

The wind kicked up dust from the prairie and threw it at the sunlit faces of the riders as they dismounted their horses. The dignity of the Princes prevented them from wiping their eyes or covering them with a hand. The most they would or could do was tilt their heads down, or squint. They handed off the reins to slaves, adjusted their mails and breastplates, and the leader of the Wyld Hunt gave orders for the disposition of the two talons of Imperial cavalry that had arrived with them. Then the princes formed into a line, each shoulder to shoulder with another, and thus they proceeded into the first city of Oldcastle.

The dirt from the plains blew into the town in just the same way and every surface that wasn't handled frequently had an encrusted layer of brown. Doorways, walls against which people huddled in the occasional storm, merchants' stalls, and the occasional public idol was well kept, but everything out of reach was soiled. The great pagoda of Oldcastle in the center of the city rose up over two hundred feet; the histories told that in antiquity it had been coated with illustrious green paint with gold which made it stand out against the horizon like a great fruit bearing tree. In the present era it had the look of an overgrown, but ornate, termite mound.

The city was forbidding to the five huntsmen-princes, for though it was known to be populous very few people knew the right conduct. The rule of thumb had been spread around the city to stay inside, or if possible flee to the countryside. The older people and those better traveled formed a broken line in the street and bowed briefly as the newcomers passed. On the far left of the formation one prince made some comment in his native tongue, foreign in that place. A short laugh was shared by the other princes, except the leader who walked on the opposite end of the line. He was taciturn for his own reasons: it was his first time leading the Hunt and he wished to example great discipline. Also it was the oldest member of their party, who had led the part many times before, which had made the joke and the young man wished to separate himself from that. Even though the people of Oldcastle were peasants of the lowest order and all the princes had carte blanche to execute whomsoever they pleased, the young prince felt their eyes upon him.

Leading the party was Tepet Elott. His face was not yet scarred by barbarians. Walking with him were four Princes of the Earth, greater in years and experience than he. Cathak Iva was the senior member, and jester of the company. Two more were of Sesus and one was of Mnemon. Together they came to the hexagonal stone steps at the foot of the pagoda where the Governor of Oldcastle and a few other important family members were assembled in the dusty wind to receive them. The actual title was duke of the tall grass, or potentate of horses but in the eyes of the princes he was nothing but a Governor. Standing behind and to the side of the Duke was a young girl, dressed in a white gown that was stark against the brown and wearing a veil over her face. This was the Governor's daughter. From his satchel Elott produced and unwrapped a silk-wrapped brick of jade which bore the twisting dragon seal of the Scarlet Empress. The Governor descended the steps, knelt, and kissed the jade. "O, you great fingers of the great hand of the powerful Empress, how beneficent are you noble saviors to give this magnanimous boon to we poor and humbl-"

Through squinted eyes Elott cut the man off. "Rise and be to your task. What news do you have of this rogue?" The Governor startled, not used to being interrupted and keenly worried that his guests might become angry or violent. He looked back to his assistants who held a set of parchments with that news. One man approached and began to relay the vital points to the Governor when Elott spat out some grains of dirt and commanded, "indoors." Then he led the Wyld Hunt past the Governor's assembly, bowed to his maiden daughter, and entered the pagoda.

The province of Oldcastle had been torn down and built up and torn day several times over the millennia. The peerless pagoda had always remained, but its appointments no longer had the splendor originally imparted by its ingenious creators. The Wyld Hunt sat on hard wooden chairs as the Governor's sister's son reported on the nature of the anathema in the country. To the best of anyone's knowledge in Oldcastle there was only one anathema that was causing the trouble. The Sidereal seers reported only one anathema. As it was revealed this unclean one fancied itself a highwayman or bandit. The province was tribute paying but in the past three months had seen-or had suspiciously not seen as the case may be- almost one hundred talents of silver disappear from its holdings. The modus operandi was heterogeneous. Sometimes when the sun rose strongboxes were merely empty as though they'd never been used. Yet other times the anathema was a gallant that robbed wagons and caravans in broad daylight with a gang of inferiors, wearing a black cloak and black mask. At these times it was said that the anathema was courtly with women, quick and ruthless with men who opposed him, and thorough in his thievery. He was a finely mounted horseman, deadly skilled with rapier and throwing knives, skilled in alchemy and poisons, and quiet as death when it pleased him. Groups of local soldiers were ineffective in even slowing the bandit's pace. A more romantic society that was not obliged by an all-powerful empire would have given the figure a more fitting name than 'anathema'.

