

"Come on, Babygirl. Breathe."

His pleas grew more frantic, and even the flickering candlelight couldn't hide the infant's lips turning bluer by the second. Her small body lay lifeless on the old dusty table, despite the frantic pressure he had been applying to her chest for the past minutes.

"Arden... It's over." The old lady's voice was soft, barely audible in the silence thickening around them. "Let her go."

Arden pretended he hadn't heard her, pretended the horrible truth she voiced hadn't been clawing at him ever since she placed the frail, motionless body in his arms. He kept pressing on the tiny chest—pushing, releasing, pushing—over and over again.

It couldn't end like this. He couldn't lose both of them on the same day. The Old Gods could not be so cruel as to rip two beautiful, innocent souls from the world in a single merciless stroke. He would not allow it.

A hesitant hand lightly brushed his shoulder, and he abruptly turned to face the healer, his usually soft features constricted in a rage so white his jaws hurt.

"It is. Not. Over," he forced out through gritted teeth. "Not until I said so." The pity in her gaze was too much to bear. Arden turned away, resuming his hopeless effort to bring his daughter back. On the bed beside him, where he couldn't dare to look, Leagh now lay forever still, her damp hair spilling in heavy curls around her serene face. He barely noticed the door's weary creak, perhaps Alda going to fetch some help downstairs.

His own hands felt disproportionately large as he gently tilted the delicate head up. "Please, please. Come back. Please." Tears were threatening to fall from his eyes, and he wiped them away in an angry swipe. "You can't go yet, baby. You need to come back to me." His heart clenched as he let despair take over for one everlasting second, everything in the room frozen around him, as if even the specks of dust floating in the air were suspended forever in the pale moonlight.

It was not supposed to go this way.

For months, life had felt miraculously lighter, ever since that day Leagh came to him, her eyes sparkling with a joy he had never believed could exist in their messed up, dangerous world.

Every little moment came rushing back to him. Her hands resting peacefully on her barely rounded belly as she sat by the fireplace during that bitter winter. The sweet, knowing smiles she gave whenever she caught him staring during a briefing. That night they never slept, waiting for hours after feeling the baby's first kick. And their mock heated arguments about names, always ending in laughter so wild she begged him to stop...

How could it go so wrong, so fast? How could he be the one still alive, while Leigh was gone forever, before she could even lay eyes on her daughter?

She had been so sure they were having a boy, and he had silently let her dream aloud about how their son would grow up to be as brave, wacky, handsome, and stubborn as his father. But deep down, he had known—hoped, really—that she would give him a little girl, blessed with her mother's fair hair and mischievous smile.

She would never know she had been the answer to every dream of his youth, and the gift of more than he had ever dared imagine.

The second ended and a sob rose in his throat, burning. He swallowed it like poison, knowing that letting it out would mean admitting his defeat. So he kept trying. Again.

Again.

Again.

The stench of blood was filling his nose, his brow covered in cold sweat, the lump in his throat getting bigger and bigger as he relentlessly went on.

Concerned whispers rose outside the door, and he couldn't fathom how much time had passed since Alda had left them. A minute? An hour? It felt as if his whole life had been swallowed by this dreadful instant, his existence reduced to praying, begging, and even threatening the Old Gods to come for them himself if they didn't let him keep the only thing still worth living for.

A loud creak told him he was no longer alone, and the heavy steps were so familiar he didn't need to turn to know Talak was approaching.

“Out.” Arden spat the word, low and menacing, and felt his friend recoil at the harshness of his voice.

“Arden.”

No.

He wouldn’t—he *couldn’t*—acknowledge the sorrow in his friend’s voice. His fingers kept pressing against the baby’s chest in a rhythm growing hectic, as reality settled insidiously around him.

“Arden, come on, we need to -”

“Don’t. Don’t you fucking dare finish that sentence.”

His second-in-command fell silent at once, and Arden sensed rather than heard him shift into a tense stance. From the corner of his eye, he saw Talak cross to the bed by the window and adjust Leigh’s blanket, as if she were only napping. Then Talak bent to place a light kiss on her forehead before turning back to Arden and drawing a deep breath.

