

*The
Black
Hood*©

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I feel coarse sackcloth against my face, covering my whole head. I should be able to see daylight and the shadowy forms of my captors through the cloth, but I see only a darkness blacker than night. The cloth bears the pungent scent of sulfur, masking the other smells in the room.

“Behave yourself, woman,” the guard murmurs beside my ear. “Think of your babies. You wouldn't want anything to happen to them, now would you?” Perhaps the women of his country-Nadaer-might be humbled by his tone and his so-playful, so-ironic diminutives, but never a woman of Ysoto.

“I bore those 'babies' sixteen and seventeen years past, slughand,” I mutter through the black cloth. “They are my comrades at arms, not babbling babes.” I did not see them captured, nor would I take this man's word for it.

I taste bile when he strikes me, and pain thunders through my jaw, but I manage not to cry out.

“Comrades at arms! You're a sword for hire and an Ysoto to boot. What do you know of comradeship, of honor?”

“Probably more than the man who took a village of his own peons and cut them into quarters, just to teach them a lesson.”

I brace for another blow, one that doesn't fall. Instead the guard laughs. “You truly think my leader's hands are dirtier than yours, outlander?”

“It is his wastefulness that offends me, not the state of his hands.”

He strikes me again, and I taste blood on my lip. Likely I now have matching bruises on each side of my jaw.

“Enough,” says another guard. He must have only just arrived, since his voice is new to me. “We must bring them up to the balcony now....”

I know the balcony well. A wide, broad platform unprotected by balustrade, it juts from the south side of the Sorceror's Tower. The tower rises a hundred feet above

this tumbledown ruin the Nadaer call a castle. We of the Ysoto would have captured it, if our employer, the Duke of Otranzo, had let us lay our own plans. If the Liberator of Nadaer had not used his magic against us. If, if, i

My wounded leg betrays me as I stumble up the worn and slippery stairs. But with my hands bound in front of me, instead of behind, it is easy enough to right myself. Sometimes I collide with the other prisoner to be slain today. He is a man of Lisia, to judge by his accent when he begs the guards for the fiftieth time: "Spare me, please! I am but lately wed, and my wife is with child."

Craven. What possessed him to turn hiresword, if he had not the stomach for this? When my husband died, I could have continued to tend our flocks of sheep. My daughter was as fair a hand with a spindle as she is with a sword; my son tended sick animals as well as he tends injured men. I could wish I had never taken up this life; I could wish my children never had. But we chose this life, they and I, and with it, I chose this death.

We step through a doorway. I feel a breeze on my hands, hear the murmur of the crowd far below me. I sense a presence, off to one side: the Liberator of Nadaer, the leader of all these people.

He begins to speak, his shrill voice rising and falling in an angry chant. He lists all that the Ysoto have done in his land, and loads us with many crimes of his own committing, including the death by quartering of the peons at Bellame. The crowd murmurs in time with his words. They are too far below for me to clearly hear their words, but I can supply ones I've heard before.

Barbarians. Bastards. Hireswords. They have called us all these things, but they keep returning to one word: Outlander. That's our real crime: to be foreign, in my case, to be Ysoto.

"My people," the Leader is saying, "The invasion of the foreign devils ends here

and now. Two by two, they will be executed for their crimes against the people.”

The crowd cheers.

“I have made a new magic today, my people, not without cost to myself. These two prisoners wear ensorcelled hoods, which can trap the thoughts-and the death agonies-of whoever wears them. These two shall die hooded, and the next two prisoners to wear them shall know before they die what it is to die helpless and afraid. Two by two, the death-pangs of these outlanders will be added to the hoods. Perhaps, I will hood a few and spare their lives. I could send them home, to gibber about our power and warn their people not to join the wars against us.”

The cheers are more scattered now, and the far-off crowd sounds confused. Their beloved Liberator is talking over their heads in more ways than one.

“...And this I swear, my people: when I capture that archcriminal, the Duke of Otranzo, I will put on him both hoods, and so he will taste death a thousand times before he finally dies!”

I cannot help but fear this new, foul magic of his. Will my son be the one to wear my hood next? Will my daughter? They might have been captured after all, and my guard’s remarks showed that the enemy knows something of our family ties. I take a deep breath, and try to think bold thoughts.

Beside me, the Lisian whimpers. He might be suppressing a cackle of laughter at the Leader’s colorful arithmetic-a thousand prisoners executed two by two would be a monstrous slow business, after all. But I doubt the Lisian sees that. Some jokes are only for the Ysoto.

“We begin,” says the Leader. “You-be silent, or you will be first.” This to the Lisian. His whining stops.