When after an hour the whole report was at last completely related, Cathak Iva was asleep. Elott asked a handful of questions to the Governor and his aunts and nephews until he was satisfied that none of them knew anything about their own country besides what was in the report. (History would acquit them; their line was wealthy urban tradesmen rather than rural herders) Tepet Elott rose and kicked Iva's boot and told him they were finished there. The Governor suddenly stood and scraped his chair against the floor. "I humbly beg your most gracious pardon, but what wise plan does our courageous warrior have?"

There was a huff from the leader of the Hunt, but he answered: "Our object is to kill this thing. Sword prowess notwithstanding, its main defense is stealth and evasiveness. That is what we must overcome. I have some ideas how. Whatever may happen, I expect we will start by burning the graze lands to limit where he can go. Keep that in confidence. If I hear of farmers bailing hay early I'll have you and your family quartered." A heavy silence spread throughout the Governor's family as the Princes left the pagoda. They walked out of the city the way they came and arrived at their cavalry's bivouac.

"So Elott," Cathak Iva said as they walked, "I suppose we know why they asked for you to be in charge."

Elott did not look as he replied. "I would not suppose that I knew the ways of our Sidereal counselors in anyway. Why do you say?"

"You know too well. The quarry's a sneak and a rider. You're both those things yourself. They must expect you to have a special insight into the mind of a beast, yes? Maybe insight into other body parts, hah? Isn't that what they teach at the palace of ancient stone?" Iva meant to draw a belly laugh out of the party, but the three between them waited for Elott's reaction.

"Perhaps I was designated to lead because burning down hamlets one after another until you smoke out one single anathema is too dear an expense to be afforded for such a foolish, rustic old man as yourself." Elott had been nursing a growing anger for Iva and his japes since that particular Hunt had been called, nine weeks ago.

Cathak Iva took three steps forward and spun to face Elott. "Rustic fool? I will pray for guidance that

this rustic fool doesn't interfere with our leader when he finds this anathema and it slashes a sword in his face, and I pray our leader doesn't cower behind me." Elott stopped only long enough to listen and then continued forward without another word.

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The best anyone could say, even himself, about why young Tepet Elott was leading that Wyld Hunt was, 'because the mystics said so'. The order for the hunt, and the prediction of where the target would be, was given by the cloister of celestial prophecy. A secluded monastery where a few exalts read oracles all day and all night, and etched their findings on stone blocks delivered by a brotherhood of deaf-mute servants. Sometimes the location was a city, or a body of water, or a certain mountain peak, or a place where five trees danced in a circle. Sometimes also there were instructions: whet your blades with wine, travel upon such-and-such a ship, speak with the village idiot, watch the birds. Members of the hunt would swear by the locations provided by the cloister (when they could be properly interpreted), but they were somewhat more skeptical of the extraneous instructions. Yet when a stone block was produced with the phrase, "*Tepet Elott will lead a hunt to Oldcastle to slay an anathema,*" the young warrior was put in charge of the affair in accordance with their guidance. However, as the instructions did not explicitly forbid it Elott was also assigned two hundred Imperial cavalymen as an assurance.

In a cavalry tent just beyond Oldcastle Elott was writing up orders for the disposition of troopers so that they didn't burn down the town or starve. Mnemon Balad entered, trailed by Iva and the two Sesus who were scraping dung from their boots. Balad was agreed to be the most sensible huntswoman of the party. "Tell us the course of action, if you will."

"I have not yet decided upon the particulars."

"Ah-we understand Elott, you have more love letters to write to the horses. Take your time with that," said Iva.

"What thoughts have you had, thus far?" Balad was quick to keep the focus.

Elott hesitantly revealed what was on his mind. "I feel certain that with our resources we cannot out track, out ride, or out flank this quarry. Perhaps our only advantage is that we can outfight this creature and its pitiful band. The object is to force battle but without a doubt this bandit will avoid that above all else. We need to know more of this creature's habits, and will need to have a few encounters with it. We had best husband up our patience."

"What rubbish-you'll have us here until snow flies on this place. Go to the village and round up the weak of heart, soon enough one will break and render up something about its bandit friends to us." Iva had only ever needed two or three different plans in a hunt, this was number two.

"That would be a waste of time and misuse of our resources. In all likelihood we could see our quarry's domicile from the top of that pagoda. His headquarters is in or very near this town. All the roads stem from here, and to suffer the farmers would swell his numbers. As active as our enemy is, and knowing that we're here to hunt him, we won't have to wait long to encounter the enemy. We'll assign small groups of riders to protect wagon convoys between the towns and let his boldness overtake him." Faced with pressure, Elott hammered out his approach very quickly.

