

Beauty and the Immortal: It started with a dig Chapter 3 - Locked Graveyard

Music Recommendation: Stay Away - Vitamin String Quartet

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A maid made haste through the corridors while attempting to keep a stoic expression on her face. Her footsteps paused when she arrived before a door. Opening it, she wished,

"Good morning, milady. It is time to wake up. Are you ready to get dressed for today's gathering?" But the moment the maid stepped inside the room, her composed expression fell at the sight of smoke. She staggered, "The room is on fire! Lady Mallory?!"

"Relax, Hattie. I am fine," came a calm voice from one side of the room that belonged to a woman. There was a soft mutter, "Unfortunately."

"Where is this smoke coming from??" asked the maid named Hattie, covering the lower half of her face with her hand.

Moving towards the windows, she fumbled them open to let the smoke escape. As the haze began to clear in the room and sun rays entered, the maid's eyes fell on her mistress, who was sitting next to the desk in the decently sized room.

Mallory Winchester's platinum blonde hair was all over the place, while she sat in her nightgown. Her features were soft on one's eyes, with a small, upturned nose and full pink lips through which smoke escaped. Her sterling blue eyes stared at her maid, who panicked even more upon seeing the cigar in her hand.

"Oh, goodness gracious, it's you!" Hattie's relief morphed into disbelief, her movements were quick as she closed the door in a hurry before someone would enter. "You aren't supposed to be smoking!"

"Wait, let me finish tha—" Mallory was interrupted abruptly as her maid took the burning cigar from her hand and put it out in the ashtray.

"Lady Doris and Lord Winchester would not be pleased if they discovered this habit of yours, milady," the maid remarked, shaking her head in concern. "What would you have done if it was one of them?"

"They're preoccupied with today's preparations for Colette's debut. It would be unlikely they'd visit this early," Mallory waved her hand, while watching her personal maid light incense sticks to remove the smell of the cigar smoke from the room.

"Don't forget, milady, that you will be participating as well," Hattie reminded her with a bright expression on her face.

"Why do you think I have been up this early?" Mallory asked, anxiety evident in her nervous leg tap.

Contrary to her cousin Colette, this wasn't her first time taking part in the season's gatherings to find a husband. It was her third year.

Despite her initial hopes, her first season ended in disappointment, with rumours of a curse she carried. The rumour stemmed from the tragic deaths her parents had met when she was small, leaving her to be the only survivor of the fire that had broken out in their vacation house. The second year was no different. Of course, it didn't help that Mallory had slapped a Count's son on the first day of the season, chasing the rest of the suitors away from her.

Hattie cheered, "This is your season, milady. You will find your husband." *You only need to avoid slapping anyone and hold back your tongue*, the maid dully thought in her mind before a nervous smile made to her lips. *Just avoid any possible scandals this time.*

Mallory's eyes quietly narrowed, "You sure? Your expression there wants to say something else."

"Only pure optimism!" Hattie cleared her throat, "I will go prepare the bath!"

As Mallory slipped into the bathtub, she knew there was no escaping this season. She had to find a decent man!

Being the sole surviving male in the family, her uncle became the rightful owner of the manor after her parents had passed away. Thankfully, Mallory's relatives hadn't abandoned her and had taken her into their care. If she failed

to marry before her uncle died, she would be left on her own with no solid roof.

After her bath, Hattie dressed Mallory in a midnight blue gown and styled her hair into a crown braid, waves cascading down her back. Having entered her twenties nine months ago, the young woman's beauty was reflecting on her face and body, moulding her into a fine woman.

Mallory's eyes fell on the cross pendant's red stone that hung around her neck, one that was a gift from her grandmother. Hattie then beamed at Mallory's reflection, "Men are going to vye for you today!"

Mallory chuckled, "Thank you, Hattie." But the maid could sense a tinge of sadness in her lady's voice.

When making her way towards the main entrance of the manor, Mallory caught sight of Aunt Doris standing there in her new gown. Hearing her footsteps, her aunt turned to her.

"I hope you remember not to pull anything like last year," Lady Doris raised her eyebrows, and Mallory nodded, feeling her face turn hot at the mention of it. "Also, change your dress to something not blue. It is Colette's debut, and it would be rather strange to have you two wearing similar colours. Hurry now! We don't have much time."

Mallory clenched her hands together, before replying, "Of course, Aunt Doris."

Turning around, she made her way back to her room while taking a deep breath and whispering, "God, bless me with patience."

If only Mallory were aware that by the end of this season's gathering, she was going to walk through chaos, and that the shadow of disaster was drawing closer.

Mallory, dressed in a beige gown, before finally departing Winchester's manor with her relatives for the season's gatherings. On the way, Aunt Doris fussed over Colette, which made Mallory's thoughts drift to her mother, feeling the ache of her absence.

When they reached the venue, Lady Doris turned to look at the two young women.

"Ladies, remember to smile," Lady Doris advised, demonstrating as she exited the carriage and Colette followed. Her thoughtful Uncle Wilfred, still inside, turned to Mallory and inquired, "Are you okay, Mal?"

