

The Beast And The Blessed

Chapter 178

Two: Charlie

Charlie's P.O.V.

I could feel him. His eyes were on me. The hairs on the back of my neck were raised, and goosebumps littered my skin, even as I warmed under the afternoon sun.

It didn't seem to matter how fast I ran or where I turned; he was faster. It was like he didn't want to be found, and since he had been the one to run away, to begin with... I was smart enough to know that might have been the case. I just didn't want to accept it.

The deeper into the trees I went without my clothes or weapons, the more humiliation I felt. What kind of dignified woman, let alone a member of the royal family, goes chasing a man who doesn't even want her?

Water dripped from the ends of my hair, flicking around me when I turned my head quickly at a sound to my left.

I could have let him walk away. I could have given him space, but I didn't know if he was just traveling through or if he lived here. If he were just traveling, finding him again would be difficult or even impossible. I could spend months or years trying to locate him.

I had dreamed about meeting my mate for so long, and I was terrified that if I let him slip through my fingers now, I would never find him again.

It was that fear that kept me moving forward. I couldn't lose him.

Even if he didn't want me, I needed to hear it for myself so I wouldn't spend the rest of my life wondering, 'What if?'

There was no sign of life between the trees. The thick trunks blocked most of my view, and I stepped to the side quietly as I tried to peer around them. The breeze was still blowing to the southwest, the same direction my mate had taken off in.

It also made it so I couldn't catch the scent of whatever was lurking nearby, but I knew they would catch mine.

A deer stepped out between the trees and into my line of sight, grazing. I felt my chest drop in disappointment. Surely, if my mate were nearby, he would have spooked the animal a while ago. I doubted a deer would be confident and comfortable enough to graze with a bear in its presence.

Yet, I was still aware of the distinct feeling of being watched. I could still feel the heat of embarrassment on my chest, knowing my mate was doing a better job of hunting me than I was him.

I knew how to hunt and stalk creatures of all sizes, yet he was outsmarting me. Just another way for me to humiliate myself in front of him before even getting his name.

When the sun sank down further, and I could hear the sound of one of my men calling out to me, I realized how far I had wandered. My feet had sunk into the soft soil as I continued to stare between the trees. I had been watching and waiting, desperate to see him again.

'Charlie!' The deep and gruff shout of my name from Paxton made me turn my head slowly. The darkness that had taken over surprised me, and I looked up and around. How long had I been standing here listening for my mate or hoping the breeze would shift so that I could catch his scent again?

'For fuck's sake, Charlie! What the hell are you doing out here?' Paxton's eyes widened when he saw I was in my undergarments. It clearly hadn't been what he had been expecting by the shocked look on his face. There was no need for me to be dressed this way as we remained clothed in our skin and were naked in our fur. Any in-between was almost scandalous. "I told you to stop trying to seduce me."

Paxton was the lady's man of the group, tall and confident. He could make a woman melt by flashing his perfectly symmetrical grin and setting their panties on fire with one heated gaze.

I knew he could. I had seen it for myself, but it had never worked on me.

He tried. Oh, trust me, He tried.

It was how we met.

Paxton had placed his hands on the bar where I sat, caging me in, and leaned forward with the weirdest pickup line about loving women with long hair and how if I left with him, he would braid it for me in the morning.

When I laughed in his face, the charming devil faded away and left one confused man. He hated the chase, and my rejection made him flip like a switch from seductive to laid-back. The way he had put it, why would he spend time chasing a woman who wasn't interested when he could turn to the next willing one and bag them with minimal effort?

Too bad for him, I was the only female in the bar then, as it was early morning. So, he decided to take a seat next to me. He tried a few more lines on me with no conviction, all of which I shot down. But our conversation after that was great.

I ran into him a few more times around the town over the next few days, and we got to know each other.

We bonded after that, and he introduced me to Barley. Barley was the Papa Bear of the group. An older, jolly fellow, taller than most Lycans, but with a bigger gut than them too. Yet, seeing him in battle was like watching a

child on Christmas morning. I had never seen such a large and round man move so quickly and fluidly with as big a smile on their face.

My eyes locked with the grey orbs of Paxton, and I blinked my dry eyes once as I tried to focus on him.

It was then that the feeling of being watched faded away, and I knew my mate was no longer around. My chest dropped as disappointment flooded me.

