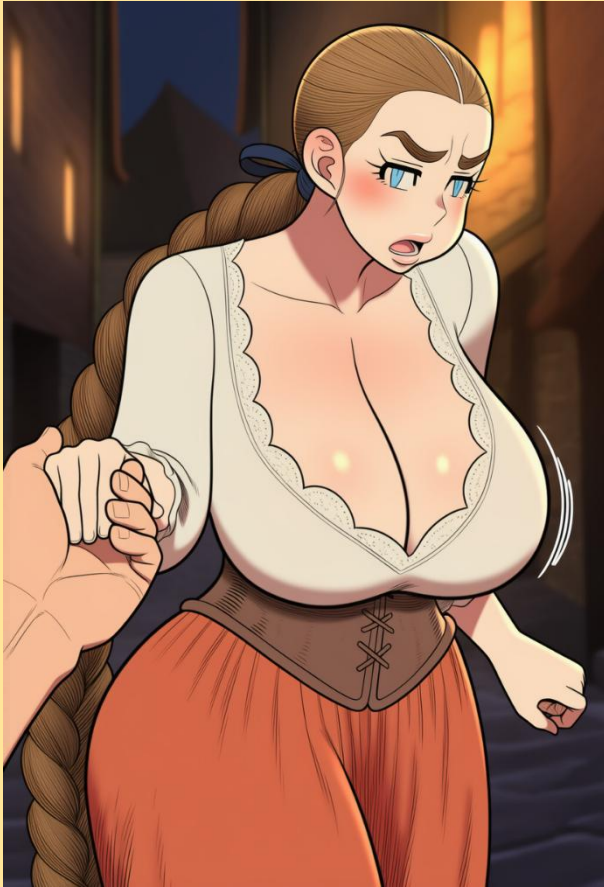




— Not here... — the guy whispered, and the warm air from his mouth literally scorched Teresa's tender skin, which, however, instead of blistering, became covered with far too noticeable goosebumps, even in the night darkness.

So noticeable that one could imagine them even while standing around the corner, next to the half-dismantled stall that still carried the scent of some spices. Even considering that your fingers were clenched into the rough board until it hurt, and your heart was pounding as if it wanted to break through the ribs and burst out.

— Not... not here? — Teresa almost whispered, with her lips still slightly parted, saying it as if she herself didn't quite understand the meaning of her own question.

He just smirked, took her by the hand and calmly, far too confidently, led her somewhere, as if this was the most natural thing in the world.

"Not here..." spun in her head while her own palm trustingly settled into his, as if it had already gotten

used to this touch.

Her heart was beating like crazy.

Her breathing, though not as rapid anymore, was still uneven, echoing inside her skull.

"Not here... not... wait, what do you mean not..."

— Hey, wait... — she began, stopping and pulling her hand back toward herself when she suddenly remembered who she actually was and why the hell she was even here in the first place.

But the guy didn't even react, taking confident steps forward and not letting go of her hand — and from that sharp tug Teresa's whole body was literally yanked forward: her breasts heavily swayed under the corset, sending a pulling jolt into her shoulders, her hips jerked after him by inertia, and the skirt whipped against her legs as if reminding her of every unnecessary movement.

She stumbled half a step, nearly losing balance, and instinctively tensed up, trying to stop.

But it came out somehow awkward and abrupt.

"What the fuck?!"

— I said... — a weak squeak escaped her mouth instead of the furious command her brain had expected to hear, — wait.

A quiet crack of wood rang out in the silence of the street.

It was those same fingers that had been clenched into the rough board around the corner until it hurt — they had finally finished their job, turning that board into a scattering of splinters and broken fibers, as if it hadn't been an old market stall, but someone's throat.

Rodrik stood there, breathing heavily through his nose, staring at his palms that were now covered in splinters, with drops of blood welling up — but he wasn't thinking about that at all.

He didn't feel the pain.

At least not the physical one.

— I said... let me go... — her voice cracked, becoming thinner and thinner, almost pleading. — You... you don't understand... I need...

"I need to go back! Why am I not screaming, why am I squeaking like some scared little mouse?! I am the heir of Marzipania! I—"

The thought broke off because the guy suddenly stopped.

Slowly he turned his whole body toward her, and she noticed how in the half-darkness his lips curved into a barely visible smile.

— Come on, my sweet... — he said quietly, almost tenderly, but with that same low, dragging intonation that instantly dried out Teresa's mouth. — Don't squirm like that, little girl. Daddy's gonna do everything right.

Too many words hit the target at once: "sweet", "my", "little girl" and of course "Daddy".

All of them felt like specially chosen keys, each one turning in the most shameful lock of her new body.

Between her legs it instantly became hot — not just warm, but precisely scorching, wet, throbbing.

Her knees trembled as if someone had suddenly yanked half the strength out of them. She involuntarily clenched her thighs tighter, trying to suppress this treacherous, humiliating sensation, but only made it worse — the fabric of her chemise immediately pulled taut, outlining everything far too clearly.

Teresa let out a short, almost soundless gasp.

