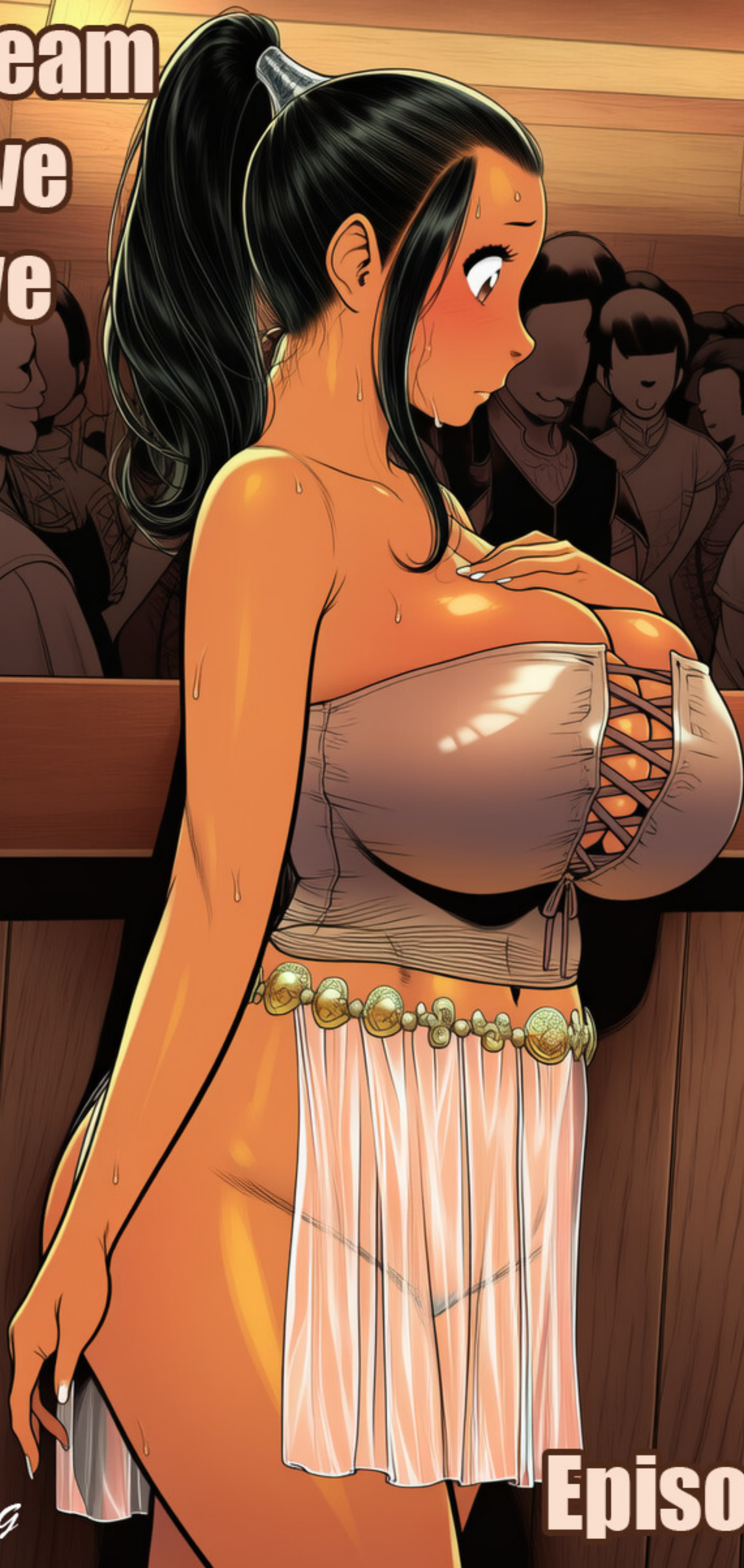


Dream Dive Live





Half a year. Six months. 183 days.

183 endless, hot, dusty days, under the roar of soldiers, under the clatter of mugs, under the music that had already sunk into my brain like a part of my new pulse.