“What exceeding cleverness—we shall sit, and we shall watch. Hmph!” Iva fussed and left the tent. In spite of his faults, Iva loved to fight. He never tired of it.

Balad said, after his departure, “Then that’s what we shall do. I suppose... we should ride with the occasional wagon train?”

“In a false guise, even.”

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The province of Oldcastle was a stalwart center of life on the far side of the Grey River. A series of mountains caught Western winds and created a tributary to the river, which made irrigating the valley a simple matter. At one time this great stream passed by the first city and pagoda. But sometime before the oral record could recall there had been a great geological uproar and the stream moved far north, maybe breaking a dam or aqueduct, leaving the central valley the dusty place that it had become.

Still there was good graze land in the new valley, and so long as the lands had water there would always be farmers and herders there, and there would always be someone to collect tithes and duties on their prodigious trade. Elott and Balad were getting a close insight into that trade. For over two weeks they had been riding up and down country roads dressed as common legionnaires following wagons and herds. After the first day every mile of countryside became indistinguishable from the last. In order to conceal the colorful hues of the prince’s faces, every soldier had smeared their face with dirt as though they did not know the meaning of washing. On one of these voyages back to the city, along a road cut into the hillside, Balad said “The more and more weary I become of the saddle, I start to think that Iva’s plan is very attractive.”

“Without a doubt the soldiers would like it as well, a solid opportunity to loot homes and line everyone’s purses before retiring. We won’t be doing that. Watch the ledges as we go through this cutback.”

“You may miss a rare opportunity doing this. It’s not often that a hunt receives a potent military force. Iva’s way will line your pockets, and everyone’s, and still we will slay this anathema. This hunt never otherwise furnishes such pecuniary benefits.” Balad was not eminently forceful, but nonetheless firm in her points.

Elott adjusted the reins in his hand and slowly answered. “I’d thought that was so because the Hunt is not materialist in nature. Our purpose is hunting, and hunting only. With ruthless efficiency and tireless energy we root out and destroy the unclean. That devotion is our strength, and why a hunt is seldom seen that returns without triumph.”

“Our hunters are skilled, and for this hunt we have far more than we need. One whole talon of soldiers is still camped in the city motionless, when it could be set to our considerable profit.”

“Reserves, Balad.” Elott was starting to be short with her; his decisions adhered to the ten thousand correct actions.

“Which are unnecessary for five trainee—” The point of argument was abruptly given up. Tepet Elott spurred his horse forward in the wagon column as one of the sentries screamed, and grasped an arrow that had just pierced his side. The convoy was under attack.

A steep embankment bordered the right side of the road, and a number of bowmen were loosing arrows from concealed positions behind logs, rocks and trees. Elott fell immediately to dispensing orders: "Balad lead right column in a charge on the enemy position. Left column, form tight around the wagon!" The response was immediate, and fifteen cavalry troopers turned sharply ninety degrees and drove their horses uphill. They fell upon the bowmen like an axe and struck them down from horseback. When the ambushers broke and retreated Balad pursued, hoping to be led to a place of importance for the bandits. Elott remained around the wagon as the battle sounds receded into the forest. The loose protocol that had been established in camp for a situation of this sort was that the caravan was to hold position for an hour to await news of the pursuit before moving onwards.

For Elott the wait of those few minutes was unbearable even when set against days and days of empty riding. He stared pensively uphill into the forest line, just as he was expected to do. A downhill attack was to be expected; the approach was textbook and used terrain to its advantage. Because of course nobody would attack uphill if they could avoid it—at least nobody that was not exceedingly clever. That day there was an exceedingly clever man in the woods.

From where he was mounted Elott had kept his ears pricked towards the woods to pick up any sound of combat that might carry back to him. The left side of the road which slid steeply away was ignored all this time, until there was a sharp tap against the chest piece of Tepet Elott's armor, and a heavy voice said loud and clear, "Do not move, O Prince." Standing beside the horse, garbed in a black cloak and with a cloth tied around the bottom of his face, was the anathema. His stealth was everything it had been said to be. Beneath the eyes of the cavalry he had come to stand exactly alongside the commander and was just then holding the point of his rapier to Elott's breast. "Tell your soldiers to dismount, and unclasp their swords." The guards were motionless while this developed. And then from up the left side of the road, a group of perhaps thirty men dressed in various black rags and adorned with leaves and twigs climbed up the hill onto the road and surrounded them all. Their surprise and tactical superiority was complete.