Her breasts rose with a sharp inhale, straining the corset until it creaked, and the heavy hemispheres swayed, making her entire upper body rock after them. She felt her nipples harden to the point of pain and press against the thin fabric of her blouse, standing out as two distinct, sharp little peaks even in the half-darkness.

— What... did you... say... — she exhaled, but it came out quiet, broken, almost pleading.

The guy took another step closer. His free hand slowly rose and settled on her waist — just below the corset, where the skirt fabric was already gathering in soft folds. His fingers tightened slightly, not to pull her closer, but simply to show that everything had already been decided.

— You heard every word, — he whispered, leaning in closer, — Don't pretend you don't like it... Little obedient girl who's been wanting for a long time to finally be...



— Ahh — a sudden low, drawn-out moan tore from Teresa's chest, cutting off his languid voice against her will.

She immediately clapped a hand over her mouth, but it was already too late — because that sound, trembling, wet, full of exactly the kind of shame that Kalendor Verden would never in his life have even allowed himself to think of, already hung in the air.

Her eyes widened in horror. Her cheeks burned as if they'd been doused with boiling water. And between her legs everything pulsed even harder, as if that very moan had given her whole body final permission to surrender completely.

The guy froze for several moments. Then slowly — very slowly — he smiled.

— There it is... — he breathed out, almost brushing her temple with his lips. — I knew it the second I saw you...

And at that moment the silence was shattered by heavy, rapid footsteps pounding over the cobblestones.

— Get away from her.

Rodrik burst out of the shadows like a bear stabbed in the side with a spear, clutching a broken piece of stall board in one hand, the other fist already clenched and ready to swing at any second.

The guy slowly turned his head with deliberate calm, not even letting the smile drop from his face.

— I said — FUCK OFF!

— RODRIK! NO! — Teresa screamed, throwing herself between them so abruptly that her braid whipped across her back, and her breasts, swaying from the violent motion, nearly spilled out of the corset. She spread her arms wide, as if trying to hold both of them back at once.

Rodrik froze.

The broken board in his hand trembled, but didn't lower. He stared straight over her head into the guy's eyes, simply waiting for a better moment, treating Teresa as nothing more than a temporary obstacle.

— Teresa, — he said quietly, almost calmly, but with each word falling like a stone. — Step aside.

— No! — she shouted again, but already not as loudly. She took a step toward Rodrik, reaching out her palm toward the hand that was clutching the broken board, immediately noticing the fresh splinter wounds on it.

Teresa's fingers were trembling when they touched his wrist.

— You... you're hurt? — she said with fear and at the same time reproach, afraid to look him in the eyes and desperately wishing for all of this to just end faster.

At that moment Rodrik's gaze dropped down to her, and the anger that had been so easily readable on his face just a second ago was replaced by some sudden, almost painful bewilderment. His chest was heaving heavily, his fingers still white-knuckled around the broken board, but the grip was weakening with every passing second.

— It's... nothing, — he forced out hoarsely, never taking his eyes off her face. — Scratches. Not worth attention.

Teresa finally raised her eyes. In the half-darkness they looked enormous, shining — either from tears or from the reflection of the last lanterns on the square.



— It is worth it, — she said quietly but very firmly.
— Because it's because of me.

The girl's fingers carefully, almost weightlessly slid along his wrist, tracing the skin around the fresh red welts. She didn't notice how with every short breath her own breasts nearly brushed against his shirt.

Rodrik exhaled noisily through his nose. His gaze darted to her lips, then to her cleavage, then guiltily back up.

— Teresa... — he began and faltered, because at that moment the stranger, who had been standing silently behind Teresa's back the whole time, suddenly let out a short, mocking snort.

— What a touching scene, — he drawled, lazily crossing his arms over his chest. — The village idiot came to protect his little whore. Cute.

Rodrik jerked as if lashed with a whip. The broken board in his hand rose again, but now not just as a threat — with clear intent to use it.

— Say it again, — he said quietly, almost in a

whisper. — Say that word one more time.

The stranger only grinned wider, clearly enjoying the moment.

— Little whore, — he pronounced slowly, relishing every syllable. — And what, if you hadn't shown up she'd probably already be on her knees in front of me, begging me to—

CRACK!

The sharp sound of a fist connecting with jaw echoed through the alley like someone had split dry firewood with full force.

The stranger flew back two steps, head snapped to the side, a thin stream of blood sprayed from his mouth. He clutched his face, eyes wide with shock and pain, but that damn smile still clung on, even if crooked now.

— Rodrik! — tore out of Teresa before she could stop herself. She instinctively grabbed Rodrik by the sleeve with both hands, trying to drag him back — Rodrik, enough! Please! Let's go!

— Well damn, you country bumpkin... — the stranger began, spitting reddish saliva onto the cobblestones, then paused as if thinking something over, looking the huge rival up and down from head to toe, but finally added, — Fine. Go on then, I'll let you.