“Bring the woman forward,” the Leader says.

This hood might pass to one of my children. What will they feel if I go to my

death quietly?

I throw back my head and scream out my warcry, the call of a mountain eagle. I thrash against one of the guards as he drags me forward, and pull him down with me. Before the others can interfere, I clutch at him and we struggle, rolling over and over on the platform. I roll him off the edge of the balcony, and he pulls me down with him. I had hoped to toss him over and make trouble for the other guard before I died. But if my daughter wears this hood next, at least, she will not be shamed by me.

I can hear the crowd muttering, half angry, half puzzled. The sound is much closer now, but I have not reached them yet.

Let me show you bastards how an Ysoto dies.

“I heard of your mother’s fate,” says the Duke of Otranzo. “A terrible death, but she transformed it into something glorious.” His strong right hand and his withered left twitch across the carved arms of his mahogany chair, the only thing of luxury his tent holds.

The tall girl-last surviving officer of the Ysoto, their captain by default-squints down at the Duke with eyes old beyond her sixteen years, before answering him. “She was Ysoto,” the girl says.

“My aide tells me that you have a plan to bring down the Liberator once and for all. I should warn you that the Lisians swear they will not assail the Liberator’s castle again, not for any gold.”

“Neither your troops nor the Lisians will have to face the Liberator,” says the girl.

“That is the beauty of this plan.”

As she describes it to him, the Duke relaxes-it will require almost nothing of him. He need only let the Ysoto slip off their leash, and then he might gather the fruits of

victory or shrug off the casualties of defeat, as the case might be. But there is one slight hole, which nags at him.

“Your plans to call for more archers than I hired from Ysoto,” he points out.

“Will you then wait for reinforcements?”

“We will not. Our healers train with bow and arrow from the time they enlist, and they often assist our archers as shooting partners and fletchers.”

The Duke cannot suppress a shudder. He first encountered the Ysoto and their arrows many years ago, perhaps before this girl was born. They’d fought for one of the Duke’s rivals then, and put an arrow in his shoulder. As long as a man’s arm the thing had been, made of birch footed with oak and painted black. The head was still in his left shoulder, but the surgeon had shown him one of its brothers: forged of black iron and coated with poison, the same poison that withered his hand. Yes, a healer would be good at making such arrows, since it called for strong, sensitive fingers and some knowledge of herbs. But only the Ysoto would put a healer to such work without thinking twice about it.

“Do you have need of our healers elsewhere, sir?” The girl asks.

“No, no. Your plan of attack will go forward, with my blessing.”

The previous Captain of the Ysoto Legion would have bowed to the Duke slightly and left at that. But the girl pauses for a fraction of a second, so small a space of time that only someone who knew her people well would take it for a hesitation.

“Do you have the hood?” She asks.

The duke hesitates—he has no wish to look on the foul thing again—but there is no decent way to refuse her.

“I do indeed,” he says and bending down, he takes up a small casket of black wood from beside his chair. “A man of Nadaer smuggled it out of the Liberator’s castle and it came to one of my men, through cousins and friends of cousins.”

He does not have to elaborate, since the girl has surely seen for herself how tangled were the family ties between the Nadaer and the cantons surrounding them. "The spoken message sent with the hood said it was for the dead woman's kin, that they might know of her last deed."

The girl says nothing, but when the Duke offers the casket to the girl, she takes it. She opens the box and removes a coarse black bag the size of a human head. The Duke watches her face for any signs of emotion; her brown eyes narrow by a tiny fraction and her mouth tightens, but there are no tears. Quick as thought she slips the black hood over her head, covering her face completely. The duke rises from his chair, knocking it noisily over, but before he can stop her, she gestures with her hand.

"Hold," she says, and for once her employer permits her to give him orders.

He watches as her shoulders tighten and her hands ball up into fists, the short blunt nails digging straight into her palms. The tautness of her body holds for a few minutes, just enough time for the Duke to wonder if he should call for a healer. But before he can, a faint twitch, scarcely even a shudder, runs all through the girl's body. Her muscles relax, and she pulls off the hood. Her eyes sparkle, but still no tears fall. She folds the hood up without reverence but with a tidy practicality that reminds the Duke of his wife putting away a bit of unfinished embroidery.

"Thank you," she says. "Our own banner was damaged in the last battle. You have given us a replacement...."

Two days later, the Ysoto attack Castle Relmeon. Of the Ysoto foot soldiers, the women attack a breach in the castle's outer wall, in full sight of the Liberator's high balcony. The Ysoto standard bearer marches with them, with a bit of black cloth flapping from the top of his lance, instead of the traditional three yards of poppy-red linen.

