

CHAPTER 5 — TRUTH IN THE DARK

The Name Day, and the Secret

In the years that followed, Arica learned how to move through the palace like a shadow — how to avoid the worst tempers, how to read danger in the curl of a lip or the shift of a footstep. Ethan still shielded her when he could, but even he couldn't be everywhere.

The one constant she never expected came from the place she feared most.

The dungeons.

At first, she delivered the trays in silence, eyes down, breath held. But the old man in the last cell — the one with the kind, tired eyes — always greeted her as though she were someone worth seeing.

“Careful on the steps child,” he would murmur. “Did they work you too hard today?” “You're growing stronger he would often say, I can see it.”

No one else in the palace spoke to her like that.

Days became weeks. Weeks became seasons. And slowly, the dread she felt on the stairwell softened into something else — something she didn't have a name for. She found herself lingering a moment longer when she set down his tray. She found herself answering when he asked how her day had been. She found herself looking forward to the only place where someone other than Ethan seemed to care whether she was tired, or cold, or hurt.

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The dungeons.

She still remembered — when she was younger, often exhausted from the stables, her arms aching from hauling buckets. She would hear him before she saw him: the soft pop of stiff joints

as he shifted on the cold floor, the faint scrape of his chains settling. Those sounds had become familiar over the years, oddly comforting in a world that offered her little comfort at all.

One day — she couldn't even recall when — the name had simply slipped out. A quiet, tired murmur as she set down his tray. "Here you go, Pop Pop."

She hadn't meant to say it. But he had looked up with such gentle surprise, such warmth in his worn eyes, that she hadn't taken it back. And he hadn't asked her to.

Instead of correcting her, the old man's face warmed with a quiet, aching joy — a joy so deep it startled her.

"If that is what you wish to call me, child," he said softly, "I would be honored."

After that, the name stayed. And so did their bond.

Visiting Pop Pop became the one place in the palace where Arica felt seen — not as a servant, not as a burden, but as a child growing into herself despite everything trying to break her.

And she wasn't the only one who changed.

The palace shifted around her in ways she didn't understand. The guards who once laughed at her began to notice her in ways that made her stomach tighten. Their eyes lingered too long.

Their jokes shifted tone when they thought she couldn't hear. They grew lazier in their duties but bolder in their attention — the kind that made her instinctively fold in on herself, keep her head down, keep moving.

She learned to read danger in silence — in the way a corridor suddenly felt too narrow, in the way footsteps slowed behind her, in the way a laugh carried from the wrong place at the wrong time. She learned how to linger without being seen, how to slip away before someone decided she was worth noticing. She learned to survive by becoming smaller than the threat.

And so the dungeon, dark and foul as it was, became the only place she could breathe.

In time, all the prisoners began to treat her with more respect — not just Pop Pop. She didn't understand why. She assumed they were simply grateful for the food, even if it was stale and thin. But they straightened when she entered. They thanked her. They spoke to her like she mattered.

Pop Pop most of all.

His voice was always gentle, always steady, always warm in a way nothing else in her life was.

He whispered through the bars: "Are they treating you well up there?"

A hesitant answer: "I... I manage."

A soft chuckle: "You sound like someone I once knew."

She didn't understand what he meant, but the warmth in his voice made her stay a moment longer each day.

By sixteen, their conversations had become the quiet rhythm of her afternoons. She would bring his food, set it down, and instead of hurrying away, she would sit on the cold stone floor just out of sight of the guards. Pop-Pop would lower himself to the ground on his side of the bars, mirroring her posture.

He told her stories — not of Kings or battles or politics, but of simple things. Of a boyhood spent climbing cliffs near the sea. Of a stubborn horse that refused to be tamed. Of a winter so cold the rivers froze solid and children skated on them.

Arica listened with wide eyes, soaking in every word. No one had ever told her stories before.

No one had ever spoken to her like she mattered.

Sometimes she shared pieces of her own life — carefully, cautiously, as if each admission might be taken from her.

"I like the stables," she confessed once chuckling. "The horses don't yell."

Pop-Pop smiled. “Animals know truth better than people.”

Another day: “I wish I could see the mountains at the edge of the kingdom someday.”

“You will,” he said with quiet certainty. “You’re meant for more than these walls.”

She didn’t believe him — not really — but she liked hearing it. She liked the way he said it, as if it were already true.

And always — always — as their conversations wound down and she turned to leave, he would murmur something soft, almost absentminded, as though speaking to a memory rather than to her.

