

Some days later the convoy returned with prisoners from the attack. It was presumed they were the same bandits that consorted with the anathema, so they were to be tortured for information about their quarry's whereabouts. As with most dynasts who were of the Wyld Hunt, every Prince in Elott's party considered themselves, without qualification, an expert in the art of extracting information by means of stress and physical mutilation. Mnemon Balad was having a crack at two of the bandits in a courtyard of the house where she quartered in the city. Her method utilized a wagon wheel and a complex twisting of limbs with rope and misuse of human joints. Tepet Elott was in attendance.

"You... I don't understand what it is you say you've discovered about the anathema, o captain," said Balad as she tightened a rope that painfully bound the legs of both men.

"I understand enough that I have begun the next step of my strategy to defeat the anathema. It should not be very long now," answered Elott.

"Invoking all the respect I have for you and all the regard, I must with seriousness ask you to be honest with me-what's the plan, Elott?" she asked.

"The precision of that ambush demonstrates to me that the anathema clearly has an intelligence network here in the city reporting to him, and he is planning his raids accordingly. I am going to create a convoy which I can be entirely certain that that anathema will attack. We will lay a trap for him, and at that time defeat him in battle." Elott approached Balad, took the rope from her, and untied both of the prisoners from where they had been strung up. Both men fell writhing to the floor, grasping at their limbs. "I am going to do so by utilizing the great financial resources of the Governor of Oldcastle. Now have these prisoners returned to the holding pen with the others, and in the morning cut their throats and have the bodies affixed to posts along the roads as a warning."

Balad became cross with him and went so far as to swear, saying "Dragons damn your family, Elott. I was just getting started with those two bandit men... Whatever else shall I do with my day?" Then she stormed out of the courtyard leaving Elott. The leader of the Wyld Hunt, for his part, had another reception to attend at the pagoda with the beautiful daughter of the Governor.

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After a month went by where guarded caravans were still attacked with calculated precision and many loud complaints made by Cathak Iva, who was frequently seen attending the wine shops in Oldcastle, Elott had little to say about his plan to trap the anathema. The rumors were spreading around the city that he forgot his duty and intended to make the Governor's daughter his wife. Some speculated there was a love match. Some said he had asked for her hand in marriage because it would be economically beneficial to his household to marry into the Governor's. Aside from equipping one of its young members with a wife, it would buy a huge dowry from that wealthy merchant clan. Huge in the sense that it would have to be delivered by the wagonload, and especially huge considering the circumstance of the wagonloads traveling under a heavy guard of Imperial cavalry. The wagonloads of dowry money were the shipment Elott was certain the anathema would attack. The trap was set and the dowry convoy was sent out to finally undo the unclean thing.

However, Tepet Elott announced at the corral that his new horse would not be saddled to go with the convoy. Instead was going to retire to a countryside villa with the Governor's daughter following their exchange of vows later that afternoon. Thus he would need a wagon team prepared, and the horses

would have to wear maiden-white blankets and the carriage likewise dressed with white bunting for the event. They would leave the day after the dowry.

The remaining time before his own departure the leader of the Wyld Hunt spent closed up with the Governor's daughter in one of the high chambers of the pagoda. A tailor was called up to fit the man for a new suit and the girl for a new dress. When darkness fell after dinner, word went through the Governor's servant staff at the Pagoda that Tepet Elott and his new wife would be going to the corral to take the carriage to their honeymoon villa. Porters prepared their bags.

The young girl still wore a white veil over her features as Tepet Elott guided her with an arm around her waist to their carriage at the city's finest stable. There under supervision of some of the Governor's guards the carriage was seen off as it went under cover of night to bear away the newlyweds. By and executive order of the leader of the wyld hunt the city of Oldcastle was lit perpetually with torches by night, spaced as evenly as possible, to give bandits no place to hide. Though as a curfew had been ordered as well, there were few people around to see any bandits either. The glow of the torches passed in through the carriage windows and shone on Elott and his new wife.

A noise came from the driver's bench. The carriage jarred softly and began to slow down from the sharp pace that it had been keeping, eventually stopping. Tepet Elott had carried his bow with him, as though he meant to do some hunting as soon as they arrived in the country. Now he placed a firm grip on the handle and checked that the string was taught as ever. Proceeding as softly as he was able, he moved to the front of the carriage. There he looked out through a curtained window and saw that both teamsters were slumped over dead, from thrown knives in the neck. And down the city street at an intersection he could see that there was the figure of a man on horseback, wearing a black mask over his face and a long black cloak.

"Do not make a move, woman." Elott opened the carriage door and stepped cautiously onto the running board. He called out down the street to the horseman, the anathema. "Good evening. I presume you have come to take more than my horses."

"Yes," called back the anathema.

"That is as I thought. My own sword is packed in a trunk on top. Assuring you I don't mean to flee, will you permit me to arm myself? You wish to cross blades with me I take it." Their words echoed to each other back and forth along the dark, clear street.

