

The Beast And The Blessed

Chapter 161

Fifty-Four: Joselin

Joselin's P.O.V.

We moved carefully up to the front door. The latch was still broken, presumably from when Tobias had destroyed it during our visit over a week ago. But the way the heavy barrier of wood hung from only one loose hinge had the bottom corner on the floor and the top leaning toward us like it could fall at the slightest gust of wind.

Tobias moved in first, pulling the door right out of the frame and setting it to the side with ease. If it weren't for the interior looking like a tornado hit it and distracting me, I would have worried about him being the first to face whatever was on the other side of the door.

Everything was out of place. The large television that used to be mounted on the wall was on the floor, the screen shattered. The couch was charred, clearly having been set on fire, and sat hap hazardously with one side lifted on the upside-down entertainment center, the back cushions missing.

Every drawer was open and thrown across the room as if a poltergeist had come through with a fury. The contents were scattered around, littering the ground and mixed with the shards of glass from the demolished windows.

My chest dropped as the realization that I had been wrong sank in. All this time, I had been chasing the wrong person, and now another council member was either in danger or dead.

As much as I hated her and wished for her to be replaced on the council or for her to die, seeing the horror of the crime scene made my mouth water as my stomach rolled with nausea. Never before had I felt sick because of death. It was a part of life.

But I did wonder if by targetting her if I had put her killer's focus on her. Was she already a target, or did I just turn on the spotlight that made the killer decide to use her as a distraction or a scapegoat?

The problem was also that my failure could have killed Cyrus, someone I cared about. It was guilt making me feel this was. If I hadn't been chasing Rona all this time...

I pushed away the thought. There was no room for emotion when I was on a mission.

Whatever was going to happen here required my undivided attention, and I forced all emotions into a locked box in the back of my mind.

My eyes moved to the blood splatter across the wall. Someone had done some serious damage with that blow. I took tentative steps around the couch, seeing the larger pool of blood behind it, followed by drops that went right out the back door.

Whoever bled that much wouldn't have been walking on their own, and since there were no footprints, I assumed they had either been carried out, or someone used magic to get them through the door without dragging them.

I knew I needed to follow the trail to see if there were any survivors or if there was a struggle still going on, but a nagging feeling was pulling me away and urging me toward the bedroom. The debris crunched beneath my shoes as I rushed down the hallway, grabbing the door frame.

The room looked the same as when Tobias and I had been here. Better even, as the bed was made. But the dresser was bare beyond one long white hair hanging off one of the knobs of the top drawer as if it had been knocked off the surface without a second thought.

I picked it up, shoving it into my pants pocket before looking up at the wood surface of the chest of drawers.

The glowing blue electrical field was gone, and so were the bones that it had been protecting.

I let out a deep breath as I nodded in understanding and disappointment before straightening my spine and spinning back around. Tobias was in the doorway, looking every bit the terrifying warrior that I knew him to be.

His eyes scanned the room, looking for a threat. His gaze didn't land on me for more than a second before he stepped to the side and allowed me to pass. He was in work mode, and I appreciated his lack of judgment on my mistake.

"Contact the king. Get him and the queen to safety. Lock down the castle; no one goes in or out. I want the rest of the council members restrained immediately. Let me know once they are all accounted for." I snapped, and Tobias's eyes dimmed as he obeyed.

I had the feeling that they would be reporting back at least one missing council member besides Rona. The Lycans were moving carefully about the room, and Aurora stood at the back door, staring out into the trees.

It was time to get to the very bottom of this.

"Let's go hunting!" I called out, and a few men stepped forward, taking a deep breath to memorize the scent before racing out the back door. I moved with them, Aurora staying at my side as we took off at a jog.

The Lycans swept the area but quickly settled on one path and moved in formation.

Those that were not tracking the blood trail surrounded Aurora and me. I was tempted to teleport ahead of the group like I usually would instead of jogging to keep up with them. Still, I couldn't justify exhausting my magic any more than I already had when I had an enemy to face.

I was grateful that Aurora had recently visited The Sanctum of Light to recharge because we wouldn't stand a chance against Cora or Rona if we were both weakened.

I brushed my hair over my shoulder as I took a deep breath. The smell of death washed over my senses, and the beasts around me bristled in anticipation. The aura from the opening before us made the hair on the back of my neck rise. Dark. Evil.

Tobias moved in closer, staying in position, but he was tense.

'Bears were here.' Tobias said to me through the mind link as the pack slowed, cautiously approaching.

My eyes widen in surprise. The bears?

