

66 Sitting on the tree ¹²

CRACK! ¹

Mallory's eyes widened, her heart leaping almost to her throat at the sound of the branch internally breaking. Then, with a final snap under the pressure of Hadeon's legs, it gave way completely, sending him gracefully leaping onto another branch. She could already sense her own impending fall to the ground.

Hadeon eventually landed on the branch of the tree where Mallory sat, causing it to dip slightly before rebounding as he approached her.

"I placed you on the sturdiest branch around, just in case the others couldn't bear your weight," Hadeon explained, settling down beside her. ¹¹

"Thank you for your consideration," Mallory expressed her gratitude before adding, "But honestly, you didn't have to come here. We could have talked from a distance."

"And I told you it was too far," Hadeon replied, retrieving a cigar. ⁷

"Can I have one?" Mallory asked. Had it been any



other man, she might have hesitated about making such a request in this time and place. But with Hadeon, she felt at ease enough to ask for something typically frowned upon when done by a woman. 9

Without a word, Hadeon offered the cigar to her, and Mallory accepted it with a murmured thank you. As he pulled out the lighter and ignited the tip, Mallory leaned forward to catch the flame and ignite the cigar. In that moment, the pureblooded vampire observed her closely, noting how her eyebrows almost brushed against her pale cheeks as she focused on the task. 16

Sensing Hadeon's gaze, Mallory slowly pulled away and questioned him, "What is it?" 4

"I can't watch?" Hadeon countered. 8

Mallory knew if she were to say no, the man would surely tell that it was his eyes and he could do what he pleased with it. Which he was entitled to, and she replied, "I didn't say that. I just wondered if something had happened. That's all." 4

"I was looking at Mallory Winchester, who doomed young boys because of which the witch

killed them," Hadeon shook his head with a look of pity on his face. He noticed the look of guilt on her face, and he said, "You are wasting the cigar by letting it burn." 3

Mallory took a drag from the cigar, feeling the smoke prickling her senses a bit more than usual before exhaling it through her delicate pink lips. 6

Hadeon commented, "You shouldn't feel guilty just because you're easy on the eyes." 12

"It's not about looks," Mallory countered, her voice tinged with a mix of bitterness and sorrow. "It's about the young boys or men—I don't even remember anymore—who lost their lives." She recalled the times she had unknowingly imbibed the concoctions Sable offered, her expression darkening with each memory. Taking another drag from the cigar, she continued, "How do you even begin to question that the friend you practically grew up with, the person you trusted, could be a killer? That she was busy concocting deadly mixtures..." 5

"It's often said that in the realm of the living, it's those closest to you who betray you," Hadeon remarked, a wry grin playing on his lips as he glanced at Mallory. Then, he turned his attention ahead, where the distant shouts of villagers

echoed as they scrambled to locate the 'poor' woman. 1

Mallory's voice lowered as she spoke, her words heavy with a mixture of sadness and bitterness. "My grandmother was a witch too, but she never attempted to harm me... It seems humans can be as cruel as monsters." 6

Hadeon's expression turned dramatically offended. "That's a rather rude comparison!" he exclaimed theatrically. "Comparing mere humans to monsters? You're tarnishing the reputation of monsters everywhere!" After a moment of silence, he added more somberly, "I heard about the fire." 4

It was a thought Mallory had been trying to suppress, yet it stubbornly resurfaced, triggered not by Hadeon's words but by the weight of her own thoughts. Staring down at the cigar in her hand, watching the ash flutter to the forest floor, she finally voiced her inner turmoil.

"All this time, you believe there's something suspicious about your parents' deaths, only to realise that the fire was intended to claim my life, orchestrated by my own parents..." Her words came out in a mixture of disbelief and denial, her mind struggling to grasp the

enormity of the revelation. "Do you think Sable was fabricating tales?" she turned to ask Hadeon, seeking reassurance amidst the chaos of her thoughts. 7

"She was speaking the truth," Hadeon responded, much to her dismay. "Must think I am blessed for having none," he said, trying to lighten the atmosphere that had begun to turn heavy.

