harbor. They rented a groundcar since aircars were not permitted in the town of Freeport. They were to meet Lt. Petrie at the tobacconist’s shop. They admired the old ‘French Quarter’ style of architecture as they drove into town. Lt. Petrie had left given them excellent direction when he contacted them on Nick’s communicator and they soon pulled up at the tobacconist’s shop.

The shop was in a rather exclusive area of Old Town. It was housed in a more modern two-story building. The left and right sides were mainly multi-paned windows. An ornately carved wooden door with stained glass window sections was in the middle. Outside the main door stood a brightly painted wood-like American Indian holding a peace pipe in one hand and a bundle of cigars in the other. The left and right side windows announced that this was the ‘Freeport Tobacconist’ shop and that Tom Coltwell was the proprietor.

“Must be a new location” Nick said “The building does not look like it has been here more than ten years, not the thirty that Leo said Tom has been in business.”

“Yes, about ten years. Nice décor, note how the architectural style fits in with the older buildings.” Lu Jo said.

An older gentleman was standing outside the door. From the description they were given, it was Lt. Petrie. They introduced themselves and went inside the shop. Although quite modern on the outside, the inside was a different story. It had been designed to replicate an Old Earth 1920s tobacco shop. Short display cases were beneath the windows. Along half the back wall and around the right side of the room was display cases and counter. The display cases were filled with all types of pipes. Behind the counter were shelving filled with tins of pipe tobacco. Glass jars holding tobacco sat on top of the counter. On the left side were a half-dozen over stuffed chairs set up amongst book cases and a visiscreen. On the back wall, across from the main door, was a doorway leading to the back room. They observed two men, on each side of the counter, talking. When they had walked into the shop, the customer completed his purchase, took his bag and left the store.

Lt. Petrie introduced Nick and Lu Jo to Tom Coltwell. “A fine shop you have here, Tom” Nick said.

“Very nice” Lu Jo.stated.

“Thank you very much” Tom replied “So, you are friends of Emperor Leopaldo. I have provided him with a couple of nice pipes over the last 30 years. I enjoyed working with him. He is a pleasure to deal with. I understand that you are here to help find my stolen pipes.”

“I have a special blend for you to try. I call it ‘Old Freeport Blend’.” He passed a jar containing his new blend of pipe tobacco around for them to fill their pipes. Lt. Petrie had a nice locally made full bent. Lu Jo filled up her small Dunhill, and Nick his old Larenzetti pipe from the jar. They lit their pipes and continued the discussion.

“Thanks for the very nice tobacco. I think I like it. It is quite pleasant. There is no tongue bite. It is quite mellow. We are going to try to find the missing pipes; if we can” Lu Jo replied “Can you show us around? How did you discover the pipes were missing?”

“The four missing pipes were a special order for one of my collectors. I received them two days ago. There were six pipes, all charlatans, two executives, two Supremes, one Coronation, and one Grand Coronation. They were the top of the top in terms of Charatan pipes. I locked them in the side door of my desk in the back room. When I came to the shop yesterday, I went into the desk late in the morning. I opened the side desk drawer and the pipes were gone. I had not seen anything out of place. The front door and windows are alarmed, and the alarm was ok. The back door has a new electro-combo lock, and it did not look like it was forced. I had to use my combination to open

the door. I do not know why those specific pipes were taken, as you can see, there are some just as valuable in the display cases.” Tom said in explanation.

Nick, Lu Jo, and Lt. Petrie examined the doors, windows and alarms. They were all intact. Both the entrances, front and rear, had sidewalks, so there had been no footprints.

“You saw no sign of forced entry” Nick asked.

“No, I saw nothing. Nothing, other than the pipes, is missing. There are no signs of forced entry. Is it possible the thief had a key?” Tom asked.

“Unlikely” Nick replied “Your rear door has a electro-combo lock. The front door is keyed, but also alarmed. Why did you not alarm the rear door?”

“We had a break-in about a year ago. They were after money. We keep no money overnight in the shop. However, we had the whole door replaced. I decided to go with an electro-combo lock as it is the most recent design, and is supposed to be pick proof.” Tom answered.

“No lock is pick proof” Lt. Petrie replied “You should get the door alarmed. Almost as soon as a new design lock is produced, someone finds a way to defeat it. Although there is no evidence, I am willing to bet the thief entered through the rear door. If you look real closely, you will see scratch marks on the lock mechanism on the center drawer of the desk. It looks relatively fresh, not old. I think the pipes were taken, by a very skilled thief.”

