

AGATA

The Khadrans burned everything they touched, if one believed the stories. The crops withered under their boots and the sky took on the color of blood. Agata had never been one to listen to stories, but perhaps this tale had a kernel of truth. The sky was still the deep blue of a late summer morning, the birds still sang, the breeze smelled of flowers and last night's rain; and yet, her mouth tasted of ash.

For so long Dama Agata Breznia had prayed to the Crones that the northerners' flame would not spread this far, that the peaks of Belgrebya would keep them safe. A foolish hope. The Khadran army had marched south, cutting down clan after clan, chief after chief...and now they had made it to Breznia. They had made it to her home.

Agata sat in the ruin of her daughter's bedroom, head in her hands.

"They'll pay for what they took." Her husband, the Magnat of Breznia, sat on the bed next to her. The wooden frame creaked under his weight. Agata couldn't help but tense as he placed a hand on her knee. She didn't want his false promises, his foolish threats. She wanted her children back.

"You speak of them as though they are already dead." She leaned away from his touch.

It had been two days since Agata's children had been taken and she still wouldn't let the maids clean their bedchambers. She didn't want this to be normal, she didn't want to pretend that everything was okay.

Her daughter was only thirteen but had always been strong, a spitfire too much like her father for her own good. Alicija had fought. Her wardrobe had toppled onto its side, clothes and bedding bleeding out of its broken doors. A little stone wolf, a favored toy from her childhood, had cracked in half -- two halves of the granite lay amongst scattered shards of glass in a pool of dried blood. Agata could only pray the blood didn't belong to her daughter.

For all the chaos and imagined pain of Alicija's quarters, the Dama preferred to sit in here. Nikolai's room was too perfect, as if he hadn't been taken at all. Her son, Breznia's heir, was barely ten. The child had always been soft, kind. It didn't look like he'd even lifted a finger when the Khadrans broke down his door and stole him away. Her sweet boy.

The Magnat took a deep breath, hesitating. He didn't believe their children could be saved, she knew that, could feel it in every step he took around her like a dormouse trying to slip past a cat.

But there was a way. He was just too proud to take it.

Her eyes snapped up to his. Rage, cold as winter, flowed through her veins and out through her tongue. "You *will* surrender."

"Agata...they'll take everything."

"They already have everything, Felicks. They have our children."

Her husband was a stubborn fool. She had loved that about him once, a long time ago. She had found his integrity admirable, his moods and particularities amusing. Where a young girl had once seen pride and strength, she now saw weakness. For pride is a folly when man places it above all else, and his pride was about to cost her her world.

"The Magnat of Chernevo laid down his axe and was left alive," Agata continued. "He still leads his clan, his wife still breathes, the laughter of their children still echoes through Blackhall." She stood, not able to bear being next to him for another second.

"The Magnat of Chernevo is a puppet. I am a lord."

"You are an ass," she spat back.

"Agata." He stood, hand cradling her hip and then slowly sliding up to cup her stomach. It was flat still, but she knew that would change soon. It had been three months since her last blood. "Not all is lost. Not yet. The walls of Breznia are strong and we are young."

She struck him.

Felicks sucked in a breath, fingers going to his lip and coming back red. Rage flared in those gray eyes, a winter's storm. He grabbed her wrist in one hand and a fistful of her long black hair in the other, yanking her neck back to look up at him. For a moment she felt afraid, but then she remembered her daughter. Alicija had been dragged from this room fighting for every inch. She wanted to live, she deserved to live.

Agata held fast, not breaking his gaze.

Felicks' grip loosened and he pushed her away with a growl. "I'm doing what I can. I'll lead a raid tonight with Vasily, we'll take as many lives from them as they took from us. More. Make them think twice for what they did to us, to all of house Breznia. Our family isn't the only one grieving, Agata."

The guards had been found in the morning, good lads, clan members with ten generations of ancestors buried in the boneyard. They'd been dead for hours, stuffed into broom closets, bodies riddled with cauterized holes.