The music was so loud it felt like the stone walls vibrated with every drumbeat. Heat came from the stage: burning oil lamps, smoke from spicy herbs, the thick, almost choking smell of burnt meat from the kitchen area behind the counter, and of course this hot floor I slid across with my bare feet, feeling every knot, every splinter, every moldy scent soaked into it over centuries. The boards were hot, as if they breathed in time with the music, and the warmth rose from below, wrapping around my calves, climbing to my thighs, making my body move softer, smoother than I wanted. My breasts swayed heavily in the hot air, as if they were dancing too, and my hair stuck to my back, annoying me, tickling my skin — and all of it mixed with the noise of soldiers' voices, drunken laughter, and the dull roar of the crowd that gathered here every evening, as if I were part of their boring ration, as mandatory as salted fish and cheap wine.

Yeah, no point hiding or being shy about it now. Tonight, like every evening, I was dancing on the wooden platform of the municipal bar at the Red Gates — a place decent people didn't enter unless by accident. More like a trampled barn with soldiers who had long forgotten what discipline even was. Dust, heat, beer watered down with sour wine, wild voices. And me — a beauty, a sex-bomb, or just a “dumb whore” when one of them was in a bad mood — but always, always in the same role: their evening entertainment.

The music suddenly switched to some fast, jerky rhythm, and I had to change my pace to match it. I threw a glance at the musicians and automatically twisted my face at those idiots. Damn, I told them yesterday — yesterday — that I wouldn't handle such a fast rhythm after such a hot week. That my legs cramp, that my breathing stumbles, that I'm not made of iron. But who cares here? The musicians only exchanged glances, smirked, and — as if just to piss me off — added another beat, another push, another sharp shift. — Seriously?.. — I hissed under my breath while still moving, — you know I haven't even eaten today, assholes...

But of course no one heard. Or more likely, no one gave a damn.

The flutist only nodded at me, as if cheering me on: ‘Come on, come on, don't whine,’ and the drummers went even harder. And I sped up again, arched again, adjusted again to this stupid, painfully familiar rhythm, trying to keep my breathing steady and not mess up, because if I messed up, the soldiers would start whistling, the innkeeper would start yelling, and the bar owner would cut a couple more coins from my pay later.



And what will I do then? Beg for food, and then... No, no-no and no again. I don't want to die here again. Two times were more than enough. Though once, it even seemed like a way out. Because it was logical, right? It's just a VR game. Die and you return to your reality.

But no. It wasn't like that at all.

The first time, I decided to sass the guards who are now sitting at the far table, watching me without even remembering that incident. But I remember, I remember it perfectly. I remember their spear under my ribs, how it drove into me. I remember that pain that cut through my whole body like a thousand piranhas biting into my skin at once. I remember those torturous hours when I lay there, praying to every god for it all to end quicker — but it didn't. I choked on my own rattling breath, felt every second crawl across my nerves, like someone was intentionally stretching my death into a long, slow torture. And when darkness finally covered me, I exhaled with such relief it felt like I really died.

And then... I woke up. Not in a capsule. Not in the menu. Not next to Stephanie. But here again, in this damn body, in this cursed hole, with these huge tits, just one day earlier.

That's when I realized that I really would have to live here for the whole term. All ten fucking years... Why even put something like this into a VR game? Who even came up with this? Making everything so realistic?

Alright. What was I saying. I need to dance, not think about all this shit, or I'll lose the rhythm again. Rhythm, movement, grace. That's what matters right now. And it doesn't matter how much my breasts piss me off, swinging with every step so much that I'm ready to give anything just to get rid of them. These two soft, unbearably heavy masses pulled at my skin like someone invisible was dragging me down by strings hooked right to my nipples. Sometimes, especially on sharp turns, pain shot along the sides of my breasts. A strange, warm, dragging kind of pain that made the muscles clench on their own.

But if that helped, I'd be glad, because these pieces of flesh didn't obey at all. I had to control even my breathing because of them: inhale too deep — and the weight shifts painfully; exhale too sharply — and all this "treasure" jerks to the sides so hard it makes you want to howl.

And yeah, I hated every single fraction of a second of this weight.