Lu Jo and Nick closely examined the desk drawer locking mechanism. “Do you have any enemies that may wish you harm or embarrassment?” Nick enquired.

“No, well, some people” Tom said as he eyed the Lieutenant “think I had something to do with the murder of Darius Dooking. The only involvement I had with Darius was in preparing his favorite tobacco blend for him. It was a blend of wexel-virginia tobacco laced with Knearian brandy. He and his old manservant Renton were the only people that smoked it. Renton still gets it from me on occasion. I assure you that I had no involvement, whatsoever with the death of Darius Dooking. However, there are those in his family who do not accept this fact. You may wish to start with Carl Dooking, his brother.”

“We will.” Nick noted “One final question, who was the principal in the order for the six Charatan pipes?”

Tom replied “I am not at liberty to say. I can say that it is someone that is known to you, but beyond that, I must hold my silence.”

Nick purchased a pound of the Old Freeport Blend, and some pipe cleaners. Tom measured out the tobacco, wrapped it in an autoseal plastic bag, and gave him two packages of Pill's Pipe Cleaners.

They left the shop and went outside. "What do you think?" Lt. Petrie asked Nick and Lu Jo.

Nick replied "I agree with you on the entry into the shop. I think it was done professionally and the thief knew exactly what he was to steal."

Lu Jo added "I agree, but I also think there is some significance in the stolen pipes. Not so much for the money, but to embarrass Tom Coltwell. There is more here than meets the eye."

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It was still early evening. Leo and Varten were sitting on the veranda, Leo smoking his Dunhill Group 6 Cumberland billiard, and Varten his Jim Cooke billiard. Martha and Helen had taken off for a walk down the beach.

"Martha and I have had a wonderful time here on Venusia. The house, beach and companions were great, not to mention the fantastic weather. Of course, you supplied some excellent tobacco, Leo."

"Thanks Varten. I was glad that Martha could accompany us this year. I thought it would be good for her to come since Lynda got married this year and moved away. Helen also enjoyed her companionship. Lu Jo seemed to fit right in with the group, and Nick could easily become part of any group."

"It is nice to see Helen get out and enjoy herself. She, you, and I go back a long time. You remember when we were all at the military academy. We were all so young and naïve. You became the Emperor, I became your helper, and Helen became Robert Chamberlain's wife after she left the service. It was a shame when Robert was murdered by that Utopian terrorist group five years ago. Helen took it real hard. It was a generous offer you made to invite her to come and reside at Castle Pesaro after Robert's death." Varten said.

"It was the least I could do, Varten. Robert was one of my best officers and Helen was a good friend to both of us. I was glad she came to live at the Castle. It has been good for both her and I, especially since Princess Karina died so long ago. I know that you are a good observer. You must have observed that Helen and I have renewed a relationship that I thought had ended many years ago. We are becoming very close." Leo stated.

"Yes, I think we all recognize that you and her are becoming very close."

They observed that the ladies were coming back from their walk. The two of them were laughing while walking along the edge of the water on the white sandy beach. They saw Leo and Varten, waved, and walked up the short steps to join them on the veranda overlooking the beach.

“Did you have a nice walk?” Leo asked.

“Wonderful. You know Leo that this island is a regular paradise. It was nice of Donald to offer it to us for the vacation this year.”

“Yes, Donald was quite generous.” Leo replied.

They sat around the table. Helen and Martha took out their new Rathenberg pipes, filled them with a local tobacco, and lit them using the wooden matches set out on the table.

“Martha was telling me how well Lynda and her new husband, Robert, are doing. Robert enjoys his new assignment. Lynda just loves their new house.” Helen said.

“Yes” Martha replied “and the best think is that we now have an empty nest. It is just Varten and I.”

They all laughed.

“You know Leo, Varten, sitting out here and just enjoying ourselves in this paradise reminds me of our younger days. We had a lot of fun together until life caught up with us and made us meet our responsibilities head on. We have all grown a lot since then. For the better I think. After all these years, we are still together, and we still enjoy our pipes.” Helen observed.

“Good observation Helen” Varten said “Life is sure an interesting trip, and we never know the road ahead of us. Boy, aren’t we serious tonight”. Varten replied.

“Let’s talk pipes and tobacco.” Leo said “I wonder if Nick and Lu Jo are making any headway on finding the pipes? I will bet that Tom Coltwell made a fine impression on them.”

