

Sand Roughs

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Incident at the Opera

Chapter 1: Prelude to a Killing

Torches flared brightly at the Grove Amphitheater. Scores of smartly dressed citizens huddled to their seats in anticipation of the evening's performance. The opera being performed was a new one. It was based on an actual military campaign. Decades ago imperial forces had invaded their northern neighbor and were vanquished in a terrible slaughter. There was a small band of soldiers who got away during the skirmish and were trying to get back to their home base. They encountered some unarmed youth and let them live. The young tribesmen contacted guerillas that then harassed the soldiers and killed all but a sole survivor.

Cureeves, a retired public guard, looked forward to the opera. He liked to immerse himself into these performances. It took him away from himself. He missed his days with the public guard. He was both respected and feared when he wore the blue breeches and black cape uniform. The work was mostly routine: rousting suspicious people from the pubs and eating places of the well to do, locking up drunkards, and arresting lawbreakers. He also helped the everyday citizens: directing the busy traffic at central markets, helping to fix the occasional broken wheel on a cart, and giving directions to newcomers. It was a nicely ordered existence. He enforced the rules, kept order, and tossed the disrupters into jail. He felt the public lost something without him being active. Things seemed ruder now.

The crowd continued moving into their seats. The show would start in twenty minutes or so. People were purchasing snacks and drinks. Small cups of highly sweetened fruit juice and salted nuts for the most part. The snacks were wildly overpriced but still hugely popular. Most people felt you couldn't really enjoy the performance without the salted nuts and sweetened juice.

A new arrival, Chadoul and his wife seated themselves in the row directly in front of Cureeves. Chadoul was a busy man and he was worried about his daughter. She was ill, and in care of a nurse. Nevertheless he felt the need to get out and enjoy an evening's entertainment. Chadoul had employed a "runner" for the night and would send his daughter a message.

Some of the torches were extinguished so now there was only a soft glow of light in the amphitheater. The curtains opened revealing a torch-lit stage. Soft music played while lovely young women and men danced slowly in the background. An announcer took to the stage. He welcomed everyone to the theater and asked everyone to be quiet and to put away any writings implements. The announcer began talking about performances scheduled in the future.

In a few minutes Chadoul would be dead at the hand of Cureeves. Cureeves would be arrested and decisions would have to be made. In a crowd of several witnesses different views would occur, different sides would be taken. Public opinion would differ. A King would decide Cureeves fate.

Chapter 2: Conac Listens

Marcus, the Captain of the Public Guard, arrested Cureeves the previous night. A killing in a public place brings public attention. The streets were filled with the news. Some sort of announcement would have to be made.

The Captain normally had the authority to punish prisoners immediately. A disorderly person was arrested, beaten, fined or dismembered on the spot. No need for courts, judges, or other stately decisions. But a murder among citizens was treated with more legal doings. A magistrate could take the case or the Captain could take the case to the King. Marcus had an appointment with King Conac. He needed the stalwart barbarian king to help him decide what to do.

Marcus' audience with the king was taking place in an informal room at the palace. Conac knew Marcus and liked the man. They often talked on the state of public opinion and the general mood of the people. Conac wanted to be a good and just ruler but he would not kowtow and slavishly follow the mood swings of a nation.

After a warm greeting between the men, they proceeded with the business at hand.

Marcus spoke: "I know this man, Cureeves, he was a Captain of the Public Guard, when I first entered the service. From all accounts he was a good officer and a fair and just man."

"Tell me more of what happened," said Conac.

"Well," continued Marcus, "As you may know, scribing has become quite popular..."

Conac interrupted, "Scribing?"

“Yes, people, mostly young people, use lead foil sheaves to write inane messages to each other. It is especially disruptive in classrooms and public places. They use these small lead foil sheaves to pass messages to each other. The sheaves are cheaper than waxed tablets or linen and can be reused again and again. The act even has it’s own sort of coded language. When something strikes one as funny, they will pass a note with the initials TRF, meaning ‘that’s real funny.’ All sorts of things like that, OMM means ‘Oh my Mitrah. It is an exclamation of surprise.’”

“It sounds harmless enough, how does it relate to this case?”

“Well, it has become sort of a nuisance in public places. The constant passing of notes, the lead foil makes a tiny scratching noise when scribed on, and in theaters the reflective surface can act as a mirror to reflect light in someone’s eyes.