"Soldiers, dismount and disarm. You... are the anathema. And given that you know to take me hostage, I gather you know who I am." The young leader swung his leg over and descended from his horse. His charges slowly did the same. The bandits quickly looted the wagons.

"If you think you have scared me, think that I'm afraid of your hunt, you're wrong." The anathema pushed his blade against Elott's body. "I have no fear of you."

"I did not in the least expect fear from you. Our strategy does not require your fear. Go on, rogue. Do what you came here to do." Elott nodded his head down towards the sword that was pushed towards his heart.

"Ha—you would have me do just that, and then I'd face twice your number sworn to vengeance. No, o hunter, you'll go on yet. Men! Kill the soldiers, loot, and then take their horses." With quick and virile brutality the Anathema's assembled men executed the fourteen or fifteen cavalymen that remained. Their weapons and arms were quickly gathered and the force mounted. The anathema took Elott's own horse. "My deepest thanks for your generous gift. Men! Depart." And then the whole band sped down the hill and out of sight.

Elott stood on the road with the bodies of the cavalymen and some wagons that had been just been ransacked. A sigh escaped him as he adjusted his tunic and made a last check of the perimeter. Then he

inscribed and left a note to Balad if she should return and find the grisly scene, and ordered the wagons to continue back to Oldcastle while he would walk alongside.

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“You must tell me this story again. The enemy distracted you with a feinting maneuver and divided your forces. Half your force it occupied with this distraction while the rest he ambushed and wiped out, stealing the horses and equipment and whatever money was in the wagons And what of this do you say was a success, Tepet Elott?” Cathak Iva had been riotous since he’d heard of this development.

“It is a success because we are closer to the enemy now than we were before. The equipment was a marginal loss only, because it all bears the mark of the Empress. They can’t stable those horses anywhere in the province, or bear those arms. It will drain their resources if they event want to keep those horses,” Elott reasoned.

“Unless they simply stay mounted and use the new weapons immediately to expand their attacks on *Us*. Which they certainly will.”

Elott was slow to turn towards Iva. “And... so... what... if they do, Iva? Is that any concern of ours? Or cause for fear? It is not. The plan was a success because I know our quarry now. I have heard his voice, seen his demeanor. Already I have a feel for him. It’s rather foolish in a way, the bandit goes through so much trouble to stay hidden, but when you meet him he tells you so much in his behavior.”

“Then, Elott our leader, tell us what the new plan is now that you know what it’s like to be robbed by the anathema.”

“No change, you and the rest of our party will continue to ride with caravans. We’ll make them larger, better guarded, less frequent. The bandits will become rash and attack with our horses and swords. We’ll be ready and waiting and destroy them when they do. Meanwhile I will go and obtain another horse. You’re dismissed.” Elott stood and threw a purple cloak over himself, then passed by Iva on his way out of the officer’s tent heading for a livery in Oldcastle.

As an agricultural center the City had numerous establishments for livestock care; the Imperial cavalry were utilizing the best. It was a corral on the north side of the pagoda, with long lines of stalls and teams of stable hands. It was the facility that the Governor’s family and business partners used whenever they needed mounts. Groups of soldiers too now lounged around the wooden confines joking and talking of the next mission. They all stood at attention when Elott entered through the wide barn doors and pounded out a salute on their breastplates. Elott summoned over to him the top hand of the corral. “You man. Mark this, take the best of the army’s horses and place it in my stable and see that it has a saddle, yes?”

The top hand was a slightly bent man with his shoulders stooped, and he moved with an aloof, separate air. “Yes master, I shall have it done. Horse and saddle. Is that all?”

Elott looked past the stable hand to inspect the readiness of the cavalymen that were waiting in the corral. “No, I shall need another horse immediately. Make it some animal that is attractive and clean, and with the gaudiest saddle and tack that you can gather on short notice. I have a dinner reception with the Governor this evening at the pagoda.”

The stable hand nodded once and promptly stooped away down the line of stalls in the corral. Tepet Elott then employed two soldiers as runners, one to the Pagoda to inform the Governor that he was to hold a reception for him tonight and one to inform his quarters at the camp that he would be attending this reception and required a formal uniform laid out. That night Tepet Elott dined with the Governor and his family. When the leader of the Wyld Hunt found that the Governor's daughter was not in attendance he insisted that she be brought to the reception. He spent much of the evening talking to, or at, the beautiful young maiden who was the first daughter of the province. He returned to the corral and requested another reception every night for the next three. On the fourth day a rider came from the northern road and said that a convoy had repulsed bandits riding on horses with imperial brands-but the anathema was not among them.