“I expect to hear from them later this evening. They will probably stay in Freeport tonight. Hey, the youngsters have to get away from us old fogies. In reality, we will be glad to get away from the youngsters. Their absence gives us a chance to let our hair down so to speak. We don’t have to set such good examples in front of them.” Varten observed.

“Sshh” Martha said as she lightly slapped Varten “At our age, the youngsters think we are not capable of having much fun on our own. If they only knew!”

They all laughed and sat out well into the evening. Nick and Lu Jo did communicate with them that they were making some progress, but would stay in Freeport overnight. They said they would ring back in the morning.

Around eleven P.M. they went up to the house. Varten and Martha headed off to their rooms. Leo and Helen headed off to Leo's room. If anyone was watching, they were hand-in-hand as they headed into Leo's rooms. The door re-opened a few seconds later and the "Do Not Disturb" sign was placed on the doorknob.

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The Dooking family compound was in one of the wealthier residential sections of Freeport. Lt. Petrie, Nick, and Lu Jo all traveled in the lieutenant's ground car. Carl Dooking had inherited the bulk of Darius' estate as there had been no other family. Although Carl had been well off before his brother's untimely death, his inheritance had made him even wealthier. According to Lt. Petrie, Carl blamed Tom Coltwell for Darius' death.

They pulled up to the two story white mansion. They left the car and walked to the main entrance, rang the bell. They announced themselves to the man that answered the door. "I am Renton, Mr. Dooking's butler." They introduced themselves and then told Renton that they wanted to interview Carl Dooking. He asked if it were about the break-in at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop. He said that he heard about it on the newscast. He then took them to the library. Mr. Dooking would be with them momentarily.

Carl Dooking came into the library shortly after Renton had left. He was a tall man in his early fifties. He was dressed in a dinner jacket. "I don't have much time to offer you. I have a charity event to attend tonight. However, how can I help you?"

Nick began "Mr. Dooking, Tom Coltwell had a break-in a two nights ago. Some very valuable merchandise was taken. He informs us that you are the only person he could recall that had any desire to do him harm. Do you know anything about this, and could you please tell us where you were two nights ago?"

"That old fool! I? I? Why would I have anything to do with him, or care what happened to him? Legally or not, he was responsible for my brother's death. But I am over that. I could care less what happens to him. Let me think. Two nights ago I was at my club until 2:00 AM. You can check at the club and they will verify my story." Carl replied.

"We shall check" Lt. Petrie replied.

"Tell me Mr. Dooking, are you a pipe collector? I see some very nice pipes over in the pipe rack along the wall." Lu Jo asked as she went over and inspected the glass encased pipe rack.

“No, no, I do not smoke or collect pipes. Those belonged to Darius. They were part of his collection and a lot of good they did him. All his pipe collecting obsession did was get him killed. I couldn’t tell you the difference between one pipe and another. By-the-way, what happened at Tom Coltwell’s shop? Did some collector break in and steal his prized pipes?”

“Probably something like that. We won’t take any more of your time. Thanks for being helpful. We may get back in touch with you at a later time. If anything comes to you, please ring me up.” Lt. Petrie informed Carl.

Once they got outside, Lu Jo turned to Lt. Petrie and Nick and said “Something is not quite right. The pipes that were in the glass encased rack were all Charatans. However, Varten told us that the pipe in question when Darius was killed was Danish, carved by Ken Rassmussen. Something does not quite add up.

“True, but wasn’t Renton the man we saw at Tom Coltwell’s shop this morning?”

“I believe he was” Lu Jo exclaimed.

“Could you put a tail on Carl Dooking? He needs to be watched for the next couple of days.” Nick asked.

“That we can do” Lt. Petrie said.

Lt. Petrie took them back to the location where the rental ground car was parked. Nick and Lu Jo decided to get a room at a local hotel. They would have dinner, and then do some research. They would call Varten and let him know they were staying overnight in Freeport. Lt. Petrie told them he would get back with them in the morning. They exchanged communicator numbers.

Nick and Lu Jo got a suite of rooms at the Three Palms Resort Hotel. They went for a swim in the resort pool. Afterwards, then went and had dinner in the resort restaurant. Following dinner, they adjourned to the bar for cognac and pipes. Nick filled up his Larenzetti pipe with the Old Freeport Blend. Lu Jo filled up her Ser Jacopo Hawkbill with the Old Freeport Blend. They both lit their pipes, smoking up their corner of the bar.