"Yes... else I would have burned you alive in that wagon." The anathema threw back his dignified shoulders once, and then in a short fluid action lowered from his horse and drew his own sword.

"You're awfully generous." Elott stalled some by making a long search of the trunks for the sword he said he'd packed. "I wonder, you wicked brute, is that still my horse you're riding?"

"Yes, now come and fight me!"

"And my own saddle, too? How barbarous. If I should win this fight I'll be taking that horse back from you." At last Elott closed the trunk and walked to the front of the carriage. There was a sword around his waist, and a quiver of arrows over his shoulder. Forty paces separated them.

The anathema laughed and said, "I like your horse very much, and I think I will keep it." Then he

began to approach.

Tepet Elliot pulled a small brass whistle out of his pocket. He wore a superior grin and said suggestively to the anathema, "I like your horse very much as well." The black clad bandit became incensed and was about to charge when the leader of the Wyld Hunt blew sharply on his whistle; the response was immediate and stopped the anathema in its tracks. Suddenly a great clamor of feet and metal was heard along the street, from houses and side-streets and alleyways. Barefooted Imperial soldiers came from almost everywhere, filling the intersection behind the anathema and forming a line in the street near the carriage. A line of soldiers formed quickly on either side of the street lengthwise, but broken up around the middle as none of the men wished to stand too close to the anathema. Each soldier carried a heavy iron-tipped spear. Completely silent, and not yet seen either, were the two Princes of Sesus who had placed themselves on high rooftops with bows, and now also took aim.

There was not enough time for the anathema to say a single word, only turn around once looking for a means of escape, before the Imperials opened fire. The quickest, straightest missiles were the Princes' arrows. One struck immediately in the neck and another just below the chest. Next the soldiers hurled their spears through the torchlight, each imagining some great feat of revenge for the slaughter of their comrades. The iron tips were not so accurate but abundant. The anathema turned and threw himself about in evasion, and swung his sword slicing some of the spears spectacularly in twain, but not all. One spear went through his chest near his shoulder, another through his leg, and one transfixed itself through the anathema's left arm and then stomach, pinning the limb in place. Then a second wave of arrows from the Princes' bows hissed through the air and the broken body did not have the wherewithal to avoid them. It was over in a matter of seconds, the anathema was barely writhing on the ground, projectiles projecting from bloody holes.

Tepet Elott raised his hand and shouted the order for ceasefire, then approached the body. The only sounds on the street were the muffled shifting of the soldiers, and the desperate, sorrowful wails and moans coming from the bridal carriage. The Governor's daughter got out and ran forward, crying. Elott directed the soldiers to hold her back. He came to the body of the anathema. It was still alive, still drawing breath from the force of dignity.

"You love her, of course. Or at least you mean to." It was well known that even an anathema that appeared mortally wounded could be dangerous, and Elott wielded a knife as he stood over the body and removed the mask. The face behind it, except for the look of agony and anguish and blood, was familiar. "You work at the stables... shoveling feces or the like? Some of your highwaymen work there too I expect. The Governor's family goes there and you must regularly see that girl what's her name." Elott gestured blindly to where his newly betrothed wife had collapsed in sobs. The anathema's eyes went that way.

"You began a flirtation with her. Not before when you were merely a shit shoveler, but when you were a mighty bandit. Of course it was all in secret, very exciting to the young girl. Working in those stables you also heard everything these loose-lipped soldiers had to say about when and where the convoys were going, which allowed you to raid with impunity. Bag. Sergeant, fetch the bag for me!" A soldier broke rank to carry out Elott's request. "One hundred talents of silver is a breath-taking amount of money for one poor stable-boy. It was no longer a challenge so you decided to steal a woman's heart, and the heart of the fairest most sought after woman in Oldcastle..." Again Elott stumbled trying to remember the bride's name. "*Her*. It was unacceptable that I should marry your love, so you resolved to kill me before I could make her mine. What I don't know is whether the rest of your forces are stealing the dowry. If so then one of mine called Iva will be waiting to defeat and burn your allies' bodies." The

anathema made a gurgling sound. “They are? Cathak Iva will be elated.”

The soldier returned and approached hesitantly, holding out an empty and sturdy leather sack. Elott took it from his hand. In that brief distraction the anathema had clumsily withdrawn a small dirk from the perforated folds of his clothes, as though he meant to stab his enemy. Elott caught the motion before it came to fruition and kicked the weapon away. “You have an admirable rigor of hatred. And since this is a singular event for me, I shall grant you a boon. A last request.” All the anathema could do was to stare at the leader of the wyld hunt, his eyes slowly becoming darker. “I will credit you a gentleman and presume you don’t want your lover to see what is about to happen. Legionary! Secure that woman inside the carriage and draw the curtains. I don’t understand what you see in her. Makes awful conversation, even worse tea. She can’t even play a solid game of gateway.”

As the soldiers did this, Mnemon Balad appeared on horseback after racing across the city towards the fighting. Still at a distance she cried out in the night, “Elott! Did everything go as planned?”

