

The Pipe Cleaner's Twist

By
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-1-

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

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

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

-2-

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

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

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

“It has some similarities to the old Jack-the-Ripper case from Old Earth in the late 19th century, First Age. I think we are dealing with a very twisted mind. One big difference is the used pipe cleaners left at the crime scene. Spectra-graphic analysis, performed by the Kirkland CSI, did not indicate much, only that the pipe cleaners were not used recently. However, it is curious that all of the pipe cleaners are twisted to form a loop at the top with two twists near the bottom. Mass spectrometric and Chemical analysis of the residual indicated that the residue of a high grade pseudo-tobacco was found on the pipe cleaners taken from the crime scene.” Varten reported.

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

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

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

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

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

-3-

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

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

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

The both bowed before their Emperor.

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

“Yes we are.” the Governor responded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They chatted for about an hour about the local economy, their locally grown neer-tobacco, and gossip floating around the Empire. They all thought the locally neer-tobacco was pretty good, however, they all said they had never tried any Old Earth tobacco. Leo said he would send a tin of a brand called “Capstan” to John once he got back to his palace as his supply of Old Earth tobacco was dwindling very fast on this trip. Leo asked them about the series of unsolved murders and all agreed that they were very tragic and hoped that they would soon be solved with the murderer being brought to justice. Governor Harkin suggested that he believed that they had been committed by a deranged

person who simply needed the money for drugs. He thought that when the murderer was caught it would be a very simple case. However, he could not answer why there had been so many murders, why only women, why women with virtually no money, and why the perpetrator had not yet been caught. At the end of the discussion, and after they had finished their pipes, they were on the point of leaving when Charles asked Leo if he was familiar with a detective from Old Earth named Sherlock Holmes.

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

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

“Yes I am.”

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

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

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

Varten carefully took the ashtray with its contents and left.

-4-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Varten rung off and told Nick the results.

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

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

-5-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mick approached the larger display case, opened it and took out a nice straight Dublin pipe with a Lucite saddle stem. Mick handed it to him and said, “This pipe is designed

from a piece of wood that is very close to the quality of Old Earth briar. I got a limited amount of the wood from the Georgian star system. The smoking properties are very good. Look at that grain! It is almost a pure straight grain, just as I designed it. The wood spoke to me when I planned and executed the pipe. You can have it for 200 solaris.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-6-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

-7-

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

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

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

“Actually, it was quite simple, once the numbers add up. Yesterday, I noticed that John and Jewel had bent pipes. You, Charles, and I had straight pipes. I was the only one smoking Old Earth tobacco. There were 7 pipe cleaners in the ash tray after we finished. Two were twisted, the remaining five either straight or with a slight curvature. I used two pipe cleaners, John used 2, Jewel and you each used one. Laboratory analysis indicated that one of the twisted pipe cleaners was old, and one new with the old one showing signs of Old Earth tobacco residue. By a process of elimination, it had to be you. Of the seven pipe cleaners in the ashtray, throw away the old curved one as it was planted by the murderer. The three bent pipe cleaners belonged to John and Jewel. That left two straight pipe cleaners, and one twisted. The straight pipe cleaners had to belong

to me since I am not the murderer. The new, twisted pipe cleaner was yours.” Leo expounded.

“Ah, Ah,” Charles stammered,

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

“I, I did murder those harlots. If it wasn’t for them, Mother never would have died. I am sorry father, but, but, I, I just couldn’t help myself.”

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

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

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

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

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

They all left the room laughing!

-End-