“I am having a fantastic time on vacation” Lu Jo said “I and the other ladies enjoyed the Rathenberg pipes that Leo gave us.”

“I am having a great time too. Nice location, beautiful beaches, crystal clear ocean, great companions, and you” he said with a grin.

“I will take that as a compliment” Lu Jo said “I think everyone is having a great time. We all get along well together, even with the difference in ages. I have never seen Leo so

carefree. I think there is a growing relationship between Leo and Helen. There is something there, but I am not sure what.”

“About all I know is that Leo, Varten, and Helen were all close friends in their younger days. It seems they all went their separate ways. Leo and Varten worked closely for many years. Helen came back to Castle Pesaro after the death of her husband five years ago. It has only been in the last year that Helen has come out of her shell, probably due to Leo’s care. But I agree, the care is blossoming into something more.”

Once their pipes had gone out, and the glasses drained, they went back to their suite to do some further research regarding the case. As the door to the suite closed, the “Do not disturb” sign was placed on the doorknob.

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The meeting had been scheduled for midnight. He had arrived at the old warehouse in the harbor area early so as to scout out the conditions. Nothing appeared to be amiss. He entered the warehouse by the side door. He had been instructed to go to the set of offices in the rear where he would be met. He noticed a light turned on in one of the offices and approached the door. The aroma of pipe tobacco was in the air. He knocked on the door and entered. A man was sitting at the table.

“Did you bring the merchandise” the man asked.

“Yes, I have it with me.” He replied “Did you bring my payment?”

“Yes, I have the 200 solaris in this wallet.” He picked up the wallet and counted the money. “You know, the merchandise is worth well over 2000 solaris, and for the risk I took, you could be a little more generous.”

The man stood up tapped his pipe in the ash tray and said “A little more generous? We had an agreement. I have kept up my end of the agreement, and I expect you to keep up your end.”

“I shall. Here is the merchandise.” He said as he took the six boxes out of his valise. He laid each one on the table, took the top off the box, removed each pipe out of its glove, and placed the pipe in the box.”

“Beautiful” the man said. He stood back and raised his arm. A needle blaster fired from under his sleeve. The thief was hit between the eyes. He fell to the ground, dead before he hit the floor.

“I will take my money back” he said as he reclaimed the wallet, “and my new pipes.” He put the pipes in his own satchel. He turned off the light and left the room.

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Nick and Lu Jo were up early. They met Lt. Petrie in the Three Palms Restaurant for breakfast. Lt. Petrie informed them that there had been at least two complaints of groundcar garage doors opening for some unknown reason on the night of the theft. The garages were located in the vicinity of the Freeport Tobacconist Shop. He also reported that he had gone over the records of the investigation of Darius Dooking's death. He had found that Carl Dooking had been in some financial difficulty prior to his brother's death. However, the inheritance of his brother's estate had put an end to the difficulty. He also found out that there had been an unusually large amount of pipe tobacco ash on the body, more than would be found from one smoker. It had been determined that it was a special blend that Darius smoked.

Lt. Petrie's communicator began to beep. He took it out and answered. "Yes, we will head over that way. Expect us in a half hour." He said to the person on the other end. He ended the conversation. "I think we have half the answer to the missing pipes." He said "A body has been found in one of the warehouses in the Harbor district. It belongs to Greg Kadir, a well known back door man. Let's go check it out."

They left the Three Palms Resort and headed towards the harbor area of Freeport. When they had arrived, they entered the warehouse and proceeded to the offices in the rear. They entered the middle office where they found a table, a chair, and a body on the floor. The aroma of stale tobacco smoke hung in the air.

"This is Greg Kadir. He is probably one of the most skillful thieves in the islands. His specialty is breaking and entering. I had thought he was still in jail on Macrana Island, but I am obviously wrong. We have found his empty valise. You can see the ashtray on the table. I will have an analysis done on the ash and dottle contents in the ash tray. I don't believe that Greg was a smoker. It may give us a lead on the killer." Lt. Petrie reported.

"My theory" Nick said "is that this is the person that stole the pipes from Tom's shop. The merchandise was to be exchanged for payment. Something went wrong. All we have is a body and no pipes. I would suggest we go back to Tom Coltwell's shop. I have a couple of questions I wish to pose to him."

They left the harbor area and headed back to Old Town. Once they arrived at the tobacconist's shop, they went inside. Tom greeted them anxiously. He suggested they fill their pipes with Old Freeport Blend, which they did and sat down for a discussion among the streams of pipe smoke.