— I'll fucking kill you! — Rodrik already swung again, the one who had just been called "country bumpkin"

— Rodrik! I said ENOUGH! — clutching his wrist and practically hanging off him, with that instinctive commanding tone only women use when they want to protect their beloved, Teresa shouted — and it seemed to work.

Rodrik's eyes dropped again and met her huge, tear-shining gaze.

He froze. The fist, still clenched and ready for another blow, slowly unclenched. The broken board slipped from his fingers and hit the cobblestones with a dull thud.

Teresa felt the tension in his arm gradually drain away under her palms. She was still hanging on him, gripping his sleeve so tightly, as if terrified he would charge forward again any second.

— Rodrik... — she whispered, much quieter now, almost pleading. — Please. Don't. He's leaving. It's... it's already over. Let's go.

The stranger, still clutching his jaw, let out a short, hoarse chuckle. Blood trickled between his fingers, but he was already backing away, making a point of not turning his back.

— When you change your mind, doll... — he said quietly, almost tenderly, — I rent a room above the Rusty Tankard. Second floor, window onto the alley. Just knock three times. I always leave the latch open... for obedient little girls like you.

Teresa froze.

Rusty Tankard. That was the place where she — or rather Kalendor, or to be even more precise, Loran (the captain of his guard) — had lodged the small accompanying detachment that was supposed to “discreetly” follow the prince at a distance. Second floor, rooms with windows facing outward around the perimeter, so the guards could stay on alert around the clock.

She remembered that he was one of them. And how the hell had she not recognized that face? Long nose, thick eyebrows, wide cheeks — this guard stood out so sharply from the rest that Kalendor, upon returning to the palace, had wanted to transfer him to the remotest tower for permanent duty at the latrine pits — that's how much he hated that mug. And yet, just a few minutes ago, that same mug had seemed so desperately desirable that her ears were still ringing as if several cupids had fired at once.

“Fuck...”

Her hand instinctively flew to her pendant, but to Teresa's enormous shock, her fingers met only bare, warm skin in the deep valley between her heavy breasts.

Teresa froze as if someone had thrown ice water in her face.

The pendant. The blue stone. The very one that was supposed to hang on a rough cord. It had stayed with Elina. She herself had taken it off, personally handed it to the old herbalist, deciding to test whether the spell would weaken if she moved far enough away.

— I need to urgently—

— Ugh, — a heavy male groan sounded somewhere right by her ear, very close, almost against her skin.

Her thought, the sentence she hadn't even finished, vanished instantly from her mind the moment she heard that short, choked sound.



Her entire world narrowed in one heartbeat to a single person.

Teresa immediately grabbed his uninjured hand with her own trembling, small, but unexpectedly tenacious palms.

— Let me see... — she whispered, and her voice came out very quiet, almost pleading. — Rodrik, please.

He reflexively tried to pull his hand away, but she held on tight.

— It's nothing, — he grunted, looking away. — Scratches. It'll pass.

— It's not nothing, — she answered with unexpected firmness. — Show me.

Rodrik exhaled noisily through his nose. Then, reluctantly, he opened his fingers and let her turn his broad palm upward.

Deep red welts from splinters, some already swelling, blood drying in thin dark trails. Several tiny wood shards still stuck out of the skin like miniature black needles.

Teresa felt something painfully clench inside her chest.

— Stupid... — she breathed out, not even knowing herself whether she was scolding or pitying him. Her fingers carefully, almost weightlessly, slid along his wrist, tracing the inflamed stripes. — Completely stupid...

Rodrik looked down at her. In the darkness his face seemed even more harsh, but his eyes... his eyes softened when he saw how her lashes glistened.

— Come on, — he said hoarsely. — I'll walk you home.

She wanted to say "no need", "I can manage", "I'm not scared".

But instead she just quietly and obediently nodded.

...

— Teresa... — finally gathering all his courage, Rodrik began when they were already approaching the mill, and then fell silent, as if searching for the right words. But then he still asked: — You... would you really have gone with him?

The words didn't reach her right away. She was peacefully lying in his arms and was already practically falling asleep. The rhythm of his steps, the pulse from his heart, and the warmth from the chest her cheek was pressed against lulled her more strongly than any lullaby. She didn't even understand how she ended up in this position. Just a hard day. Just too many emotions. Just legs giving way — and he, without asking anything, simply scooped her up in his arms while they walked home.

But the question eventually broke through. Slowly, like a stone thrown into deep water, it reached her consciousness and spread in ripples.

Teresa opened her eyes.

At first she saw only the dark fabric of his shirt, soaked with the smell of flour, hay, and sweat. Then she slowly lifted her gaze, as if afraid of what she would see in his face.

Rodrik was staring straight ahead at the dark silhouette of the mill, but his jaw was clenched so hard that the muscles rolled under the skin. He wasn't breathing. Waiting for the answer like a verdict.

Teresa felt everything inside her clench, but not from shame — from something else. From something she had never experienced before. From tenderness. From the desire to protect. From the terror that this big, simple, ridiculously sincere guy would now decide that she really was some kind of “obedient little girl” ready to knock three times on the latch above the Rusty Tankard, and not... the crown prince?!

