

CHAPTER 4 — THE ORPHANS

Beneath the Veil of Oppression

Although her life had been spared, the years were not kind to King Arick's daughter. By her eighth winter, the palace kitchens had become Arica's entire world — a world of smoke and heat, of clattering pots and sharp voices that cracked like whips. Dawn never woke her; she was always awake before it, already working, already bracing herself for whatever cruelty the day would bring.

The housemistress — a sharp-eyed woman with a voice like fractured stone — seemed to take pleasure in reminding Arica of her place. A dropped cup, a slow step, even the slightest hesitation could earn a lashing or a shove that sent her stumbling across the flagstones. In the early years, Arica wondered why the woman despised her so fiercely — beat her so often. Over time, the question faded. Cruelty became routine. Predictable. Almost ordinary.

The other servants followed the housemistress's lead. They spoke to Arica as if she were a animal, not a child — something to be ordered, corrected, or ignored. She scrubbed floors until her fingers bled, hauled buckets twice her size, and slept in corners no straw to soften her rest. No one used her name. No one asked if she was cold. No one cared if she ate.

And sometimes... the silence around her shifted. A soldier with gaze held too long. A servant with a presence standing too close. A hand resting on her shoulder with a weight that made her stomach tighten.

She learned to move quickly. Quietly. Invisibly. Because in the lowest tier, being seen was often worse than being forgotten.

Nothing ever happened — Ethan made sure of that — but the threat lived in the air around her like a shadow with teeth.

Ethan was only a year older, a fellow servant with a stubborn streak that often got him into trouble. He noticed her long before anyone else bothered to. When the housemistress's temper flared, he found ways to step between them. When the other servants muttered or shoved or tried to corner her, Ethan's voice cut through the dark like a spark catching dry tinder. **Leave her alone!**

He took blame that wasn't his. He accepted punishments meant for her. He stood in the places she was too weak, too tired, or too frightened to stand.

Sometimes he did it openly, chin lifted in defiance. Sometimes he did it quietly, slipping into the path of danger before she even realized it was coming.

To Arica, he became something she had never known: a shield she didn't ask for, a friend she didn't understand, a light in a world that had taught her to expect none.

He couldn't stop the cruelty. He couldn't change the rules of the lowest tier. But he made sure she never faced it alone.

And in a place where kindness was rarer than sunlight, that was enough to keep her alive.

Arica — whom he nicknamed *Ari* — “Keep your head down,” Ethan would whisper whenever the housemistress's temper sharpened. “I'll handle it.”

And he always tried.

Most of the younger servants were treated like children, scolded and shooed along with the chores. But that was never the case for Ethan and Arica. They were different — not in privilege, but in burden. The lowest tier demanded more of them, expected more of them, punished them more harshly when they faltered.

Ethan bore it with a stubbornness that bordered on reckless. Arica bore it because she had no choice.

But together, they survived the shadows that would have swallowed either of them alone.

Arica learned early that crying out only made punishment worse. Silence was safer. Endurance was survival.

Her chores stretched far beyond the kitchen. When the morning fires were stoked and the pots scrubbed, she was sent to the stables, where the grooms barked orders and tossed the worst tasks her way — mucking stalls, hauling water, scrubbing tack until her fingers throbbed. Horses snorted and shifted around her, their massive bodies unpredictable, but she learned to move quietly, quickly, unnoticed.

Unnoticed... except when someone wanted something from her.

She learned to take the hardest work without complaint. Complaints earned attention, and attention earned pain. She learned to read footsteps, tones, shadows. She learned to disappear when she needed to. She learned to endure when she couldn't.

But the worst of her duties waited below.

Every afternoon, when the sun dipped low enough to cast long bars of light across the courtyard, Arica was handed a tray of stale bread and thin broth and told to take it down to the dungeons. The descent was always the same: a spiral staircase slick with moisture, the air growing colder and fouler with each step. The stench hit her first — rot, sweat, and the sour reek of waste.



Prisoners relieved themselves in buckets, and it was Arica's job to carry those buckets back up, her small arms trembling under the weight.

The guards barely looked at her. When they did, it was with the same dismissive cruelty she'd come to expect everywhere else.

"Move faster, girl." "Don't spill it." "Try not to breathe in too much," they laughed — "you'll get used to the smell."

She never did.

The prisoners watched her with hollow eyes — some muttering nonsense, others begging for more food, others simply staring as though she were a ghost drifting through their misery.

One cell, near the far end of the corridor, held an old man who rarely spoke. His hair white, his beard tangled, his posture stooped from years of confinement. Yet his eyes — pale, sharp, searching — followed her every time she approached.