"Tom" Nick asked, "Was that Renton, Carl Dooking's butler that we saw in here the other day?"

"Yes it was." He said "Renton stops by at least once a week and purchases a pound of pipe tobacco at a time. He worked for Carl's brother Darius. As I told the investigating officers years ago, Darius purchased my wexel-virginia tobacco with a topping of

Knearian brandy. It was a special blend that I made up for just him. He enjoyed it immensely. I sold it to no one else. However, it seems that Renton developed a taste for it. It isn't cheap. Knearian brandy is quite expensive; however, Renton does seem to like it." Tom explained.

"You told us that you had nothing to do with Darius Dooking's death. I believe you in this matter. Did he commission you to find the Kent Rasmussen pipe?" Lu Jo asked.

"Yes he did" Tom stated "but I was unsuccessful. I never came up with that one, despite all my contacts."

"One final question" Nick said "Regarding Darius' brother Carl, do you know if he has ever had any interests in pipes and tobacco?"

"Many years ago he had an interest in Old Earth English pipes. I believe he gave his pipes to his brother. I have not heard of him having any interests in pipes and tobacco in recent years." Tom answered.

Lt. Petrie's communicator beeped. He answered the call. He was on his communicator for several minutes. He rang off when he was done.

They left the tobacconist's shop. Lt. Petrie told Nick and Lu Jo that the lab report indicated that the tobacco was wexel-virginia mixed with an alcoholic liquor. The time of death was estimated to be a little after midnight. Death was due to the blast of a needle blaster. He also said that Carl Dooking had gone to a charity event at the Freeport Sheraton about 7:00 PM. He had last been seen at 11:00 PM after which he had lost his tail. His path was not picked up until 7:00 A.M. at his home. Last of all, informant sources indicate that Carl Dooking is still involved in an inter-island sports betting ring."

"Where is he now?" Nick enquired.

"He is at a coffee shop in Old Town." Lt. Petrie replied.

"Let's pick him up and have Renton brought in for some questioning. It is time for a little interrogation." Nick said.

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They arrived at the central headquarters of the Freeport police. Lt. Petrie ushered them into a small meeting room. "Carl Dooking has been picked up. He is sitting in an interrogation room down the hall. We put him in the interrogation room where the mindprobe sits. He is probably sweating gumdrops. We also have Renton sitting in another interrogation room."

Nick said “Good, but let’s start with Renton. I have one question I want to put to him first. If I get the answer I am expecting, I think we will be in good shape with Carl.”

They went to the interrogation room holding Renton. They opened the door and went inside.

“Renton, I have one question I want to ask you.” Nick said “Yesterday at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop we saw you leave with an order of specially blended tobacco. It had a topping of Knearian Brandy. I also found out that you make a purchase of this blend on an almost weekly basis. A pound of tobacco a week is a large amount to smoke. Was the tobacco for you or someone else?”

Renton shifted his eyes around the room, anywhere except to look at Nick. “The tobacco was for someone else. I do not smoke.”

“Who?” Lu Jo asked.

“I pick up the tobacco for my employer.” Renton said in a low voice.

“Just as I expected” Nick said as they left the room.

They entered the second interrogation room. Carl Dooking was sitting in the chair on the far side of the naked table. Off to his right sat the mindprobe. He looked very uncomfortable.

Nick took the lead in the questioning “Carl, we know you have not been quite truthful with us. It seems to us that you do know the difference between a billiard and a hawkbill or a half bent pipe. We also are aware of your regular purchases at the Freeport Tobacconist Shop, made by your man Renton. I believe that you are a closet pipe smoker and pipe collector. It was you that commissioned Greg Kadir to steal the six Charatan Pipes from Tom Coltwell. They were for your pipe collection, a collection of Charatan pipes. A second sidelight was that if Tom Coltwell had six pipes stolen from him, it would cause him great embarrassment, something to which you looked forward. Publically you blamed him for your brother’s death, and denigrating him could only benefit you. Oh, by-the-way, the pipe rack in your library with the Charatan Pipes is yours. It was not your brothers, as you explained to us. You met with Kadir to exchange the pipes for cash and something went wrong. I believe you just got greedy and murdered him. Since a needle blaster was used, it was premeditated. Your house is being searched by the police, as we speak, and I expect the missing pipes will turn up.”

“I want my lawyer” was all Carl said.