Hated how the skin on my breasts felt thinner than it should be, how it reacted to heat, to motion, to any slightest sway.

Hated the realization that these two things weren't just a "visual element." They were part of me.

A part that tugged from below, from above, from the sides, that shook, pulled, hurt — and wasn't going anywhere for the next nine and a half years.



Breasts are only half the torture anyway, because the other half is my ass.

These huge, round, way-too-soft-for-normal-life things that I drag around every day. Half a year ago I had a normal ass. A normal man's ass. Flat, functional, not taking up the whole damn doorway when I walk through it.

But now...

Every step felt like some springy muscle jolt, like I was moving two pillows stuffed with living jelly. With every twist of my hips I felt the skin stretch over the curves, felt them roll, smooth and heavy, as if on purpose, just to catch eyes.

And if I stopped too quickly, the inertia did its job, and I felt the hit of that soft mass from behind, almost knocking me off my feet.

I had to learn to live with it, hold my torso right, move right, even dance right so everything looked beautiful from the outside. But inside...

Phew. Great thoughts I've got today. Must be the heat. Alright. Arms out. Hips sway smoothly. Look into the crowd, smile.

My breasts bounced again, tugging the skin painfully. I sucked in air, made another graceful half-circle with my body, and my hips spilled into a wave — and the crowd rewarded me with another sigh, a couple of whistles.

At the nearest table sat a pair of city drunks, looking at me with some crooked expression:

— She's kinda... — one squinted, leaning forward. — I dunno... like she's dancing angrier today.

— Nah, — the second waved him off. — Angry, how? Look how her hips move soft, and her shoulders are a bit tense. She always does that when she likes someone in the crowd. I'm here every night, I know.

Liked someone?

I almost tripped right in the middle of the stage.

That was exactly what I didn't need — some drunk "expert" on my emotions, especially considering that I didn't like anyone or anything here. Though, yeah, a couple girls in this bar were actually not bad. Lirka and Savva — my so-called "colleagues," if you can call girls that when life threw them into the municipal bar at the Red Gates. We danced in turns, sometimes together. They disliked me from the very start, out of some womanly jealousy, or maybe just because I reminded them of something they would never become.

God, how ashamed and awkward I felt the moment I realized that. That other GIRLS envied me because I — yes, me, Jake, a man — looked better than they did.

That moment messed me up completely.

— Palace girl, — Savva muttered once, thinking I couldn't hear. — Even when sweat runs down her back, it looks like gold instead of sweat. How's that fair?

They couldn't stand me because I was their living reminder that someone once danced in a palace, on marble tiles, under cool fountains — while they... danced on dirty platforms for soldiers.



Damn, I think I'm humanizing NPCs way too much, right?

— I'm telling you, the higher-ups will shut this dump down soon! — a loud male shout burst out from somewhere at a table in the middle of the bar, and I automatically turned my gaze there. — Too many outsiders hanging around.

A pair of soldiers sat there, one with a scar across his lip, the other young, barely older than I used to be. They were arguing loudly about something while I turned 180 degrees and arched my head back, my hair brushing the floor.

— Come on, — the youngster waved him off. — No one cares about these gates. As long as it's peaceful here, everything'll stay the same.

The youngster laughed and looked at me like I was a piece of furniture. Not a person. Not a player. Just background.

I turned away from them, not wanting to see their faces, their lazy smirks, or the way they looked at me like I was part of the décor — something you could move or kick if it got in the way.

The music stretched on, the rhythm slowed, and I made a soft turn, rolling my weight from one leg to the other as if it all happened on its own. But my gaze, sliding across the hall, snagged on the far corner — and I froze. The smuggler. The old regular. The same one who, a couple months ago, pinned me in the dark corridor behind the kitchen when I slipped out for some air. He yanked me toward him so fast my breasts jerked in a painful pull, and his hand went exactly where it shouldn't have. If not for the guard — that grumpy giant with the shaved head...

And honestly, I still don't know what was worse: that I even needed help... or the way he lifted me by the elbow back then. Too easily. Too... gently. The way people help a girl who looks like she's about to cry.