“You remind me of someone,” he would say, barely above a whisper.

It almost sounded like a truth slipping out of him despite himself — a quiet ache he couldn’t quite swallow back.

At first, she ignored it. Then she grew curious. Then it settled into her chest like a small, persistent ache — a question she didn’t know how to ask, and a feeling she didn’t know how to name.

She could see the shadow that crossed his face each time he said it. The mixture of joy and pain.

The way his eyes drifted somewhere far beyond the dungeon walls.

She didn’t want to add to his suffering. He had so little left. So she kept her silence.

Until that afternoon.

She arrived at his cell, tears streaming down her face with red eyes and trembling hands. Her apron was crooked, her hair disheveled, her breath unsteady. Pop-Pop noticed immediately — he always noticed.

“Child,” he murmured, voice tightening with concern, “what’s happened?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. It’s always nothing.”

But her voice cracked on the last word.

He reached through the bars — not touching her, never touching her — but offering the gesture of comfort, the shape of a hand meant to steady rather than claim.

“You are stronger than they know,” he said softly.

She swallowed hard. The morning replayed in her mind: the guard’s sudden presence in the kitchen, the way he’d cornered her, the way his intentions had shifted from food to something else entirely. She had escaped only because another servant entered at the right moment.

She had been shaking ever since.

And for the first time, she didn’t bother to hide it from Pop Pop. The fear clung to her skin, raw and trembling, and the words she had swallowed for years rose before she could stop them.

“Who do I remind you of?” she whispered. Her voice cracked. “Why do you always say that?”

The question hung between them — fragile, trembling, years overdue.

He closed his eyes, as if bracing himself against a memory that hurt to hold.

“Because,” he said quietly, “you do.”

She sat down, pulling her knees to her chest. The dungeon was quiet. The guards were far down the corridor. For once, she felt brave.

“Pop-Pop...”

“Who?”

The old man closed his eyes.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low, steady, and threaded with grief.

“Someone I loved,” he said. “Someone I lost. Someone I failed to protect.”

Arica’s breath caught. “Were they... important?”

“To me?” He opened his eyes and met her gaze. “More than anything.”

She didn't understand the weight behind his words — not yet — but she felt it. Something in his voice trembled, something old and hurting, and she leaned closer, drawn by a truth she couldn't name.

“Tell me about them,” she whispered.

There was a softness in his eyes, but also a shadow — a flicker of pain she hadn't meant to cause. And Arica, shaken as she was, suddenly felt almost guilty for pressing him. She wasn't thinking clearly. She wasn't thinking at all. She was still rattled from what had happened upstairs, still trying to hold herself together.

So she let the question go. For now.

And because she needed to fill the silence — needed to breathe, needed to talk about anything that wasn't fear or danger or the ache in Pop Pop's voice — she reached for the one thing that had been tugging at her chest for weeks.

“Pop Pop...” she murmured, twisting her fingers together. “I've been thinking about Ethan.”

The old man's eyes softened. “Ah. The friend you talk so much about.”

She nodded, cheeks warming. “He's... kind. He helps me. He listens.”

Pop-Pop's smile deepened, lines gathering at the corners of his eyes. There was a quiet joy in his expression — a joy so gentle it made her chest ache.

“I'm glad,” he said. “Everyone deserves someone who sees them.”

Arica ducked her head, suddenly aware of her own hands, her own breath, the heat rising in her cheeks.

“I think I...” She swallowed. **“I really like him. Differently.”**

Pop-Pop tilted his head, encouraging but patient.

“I don't know how to say it,” she whispered.

He watched her for a long moment, something softening in his eyes. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, he said:

“So much like your father.”

Arica froze.

Pop-Pop’s gaze drifted, as if he were seeing someone else entirely. “He once spoke of a girl that same way.”

The word father hung in the air like a bell still ringing.

Arica leaned closer, eyes wide, breath caught somewhere between her ribs and her throat.

“Who?” she whispered. “Pop-Pop... who?”

For a heartbeat, something raw flickered across his face — pride, grief, longing, all tangled together. Then he exhaled, slow and steady, as if releasing a weight he had carried for far too long.

“It’s time, my child,” he murmured. **“Your father... my son.”**

The world seemed to tilt.

Arica didn’t question whether it was true — she felt it settle into her bones with a certainty she couldn’t explain. She had always sensed a deeper connection between them, something unspoken but undeniable. But hearing it aloud... hearing father... hearing my son...