“One more thing” Lu Jo added “We can now address the issue of your brother’s murder. You will note that an excess amount of ash and tobacco was found on his body. At the time it could not be explained. We can explain it now. The ash and tobacco was from your brother’s pipe and your own. It was identified as Darius’ favorite blend, one which

has become your favorite. You basically tried to get people to forget you smoked a pipe so that this fact would not come to light. It was actually you that was in debt, and by killing your brother, you found your way out of the problem.”

Lt. Petrie’s communicator beeped. He answered it, then rang off. “They found the missing pipes. I think that about wraps the case up. You will have a lot of time to talk to your lawyer, Carl, you will be charged with theft and two murders. I think you will have a long time.”

Later in the day, they stopped by Tom Coltwell’s shop to return the stolen pipes. The pipes had been duly recorded, analyzed, photographed, holographed, and sampled. They would not be needed for the trial, a short trial at that.

They walked into the pipe shop. “Here are the missing pipes, Tom” Lu Jo said excitedly.

“You found them!” Tom replied.

Lu Jo told Tom the story about the finding of the pipes, and the two deaths.

“Fine job young lady, and you too Nick” Tom said. “Could you contact the Emperor Leopaldo? I would like to visit with you all. I think you would find it very interesting.”

They contacted Emperor Leopaldo on the island. He invited Tom Coltwell to accompany Nick and Lu Jo back to the island.

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It was early in the evening when the hoverjet got back to Donald Tripm’s private island. They had all enjoyed a fine dinner. They were sitting out on the veranda having after dinner drinks. Tom Coltwell had brought several pounds of Old Freeport Blend with him to share with his host and fellow guests.

“It became quite clear to me that Carl Dooking had multiple reasons for stealing the pipes” Nick said “Beside the embarrassment to Tom Coltwell, there had to be more. He was the one that setup the search for the Rasmussen pipe and set up his brother for murder. He did it himself. He just did not have the necessary skills for the break-in at Tom’s shop. He needed a specialist to obtain the six Old Earth Charatan Pipes. Also, he was a closet pipe collector. He was the Charatan collector, and thus the reason for the theft of the pipes. They were for him”.

“Nick, Lu Jo, a masterful job of detection” Leo said “The two of you, working together, make a good team.”

“Oh, I almost forgot” Tom said “I brought the Old Earth Charatans with me to show you.” He proceeded to lay out the pipes. First were the two executives, then two Supremes, one Coronation, and one Grand Coronation. All were free hands.

They all admired the pipes.

“You will recall Lu Jo, that I could not and did not tell you who the customer was that was seeking the pipes.” Tom said.

“Yes, I do recall that.”

“Well, I guess that I can now provide the missing information. You see, I am actually here to make delivery of the merchandise. It has already been paid for.” Tom said.

They all looked at each other.

Tom walked up to Helen Chamberlain. “Mrs. Chamberlain, here is your order of pipes. I am delivering them on time and in immaculate condition.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Coltwell. You have performed excellently. However, I would suggest that you improve the security at your shop.” She said.

“I agree.” Tom said.

“She turned to the others, I guess some explanation is in order. I was very happy when you all invited me to vacation with you on this beautiful island. I have been in the dumps the past few years, but with all of your patience and understanding have finally passed the dark night. I owe a special thanks to both Leo and Varten. As a token of our friendship, I placed an order with Tom several weeks ago. Little did I realize the adventure that Nick and Lu Jo would have over the pipes I had ordered. The two charlatan executives are a matched set of freehands with double comfort stems. They are for Nick and Lu Jo. The two Charatan Supremes are for Varten and Martha. They are a beautiful set of pipes, just like Varten and Martha. The Coronation is mine. The Grand Coronation is for Leo, he is the grandest light of my life. I hope you all will accept these pipes with my thanks.” Helen said with great emotion.

They all were speechless. Finally, Tom said “Let’s light up the pipes!” He passed around the Old Freeport Blend he had brought with him.

Finally Leo stood up at the table “Helen, I think I can speak on behalf of all of us. We thank you for such a magnificent gift. You have touched all of our lives, and especially mine. I will treasure this pipe as part of my collection as we treasure you as part of our family.”

They each thanked her profusely for such a generous gift.

Last of all was Lu Jo. “Helen, I want to thank you for becoming such a good friend to me. Your kindness means a lot to me especially since I am the newest member of this family. I want to thank you for such an exquisite pipe. I shall treasure it always. I must say that, as far as gifts go, it is a quantum leap over paperback copies of ‘Secret Agent Girl’.”

They all laughed, and the laughter and pipes continued long into the night.

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