And he looked at me like I really could.

Now that bastard sat with a young guy, clearly not local, because I already remembered every local face by heart. I couldn't hear what they were talking about — they were too far — but I could see them.

The young one looked a bit tense, trying to pretend he was lazily sipping wine, while the old man gestured wildly next to him, pointed at me, then spread his hands in the air, fingers wide, and squeezed imaginary breasts a few times, smirking and giving me a sideways glance.

The young guy nearly dropped his wine, blushing and looking away. Then that asshole slid a finger along his tongue, leaned forward, and made a hand gesture so explicit my knees almost buckled.

I didn't have to hear them — I knew perfectly well they were talking about me... and definitely not about dance technique.

And then he noticed I was watching.



A wide grin slowly spread across his face, looking like it was about to spill past the edges of his wrinkled mug. He tilted his head slightly to the side, curled his hand into a fist with his index finger pointing out... and made a gesture that meant nothing good, one that made my mouth go dry instantly. He did it boldly, deliberately, like he wanted to see that hot wave of goosebumps crawl down my back.

I turned away too sharply, forgetting everything for a second, and my breasts instantly reminded me of themselves: a painful bounce, my hips slipped off balance, and I barely managed not to fall off the stage. The music was just reaching the end of the piece, the last notes sounding torn, sticky.

I took the final pose: my back to the hall, spine arched backward along with my head, arms stretched out, my breasts on the verge of spilling out from the way they wanted to “spread” to each side. In short — a horribly uncomfortable pose, but I performed it already like a professional, even though I was trembling from the strain.

And in that moment the music cut off.

Not “ended.” Not “faded.” It was cut, like with a knife.

A wave of irritated grumbling rolled through the hall:

— Hey, what the hell?..

— She done already?

— Musicians, what the hell, you drunk or what?..

But those voices stopped almost instantly, turning into whispers, and then disappearing completely. Only one drunk soldier kept yelling, demanding more, but someone nearby abruptly clamped a hand over his mouth, and the sound ended like someone ripped it out of reality.

The bar dropped into a short, dense silence, like someone had torn the sound out of the air.

And I froze in that damned pre-final pose. Sweat slid down my spine, tickled my waist, and I didn’t move. I was afraid even to breathe too loudly, like the whole world was holding still.

And then...

Clap.

Loud, sharp, like a whip strike.

Then a second... CLAP!

A pause.

A third... CLAP!

The third one sounded especially clear, like someone slapped the air itself and split it open, and after that the bar wasn’t a bar anymore. Not a place, not noise, not smells. Just an empty hall where my lungs were too loud and my spine ached like it might crack from the arch.

— Get up.

Not a shout, not a command, but a predatory-calm “get up,” like everything had already been decided for me — even the things I didn’t know yet.

I straightened slowly, untangling my hair that stuck to my back, feeling drops of sweat slide along my ribs. My breasts felt even heavier — they always did that when I got nervous, as if they were emphasizing my situation. My hips trembled from tension, and the stage under my feet felt like it arched with me.



A few seconds I stood there without breathing, afraid to turn my face toward the audience and feeling her burning gaze on my back...

And that feeling was just as sharp as the day she threw me out of the palace. Half a year ago. Six months during which my whole existence here turned into survival. And now — meeting her again. I had thought about her, I knew she was my only chance to meet the princess, my Stephanie, but at the same time I was terrified of this moment.

I swallowed, though it didn't help at all. My breasts tightened under their weight, my ribs seemed to clench. I didn't dare move, but I understood that if I didn't turn myself, she would make me.

— Well? — she said calmly.

Too calmly.

I exhaled shortly and finally turned. Slowly. Too slowly. Like the air had turned thick, and my hips too wide to move without the entire hall seeing how the skin stretched over the curves. I turned. Turned with all this soft, heavy mass of a body I still didn't know how to hold proudly. My hair fell onto my shoulders, my breasts bounced, and I felt hundreds of eyes stick to me again — but none of that mattered now, because in front of me stood her.

Madam Halarina.