It made me want to crumble, but I was stronger than that. The things I had dealt with in my life had forced me to have a harder shell and be tougher to break.

Still, having it be the one person I had been counting on, the person I was going to love and who would love me unconditionally, that walked away made my heart crack.

It wasn't fair to put that kind of pressure on him before I even met him. He could still reject me, or perhaps he had already claimed another. If not, maybe he wanted to choose one of his own kind to claim.

A Lycan with a bear... not many would be happy about that. But I would.

Even if he changed his mind and came back, deciding that he did want me, I wasn't sure my brother would be able to see past my mate being a bear for him to give him a chance. If something happened to Killian, I would take the throne, and having a bear at my side could send the Lycans and wolves into an uproar.

The wolves and bears were always in one territory dispute or another.

Bears like to roam free, unlimited by invisible borders and territory lines, while wolves like to establish a set territory for their pack to live in.

"Charlie? For real, you're scaring me. You were gone so long that we went looking for you and found your clothes. We thought you went for a run. I bravely volunteered to come after you when you didn't come back." He puffed his chest with pride, and I narrowed my eyes at him. He was freshly washed, and his hair was still damp, so I knew he hadn't been that concerned.

Paxton was excellent at playing the selfless hero. But that was all it was, pretend. He put on a good face, but it was mostly just to make himself look good, especially if he was putting on a show for a woman.

'So, you drew the white stone?' I stepped forward. It felt odd to move again after standing with my body tense and still for so long.

Paxton smirked, and I knew I was right on the money.

Neil, our resident gambler, kept a few bags on his belt of dice, cards, and a bag of six stones. Five were black, and one was white.

It was our way of deciding who would be stuck with the chores and jobs that no one wanted to do. We each drew a rock in our closed fists and then opened them at the same time. Whoever had the white stone lost.

It was fair enough, or at least it would be if Neil lost more often. I was sure he was rigging it in his favor, but when he did lose, he took the truly awful jobs to make up for giving away all the small ones to the rest of us.

'I didn't come because of the stone.' Paxton pressed his hand over his chest; his head pulled back with the practiced offense. "I was worried about my friend. How was I supposed to know you were out here waiting for me in lingerie?"

My eyebrows pinched together as I looked down at the old and faded fabric covering me. Definitely not lingerie.

"Be careful, Pax. If you keep spewing your hero complex bullshit, your eyes may turn brown. Your ladies would hate that." I rolled my eyes at him as I walked past with my chin up, even though my chest felt tight, and I could feel the heat building behind my eyes.

Paxton was the biggest flirt I knew, and women flocked to him in droves, but he had nothing on my mate. Paxton was a pretty boy. I had seen enough of them at court.

But my mate...my mate was rugged and handsome. He was a man. Just by one look, anyone would know he preferred being in the wild. It sounded like a peaceful life, one I would enjoy.

I couldn't get the image of my mate standing on the river bank, smirking at me like he knew all my secrets out of my head. He was so attractive I was surprised I didn't melt into a puddle. Then he was gone, and I had never felt more alone in my life.

Paxton jogged up next to me, blinking his grey eyes rapidly. "Darling, my incredible eyes are just a small part of a very big package, massive even."

He flashed his charming smile with a wiggle of his brows, but it only lasted a second as he seemed to pick up on my mood.

"What's going on, Charlie?"

I shook my head, mumbling before diving into the water to cross the river. ' There are bears in the forest.'

'There are also wolves.' He said, sounding more relaxed and almost as if he were trying not to laugh at his own joke. We had never had a bounty for a bear before, so we tried to avoid them when we could.

I ignored him. Leaving Paxton behind as I swam across the chilled water to where someone, probably Barley, had moved my clothes to hang from a tree branch.

As I pulled them free and began to make my way back to our camp, Paxton called out from behind me. "There are a lot of bears in these parts, but you shouldn't be wandering out there after them. It would be best to stay away from their dens.'

I nodded, unable to avoid the rogue sniffle as I wiped under my nose with the knuckle of my index finger. But as Paxton's words settled into my head, they gave me hope.

My mate had to have known these woods. He had moved so swiftly and seamlessly to escape me that I knew he must have been here before, maybe even lived here. I could only hope that his den was nearby.

When the sun rose in the morning, I would find it