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Phoenix: 1

I knew it.

I could see it behind that smirk.

The good thing was that she almost seemed to forget that I never took off my mask, so that might make things easier for me.

I lifted my mask a bit and held the spoon in my mouth.

Luna Tamia's voice boomed in the air, "Scissors!" She used her two fingers to make a cutting motion, "I need scissors."

A maid quickly brought it for her, and she cut the part of the mask that covered my nostrils. "Here," she gave a proud grin to the crowd, which had gone quiet after she made that move.

Maybe they all had realized that she had taken it too far this time.

"Now start the walk, *Ms.* Phoenix," she stressed at the word *Ms.* as if she was mocking me.

Holding the spoon in my mouth, I couldn't move for a full minute, not understanding what to do. I had stopped breathing because the powdered chili could easily get into my nose.



As a warrior, I could easily hold my breath up to one or two minutes.

Everyone was waiting for Luna Raya's announcement, who was standing there in confusion. I wanted her to hurry because I couldn't stop myself from inhaling chili if the one minute was up.

And then it suddenly crossed my mind. She was taking time. Intentionally!

Did she mistake me for a fool?

I held the spoon in my hand and smiled at Luna Raya, "It's okay. Take your time. I'll grab it by my mouth when you make the announcement."

Kiara groaned in annoyance, but I held my ground. The rules would be applied only when the game starts.

Luna Raya rubbed her hands and gave the crowd a tight-lipped smile, "Well. That's a tough one. But our very own Phoenix loves taking challenges. Don't you, Phoenix?"

I bowed my head a little.

"Well. Here the game starts. Rules are the same. The spice powder on the spoon should not spill, and Phoenix will carry it to the finishing line that is just thirty steps away."

She nodded at me. I inhaled a long breath and



placed the back of the spoon in my mouth.

"Ready. Steady," she raised her hand in the air,
"And go!"

The crowd cheered, and I started taking small steps. That was when I saw something on the ground with my hindsight. There was a patch of small tiled floor that I needed to cross. It had something sticky on it.

Maybe some oil.

Goddess. I could easily fall.

I walked up to it and then stopped. Everyone was chanting my name, and here I was standing, thinking, Why didn't I see the oil before?

Was it due to Luna Tamia's magic?

I raised my eyes and moved them sideways. Luna Tamia was already watching me. The glint in her eyes was enough to tell me that she was the culprit.

My body tensed a little, but then I tried to relax my mind.

Come on, Phoenix. If no one comes for Tina, who is an influential woman, then no prince will come to fetch you. Do it, bitch!

I took a slow step onto the slick tiled area, trying to be careful.



The spoon trembled a little between my lips, and I could feel the chill powder shifting with my move.

Maybe it was the pressure, or what, my legs shook a little. The oil was only visible when the light hit it at a certain angle.

And then...

Suddenly...

Out of nowhere...

The chanting stopped.

A strange silence blanketed the crowd.

Before I could even glance around, a deep, familiar voice spoke near my ear, "Seems like a warrior needs my help."

The spoon between my teeth clinked a little.

Sebastian?

What was he doing here?

His presence made me lose my balance, and before I could fall, a strong arm swept around my waist, and in the blink of an eye, I was lifted off the ground.



He drew me closer, and I was almost glued to his chest. His eyes never left mine.

What was he doing?

I couldn't speak, nor could I protest.

Several gasps erupted from the crowd.

But with him this close, I couldn't hear anything anymore.

It was a miracle that my spoon remained in place.

He carried me slowly to the finishing line, and I felt like he was intentionally taking his sweet time.

When we finally reached there, he didn't put me down right away. He just stood there, holding me for a few more moments.

Then, with deliberate care, he lowered me back to the ground. Right on the finish line.

His lips curled into a devilish smile as he reached out for the spoon and tossed it aside.

He then leaned a little to bring his face closer to mine, "Congratulations!" he stated, "You won!"

I didn't notice when Tina started crying. I wasn't aware when Luna Tamia and Luna Raya walked out. And I had no idea when the crowd started thinning.

All I could see was Sebastian King standing there still watching me with that knowing smirk as if silently daring me to react.

"Thank you, Your Highness," I bowed my head with a smile, "It was a team effort."

He chuckled at that.

I didn't know what came over me. This sudden urge to wipe that smile off his face felt like a challenge. So without thinking twice, I lifted myself on my toes, leaned in, and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth.

Deciding to be bolder, I rubbed my lips a bit and smiled against his mouth when I felt a sudden shift in him. 1

The subtle catch in his breath before he closed his eyes.

When I stepped back, his smirk had faded...

But what replaced it made my heart stutter.

There was raw heat in those honey-colored orbs.

Something dangerously close to hunger.

The game, Luna Raya started, may have ended.

But the real one had just begun.