She tried to pull away, suddenly fully aware of the absurdity of the question, of the whole situation, and of her own reaction to everything. But Rodrik, feeling the movement, instinctively tightened his arms, as if terrified she would slip out and run away into the night.

Her corset painfully dug into her ribs from the squeeze, her breasts heavily pressed against his chest, and for a second Teresa froze, squeezing her eyes shut with every muscle in her face. And though the pain was there, she didn’t do it because of the pain — but because of the sudden realization that here she was, in the arms of a simple guy, like a sack of flour... as if she had always truly been Teresa.

“I am Kalendor Verden. Heir of Marzipania,” — the already familiar sobering thought flashed again, but it sounded somehow too stupid even to herself, considering how the air rocked her body hanging in Rodrik’s arms and how her breasts swayed with each of his steps.

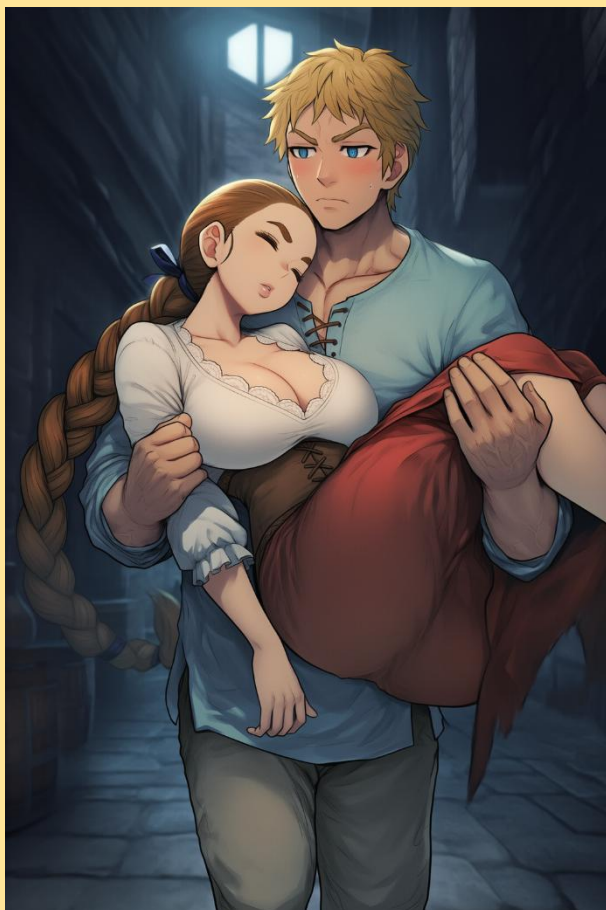
She slowly placed her palm on his forearm, as if pushing away and wanting to move farther.

— Rodrik... don’t squeeze so hard, — she said quietly, a simple request rather than an order, and something inside her twisted painfully from that.

He immediately loosened his grip.

— Sorry. I... — he swallowed, staring ahead at the black silhouette of the mill. The blades barely moved in the wind, creaking as if the night itself was grinding its teeth. — Just tell me. Would you... have gone?

Teresa felt the sudden urge to laugh loudly and viciously — the way Kalendor would have. And at the same time... as if a warm palm had gently squeezed something soft and fragile right under her heart.



“What stupid fucking questions... this is total bullshit!... but damn it, for some reason all of this matters to me so fucking much...”

She lifted her head, looked at his chin, at the tense cords of his neck, at the hands striped with splinters.

— No, — she answered shortly, but immediately understood. That wasn’t true. She would have gone. She had already been ready in that moment for anything, driven by that strongest, most humiliating desire to submit, to dissolve, to give herself to the one who called her “obedient little girl” and “doll”. And from realizing that, everything inside her turned over.

Teresa swallowed. Her throat was dry.

Suddenly the slow rhythmic swaying stopped. Rodrik’s feet seemed to root into the ground, and his wide-open eyes seemed to hook onto Teresa’s cleavage like a grappling hook.

But she didn't see it at first. At first she didn't understand anything at all. She just felt Rodrik suddenly freeze. Just turned to stone, as if someone had cast a spell on him. His arms, which had been holding her so gently just a moment ago, tensed until the muscles trembled. His breathing became sharp, ragged, as if he'd forgotten how to breathe normally.

She frowned, trying to understand what happened.

"Maybe the pain from the splinters suddenly became unbearable? Maybe he saw someone in the dark? Maybe..." she thought, starting to worry about him, and slowly lifting her gaze she immediately noticed that Rodrik wasn't looking at her. Or rather — he was looking at her, but not where she expected. He was staring at the thing she had already seemed to forget about. At the thing that that very morning had still seemed to her something alien, horrible, wrong, cumbersome and ridiculous.

"What the hell is he looking at?" — she thought, slowly lowering her gaze, following his frozen eyes.

But all she saw was the familiar picture: white blouse fabric stretched to the limit, deep cleavage, the heavy valley between her breasts that in the moonlight looked even deeper and darker, especially in this position.