“The theaters have banned their use during performances. It is announced before each performance that scribing and talking is distracting to those around you. It is a common courtesy to not do it.

“Well, Chadoul, the murdered man was scribing at the theater. His daughter was ill at home. Chadoul was scribing a note to her and was going to have a runner deliver the message and presumably have the runner return a response.”

“During the performance?” asked Conac.

“No, but after it had been announced to put away any lead foils. It was during the prelude dance performance. Cureeves was annoyed by Chadoul’s scribing and told him to stop. Chadoul took offense, continued scribing, and replied to Cureeves in a harsh tone. Cureeves then went to seek someone in authority to report Chadoul but apparently could not find anyone and returned to his seat. Chadoul confronted Cureeves about the informing and swore at the man. The torches had been extinguished, the theater was dark, more harsh words were exchanged, Cureeves was pelted by salted nuts. He says he thought the man was preparing to strike him and was frightened that this younger and stronger man was preparing to assault him again and so he stabbed Chadoul in the heart. Panic ensued, other theater goers fled, while Cureeves remained in his sit and Chadoul slowly died.”

“Self defense or hot blooded anger over a trifle? I see your dilemma,” said Conac.

“Yes. A citizen is dead and some side with the grieving widow. To be killed over a small affair is sad indeed. He was a good provider and family man. The fact that he was scribing to an ill daughter is especially sympathetic.

“Yet others see Chadoul as a bully. He was ignoring the rules and when confronted acted angrily instead of apologetically. He was physically younger and

stronger than the 71 year old Curvees. One should respect your elders especially when you are in the wrong.”

“How did all this scribing start? If I remember correctly lead foil was usually used for curse tablets. You inscribe your curse upon whoever and hide the item in their household.”

“Yes, foils are still used for that. I confiscated some today from a witch who was selling one to a rich household to curse their even more prosperous neighbors.”

“Could I see them?” asked the King.

Marcus passed the lead foil sheaves to Conac.

“I’d like to study these for a while. I’m amused but respectful of such magic.”

“Yes, as you see, the lead foil is soft enough to inscribe a message upon. The convenience of the item and its relative cheapness quickly replaced wax tablets as a means for short notes. Young school children grasped onto it quickly and it spread from there. It seems everyone scribes now.”

Chapter 3: The Curse Tablets

Conac contemplated all that Marcus had spoken of. It was said that barbarians are more superstitious than civilized men but these tablets contradicted that. Witches, Astrologers, Wizards: these all existed and thrived in the civilized countries. In his native Comeria such would be burned. Of course there were healers and fortunetellers, even in his homeland, who used magic.

Conac remembered a shaman who rose to prominence during the attempted colonization of Comeria. His tribe had soundly repelled the invaders. It was a red slaughter steeped in blood with hundreds of settlers and soldiers dead in a revenge killing that was terrible to behold.

This shaman practiced dark arts and came up with a plan that he said could kill more than a hundred thousand of the civilized invaders. His plan was to strike in the heart of their capital. He would unleash a horrifying magic that would kill everyone in the city: soldier and civilian. Whether it was possible or not, the plan was dismissed by the clan. They had only sought to repel the invaders, not become conquerors themselves. A direct confrontation with the enemy was the Comerian way. No cowardly plan to devastate an innocent population. The settlers killed knew the risks. The battle was a courageous slaughter, in hand to hand combat, using the strength and courage that his tribal god gave a man. Conac was among the counsel that dismissed the shaman’s plan.

Now Conac was king of these people! Who knows what would have happened if this shaman had been allowed to implement his deadly plan?

Conac stared at the lead foils. They were labeled and decorated with ornate drawings. One labeled “Hunger” featured a sallow fellow with protruding ribs and a weak look. Another labeled “Worry” showed a frightened man with a skeletal figure hovered over him. Conac wondered if these were real magicks or a worthless con. No matter, it was illegal to curse fellow citizens, and the witch would hang. The next lead foil was labeled “Scribing and Future Talk” it featured a woman with her hand held to her ear.”

Conac absent-mindedly traced the figure with his finger and wondered what the illustration meant? He traced it twice more while contemplating its meaning. Slowly a voice rose from the darkness in increasing volume.

An apparition appeared. But this was no demon. It appeared to be an average citizen. A little too well fed but with average dress. The woman was chatting to herself, hand to her ear, exactly as the illustration on the foil.