Daw'shifra, that's what the Khadrans them. Lightblades. Warriors wielding swords that burned hotter than steel straight from the forge. She had heard the stories of the *Daw'shifra* leading the vanguards of northern armies, slicing through armor and axes like butter before opening defenseless men up from top to bottom. Now they stalked her halls, took her children like bogies from feytales.

"Their children are already dead and they died bravely. Ours are alive, Felicks. Nikolai and Alicija are *alive*." Her tone softented. "Just give up your axe to them...please."

He watched her, eyes cold. Stubborn as always.

Before he could answer there was a knock at the door, sharp and urgent.

"Magnat, Dama." Vasily, the chief of their household guard, called to them. "Hurry, they're at the walls. They've got the little lord."

Her heart plunged into her stomach.

Agata pushed past her husband and threw open the door, striding down the hall as fast as her feet would let her.

She tore through the courtyard with her skirts raised, dodging past warriors and servants as she darted up the crumbling stone stairs of the north wall. Even in summer, the mornings were cold in Belgrebya. The air tore at her lungs and she struggled for breath by the time she reached the top, throwing herself against the battlement.

Her heart stopped.

Khadrans, hundreds of them, flying black banners bearing golden Gryphons with wings covered in eyes, watching, glaring -- a symbol of the northerner's strange patrons. Soldiers in red leathers and black and gold steel stood in lines below their walls, bearing long, curved pole arms and gleaming swords. A few at the front rode Fyreblood horses -- dainty things from the heart of the old empire with dished faces and large eyes. Siege engines capable of throwing pitch soaked boulders were being rolled into the back lines.

The Khadrans looked so different from the Kholers, who were all ashen skinned and dark haired. Many of the soldiers were brown and, if the stories were true, had eyes that burned like molten gold. A few looked as though they were from the remnants of old countries that the Afajri Empire had conquered centuries ago. Red haired Dhallans with skin like milk, golden-haired Himnarik from the eastern isles, horned minotaurs towering over the rest.

The army, formidable and alien as it was, wasn't what scared her.

Her son, little Nikolai, knelt before the walls -- his chin on a block of stone, a cloth over his eyes, still as a dead rabbit. She could hardly see from this high on the walls, but she could tell he was breathing too hard. He was scared. A man in golden armor stood over him, tall and girthy with black skin like the fabled warriors of Tsaya.

From below, she heard a faint. "Let him go! Let him go!"

Alicija struggled and kicked, held in the arms of an armored Dhallan woman with bright copper hair. Gold embossed runes ran down the soldier's scabbard, glinting in the last rays of the sun. A *Daw'Shifra*. The woman held fast no matter how hard Alicija tried to pull towards her brother, one arm wrapped around the child's waist and another over her collar bone.

"Nock!" Felicks' voice roared up the stairs and the archers posted along the walls tightened their bow strings. "Hold!"

Agata's heart was beating too fast. Her son was down there. Her daughter.

"Don't you dare let them loose," she growled as Felicks came to her side.

The black man looked up at them and bellowed in broken Khol. "If want heir to live, open gate! Surrender!"

Felicks didn't flinch.

“Please,” Agata looked to her husband. “Please.”

“Answer!” The black man yelled again.

“Felicks,” she begged, grabbing on to his arm. The stupid man, the stupid foolish man. “Felicks, you can stop this. That’s our son, Felicks. Our son.”

He ignored her, calling down. “We will not be cowed! The gates will open when every last man of clan Breznia is dead and not a moment sooner!”

The black man’s sword gleamed as he drew.

Alicija shrieked, fighting like a wild animal to break free.

It was over in an instant. The blade flashed in the light. It fell. Nikolai’s little head rolled away from his shoulders, leaving a crimson hole in its place.

Agata screamed. A long, piercing wail that rent through her chest and tore at her throat.

His body was so still.

“Till sundown to change mind!” The man called and then raised his blood-stained blade towards Alicija. The copper haired woman dragged her daughter away, the girl kicking and screaming.

Agata’s breaths came in hollow, ragged gasps. She didn’t think she could get enough air. Felicks stood at her side, watching the army below, his jaw tense. It occurred to her in that moment, that she had never hated anyone more in her life. He was a fool, a proud fool, and she could not let him take her world from her.