Teresa finally understood, and in that instant blood rushed to her cheeks, neck, ears, turning her face into a burning mask.

— Rodrik... that's indecent, — she breathed out, blushing so fiercely that even in the moonlight her burning cheekbones were visible. Her hands jerked upward, trying somehow to cover the cleavage, but in the position she was hanging in his arms, it looked pathetic and helpless. — And anyway... put me down!

Rodrik didn't let go. Or rather, he wanted to, but something stopped him.

His arms trembled from the sudden realization that he was really staring right where he had no right to stare so shamelessly. His eyes widened, his gaze jerked upward to her face, then guiltily aside to the dark outline of the mill, then back down to her cleavage as if pulled by a magnet.

— I... — he began and broke off. His voice came out hoarse, strangled. — Sorry. I didn't... I mean... I didn't mean to... just... your...

"Your pendant, where is it? You never take it off" — such a simple question, but sometimes even simple questions become impossibly difficult.

Meanwhile Teresa felt heat flooding not just her face but her breasts, her neck, even her ears burning as if they'd been held over a brazier of marzipan.

The corset dug even more painfully into her ribs from this awkward movement, her heavy breasts shifted, pressed against his chest, and from that simple contact another hot wave rolled through her body — the one she hated and at the same time could no longer ignore.

"I'm a prince," she thought furiously, almost in panic, feeling the fire inside burning stronger and stronger. "Heir of Marzipania. I shouldn't be... held like this. Looked at... like this..."

But the thought snapped off because Rodrik suddenly exhaled sharply and finally began to lower her to the ground. His hands were opening, fingers sliding along her waist, about to let go completely — and that was the last straw, after which only ringing remained in her ears and loud heartbeats, as if only the most frantic drummers and trumpeters were left inside her head.

She suddenly grabbed his shirt with both hands — hard and sharp, so the fabric tore at the collar.

— No, — escaped her almost soundlessly.

Rodrik didn't have time to ask or react.

Teresa stretched upward herself. Her braid swung, her breasts painfully shifted under the corset, but she no longer felt it so sharply. She caught his face in her palms — fingers trembling, nails digging into the skin of his cheeks a little harder than necessary — and pressed her lips to his lips greedily, insistently, leaving no room for doubt.

Her lips parted immediately, almost angrily, and Teresa's tongue — hot, demanding, fast — plunged inside as if she didn't just want to kiss him but to conquer, to devour, to show who had always been and would always be in charge, the way Kalendor always did.

Her tongue slid along his, curled around it, pressed it down, then sharply swept across the roof of his mouth, along the insides of his cheeks — greedily, wetly, with quiet, obscene smacking sounds that she herself heard and from which everything inside clenched with humiliating shame.

Her lips moved roughly, teeth sometimes catching his lower lip, biting a little harder than needed, leaving a faint taste of blood; saliva dripped down both their chins and Teresa understood how dirty it was, how vulgar, how unworthy of who she had been that morning — and precisely from that realization shivers ran down her spine while her nipples painfully strained against the blouse fabric.

She felt his cock harden through his pants, pressing into her lower belly, and instead of pulling away she rocked her hips forward, pressing harder, as if wanting to feel it even more clearly.

Rodrik let out a low, strangled sound — more like a growl than anything — and finally responded.

His arms, which had just been ready to release her, closed around her waist again so tightly that the corset dug into her ribs with a crunch, her breasts crushed against his chest, and her nipples — hard and painfully sensitive — rubbed against the rough fabric of his shirt, sending flashes of heat down her belly. His lips opened to meet hers, his tongue met her tongue roughly and clumsily but with such force that for a moment Teresa's breath caught. This wasn't a tender kiss from books; this was something else. Sincere and animalistic. As if both of them had been waiting their whole lives for exactly this moment.

"What the hell am I doing?! Stop! Stop right now! This is a stupid peasant! I should have him executed, not kiss him!" Teresa screamed inside herself, but immediately heard her own answer: "Just a little more... One more kiss... just one more..."

— Mmmmm — she moaned into his mouth when Rodrik's big palm squeezed her left ass cheek so hard that his fingers almost dug into the soft flesh through the skirt. The fabric pulled tight, the hem rode up a little higher, exposing her ankle, and Teresa felt everything between her legs become hot, wet, throbbing again — and fuck, already ready.

"I am Kalendor Verden," raced through her head like a trapped bird. "I'm supposed to rule a kingdom, not grind against some village oaf's pants, I... I... damn it! No! This is all fucking bullshit! I want more! I



don't want this to stop... I want to feel him... I want him to moan because of me the same way those court girls moaned... oh yes!"

Kalendor had always loved sliding his hand into the hair of court ladies while they, kneeling with pitiful faces, brought him pleasure — and this memory, which had just appeared in her head completely unbidden, immediately settled there and grew into something utterly obvious and the most desired thing imaginable. Teresa's hand — trembling, but no longer from the cold, now from a burning, shameful hunger — in that very instant slid down his stomach, over the rough fabric of his shirt, lower, until her fingers bumped into the hard, hot bulge in his pants that she had already felt with her body, and now with her soft little palm.