Mallory gave him a nod. Her attempt at a smile twisted awkwardly as whispers followed her gaze. I am the old attendee, no need to stare at me, she said in her mind.

By noon, Mallory had mingled, briefly celebrating her cousin's dance with a notable suitor, yet she couldn't escape the whispers and stares. Needing a break, she exited the bustling hall, only to encounter George Kingsley the count's son from the opposite direction, whose previous advances she hadn't forgotten.

You must be joking, Mallory thought to herself.

George raked his eyes over Mallory's appearance, a smug smile forming on his lips. He said, "Good afternoon, Lady Mallory. Fancy seeing you here. What do you say about the dance that we couldn't finish last time?"

"It seems that you have forgotten me slapping you," Mallory gave him a tight smile, while the man's eyes subtly narrowed before he smiled.

"Slapping me again is not going to be good for your family. Think about your cousin, you will be ruining her prospects," George rubbed the side of his jaw. He then confidently said, "I believe no one will approach you this season, and I am your best bet for marriage."

"Fortunately, I don't have to worry about it, as I have decided to be a spinster after meeting you," Mallory raised her hand, and George straightened. But she only tucked a piece of her hair behind her ear before sidestepping and leaving quickly.

The count's son didn't take her trickery well or her rejection. Being persistent, he followed her.

Mallory, who couldn't help but turn and notice George not far behind her. This is not good, she said to herself. What do I do?!

Lure him to a corridor where no one is there for another round of slap? But she wasn't stupid enough to risk her reputation. It would be reputation suicide.

Or better... Mallory thought to herself, as her eyes twinkled. Determined, she caught sight of an open door and feigned ignorance of George's smug pursuit. She gave a swift glance back to ensure he was still following, and she slipped through the door and shut it behind her.

Mallory felt her breath quicken, while waiting to hear the footsteps near the door. And when the time was right, she suddenly pushed open the door with force. Such that the door hit George's nose.

"ARGH!" George's pained cry echoed as Mallory slammed the door shut.

As tempted as she was to step back in the corridor to see if she had managed to break his nose, she heard him groan from the other side, "You little witch! You will pay for this!"

Deciding to escape, Mallory quickly made her way to one of the windows in the room. However, as her hand reached the window, a voice suddenly sounded from directly behind her.

Open it.

Mallory spun on her heel, her heart pounding in her chest. The deep voice belonged to a male, one that she knew didn't belong to George. Who spoke?!

Where did the voice come from? Was she imagining things?

Before George would enter the room, she hitched up her dress and impulsively leapt out of the window, only to clumsily land on a shrubby bush before tumbling to the ground.

"Ow!" Mallory flinched, feeling the little pebbles hidden in the grassy ground press against her.

When she went to stand up, she caught sight a few who had stopped their stroll after catching her ungraceful landing. She cleared her throat. Getting on her feet and brushed her beige dress. A few leaves scattered out of her dress. She offered them a bow with a calm expression, as if she hadn't fallen a moment ago. She then quickly left.

By the time George entered the room, he found himself alone, without a hint of Mallory in sight.

Back in the gathering hall, Mallory had slipped back inside with her heart drumming. Spotting her aunt in conversation, she swiftly approached.

"Mallory, darling! Where did you wander off to?" inquired the woman beside her aunt, eyeing her curiously. "I hope the spinster's seat hasn't caught your eye."

"Oh, I've heard it's exceedingly plush and comfortable," Mallory joked, but the two women didn't find it funny.

"This is no time to joke, dear. You have to secure your future," the woman continued to advise her, when Mallory caught sight of George entering the room. His eyes moved across the room, before they fell on her, and anger oozed out of him now.

Oh, boy, this didn't look good, Mallory said to herself. She noticed him stomping his way in her direction.

George's bright red nose was nothing less than Rudolph the reindeer's nose, attracting people's attention as he made his way through the crowd. The guests in the room softly murmured among themselves, and it caught Lady Doris and the woman who had been advising Mallory.

"Mr. Kingsley, whatever happened to your face?!" Lady Doris asked with a stunned expression.

"You should ask your niece about it," George fumed, his eyes now throwing daggers at Mallory and ready to drag her down. "She is nothing but a malicious woman. She broke my nose!"

"I didn't touch him," Mallory defended herself when her aunt's face turned grim. She then looked back at him and retorted, "My hands are as clean as your intentions are questionable."

"If you and your family are going to be spared after this, you should think again," George threatened in a venomous voice. "You are already an unwanted maiden. I will make sure no one marries you, and you will be forced to beg me to take you."

Mallory's eyes hardened at his words, and she replied, "You are delusional to think that."

"We shall see, won't we?" Saying that, George spun on his heel and walked out of the wide hall, with some of the folks' eyes following him and curious to know the conversation that had taken place.

"Mallory," came her aunt's stern voice, and Mallory could feel her stomach drop. "We should head back to the manor. Now," the older woman emphasised.