At first, she thought he was simply another prisoner clinging to whatever scraps of humanity he had left. But as the months passed, his gaze changed. It softened. It lingered. It studied her with a familiarity she didn't understand.

Sometimes he whispered, barely audible over the dripping water and distant groans.

“You... remind me of someone.”

Arica pretended not to hear. She wasn't supposed to speak to the prisoners. She simply set down the tray, collected the waste bucket, and hurried away before the guards grew impatient.

Seasons blurred. Summers baked the stone courtyards; winters crept through the cracks of the lowest tier. And somewhere in those passing years, Arica — now fifteen — had managed to blossom despite the cruelty around her. The world had tried to grind her down, but she had grown anyway, quiet and fierce as a weed pushing through broken stone.

Live free

It was on one of the rare afternoons when the housemistress sent Ethan and Arica to fetch water from the stream beyond the lower fields — a task usually reserved for older servants — that Ethan brushed her hand and whispered, “Come on, Ari. We're not going straight there.”

Arica hesitated. “If we're late—”

“We won't be,” he said with the confidence of someone who had never once considered failure.

“Trust me.”

She always did.

He led her off the worn path, through tall grass that brushed their shoulders, toward a cluster of old oaks standing like silent guardians over the hillside. Arica had passed them before but never dared to explore. Servants weren't supposed to wander.

But with Ethan, the rules felt... breakable.

They reached the largest oak — a massive thing with branches that twisted like ancient arms.

Ethan dropped the buckets and scrambled up the trunk with the ease of someone who had done it a hundred times.

Arica stared up at him. “We’re going to get in trouble.”

“Only if you stay down there,” he teased.

She huffed, but her heart fluttered with something she didn’t often feel: excitement. She grabbed the rough bark and climbed.

Her hands slipped twice. Her foot caught on a knot in the trunk. She scraped her knee. But Ethan reached down, grabbed her wrist, and hauled her up beside him.

She opened her mouth to complain about her knee — but the view stole her breath.

From the high branch, the entire valley stretched out before them: golden fields, the glittering ribbon of the stream, and far beyond, the faint outline of the mountains marking the edge of the kingdom. The wind tugged at her hair, cool and clean, nothing like the smoke-choked air of the kitchens.

Ethan nudged her shoulder. “Told you it was worth it.”

Arica laughed — a real laugh, bright and unguarded, the kind she hadn’t heard from herself in years. It startled her, but Ethan only grinned wider.

They sat there for a long time, legs dangling, watching clouds drift lazily across the sky. For a moment, the world felt big. Possible. Free.

“Do you ever think about leaving?” she asked quietly. “Do you ever think of what it would be like to **live free**?”

Ethan shrugged. “Sometimes. But then I think... if I left, who’d keep you out of trouble?”

She elbowed him, but her smile lingered.

Up there, she wasn't the girl everyone barked orders at. She wasn't the servant blamed for everything. She wasn't the one the housemistress singled out.

Up there, she was just Ari.

And Ethan realized — maybe for the first time — how much he liked seeing her this way. How much he wanted to protect this version of her. How much he wished the world would let her breathe like this more often.

Ethan climbed down first, dropping lightly into the tall grass. Arica followed, her bare feet brushing the sun-warmed earth as she steadied herself on the lowest branch before hopping down beside him.

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.



The afternoon light filtered through the oak leaves in soft, golden shards, catching in Arica's hair, turning the dust on her skin into something like glow. Ethan froze — surprised by the sight

of her, surprised by the way his chest tightened at it. He had seen her a thousand times, but never quite like this.

Arica looked up at him, breath still quick from the climb, and something in her expression shifted too — a flicker of awareness, unfamiliar and fleeting. The world felt strangely still, as if holding its breath around them.

Ethan cleared his throat, rubbing the back of his neck as if embarrassed by a feeling he couldn't name. Arica looked away first, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Come on,” he said, softer than before. “We should, get the water now.”

She nodded, and together they hurried toward the stream, splashing each other as they filled the buckets — laughing a little too loudly, as if trying to drown out whatever had just happened beneath the old oak.

They returned to the palace soaked, muddy, and breathless — and somehow managed to slip back into the kitchens without the housemistress noticing their delay.

Later that night, as Arica curled up on her thin straw pallet, she replayed the moment in the tree over and over. The wind in her hair. The laughter. The feeling that, just for a heartbeat, she wasn't a servant at all.

She was just a girl. A girl with a friend. A girl who could climb higher than she ever thought she could.

And in that memory, she found something she desperately needed — a reminder that hope wasn't dead.

Not while Ethan was in her world.