She squeezed him clumsily through the fabric. It came out nervous but strong. Rodrik jerked with his whole body, let out a low, strangled sound right into her mouth, and Teresa felt him throb under her palm, growing even harder.

Their lips parted with a wet, obscene smack. A thin thread of saliva hung between them and snapped.

Rodrik stared down at her with eyes widened in incomprehension.

— Teresa... — he began hoarsely, — what are you...

But she didn't answer — only smiled that same crooked, greedy, almost bestial smile that had always been too recognizable to anyone Kalendor had ever forced to pale and lower their eyes. And that look produced exactly the same effect on Rodrik — who never could have expected such a thing from such a modest, good girl like Teresa, such... But shock and pleasure did their work — he simply froze, not knowing what to do.

But Teresa knew. The cold ground already touched her knees, the skirt gathered in folds around her legs, her braid whipped across her back, her breasts heavily swung forward, nearly spilling out of the cleavage. Her hands, nervous and clumsy but with a greed she herself hadn't expected anymore, were already fumbling with his belt.

— Teresa, wait... — he began in a hoarse, bewildered voice. — We... here... on the street...

She wasn't listening.

The fabric parted. His cock — already hard and hot — sprang free, swaying right in front of her face, and instantly the sharp smell hit her nostrils.

Teresa licked her dry lips. Greed burned in her eyes, mixed with some desperate, almost vicious triumph: "No, I'm going to do it! I'm going to do it! I want to! I always do what I want!"

She leaned closer. Her breath scorched the sensitive skin. Rodrik jerked with his whole body, let out a low, strangled sound.

— Teresa, I... — he began again, but she had already wrapped her hand around the base and dragged her tongue along the entire length — slowly, from bottom to top — as if tasting forbidden fruit.

Rodrik made a sound that was half moan, half growl. His knees trembled.

Teresa opened her mouth wider, when suddenly...

BAM!

Somewhere in the distance a loud shot rang out, echoing through the silence of the night. Teresa froze with her mouth open, lips a millimeter from the hot skin.

Her eyes widened.

“What I... what the hell did I just...”

Both of them froze, unable to comprehend the scale of what had just happened. Or what had almost happened.

Teresa was still on her knees, hand gripping the base of his cock, lips glistening with her own saliva, breathing coming in short, hot bursts.

Finally, after a second that felt like eternity, she jerked back violently. So violently that her braid lashed across her shoulder and her breasts painfully bounced, stretching the blouse fabric to its limit. Her fingers sprang open as if burned. She jumped to her feet, stepped back one pace, then another, wiping her palms across her mouth as if she could erase everything that had just happened from her lips and tongue.

Rodrik stood there, breathing heavily with his cock still sticking out, which only added to the absurdity of the scene on the dark street under moonlight.

— Teresa... — he exhaled. — What...

She didn't let him finish.

— No, — she whispered, almost soundlessly, shaking her head. — No-no-no...

She spun 180 degrees, pressed her palms to her mouth, stuck out her tongue as if trying to wash away the taste — which, as if on purpose, only became clearer and more distinct.

“What am I doing? What the fuck did I almost just do?!”

Her legs carried her forward on their own. First a step, then another, then already running — awkward, stumbling, skirt catching on her thighs, braid whipping her back like a lash, breasts bouncing so violently that the corset creaked, threatening to tear.

Behind her came a hoarse, bewildered shout:

— Teresa! Stop! Wait!

She didn't stop, even though everything inside clenched at that shout.

“I am Kalendor Verden! Heir to the throne! I should have executed people like Rodrik just for the suspicion that they dared to raise their eyes to me, and I... I almost took him in my mouth right on the street, like some...”

The word stuck in her throat even in thought, but you can't run from thoughts.

“Like some whore from the port district. No. Worse. I'm worse than a whore!”

Her cheeks burned, tears stung her eyes, mixing with the desperate urge to turn back.

“And if someone saw? If someone was watching from a window? If Father...”

She cut off that chain of thought herself this time.



“What fucking Father?! What Father?! My father is the King of Marzipania, not this sack of flour who calls me ‘little fox’ and waits for grandchildren! I don’t have a father here! I don’t have this life! It’s all a lie! A lie! A LIE!”

She turned into a narrow alley, almost crashing into a cart shed. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it wanted to break free and run ahead. Breathing came in short, gasping sobs. Fragments raced through her head:

“Twelve hours. Twelve fucking hours have long passed. They passed, didn’t they?! Why am I still her? Why do I still want... to go back there, to my knees?”

She squeezed her eyes shut while running and nearly fell.

“No. No. The pendant. I need to get the pendant. Elina. Why the hell did I leave it there?! That was the stupidest idea ever!”

Somewhere behind her, already farther away, Rodrik’s anxious shout rang out again:

— Teresa! Where are you going?! Come back!

She only sped up.

“Shut up! Please! If you shout one more time I’ll stop and run back to you! God, he’ll think I’m some kind of idiot. Yes! I am an idiot. I became an idiot the moment I allowed myself to want. The moment I allowed myself... to like it.”