Not in the red lacquered suit from back then, but in a long dark-turquoise cloak lined with something shiny, almost like scales. At her belt — a thin cane with a metal handle. Her hair was still styled perfectly, high and sleek. Her face carved from the coldest stone.

She looked at me as if simply acknowledging the fact that I existed, and already couldn't understand why that fact bothered her.

— Are you going to just stand there? — she asked calmly, tilting her head to the side.

At that moment some drunk soldier even tried to lazily lift his mug and bark something like:

— Hey, ma'am, we were actually—

But he didn't finish, because one of the palace guards who came with Halarina appeared beside him so fast the soldier didn't even realize what happened. A huge leather-gloved hand grabbed him by the back of the head and slammed him down to the table so sharply that the mug jumped and tipped over, spilling beer all over his coat.

The soldier wheezed, trying to fight back in the slightest, but the guard only pressed his face down harder, as if playing with a kitten.

— Quiet, — the guard said in a low voice, absolutely emotionless. The soldier seemed to understand and fell silent, not daring to twitch.

— Anyone else wants to speak up? — Halarina announced loudly, her voice spreading through the bar like the walls had moved closer.

The silence became even more silent.

I heard my own breathing.

Heard the tremble in my stomach muscles.

Heard the wooden stage creak under my weight.

Of course no one answered.

— Perfect, — she drawled, half-closing her eyes as if savoring this obedience.



The guard released the soldier. He slid down onto the bench quietly, clutching the table, too scared to lift his gaze. Halarina, as if that little scene hadn't just happened, shifted her eyes back to me.

— Come down, Arissa, — she said softly, yet in a way that twisted something deep inside me. — This place is not worthy of someone who once danced on marble floors. You remember how to dance, don't you?

I stood there another second, as if my feet had grown into the burning-hot floorboards. The same boards I had spent half a year of my life on. Half a year of sweat, pain, despair and... even a strange, crooked sense of habit.

And now what? That's it? The end? Or the start of a new hell? Though honestly — what could be worse than this?

— I... — I exhaled, but my voice cracked.

— Down, — Halarina repeated, without raising her tone. — Or do you have objections?

I tried to say something, but my throat was dry as dust. In the end, all that came out was a raspy “n-no.”

— If so... — her lips twitched ever so slightly, like she smiled, but it wasn't a smile — it was a thin mark of authority. — Then come down.

I took a step. One. Careful. And immediately felt my breasts pull downward, my hips shifting heavily, like I was carrying all this unwanted femininity on my back. On the second step the boards sighed quietly beneath my feet, hot and overly sensitive after the dance. The stage was low, but the descent felt endless. The crowd parted silently, reluctantly.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the girls — Lirka and Savva — standing by the counter behind the musicians, glancing at each other.

Lirka — sharper, quicker to bite with words — raised her brow slightly, like she couldn't decide whether to envy me or get angry. Savva, on the other hand, stared as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. I caught her lips forming, silently, with awe and a massive wave of jealousy: “To the palace?.. Seriously?..”

— Look... her legs are shaking, — Savva signed soundlessly, gesturing toward me at Lirka.

— Of course they're shaking, — Lirka replied, not even hiding her smirk, also silent. — Our little palace girl. I clenched my teeth. I wanted to answer, but what was I supposed to say?

“Hey girls, I'm actually a guy from another world and this is worse than death for me”?

Yeah. Perfect line.

Especially when you're standing barefoot on scorching boards, with your breasts dragging downward so much you feel like you'll collapse any second, and right next to you stands Madam Halarina, whose shadow alone feels like it might crush you.

Of course I stayed silent — saying anything would've been suicide in my situation.

I simply walked toward Madam slowly, lowered my head and braced myself, expecting her to grab me by the chin, lift my face and say something sharp, but... she just turned and headed toward the exit without a word. And I understood instantly — I was expected to follow. Immediately. Like something trained. Like a shadow. The crowd parted in silence.

One of the soldiers whispered:

— Well damn... lucky girl. You don't get taken to the palace for nothing.

Lucky?

Oh sure. Of course. “Lucky.”

Maybe I should thank someone too?