“Let them go together.” He paused, just long enough for Arden to hear the raw pain in his voice. “She’s gone. They’re gone.” Another pause. “Let them go together... so they’ll have each other while waiting for you.”

Arden went utterly still. His hands curled into fists, knuckles whitening as a buzzing filled his skull. The infant’s eyes remained closed, the deafening silence of her still heart driving an icy dagger into his chest, again and again.

“I can’t. I – I can’t.” He lowered his head, eyes shut tight, shoulders trembling as repressed sobs crept up his throat. “I failed Leigh. I did, I... I can’t. I can’t fail her too.”

He looked up as Talak stepped closer and gently took his arm, trying to turn him from the small body. “You didn’t, brother, you hear me? You didn’t fail her. You did everything that was in your power and then some more.”

Arden let out a lifeless sneer and raised his chin toward the bed in a brief nod. “Tell her that. Tell her how I did everything I could and still let our daughter die. Tell her...” His voice

broke as he finally looked at his friend's face. It was streaked with dried tears—tears he probably tried to hide before stepping into the bedroom.

Seeing the grief already etched into Talak's features suddenly made it all feel unbearably real.

He would not be waking up.

This was happening.

Turning his gaze back to the baby, he admired her plump, round cheeks, and those small pouting lips that would never smile at him. Her fingers, so tiny, looking as fragile as ten little twigs, that he would never feel grasping his own. In the dim light he thought he could see the shimmer of her mother's fair hair. Silent tears spilled down his face, and this time he made no effort to hold them back.

"Let me help you," Talak whispered, "let me, please."

With a softness Arden would never have guessed his friend could display, Talak wrapped the woolen blanket around the newborn and took her in his arms.

"Let me hold her," Arden choked, "I need to hold her. Don't take her away, let me—let me carry her, just this once." Stretching out his shaking arms, he sat down on the armchair he had knocked aside in his frantic attempt to revive the baby, as Talak laid the almost weightless bundle in his lap and gave him a solemn nod.

"I'll be right outside. Take as long as you need." Quiet as a shadow, he left the grieving father to share his first—and only—moment with his daughter.

Arden could not tear his eyes away from her little face, so peaceful in her final rest. He placed a light kiss on her forehead, his tears slipping from his cheeks onto hers, clinging to her as if he could keep her with him. Her small head nestled in the crook of his neck. In a hushed voice, he began humming the old lullaby Leigh had taught him, slowly rocking back and forth.

As he finished, the quiet atmosphere fell once more heavily around them and he bathed in it, pretending for a moment that she had only fallen asleep after a dreadful night of crying herself

hoarse. Just yesterday, Leigh had teased him that he would soon be begging for rest once the baby arrived.

Tonight he would have given anything to prove her right.

Raising from his chair, he finally mustered the courage to walk up to the bed, his vision blurring with each step he took, until he was standing right next to Leigh.

“You did so well my love.” Words started to spill raggedly from his lips. “You did so, so well Leigh... She’s...she’s absolutely—absolutely perfect, our little baby girl.”

He gently laid the girl in her mother’s lap, his heart tight with unbearable grief as he lifted Leigh’s slender arm and folded it around her daughter. His legs gave way at last and he collapsed to his knees, reaching for the baby’s tiny fingers while pressing his face against his wife’s chest.

Empty.

Utterly broken.

Unable to feel anything anymore but the devastating void that was taking hold of his soul.

A burst of heat escaped his body as an agonizing cry tore from his tear-stained lips, leaving him shaking with cold and weeping like a child, knowing he would never be able to stop now.

He was so deeply lost to the world it took him a full second to register the small fingers squeezing back his own.

Lifting his head slowly, unwilling to believe what his mind was screaming, his eyes found the baby’s face.

Just in time to see her open her mouth for the first time.

The piercing wail that echoed through the house was the most magnificent sound he had ever heard.