

79 Long gone ¹²

For the first few seconds, Mallory struggled to comprehend what was happening and what Hadeon had just said. Her heart pounded in her chest from the uncertainty. She voiced her confusion, ¹

"What's going on?" Her eyes then fell on a rusty dagger lying near where her maid had fallen. "Hattie?"

Hattie, with an eerily calm expression, suddenly grabbed the dagger and lunged at Mallory. In an instant, Mallory instinctively apparated, reappearing behind Hadeon. The unexpected move stunned Hattie, leaving her momentarily frozen. ¹⁵

Hadeon didn't waste any time. He punched the maid in the stomach with such force that she was knocked unconscious and crumpled to the ground.

"What is wrong with Hattie?!" Mallory asked, disbelief and shock colouring her voice. ⁴

"Everything," Hadeon replied curtly, walking over to where Ivy's body lay. Mallory's mind raced with questions. Did Hattie kill Ivy? She watched as the pureblooded vampire crouched beside Ivy's body, inspecting her closely.

"I—I'm sorry about Ivy..." Mallory stammered looking back at the dead body and then back at Hattie. Her mind felt like it was spinning.

Hadeon placed his finger on the dead woman's forehead, and the vampiress suddenly turned into a heap of dust on the ground. "Don't be," he murmured. "I guessed this might happen." 6

"I don't understand," Mallory said, her eyebrows furrowing. "The Hattie I know would never bring harm to me or anyone else! She was scared of ghosts and everything else." She knew her maid for many years, and they had shared genuine moments together.

Footsteps approached the door, and Mallory's eyes widened upon seeing Ivy appear with Barnby and she looked perfectly fine except for the mark on her cheek. "She's alive? Then who is that?" she whispered, pointing at the floor. 13

A corner of Hadeon's lips curled as he stared at the unconscious Hattie. "That, my dear monkey, was a clone. I thought it only made sense to have an illusion for an illusion. This isn't your maid," he revealed, then ordered, "Tie her up. She will be returning to consciousness soon." 23

Hattie was dragged out of the room and taken to an underground chamber of the castle. On the way, George caught sight of the maid being dragged and his eyes bulged in terror. Even

though he had finished his tasks for the day, he quickly went back to wipe the windows so that he didn't end up dead here. 21

In one of the underground rooms, an iron chair was bolted to the ground with chains attached to it. The maid was soon bound to it, restricting her movements. Torches and lanterns burned on the walls.

Mallory, who had followed them, stood at the side with bated breath. She demanded from Hadeon, "Why did you say she isn't my maid?"

"When I heard you fall this morning, I confronted Ivy about what happened," Hadeon said with a bright smile. "I have known her for so long as a perfectionist in her duties, so I found it rather odd that she would make such a simple mistake of dropping oil on the stairs, unless someone purposely wanted to hurt you." 9

He walked towards the chained Hattie and said,

"The other odd thing I noticed was how you said both you and Hattie dug out my coffin, yet only you were punished for running away and it was something I have wondered about for a long time now. Though George has a sticky attachment to you, I doubted everyone else would let Hattie off the hook. This could only mean one thing." He paused and then asked with his voice dripping with politeness, "Would you

be so kind as to pass that bottle from the table?" 12

Mallory turned and found a small flask filled with a transparent liquid. She handed it to him and watched as he pulled out the cork before pouring the liquid on one side of Hattie's face. She woke up screaming in pain, her cries echoing through the room and down the corridor.

"I observed her for days, wanting to see if there was something going on. But she stuck to whatever she was told to do. And you seemed so sad, I thought you would cheer up by her presence," Hadeon stated in a nonchalant tone before his lips twisted in disdain. "Though whom you departed with in the graveyard was your maid, the one who returned was someone else." 7

"Who...?" Mallory asked, feeling the weight of the revelation sink in. The more she learned about this world, the worse it felt.

Hadeon's eyes darkened as he looked at her and replied, "Some of us call them changelings, some call them switchers. Purely because they can shapeshift into anyone after consuming the person. By doing this, they acquire not just the appearance but also the memories of the deceased." 22

Mallory felt as if a bolt of lightning had struck her. Hattie... was dead? Her eyes began to water

at the thought. Hattie had suffered... Her lips trembled, unable to form words. Her hands clenched tightly as anguish filled her chest. 2

The realisation that the person she had been happy to see was the one who had killed Hattie was almost too much to bear. She desperately hoped Hadeon was wrong, but she knew the pureblooded vampire was rarely mistaken. 5

Hadeon explained to her, "Once I spoke to Ivy this evening, I devised a bait for the suspect, who took it."

As the fake Hattie's eyes pried open to see them in the room, Mallory demanded, "Why did you kill her...? What did she do to you?!" with anger beginning to consume her.

The switcher began to smile, one that looked deranged as he replied, "I found her in the woods, all alone. I tried to get her before, but somehow she always slipped. She wasn't the best, but when I finished eating her, it was wonderful. It was everything I needed," he chuckled, which fueled Mallory's rage. 9

"What's your name? Who are you working for?" Hadeon questioned, upon seeing the switcher struggle to get out of the binds and the chair.

"What are you going to do with it?" the switcher scoffed.



Hadeon grabbed a nearby iron rod, and with a swift movement, the rod kissed the switcher's arm, producing a sickening crack. The pureblooded vampire then said, "Let's try again. Who are you?"

"I work for someone you don't need to know," the switcher responded, his eyes falling on Mallory. "How did you teleport? You had no abilities before." 5

"If you were her husband like me, she would have told you," Hadeon said, clicking his tongue. 18

"Husband? You two are married?" The switcher's eyebrows furrowed. 6

"Yes," Hadeon nodded, while Mallory struggled with the grief over Hattie's death. He then said, "Now, care to share why you were so desperate to keep Mallory from finding answers? Or better yet, why you decided that push had come to shove and tried to kill her."

When the switcher didn't respond as he stared between Hadeon and Mallory, the pureblooded vampire raised the iron rod and the next moment it landed sharp on the switcher's foot, eliciting a loud scream with curses.

"You are making me upset, boy," Hadeon remarked, his voice dropping to an eerie tone that even the switcher caught it. 20