“Splendidly so!” Elott called back. Then he bent over and cut off the head of the anathema, grabbed it by its hair, and threw it in the leather sack. When Balad arrived he handed the bag to her. “You know what to do from here, put this under lock and key and have the body taken in as well. Arrest and interrogate everyone associated with him... send that woman back to the pagoda. I’m going to take the rest of the reserves in support of Cathak Iva.” Elott then took his original horse back and rode off the way that Balad had come.

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A week later the ordeal was all over. The curfew was lifted in Oldcastle and once again the roads were open with only the typical, everyday bandits carousing them. Though when Cathak Iva was done with his campaign there were considerably fewer of those. In the end Tepet Elott had ordered no graze land burned. Word spread through the town that the Governor’s daughter was heartbroken at the death of her lover. The word then spread over the whole province, and then into neighboring lands. The old women and young wives throughout were saying that her love for the bandit had been legendary.

Amongst the men there was considerable interest in locating the stolen silver. Rumor spread that there was a one percent reward for recovery. Nothing of the sort was true but the leader of the Wyld Hunt wasn’t about to confirm that. Dozens of small groups were at large in the countryside looking for tracks or encampment, or caves the likes of which thieves and dragons used to hide their riches. Tepet Elott, however, was of the opinion that the anathema had hidden his loot in the city. After seeing to the particulars of having his marriage dissolved he was in the corral himself joining the search.

Elott sequestered himself in the bunkhouse of the stable where he had worked, going through the anathema’s private things. It had been the top-hand. The man had been lettered also and had a journal hidden between a few pairs of pants. There was nothing in it of his days as anathema, as keeping a journal was too mundane for a terrible monster such as himself. But it did record the days when the Governor’s daughter came to the stable, and there was a series of crude sketches of her face. He had earned some degree of celebrity at harvest festivals for his equestrian skills; pressed between the pages of the journal were a dozen silk ribbons for riding and roping. Many pages had diagrams for ways to improvise halters and harnesses with rope.

Tepet Elott was absorbed in these diagrams when one of the lieutenants entered and hailed him: “Lord. We have completed the search of the stable and again found nothing.”

The leader was slow to look up from the book. “Did you look under the dung-heaps?”

“Beg your pardon, Lord?”

“You haven’t. Get every man a shovel or a wheel barrow and excavate all the dung heaps.” Elott turned a page in the diary.

“Uh-b-Yes Lord.”

“Even in death with its head cleft from its shoulders that anathema still has you outmatched for wits,” Elott said after the soldier had left. Hours later as the sun was going down the soldiers, with their heavy armor cast off for laboring purposes, struck rich as their shovels found all the talents of silver buried under the piles of feces. They also found a good deal of miscellaneous plunder. In the absence of means to prove the original owners Tepet Elott ordered it to be split up among the cavalry as a bonus. The silver was to be delivered to the Realm as tithe, under the guard of the five Princes.

The departure ceremony was very brief. The leader of the Wyld Hunt and the Governor met for a brief talk and some bows. Then one turned back into his tall brown pagoda and the other rode from the city of Oldcastle on horseback, with the long trip back to The Realm ahead of him. The camp had already been struck and Elott gave the order to march. At the head of the cavalry were the Princes, riding abreast of one another. From one end Cathak Iva growled, “it’s been over a whole month we were here with all these soldiers, and we didn’t rob one stinking town or ranch. We didn’t even ride to an enemy’s land and rob them. What a foolish, inexperienced waste.”

“I don’t have it in my log book that I expressly forbade you to steal anything, Cathak Iva. I find your complaint misplaced.” Elott was the first to answer him, from the other side of the line.

“Ach, is that so? And I see you have another horse to your name after all this? You rotten hypocrite, all this time you insisted on being gentle with this hunt and then you go and steal a horse for yourself! Maggot!”

“And you didn’t have to pay a tab at those wine shops. Or those brothels where you spent so many nights I’m told they started polishing your boots for you? Control yourself, Cathak Iva. I’ll have you know that I did not steal that horse. Mine was stolen in the line of duty and I required a replacement.”

“An’ here it is still. So you admit to stealing it!” Iva rode forward and stopped in front of Elott. The line of Princes stopped, and the whole army of cavalry behind them was forced to a halt.

“Well Cathak Iva, no I did not steal it. That’s a cavalry horse, strictly speaking I embezzled it. If it pleases you I invite you to file a complaint with the Master of the Hunt when we return. But that won’t be for some time. You should think about it. In fact Cathak Iva, I order you to meditate on this issue *in silence* for the remainder of our journey home, is that understood?” Iva was about to answer when Elott cut him off. “Ah-ah. Just a nod will be sufficient.”

Insubordination was as serious a matter as there was in the Hunt, and the whole Empire. Without nodding one way or another Cathak Iva returned to his spot on the line, and the leader of the hunt resumed the order to march across the dusty sunlit prairie.