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Aurora: 1

The little girl tilted her head, studying me with a grin that didn't quite match her age, "Stop shouting like that," she said softly, "It might wake the forest."

Before I could respond, she moved closer, confidently, and to my shock, she started wrapping a coarse rope around my wrists.

"Hey... what are you doing?" I tried to pull back, but the way she tied the knots was practiced. Goddess. She was an expert.

"I don't want you to scratch me when I let you down," She said cheerfully, bobbing her head a little as she spoke.

She was cute, I would give her that. A few tiny braids framed her round chubby face, and they kept slipping forward, brushing across her cheeks.

Every now and then, she'd puff out air to blow them aside or tuck them neatly behind her ear, only for them to fall forward.

If we had met in some other situation, I was sure I would have liked her more.

I kept observing her face, thinking how a flimsy



rope could hold me. But when I tried to move my hands, the rope didn't budge.

"Aria. Is the rope made of iron?" It was digging into my wrists, "What the hell..."

The girl only smiled wider, wiping her face innocently with the back of her hand. Then she pulled a small knife from her belt.

"Wh... what are you doing? Keep that away..." Before I could utter more words, she jumped in the air and sliced through the snare rope above my ankle with a clean, swift motion.

"Ah!" I yelped, dropping down hard on the ground.

The girl placed the knife back into her belt and turned away as if she did nothing, "Come on," she said, glancing over her shoulder, "You'll hurt yourself if you just sit there..." her voice then turned into a whisper, "There are rogues in the jungle. Dad told me."

What kind of parents leave such a small kid unattended in the dense forest? They needed a good beating.

I pushed myself up slowly, wanting to brush off the dirt, but I couldn't do it because my hands were tied.

"Can't you free my hands?" I called out to her

small figure.

She shrugged, walking ahead, "Maybe. Maybe not. Follow me, if you can."

I was half amused and half suspicious. The way she was walking. It was too familiar. Like I had seen this walk somewhere. Her face also looked familiar.

With a sigh, I started walking after her. The ropes on my wrists were burning it faintly, but for some reason, I wasn't scared. Or maybe I was underestimating the kid.

"I can't believe she is a child," I told Aria in my head, "What's going on here?"

"You need to be careful, Aurora," Aria murmured in my head, "She might be a witch, in human pup form."

"So," I tried to start a conversation while following her, "What's your name?"

She didn't look back when she said, "Jia!"

Jia? Too similar to Jai!

I swallowed hard and then tried to sound casual, "So, Jai... I mean... Jia... Do you live nearby? Aren't your parent worried?"

She twirled around once, her short bob hair bouncing with the movement. The same



mischievous grin appeared on her face as she kept walking backward, "Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. Maybe they sent me. Maybe I found you," she giggled and turned back.

She might sound playful, but the words...

She didn't look like a normal child.

"Are you taking me to your home?" I asked her, narrowing my eyes.

She giggled and tucked a loose braid behind her ear again, "You ask too many questions, Luna."

I froze, "Luna? How do you..."

She had already started walking away, humming to herself. I had to speed up my pace when she disappeared between the trees.

"Aurora... Aurora... look at the rope," Aria warned me in panic. The strange rope around my wrists had begun to glow faintly. The light faded after a few seconds, but now it was confirmed that the little girl wasn't a little girl.

The little monster was a witch.

"What was it?" I asked Aria to confirm, and she spoke only one word, "Witchcraft."

I glanced at Jia, whose hair was bobbing along with her head.





"Jia!" I called her name softly.

"Hmm?" This time, she didn't even bother to look back.

"D... do you know Lucien?" She suddenly stopped and turned halfway. Placing a finger on her lips, she passed me a secretive smile, "Shh," she said softly, "You talk too much. Didn't I ask you to stay quiet?"

Her big blue eyes were shining in the dark.

We kept walking until the trees suddenly started thinning, leading us to a wide clearing. I raised my eyes and halted in my tracks. Before my eyes stood a massive palace built entirely of red bricks.

"Wow!" I whispered.

Jia must have heard me because she turned around and gave me an innocent grin, "Do you like that?"

She was acting as if she were the one who built it.

"What if this palace is nothing but a hoax. It might disappear by tomorrow morning," I stated.

Aria didn't respond to that. She wasn't at ease, and I was sure she must have smelled danger.

When we reached near the tall gates of the



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palace, they opened automatically. Jia stepped inside with confidence.

I had to stop once again when I saw several guards in black uniforms standing in lines on either side of the gates. And as Jia passed between them, they all bowed to her.

Like a princess, Jia held up her hand and asked them to rise.

"She..." I gave Jia a confused look, "She looks so familiar ... I've seen her somewhere..."

Aria made a face as if she wanted to facepalm.

"Aurora. Come on. Are you playing dumb, or is it some kind of..." I curved down my lips.

"Why, Aria? Have you seen her before?"

"You are really dumb! She resembles you, silly. She is a Xerox copy of you, Aurora."

A chill ran down my spine.

What was going on here?