Her thoughts scattered like startled birds.

“My... father?” she breathed. “Pop-Pop, I— I don’t understand. Who was he? What happened to him? What happened to my mother? Why am I—”

A servant. The word stuck in her throat like a stone.

Pop-Pop lifted a hand toward her — not touching, but offering steadiness all the same.

“Easy, my child,” he said softly. “There is much you—much I have longed to tell you.”

Arica swallowed hard, her heart pounding. She wanted answers — needed them — but she could feel the tremor beneath his calm, the cost of speaking even this much.

After a moment, his expression shifted — still warm, but edged with caution.

“My child,” he murmured, “it is a gift to care for someone. But gifts can be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

Arica blinked, thrown by the sudden turn. Her mind was still spinning from what he’d revealed — *your father... my son* — and now he was speaking of danger? Of caring for someone?

Was he warning her about Ethan? Or about her father? Or both?

Before she could stop herself, the words burst out of her, sharp and too loud for the dungeon’s quiet.

“Ethan would never hurt me!”

Her voice cracked against the stone walls.

Pop Pop’s eyes flicked toward the corridor — a quick, practiced check for guards. Arica realized too late how loudly she’d spoken. Her heart lurched.

No footsteps came. No shadows shifted. But the silence felt too thin, too fragile.

For a breathless moment, they both knew the same truth: **if anyone had heard, it would have been disastrous.**

Pop Pop exhaled slowly, the tension easing from his shoulders by degrees. Then he looked back at her with a tenderness that made her chest ache.

“I believe that,” he said.

And he did — she could hear it in his voice. But beneath that belief lay something heavier, something he wasn’t ready to say. The shift in his expression told her the truth: he had steered

the conversation away from her father on purpose. Not because he doubted Ethan — but because the truth was too dangerous to speak freely.

Not yet. Not now. Not with guards wandering the halls.

Arica swallowed, pulse still racing. She wanted to ask more — *needed* to ask more.

Who was my father? What happened to him? What about my mother? Why am I a servant?

But Pop Pop's gaze softened with a quiet plea for patience.

"There is more you must know," he murmured. "But not now. We have already spoken too long."

She nodded, though confusion churned inside her. She trusted him completely — she always had. And even now, with her world tilting beneath her feet, she believed him without reservation.

But the questions burned all the same.

Pop Pop reached toward her — not touching, but offering steadiness all the same.

"Come back tonight," he said softly. "When the palace sleeps. I will tell you the rest."

Arica held his gaze, her heart caught between fear, hope, and the lingering echo of her own outburst.

"Okay," she whispered. "I'll come."

But when she climbed the dungeon steps, her legs felt unsteady beneath her. The encounter upstairs, the danger, Pop Pop's words — it all churned inside her like a storm she couldn't contain.

She didn't go to her quarters. She couldn't.

Her feet carried her down a narrow side corridor, toward the cramped alcove where Ethan slept with the other lower-tier boys. She hesitated only a moment before slipping inside.

Ethan sat up the instant he saw her.

“Ari?” His voice was rough with sleep and worry. “What happened?”

She didn’t know how to explain. Not fully. Not safely. But she told him pieces — the parts she could say aloud. How Pop Pop had said she reminded him of someone. “My father, his son”.

How he had promised to tell her more. How everything felt too big, too heavy, too close.

Ethan listened, brow furrowed, trying to make sense of it.

“So…” he said slowly, “if your father is his son… does that make him, I don’t know… your grandfather?” He paused, then added with a crooked grin, “A very smelly, prison gnome?”

Arica nudged him, half annoyed, half grateful. “It’s not funny.”

“I know,” he said gently. “I just… wanted to see you smile.”

And she did. Just a little.

He shifted closer, his voice softening. “Whatever he tells you… whatever this is… I’m here. You know that, right?”

She nodded, throat tight.

They sat together on the thin straw mattress, the dim lantern light flickering across the stone walls. The fear ebbed. The questions quieted. And in the stillness, something warm and fragile rose between them — something they had both felt but never named.

Ethan shifted, leaning in a little without seeming to realize he was doing it. Halfway there, he hesitated — nerves catching up with him — and pulled back just enough that the moment hung awkwardly between them.

Arica noticed.

She let out a soft, exasperated sigh, rolling her eyes just a little — Then she leaned in to finish what he had started.

Their **first kiss** was small, hesitant, almost accidental — the kind of kiss that happens because two people lean in at the same time and neither pulls away.