“...and then she put on her perfume as if nothing happened. Clearly she was flirting with my husband. I should have let that hussy have it right then and there. She was clearly trying to entice my husband. But I have dealt with sluts like her before. She can’t hold a candle to someone like myself. My husband was not impressed with her in the least. He told me later that he was going to tell her to behave herself but he thought I would be upset if he was rude to my friend. My friend! She is no friend of mine. I just happened to know her through Susann. Susann introduced us that one time I was at the market. You remember that day about a year ago when that big storm was coming through. My goodness, you remember how cold it got then? That was when I bought that magnificent wool coat. That is my favorite coat. Mari wanted to borrow it last month. She was travelling north and needed a good warm coat but I didn’t want to part with it. It is, after all, my favorite. Johan said I was being selfish but I really wasn’t. A cold spell was brewing and where would I be without my coat. Anyway, this hussy now thinks my Johan is in love with her. My word, how can anyone be so self centered as to think my Johan would love anyone but me...”

The voice continued. Conac wondered what to do? Cold steel did not seem to be called for. The apparition seemed impervious to a physical threat anyway.

“...Rax told his teacher that he was boring and walked away from the lesson. And now I have to try to convince this man to give Rax another chance. You know Rax has to learn a trade. He will be living with us forever if he can’t find work. I do not know why he cannot be more like his father. Johan works constantly, sometimes I think he is having an affair. But no woman but me would have him. I swear he only comes home to eat and sleep. If he had to retire he would go insane. He loves his work. Rax only likes to drink and rut. That girlfriend of his is bound to get pregnant and where will I be then. I would have to be the one to take care of the baby. But I do love babies. I

remember when Rax was young. He was so cute. He would fuss and fuss all night long though. I knew I was going to have trouble with that one...”

Despite his early reasoning Conac thrust his sword into the demon. Yes, it was a demon! No human could talk so much and so incessantly. But the sword had no effect. Conac took a torch from the wall and tried to set fire to the demon. But again, there was no effect.

“...I asked for a red scarf but the merchant only had blue ones. The blue ones match my eyes but I really wanted a red scarf. That would match my gloves and give me a good look. Bettina has a red scarf that her husband gave her for her birthday. My birthday is next month. I could wait until then to see if Johan will buy me a red scarf. I bought him a nice pair of sandals for his birthday. I can’t believe he turned 47 last year...”

It would not shut up.

Chapter 4: Conac’s Decision

Conac met with Marcus in a different room of the palace. Marcus noticed the carpenters and workmen removing Conac’s belongings to this new room. The old room was being sealed. One could hear a faint voice coming from it. It was a woman’s voice and it never stopped. Plaster upon plaster was being smeared on the walls and it slowly muffled the voice.

Marcus broke his silence: “Is the case to be turned over to a magistrate or will the King decide Cureeves’ fate?”

Conac spoke: “Sometimes there is no easy solution but I will decide his fate. To keep civil order we cannot allow fellow citizens to kill each other over trifling incidents. I confess, that even I like the various entertainments that civilization offers. It is good to laugh with others when the acrobat makes his pratfalls. It is good to clap in unison after a particularly good minstrel finishes his song. It would be less enjoyable if a man was killed every time I attended one of these events.”

Conac paused thoughtfully. Marcus had never noticed the thoughtfulness behind those cold blue eyes before. He had thought of the King as a magnificent animal most times. Strong and fierce, a wolf among dogs. Quick acting and deadly. But the King was learning all the time. He knew scores of languages, he read literature and attended plays. He was truly a great King. A man born to rule and better the men he ruled. It was his King who now spoke:

“This scribing seems an irritant to my mind, yet certain people are addicted to it. Some like to talk or scribe constantly. It is sad but I suppose they cannot be alone with their thoughts and apparently there are those that are willing to be shared upon.

“Scribing or talking, there is no question, that at a public performance, that it is irksome. But for it to be a capital offense seems unrealistic. The aisles would run red at every performance. It seems to me that these theaters used to employ people to guide people to their seats and attend to special needs. Now these ‘ushers’ no longer exist. These merchants in their greed tax the public with their petty cost cutting. It is their lack that led to this event.

“Cureeves will go to prison at night and weekends for five years. He shall be re-enlisted into the Public Guard. Half his salary will go to Chadoul’s widow. Cureeves’ notoriety should have a quieting effect at his new post as the Grove Amphitheater’s usher!

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