

The Beast And The Blessed

Chapter 180

Four: Charlie

Charlie's P.O.V.

There were three things I knew for sure:

My mate had the most incredible voice in the world. The way he let my name roll off his tongue had been replaying in my head all night, keeping me awake.

I didn't even like my full name. I preferred Charlie.

There was no reason for me to have given him my full name, but it came out instinctively like I was trying to impress him with a long, classy name even though I bathed in a river and slept in the forest. I had hoped he would reciprocate and give me anything in return. His name would have been nice.

He came after me last night, which meant we were making progress. I felt butterflies in my stomach at the idea that maybe, with time, he would be willing to have a real interaction with me.

I didn't chase him when he left me beside a fresh carcass yesterday. Instead, I watched him go, shifted, and ate my fill. It obviously hadn't been his intention when he left it there, but eating the kill of my mate satisfied my beast in a way I hadn't been expecting. He had provided for me... even though I had done something to spook him away from his food and then stolen it. It still counted.

Okay, so it didn't sound so romantic when I thought about it, but somehow it was also the best-tasting meat I had ever had.

Growing up in a castle and being served only the finest, hand -crafted meals, it had been a startling realization that the bloody, raw meat was my new favorite meal.

I was done allowing him to send me on these wild goose... well, bear chases. We had broken down a wall between us yesterday, and I wouldn't humor him anymore in playing these games.

At first, I thought they were cute. I thought maybe my mate was leading me somewhere.

Instead, he was just keeping me busy. I felt his eyes on me the entire time, and each day I got more excited than the one prior.

The thoughts would flow through my mind, "Was today the day he was going to introduce himself to me?", "Was he taking me somewhere beautiful he wanted to share with me?", or the most humiliating one... "Was he taking me to his den?"

That last one was the hardest because I allowed myself to get my hopes up. I had ignorantly thought that maybe he had been taking me back to his den so we could spend time together without the possibility of anyone stumbling upon us. We didn't have to do anything intimate or physical, even though I was eager and nervous to finally be with the man I had saved myself for.

Just talking would have been nice, but he didn't want to do that based on the three words I had gotten from him over the past week.

At the end of the first day, the realization that he had been trying to throw me off his trail and keep me away from him hurt. It hurt so much that I almost stayed in camp on the third day after giving him a second chance and humiliating myself again.

But like the stubborn woman I was known to be, I kept going. Whatever this test was, I wanted to pass it. I wanted to prove myself.

Today was different because I was done playing by his rules.

If he wanted me to leave him alone, all he had to do was reject me.

My stomach hurt as I got ready for the day, wandering around camp and making coffee over the fire while the others slept. They would be up as soon as the sun started rising, but I was too impatient to stay in my tiny tent and sleep in.

I stared into the flames, watching them grow higher as the water pot heated. My mind was swirling with thoughts of my mate and my past. Did he know who I was? Was my past the reason why he didn't want me?

My family and childhood had been less than ideal, and I still had the heavy burden of my title weighing on me since my brother was so resistant to finding a mate and having an heir. Until he did, I was stuck as his backup.

It used to be the two of us against the world until he ascended to the throne, then it became the king versus his

heir. If Killian didn't think I wasn't doing enough to help him with his workload, I was failing my duties. If I had done more, going above and beyond to support him and earn his respect, he said I was trying to take control and needed to learn my place as someone beneath him and the crown on his head.

Yet, for some reason, I kept going back home. I would feel homesick after a few months and want to see my older brother and be around the familiar faces I had grown up with.

As soon as I vocalized an opinion or suggestion that deviated from his by even the smallest amount, I made was shut down.

If I told my brother publicly, he would berate me for being unprofessional. If I did it in private, he was free to lay into me and remind me that my opinion did not matter since I did not wear the crown; he did.

Eventually, I stopped caring and just started talking to him as my brother. Public or private, I no longer gave it a second thought. All I wanted was for him to hear me. As soon as he gave me his memorized speech about when and where I could open my mouth, I would leave.

Getting away from the castle was one of the best decisions I ever made for my mental health.

A large hand landed softly on my shoulder, and I turned to face Barley. The giant man smiled at me as he sat beside me. "You okay, kid?"

My instinct was to shrug at him, but my years of training told me it was better to remain composed and keep your heart tucked under your sleeve instead of on it. He reached his freckled arm forward, proof of his constant time in the sun, and used a stick to adjust the wood in the fire before he reached back and grabbed another large log.