Afterward, they didn't speak. They just stayed close, the world finally quiet enough to breathe.

At some point, exhaustion claimed them both.

The Name Day, the Secret, and the Day Before

Arica had fallen asleep in Ethan's arms, but she awoke in a panic. She had promised Pop-Pop she would return to the dungeons after everyone slept — and now it was nearly dawn.

Her heart fluttered with a strange anticipation she couldn't explain.

The kitchens were already alive with noise, but she barely heard any of it. Her hands trembled as she made her way to Pop-Pop's down the familiar staircase.

The dungeon was quiet. Too quiet.

She reached his cell and froze.

Pop Pop was standing — not rising, not shifting, but *waiting* for her. He had never done that before. He was always on the floor when she arrived, joints popping softly as he pushed himself upright, chains scraping in the familiar rhythm that had earned him his name.

But tonight, he was already at the bars.

Still. Silent. Watching.

A dozen thoughts collided in her chest. Was he angry she hadn't come back? Had he worried?

Had something happened?

She couldn't tell — his face was unreadable in the dim torchlight.

Before she could speak, his voice cut gently through her spiraling thoughts.

“Sit.”

Not harsh. Not commanding. Just... steady.

She obeyed without thinking, lowering herself to the cold stone floor. He mirrored her on his side of the bars, their faces only inches apart.

For a long moment, he simply looked at her. Not with pity. Not with curiosity. But with a depth of emotion she didn't understand.

"Arica," he said softly, "do you know what today is?"

She hesitated. "I... I don't know," she admitted. "what is today?"

Pop Pop's breath trembled — not with anger, but with something far deeper.

he whispered. "It is your **name day**."

She blinked, stunned. "My... name day?"

"Your sixteenth" he said, voice thick with emotion he could no longer hide.

She smiled faintly. "My name day isn't important right now. Can we please continue talking about who I am? About my father?"

"Not important?" he scoffed — gently, but with a weight that made her chest tighten. "It is the most important day of your young life, my child."

Something in his tone made her breath catch.

He reached through the bars — not touching her, but offering connection, steadiness, truth.

"Arica," he said, closing his eyes as if gathering strength, "my name is **Bartholomew Edrich**."

The name meant nothing to her. But the way he said it — the way the air seemed to still around them — made her heart stutter.

"I am—" He paused. Corrected himself with a quiet, aching breath. "I *was* the **Unzen** Dominion. King and sovereign of the land of my birth, as my father was before me."

Arica's mouth fell open, but no sound came out. A King. A real King. In chains before her.

He continued, voice trembling with a grief he had carried alone for far too long.

“I ruled for many years before passing my crown to my beloved son, Prince Arick — your father — who served as Dominion after me.”

The words struck her like a blow.

Your father. My son.

Her breath caught. Her vision blurred. Her mind refused to understand — refused to believe — refused to let the words settle into the shape of truth.

All her life she had been told she was nothing. A burden. A mistake. A servant girl lucky to be alive.

And now this man — this prisoner, this gentle **voice in the dark** — was telling her she was the daughter of a King. The granddaughter of a King. Born of a royal line that once ruled a Domain. Her throat tightened. Her hands trembled in her lap. She felt suddenly too small, too fragile, too unworthy to hold the weight of what he had just placed in her hands.

“Arica,” Pop Pop whispered, his voice breaking as he watched the storm inside her, “you were never nothing.”

Her pulse thundered in her ears.

“During the Siege,” Pop-Pop continued, “all the Great Domains united under a single banner to face the threat that sought to devour our world. Your father led them as King Regent. He defeated the enemy. He drove what remained of their forces into the Abyssal.”

Pride shone in his eyes — fierce, unbroken.

Then it dimmed.

“And after all he sacrificed... after all he gave... he was not rewarded as the conquering hero.”

Arica leaned closer, breath trembling. “What happened to him?”

Pop-Pop’s jaw tightened. “He was betrayed.”

The word hit like a blade.

She didn't understand—"who would betray him?"

Pop-Pop's gaze drifted toward the corridor — a reflex born of years in chains. When he looked back at her, his voice was low, steady, and threaded with grief.

"By those who feared him. By those who feared what he represented. By those who believed the Regent's power was too great."

Arica swallowed hard. "And my mother?"

Pop-Pop's face softened with a pain so deep it seemed carved into him.

"She loved you fiercely. She died protecting you."

Arica's breath caught. "Protecting me from what?"

"From the same fear that killed your father."