The only bear sleuth openly on decent terms with the Lycans was the one Charlie, the king's little sister, had mated into. She and her mate, Damien, had been staying with us a while ago during the war. Killian had hated Damien at first but warmed up to him over time... at least until Charlie left again to go back with Damien to live in the forest among the bears.

Charlie's connection to their kind is the only reason they're on good terms with the Lycans. Killian had been furious when Charlie announced a bear was her mate.

But what the hell were they doing here? Were they involved?

The guards dispersed, taking up a protective circle in the tree line around us as the body came into view.

The scene was so familiar, so hauntingly similar to my childhood, that I had to swallow hard to push down the acid that rushed up my throat. The smell alone was enough to make me want to vomit.

Rona's naked body was chained to a slab of rocks. Her eyes were open and lifeless, her head turned to the side, staring off into the distance. Blood dripped from the stones and onto the wet Earth below. Flies flew around her fresh corpse, stopping to walk along her torn and beaten flesh every few seconds.

Runes and knots had been carved into her body, and my right hand gripped my left forearm instinctively as if I could hide the markings on my skin that mirrored hers. But while mine had healed to leave black lines that moved and vibrated, hers were clean incisions. Open and draining her of her blood.

Aurora lifted her hand over her mouth before moving to Rona's head. The older woman had nothing to say for once, which was unsettling. Her shaking fingers ran over Rona's eyelids, closing them before brushing her hair back.

I looked away. Even though I wanted Rona to die when I thought she was a threat, no one deserved death this way.

I dabbled in dark magic occasionally, but this ritual would never sit right with me.

"What direction did they go?" I asked, and one of the guards pointed to the northeast.

"The bears went this way, but there is no sign of the witch.' He picked up a large trampled leaf and sniffed it before wrinkling his nose and tossing it away.

I heard chains rattling, and I spun around. I half expected to see Rona returning to life and wanting revenge on her killer and everyone else who wronged her. But it was Aurora, working with her bare hands to get the chains off Rona's limbs.

As a descendant of the Goddess, I expected she would respect the dead, but I had never seen her so bothered.

Rona's arm hung over the side of the rocks, and Aurora lifted it by her wrist and gently placed it back by her side. The movement caused the light to glisten in the liquid and piqued my interest. Gone were the reservations of seeing another in this position, and instead, I found myself closing in on the body.

While her skin was covered in blood, the crimson liquid on her stomach stood out. It was brighter and put off a little power as if it were still alive. It wasn't hers.

The reflective black shimmer in the blood was so similar to mine that I knew it could only belong to one person.

Cyrus.

"The altar in the mountains," I whispered as I lifted my finger and dipped it into the blood of the first, and possibly last, spell caster in my lifetime. "She wasn't just trying to drain their powers. She was using them as conduits to get to Cyrus."

Both attacks on him had aligned with the discovery of an altar, and now it was finally becoming clear. This whole time, she wasn't after the queen or me. She didn't want to take my position or rule the kingdom. All of this was because she wanted Cyrus's powers, or at the very least, to kill him.

But why? How long had she known about him, and what could she possibly have against him?

His existence should have been a win for our kind. It allowed us the knowledge and possibility of breeding with another of our kind and producing a stronger line of witches for the next generations.

I looked up at Tobias, and his eyes were dull, telling me that he was already speaking to Killian or another guard, ordering Cyrus's protection without me having to ask.

'Cyrus is in the queen's study with Killian and Natalie. The only council member missing is....' 'Cora.' We said at the same time.

I let out a bitter laugh of anger and frustration, feeling stupid for wasting months on the wrong person. 'All this time and she was right under our nose!'

My hands moved up to pull at the roots of my hair. 'Cora. That fucking bitch!'

A low growl surrounded me but dropped quickly as a figure moved toward us through the trees. Her curly brown hair and bright emerald green eyes landed on me. "Joselin!"

She rushed forward, and the giant man trailing behind her stopped halfway between us and the wall of bears lining up behind him.

"Charlie," I whispered in shock. She shouldn't be here. I knew she could take care of herself, but if Killian heard that Charlie was anywhere near this, he would be livid. 'Why are you here?' "We were out on a hunt and headed this way when we felt the magic. It was stronger than anything I had ever experienced in my life." Charlie grabbed my elbows, looking me in the eye as she shook her head back and forth. "We tried to stop her, but her magic felt different than before, darker and stronger. When we finally got close enough to deal damage, she disappeared...teleported away."

One glance at Aurora confirmed she was under the same impression I was, thinking Cora couldn't teleport. It was a skill that had to be mastered and required a lot of power and training. We had never seen or heard of her being able to move through the realms.

"We searched the area, but there were no other signs of her. She's gone."