I hadn't realized how low it had gotten, the fact that the water was boiling, or that the sun was up and the men were moving about. Roman and Paxton had made their way out to relieve themselves, and I covered my mouth when I heard one of them let out a long morning fart as they peed.

Diego, our pocket-sized thief, was lying in his bed roll, exposed to the elements where he preferred to sleep in case of an attack. Even in the rain or snow, he would just move to the base of a tree and weather the storm. Diego's hands were behind his head as he stared at the sky. He was minding his own business, always did, and I appreciated him for it.

Neil was nowhere to be seen, so he probably hadn't left his tent yet.

"I'm fine," I said, resisting the urge to wince at using the f- word. They had laughed about that a time or two when Paxton got into fights with his one-night stands. He was smooth and tended to leave most of them with a smile on their faces, but one or...ten had gotten angry when he tossed them aside the following day. They always used that word either during their yelling or to end the conversation.

"I'm sure you are." He poured the fresh coffee into our mugs, the lightweight metal heating my hands, and I took in a deep inhale of the rich aroma. "But you also keep running off, and each night when you come home, you look more down than when you left."

I took a long and much-needed sip of my drink, ignoring the burn of overheated liquid on my tongue. "And I will be doing the same today."

He nodded, smiling behind his mug as I stood up, wanting to escape this conversation. If anyone could get me to spill my guts, it was Barley. The man was as dangerous in battle as he was in a conversation, and he knew it.

He watched with amusement as I finished my coffee and brushed my teeth. By the time I had my weapons strapped on, filled the pouch on my hip with a few sticks of dried meat, and was ready to go, the other four men had made their way to sit around the fire.

I waved at them over my shoulder and received a grumble of grumpy goodbyes in response.

"Good luck with the bear today," Barley called out, and I stopped in my tracks, not wanting to turn back to face them, as they all laughed.

"So, everyone knows?" I confirmed, and the big man just grunted in response. "I'm so glad to hear my mate avoiding me is so funny."

They laughed even harder, cracking jokes about a wolf chasing a bear as I went down toward the river. It wasn't funny to me, not even a little bit.

A short way down the river, there was a tree we had knocked down to be able to cross and remain dry several weeks back, and I rushed over it, eager to get away from the men still hooting and hollering. The only one who didn't engage was Roman, but that was because his mate had rejected him. He knew how hard it was to survive a rejection. Some days, I would look at him, and there was nothing. His face and eyes were just empty. Half of his soul was gone, and he was constantly hurting.

My mate had been hiding from me, and I knew what I was likely to face when I finally got him to talk to me was no laughing matter.

If my mate wanted me, he could have had me by now.

I moved to the west. I didn't need to be quiet today. I wasn't hunting him, not this time. Over the past week, he had steered me in every direction except this one, so I knew this was where he had been hiding.

The further I moved, the more apparent his presence became.

There would be a noise in one direction, and when I glanced over, I would see footprints in the dirt or a noticeable scratch on a trunk. He was trying to catch my interest and get me to chase one of his fake trails.

But I walked right past them. I wasn't falling for this shit today. I was going to go exactly where he didn't want me to. Eventually, he would have to come out of hiding, and that was when I would demand an explanation.

The deeper into the woods I went, the more I could feel him.

I could also feel just how frustrated he was getting.

I was no longer trying to track him, and he was in no way being discrete about following me this time. As he got angrier, he got more careless, stomping through the woods behind me, letting out little growls of irritation.

My lips were pressed together to hold in my laugh when the forest became very silent. I slowed. The feeling that I had entered somewhere I shouldn't have gone sat heavy in my gut, and I couldn't hear him anymore. My hand moved to my thigh to grab my dagger but met warm flesh as my weapon was stolen from me.

He pulled me against his front, my sword between us. His arm wrapped around my chest, keeping mine down as he lifted the dagger to my throat with his other hand.

The sharp edge of my blade bit into my skin, and I let out a low hiss.

"Why are you following me, Charlotte?" His deep voice sent goosebumps over my skin, and I sank back against his hard, large body.

It seemed to confuse him briefly before he tightened his hold on me. I held my head still, trusting that he wouldn't hurt me but not wanting to be the cause of an accidental slip -up.

"I wouldn't be following you if you just talked to me!" I wanted him to say something...anything so that I could enjoy the sound of his voice once more.

"Why should I?"

My eyebrows pulled together as I risked turning my head to look over my shoulder. He moved the dagger away from my throat a few inches, but it wasn't enough for me to spin around in his hold and face him completely. Still, his face was so close to mine as he looked down at me that I could easily brush my lips against his jaw if I moved a millimeter closer.

"Because you're my mate."