Elsewhere the men try to mount the wall with siege ladders, at a point where it is mostly intact. This concentrates the Liberator's magical attention on the breach, and his men's work...elsewhere. Each group of foot soldiers is backed by a third of the archers, who send volley after volley over the wall. Whenever an arrow reaches the Liberator, his magical shields flash blue in front of him, and the arrow burns to ash, which falls to his feet.

The remaining archers have split into two bands. One band goes east, one goes west, swinging wide around the main theater of battle. The Liberator, both player and audience to the drama of this battle, barely notices them, so firmly have the other Ysoto players fixed his attention on the stage. The archers slip through what cover the battlefield offers—a patch of bushes here, a large stone there. They pay little attention to the hiss of arrows, the thunder of magic, or the shouts from human throats. Unless the attacks strike close to them, and then they dodge out of the way as quickly as any.

The western band stops behind a tall, twisted pine, at a place that gives them a clear but far-off view of the Liberator in profile, throwing bolts of lightning at the attackers below, or raising shields of magic around him.

Their leader, seventeen years old with a healer's blue head-kerchief, raises his hand. “Waste no arrows,” is all he says.

He turns towards the castle and pulls an arrow out of his quiver, but he does not yet nock it. Instead, he watches the battle, particularly the rhythm of the volleys of arrows meant that rise from one side of the walls and fall on the other...or on the Liberator's shields. The other archers are using the butterfly volley pattern, where there might be two or three or five or six beats between volleys, depending on how far through the pattern the archers have worked. The gaps between each volley appear random to outsiders, but like all Ysoto volley patterns, it has been carefully memorized and practiced till every band of archers could match their shots to that rhythm in their

sleep.

“Do you recognize this part of the pattern?” He quietly asks his men. If they have not seen for themselves what section of the volley pattern the other archers have reached, he and his men will fail, and the Liberator’s magic will not allow them a second chance. But grunted yeses are all the leader expects, and all he gets.

Still watching the battle, they raise their bows and nock their arrows, moving almost in unison. They watch the next volley rise and fall, slowly drawing their bows taut. Five beats later, the other archers release their arrows, and the boy and his men follow them by a beat. The air in front of the Liberator is full of blue flames and the shimmer of his shield, but that concentration of magic leaves his side exposed, and five black feathers appear in the left side of his throat.

The Liberator staggers, clutching at his throat. He lurches towards the west, but stops short of falling off the open balcony. A ball of blue lightning begins to form in his free hand.

“Down!” The boy orders, dropping his bow and throwing himself to the ground as the lightning strikes the pine tree.

A moment later, the tree turns black and scorched, as if it had spent an hour in a raging forest fire. One man had been lying against the tree's root when the lightning: now he is only ash. Without sparing a look for the dead man, the boy rises to his feet and leads his men to a different position. Elsewhere, the Ysoto women pour through the breach in the wall, no longer pinned down by the Liberator’s magic....

As the boy enters the courtyard on the west side, his eyes are drawn to the sprawled, broken body of the Liberator, even though he knows his duties lie elsewhere. With the instincts of a healer, the boy notes how the broken bones and twisted body give the dead man the look of a great, half-crushed spider; with the heart of an Ysoto, the boy smiles at the effect. Beside the body stands his sister, his commanding officer,

with four of his archers. In her hand is the black hood. She beckons to him.

“Your arrow is in his throat,” she says in a voice so taut with triumph that it vibrates.

He shrugs. “Captain, it is but one of five.”

“You led the attack,” she says, “You must lead the display.” She draws her knife, and in the blind black hood she cuts two eye slits. She passes the hood to him, and then she squats down to hack off the Liberator’s head....

As the Duke of Otranzo rides into the courtyard of his new conquest, he looks up to the balcony. A man stands there in a black hood, flanked by four archers. He holds up a bloodied head, with five arrows still sticking in the throat. In the courtyard below, a chant goes up, many voices blending into one voice, full of controlled fury and exultation: “Ysoto! Ysoto! Ysoto!”

In all that roar of triumph, only the Duke and his men are silent. Then the Duke mutters to himself: “Are you men, or are you devils?” And his withered left hand clenches with pain.

The victorious Captain does not hear him. Her lips move quietly in the chant of her people, and her eyes are fixed on her brother high above her....

As he stands on the balcony and brandishes the head, he barely hears the roar of the crowd beneath him. His soul soars with a son’s joy in revenge, an Ysoto’s joy in victory, a healer’s joy in incurable suffering made useful, even as his thoughts are filled with the echo of falling, and of his mother’s last moments.

Let me show, you how a Ysoto dies.

The end