The last thought cut especially deep.

“I liked it. I really liked it? I wanted it myself... damn it!”

She burst out onto the familiar little street where Elina’s house stood, and thank all the gods, the light was still burning in the window.

The door flew open with a dull bang against the wall.

— Grandma Elina! — burst out of her, too sharp and too high-pitched, and from that automatic “Grandma Elina” everything inside clenched.

“What fucking grandma! And don’t scream like a frightened girl! You’re a prince!”

With those thoughts she took a quick step inside and immediately froze. Four pairs of eyes turned toward her at once.

A frightened pair belonging to the elderly woman standing by the hearth, pressing both hands to her chest as if afraid her heart would jump out. And three pairs from men. Two were already pulling on cloaks, the third held a sack from which poked all the supplies Elina had managed to accumulate in her lifetime... and a cord. With the pendant?

The realization made her vision darken for several moments.

“They... are stealing MY artifact. These filthy... these pathetic...”

— Teresa! — Elina exhaled, and in that cry relief and horror were mixed. — Run! Run away from here!

One of the bandits — the taller one, with a crooked scar across his left eyebrow — strode sharply toward Teresa, his hand landing on her fragile shoulder.

— And who the hell is this? — he snorted, slowly looking her up and down, appraisingly. His gaze lingered on the cleavage, on the heavily rising and falling breasts. — Oh, sweet thing... you came just in time.

The second one — stocky, with a thick red beard — gave a short bark of laughter.

— Maybe we take her too? Tits like that don't just lie around for free.

Teresa felt the blood drain from her face, then rush back — a burning wave all the way to her ears.

"They dare... They DARE talk to me like that?!"

But her body... her body was already trembling with fear.

— Give it... — Teresa forced out with difficulty, jerking her shoulder, but only feeling the bandit's grip tighten. She immediately clenched her teeth and forced out again, lower: — Give me the pendant. Right now.

The bandits exchanged glances. The one with the scar stepped forward, closing the distance. He reeked of sweat, iron, and cheap wine.

— Pendant? What pendant? — the scarred one repeated, slowly turning his head toward his accomplices. In his voice there was genuine puzzlement mixed with sudden interest.

Teresa felt the floor drop out from under her.

"They... didn't take it? They really didn't take it? Then where..."

The next second her gaze darted to Elina. The old herbalist stood with her palms pressed to her mouth, her eyes flicked toward the cupboard — and the red-bearded one immediately noticed. He followed her glance like a hunting dog that had scented blood. The corners of his mouth slowly crept upward.

—Aaah... — he drawled, almost tenderly. — So that's it.

He took two wide steps to the old chest of drawers where jars of ointments usually stood, and without bothering to search, simply swept his elbow across everything in the way. Glass clinked, one jar cracked, and a dark stain of tincture spread across the darkened wood.

— And here's the little trinket, — the redhead said with satisfaction, taking the familiar cord in his hand. The blue stone caught in his fingers gave a cold glimmer.

Everything inside Teresa clenched.

"No. No-no-no. Not this. Not in their filthy paws..."

She lunged forward, but the scarred one caught her around the waist with his free hand, yanking her against himself so hard the corset creaked pitifully, and her breasts painfully flattened against his dirty leather breastplate.

— I am Kalendor Verden! — she suddenly shouted, her voice cracking into a high, almost childish note.

— Hereditary Prince of Marzipania! I order you to release me immediately and return the artifact! When I return to my body, I will burn your gang alive! I will order every single one of you quartered on the central square of Flermar! Your heads will rot on pikes above the northern gates until the crows peck out your eyes!

Silence hung for a second.

And then the bandits burst out laughing. Loudly. From the heart. The redhead even doubled over, clutching his stomach, the pendant swinging from his fist.



— Oh, girl... — he wheezed through laughter. — Have you been reading too many royal fairy tales in that head of yours?

The scarred one, still holding her by the waist, roughly grabbed Teresa's chin with his other hand and forced her face up.

— Look at that, so high and mighty, — he leaned in so close Teresa felt his sour breath on her lips. — And such a pretty little face... And damn fine tits.

He slowly, deliberately slid his palm downward and squeezed her right breast. The blouse fabric stretched tight, the nipple stood out through the cloth. Teresa hissed, jerked, but the grip only tightened, and her body responded with a wave

that made her want to scream from rage and shame at the same time.

"I hate it. I hate this body."

— We'll take you with us, princess, — he grinned, squeezing even harder. — You'll ride in the baggage train. For morale. And the pendant... the pendant we'll sell to some mage. Or figure out ourselves what it can do.

Elina whimpered against the wall, but the scarred one only threw a glance in her direction.

— Keep quiet, old woman.

Teresa felt something inside her break. Pride cracked, giving way to cold calculation and logic.

— I... I'll give you money. A lot. A whole chest of gold. Just... just give me back the pendant. Let me say the words. I'll turn back. I swear. I... I'm the prince. I'll keep my word. Please...