"In a twisted way..." Mallory replied with a faint smile that failed to reach her eyes. "I believed they loved me. I thought that my mother... the person I thought was my mother loved me. But now it's clear that everything about my family was a lie..." Her voice trailed off, laden with the weight of betrayal and shattered illusions. 2

"It could have been different if your grandmother had nurtured the woman she chose as her daughter, if she had imparted knowledge about witches to her. It might have fostered compassion for those different from humans," Hadeon explained, offering Mallory his perspective. "From what I gather, your grandmother wasn't like other witches. I call them the rare ones. Perhaps she found your mother as an orphan and raised her as her own. It's harder to kill a grown witch than a child." 3

"So she wasn't a bad person after all, was she?" Mallory asked, desperately clinging to the hope that her life wasn't built on deception.

Hadeon met Mallory's gaze, seeing the grief reflected in her blue eyes. He slightly leaned towards her before pulling back. "Bad is subjective," he replied with a shrug. "Many consider me a monster, while others don't. It's a matter of perspective and personal standards. Your grandmother cared for you from infancy, and wanted to give you a family." 5

Mallory didn't dwell on whether her grandmother had engaged in dark deeds like killing or feasting on humans. What mattered was the love they shared—the bond between them that transcended any shadowy past. "She had an odd sense of humour. You two would have gotten along," Mallory remarked with a faint smile. 3

"I'm sure we will, in hell, one day," Hadeon added cryptically, catching Mallory's curious glance.

Mallory couldn't help but quip, "And pay a visit to the Devil for a tea party?" 6

"Fortunately or unfortunately, nobody's heard from the Devil in quite some time," Hadeon

replied casually. "They say things have changed in the underworld—it's not the same as we once knew. So most of us prefer to stick around here, until boredom sets in." 6

"And then?" Mallory pressed.

"Well, it's either turning to dust, where your soul disappears for good, or taking a long nap in a coffin until you feel like stretching your legs again," Hadeon answered matter-of-factly.

Mallory's curiosity piqued as she considered Hadeon's origins, leading her to ask, "How does Hell look?"

A smirk graced Hadeon's lips before he replied, "Just like this place. It's a reflection of the living realm, except there's the realm of the dead. There's a tree similar to the one we're sitting on, but it's leafless and perhaps broken. The damage here reflects on the dead. Well, anyway, it's time to descend!"

With those words, Hadeon gracefully moved forward and leaped to the ground before standing upright.

Mallory's eyes widened in realisation as she remained perched alone on the tree. "How am I going to get down?" she asked in worry. 5

"Take a jump," Hadeon remarked coolly. "If you need motivation, I can give you a little push from behind." 10

"That won't be necessary!" Mallory shot back from her perch with a glare, her hands clenched tightly. She took a deep breath and muttered to herself, "One, two, two..." 6

Rolling his eyes at her hesitation, Hadeon approached the tree. With a swift motion, he struck the trunk, creating a crack. In less than three seconds, Mallory's branch snapped, and she came hurtling down. 1

"Ah!" Mallory exclaimed in shock as she found herself suddenly in Hadeon's arms, her eyes squeezed shut in fear. 6

"What are you afraid of when I'm here to catch you?" Hadeon asked, his voice calm despite the rapid pounding of her heart against his chest. 18

Mallory finally opened her eyes, her voice shaking as she replied, "I'd be more grateful if you weren't the reason I was stuck in the tree in the first place!" Seeing him not drop her, she murmured, "Thank you... for not letting me turn into a stew." 1

"It's only right to save the wifey," Hadeon

grinned, his words laced with amusement as he finally released Mallory from his arms. "Let's head to the village." 6

"Right now?" Mallory asked, a hint of uncertainty in her voice. 3

"What better time than when the villagers are preoccupied?" Hadeon remarked confidently. He quickly whistled, and a crow cawed.

"Lord Hadeon!"

"Inform Barnby where we are and to pick us up," Hadeon ordered, and with Mallory, he returned to the village.

Upon arriving at the house, the pureblooded vampire made a beeline for the kitchen, quickly gathering items and packing them into a trunk. When Mallory gave him a curious look, he asked, "What? It's not like she'll be able to use any of it." 5

They were picked up by Barnby and whisked back to the castle. Once they arrived, Hadeon tossed his cigar case at the coachman and instructed, "Refill it."

"Yes, milord," Barnby offered a bow, while Mallory realised that Hadeon had given her the last cigar from his case. 3

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"What are you standing around for? We have work to do," Hadeon stated briskly, leading Mallory to the room where she had been sleeping. 2

As they entered the room, Mallory watched Hadeon walk to the painting and stand before the one that she had picked up from her grandmother's house. He then said, "There is a possibility that this is a door. Just like Sable's painting." 18

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