Soon the Winchesters left the gathering, much to Colette's dismay as she was enjoying herself with Mr. Nottingham. The carriage ride was rather quiet, with Mallory's eyes darting to her uncle and aunt, while her cousin fidgeted with her blonde hair while wearing a dreamy smile. Once they stepped inside the manor, Lady Doris finally spoke.

"Must you always be the season's spectacle, Mallory?" Her voice was filled with disappointment. "Mr. Kingsley's nose, of all things!"

Mallory began to speak, "I didn't touch him, Aunt—"

"Enlighten me, Mallory," Lady Doris said in a controlled voice.

"There must be a reason behind it, Doris." Uncle Wilfred tried to keep a calm atmosphere in the room.

Mallory felt everyone's eyes on her, and this included Hattie's, who stood at the corner of the wall. She explained, "It was a case of unfortunate timing. Mr. Kingsley was on his way just as I was exiting a room. Our paths crossed at the door, and while opening it... his nose bumped into the door."

Lady Doris let out an exasperated sigh, shaking her head. She said, "I don't know what to do with you anymore, Mallory. Your uncle and I took you in out of our kindness. But you are hell bent on dragging us down. And now, it's Colette who is going to pay the price."

"Is Mr. Nottingham not going to pursue me anymore?" Colette asked in dejection, before accusingly looking at Mallory.

"Colette, Mr. Nottingham will come visit you. He has fancied you before now," Mallory assured her cousin.

"How would you know? You haven't even danced with anyone or spent time with them," Colette fretted in worry.

Mallory turned to her aunt and insisted, "I never intended for any of this. Mr. Kingsley is sickeningly persistent, even after my rejections."

"The matter could have been handled delicately. You could have stayed in the hall, found a possible gentleman for the day. I asked you one thing," Lady Doris grew visibly more upset at the thought of her daughter's diminished chances. She muttered, "Sometimes you make it seem that the rumour that floats around is true."

"Doris!" Uncle Wilfred intervened, not wanting his wife to go further with her words.

Mallory's heart ached with rejection as her gaze fell from Lady Doris to the ground, feeling the distance widen. As her aunt and Colette departed, the lingering curious servants also dispersed.

"Mal," Uncle Wilfred appeared to stand next to her. "Your aunt... she's under a lot of pressure with the season's gathering. She didn't mean what she said."

But Mallory knew it wasn't true. She forced a smile, "I understand. And Colette will find someone."

His gaze softened. "It's not Colette I worry about—it's you."

"Because I'm a handful?" Her smile faltered.

Uncle Wilfred hummed before stating, "I believe you are a brilliant woman, Mal. Smarter than most. And the more knowledge you seek, the more you come to resist and question."

"That is a kind way of putting that... So, you are not angry?" Mallory asked in doubt, her eyebrows furrowing.

"I don't think you are someone who would go to the length of hurting someone who doesn't deserve it," Uncle Wilfred remarked and when he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkled. "And if it eases your mind, Baron Kaiser has been inquiring after you."

Her heart skipped, "Baron Kaiser?" knowing his status among the nobility.

"Yes," he chuckled. "It seems you've caught more than just trouble this season. With the way things are going, I might find this house a lot quieter by the end of the season." He patted her arm and said, "Now, go get some rest."

As she turned to leave, his voice called out once more, "Mal?"

She paused, turning back. "Yes, Uncle?"

"Would you mind asking Hattie about my cigar case? Last I saw it, it was in the drawing room, and I couldn't find it this morning," Uncle Wilfred inquired thoughtfully.

A guilty realisation dawned on Mallory. "Of course, Uncle," she managed, turning around with her eyes widening. She had forgotten to put it back!

That night, the clouds which had gathered themselves since noon, began to rain heavily. The water eroded the loose soil from the ground. Despite the pitter-patter of the raindrops on the glass, Mallory remained sound asleep.

'Mama! Papa!'

A young Mallory desperately tried to find her parents, but the fire engulfed the corridors, making it impossible for her to cross. There was no response from her parents, as if she were the only one in the house.

She started to cough as the smoke and heat from the fire filled the house. Tears welled up in her eyes as they stung.

'MAL?!'

'MAMA!' Mal cried out in relief upon hearing her mother's voice from the other side of the house. 'Where are you, Mama??' But before she could get any further, the fire surged as if a dragon had unleashed its breath upon it.

As the flames grew too intense, Mallory drew her hand over her face to shield it and then collapsed on the floor, unconscious. The fire had died out by the time she awoke, yet its heat persisted through the room and the walls.

Soot covered the young girl. With her little feet, she stood up and began to search the home for her parents. But when she finally found them... They were dead, their bodies charred.

The nightmare was enough to jolt Mallory awake, causing her to sit upright on the bed. Her breath was heavy and uneven.

After taking a sip of water, Mallory was about to settle back into her bed, when something caught her eye in the mirror. The pendant around her neck caught her attention, its ruby emitting a radiant glow. Something that had never occurred previously.

'Open it.'

And Mallory jumped from her position, startled and wide awake from the voice.