The redhead wiped a tear from laughter from his eye.

— You hear that? She really believes this shit!

— Maybe we sell her to the circus later, — the second one added. — I think people would love it.

"No. No. I'm not meant for this..." Kalendor howled inside from fear. "I need to do something! I have to!"

Teresa straightened sharply, yanking her chin out of the stranger's fingers, and without taking her eyes off the blue stone, began to whisper the words she had memorized by heart. The very ones she had read in Kaleus's diary for returning to the original form.

— Rivath mor'elan... sanguis et forma...

At first — nothing.

And then the pendant in the red-bearded man's hand suddenly flared with a bright, furious blue light as if someone inside the stone had abruptly opened a shutter. The blue flow wrapped around his wrist, shot up to his shoulders and sharply clamped around his head like a collar.

— Hey—! What the fu— — he didn't finish.

His body jerked. Broad shoulders began to narrow, as if someone was forcefully pressing them inward. The beard fell away in clumps like rotten straw, exposing the skin beneath. His face elongated, rough features melted, softening and at the same time reshaping into another, far too familiar form. Bones cracked — not loudly, but in a way Teresa physically felt, as if the sound had run down her own spine.

Teresa stood pressed against the wall by the scarred bandit, watching the impossible unfold before her eyes.

“No. No. This isn’t how it was supposed to work! Why HIM?!”

The light flared brighter, and for an instant the redhead’s figure dissolved inside the glow. And when it receded, in place of the dirty, stocky bandit stood a man in a rich blue doublet with golden embroidery, white shirt with the collar undone, red breeches and an expensive blue cloak carelessly thrown over his shoulders.

Kalendor Verden in his original form.

He blinked. Once. Then drew in a breath and looked at his own hands.

— ...what the devil, — he said in a hollow voice, and that single phrase was enough for everything inside Teresa to turn over.

“My voice. Mine! What the fuck! I...”

— Give me the pendant! — she screamed and took a step forward, but in that same instant the door of Elina’s house exploded with a crack.

— In the name of the King! — roared from the threshold. — Everyone on the floor! Drop your weapons!

The guards burst in. Six of them. In blue cloaks bearing the Marzipania crest, swords drawn, movements honed to automation. Two immediately pinned the scarred one to the floor, a third knocked the second bandit down. It all happened so fast the mind couldn’t catch up.

— Your Highness! — one of the guards dropped to one knee before the real Kalendor. — We found you. Come with us immediately, it’s not safe here.

— Your... Highness? — the “Kalendor” pronounced, feeling something pleasant inside, something that comes with enormous power.

He slowly ran a hand over the doublet, as if checking if it was real. Fingers glided over the golden embroidery, over the familiar weight of the chain around his neck. The smirk — the very one Teresa had seen in the mirror a thousand times — slowly spread across his face.

— Yes, — he answered himself quietly, as if tasting the word. — Exactly.

The scarred one struggled, cursed, swore by all the gods that “there wasn’t a whisper about the heir,” but he was already being pressed down with a knee, his arm twisted. The red-bearded one, the very one who had held the stone, could only rasp hoarsely:

— I swear... we didn’t know...

The guards weren’t listening. One of them struck the scarred one sharply on the back of the head with the hilt of his sword and he dropped to his knees, gasping.

— Shut up, — Loran said coldly. — On the floor, hands behind your head.

Elina, who had been standing against the wall the whole time, suddenly stepped forward. Her old hands trembled, but she resolutely reached toward Teresa, who was too close to the soldiers.



— My girl... — she whispered with such pain in her voice that for a moment Teresa forgot how to breathe.

The old woman gently but firmly pushed one of the guards aside with her shoulder and pulled Teresa to herself, wrapping her arms around her so tightly as if she wanted to hide her from the whole world. Teresa didn't even notice how she ended up pressed against the dry, herb-scented breast of the old woman.

— Shh, shh... — she whispered, stroking Teresa's back. — It's alright, my dear...

Teresa wanted to shout. Wanted to break free, rush at that "Kalendor", sink her fingers into his throat, take back her body, her life, her power.

"This is my body... my throne... I was supposed to rule, not... not this..."

But the words stuck in her throat. Instead she suddenly buried her face in Elina's shoulder, feeling tears burn her eyes. Warm, old palms gently stroked her head, her long braid, and it felt so

familiar, so... right.

"No. No! I don't need this! I'm the prince! I..."

— Please... — she whispered quietly into Elina's ear. — Grandma... tell them... tell them that I...

Elina pressed her even tighter just as the guards began dragging the bandits toward the exit. They still resisted, kicked, shouted excuses, but it was all useless. At the threshold "Kalendor" turned back, surprise on his face as if he wanted to ask something... but he didn't. The cloak slipped, the door slammed.

Teresa jerked, took a step after him.

— Wait... — escaped her.

Elina sharply covered her mouth with her palm. Leaned in and whispered almost soundlessly:

— Be quiet, girl. Better to stay quiet now.

The door slammed shut at the same moment as Teresa's mouth — she still hadn't realized what had just happened.