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The witch's expression hardened instantly, her eyes narrowing as her hand fell away. "Then I suppose I'll just have to do away with those who distract you," she hissed, her voice seething with venom. Her gaze darted to Mallory, Lady Rose, and Wallace, her fingers twitching as dark fumes began to gather in her palm. 1

"Enough of this!" Mallory's voice rang out, and in a split-second, she apparated behind the witch, her dagger poised at the person's neck. "If you make one more move, you won't live long enough to regret it." 8

Hadeon's eyes lit up with admiration, and he gave a slow clap, thoroughly entertained. He remarked,

"Ah, my darling Mallory! How charmingly fierce you are. It warms my unbeating heart to see you fight for me so valiantly." He flashed her a playful grin. "One would think you were jealous, doll face." 2

The witch's lips twisted into a snarl. "You think you can intimidate me, child?" she spat, her voice laced with contempt.

"Not if you're too busy to focus," Hadeon interrupted smoothly.

In a blink of an eye, Hadeon took the bottle of alcohol he carried, and moved in a circle around the witch. Before she could recover, he snapped his fingers, creating a spark that ignited into a ring of fire around her. The flames roared to life, encircling her in a flickering prison of orange and red, while Mallory apparated to his side.

"You bastard!" the witch cursed at him.

"That was since birth," Hadeon clicked his tongue with mock dismay. He then cast her a darkly amused smile and said calmly, "Now if we can stop the childish games, how about you answer a question or two of mine." 2

"I will pull out your insides and feed them to the wolves!" the witch was enraged, while Wallace had successfully helped Lady Rose out of the vines that had finally stopped moving like snakes. 2

Hadeon clicked his tongue and said, "It is unfortunate for you that I have already decided how I want to die. Anyways, do you have potions or spell on how to turn a vampire into a human again?" 4

The witch glared at him, but the heat of the flames forced her to stay within the circle, her face twisted in defiance. "You think you can demand answers from me?" she snarled. "I could —"

Hadeon held up a finger, silencing her. "Ah-ah. I wouldn't finish that thought if I were you." He gestured to the flames, which flared higher as he snapped his fingers again. "Now, the answer, if you please. Or we can turn this ring into a bonfire." 2

When the witch looked at Mallory, the woman couldn't help but stare at her as if she were being betrayed. On noticing this, Hadeon said, "That's a false witch."

Seeing how there was no other way, the witch reluctantly said,

"There is a potion. An ancient one. It requires a rare herb called Hellsprout that emerged from hell, found only in swamps. It is black and purple in colour."

"Surely, you must have it in your coven," Lady Rose said in a firm voice. 1

The witch glared at her, before replying, "I am not friends with vampires to keep it, or friends

with humans. The herb must be brought to me. Only I have the knowledge to prepare the potion correctly."

"And we're supposed to trust you?" Hadeon asked with a wide smile. "Talk about leap of faith there." 3

"Do you have any other options? You seem a little desperate to have it made," the witch smiled in malice. "Because the potion requires more than just ingredients. It requires a spell, an incantation that only I can perform. Destroy me, and you'll lose your chance of making the needed potion."

Hadeon's smile didn't waver as he listened to the witch's response, but a subtle glint of calculation sparked in his eyes. He leaned forward, still maintaining his playful demeanour, though there was an edge of danger beneath it.

"Here's how it's going to work," Hadeon stated in a casual tone. "You are going to swear an unbreakable oath with me—one that will ensure you don't double-cross us while making the potion and you will hand it to us. If you betray us, your powers, your very essence, will turn to nothing. Forever." He watched her reaction with cold amusement. "Trust may be in short supply

here, but magic is something you understand, yes?" 3

The witch's face twisted in anger, but as the flames danced higher around her, she seemed to weigh her options, her gaze flicking between the dagger at her throat and the fire circling her. She gritted her teeth, finally speaking with a venomous tone.

"A little too smart for a vampire, aren't you?" the witch hissed.

"Well, what can I say? I was made by the devil himself," Hadeon replied, his grin widening. "It would be better for you not to harm a single one of us directly or indirectly until the job is done. And, of course, once the potion is complete, you will not interfere with us again. Think of it as a little... insurance."

"Fine," the witch spat, her voice dripping with resentment. "I'll swear your pathetic oath. So let us get this over with."

Lady Rose stepped forward, muttering an incantation under her breath, drawing ancient symbols in the air between them. The symbols glowed faintly, binding the energy around them into a shimmering form of agreement. The

witch's face grew pale as the magic took hold, sealing the oath.

"Repeat after me," Lady Rose instructed, her tone brooking no argument. "I swear upon my power and my life essence that I will prepare the potion with the herb they seek, free of deceit or harm toward these five."

"Five? There are only four of them here," the witch muttered.

"You missed Duckie there. He's sitting right above you," Hadeon pointed at the ghoul, whose legs lightly swung whilst he sat on the branch of the tree. 6

The witch's eyes widened in shock, not expecting a creature like that and she asked, "What is that?"

"A pet of my future wife," Hadeon remarked, before snapping his fingers, "Let us get on with this already," as he glanced at Mallory, whose black specks in her eyes hadn't disappeared and was only growing. 2

Once the witch repeated what Lady Rose said, the vampiress made a seal with her hand. A faint light pulsed around the witch's throat, causing a mark of vines around her neck.

"There," Lady Rose said, stepping back. "You're bound to your word. Try to break it, and your powers will unravel and you will die."

"Now, as much as I'd love to stay and chat," Hadeon drawled, casting a sideways glance at Lady Rose and Wallace, he said, "we have an herb to retrieve. Mallory and I will look for it. You two don't mind babysitting the witch, do you?"

"More than happy to rest here," Lady Rose replied, and Wallace gave a nod.

Soon Mallory and Hadeon set off, following a narrow, twisted path that led them deeper into the forest. The corruption inside her was growing, and though she tried to hide it, every step made her feel as if her senses were slipping into darkness and it made her grip the dagger in her hand. 8