

# The Beast And The Blessed

Chapter 181

Five: Charlie

Charlie's p.o.v.

My lips were damp from licking them, and his warm breath blew across them like a silent siren song, begging me to give it to the source and let him devour me. I expected a smile, maybe even a kiss. Any reaction telling me he was happy about the news would have been welcomed.

Instead, he shook his head, his eyebrows pulling together as he loosened his hold on me.

That wasn't supposed to happen. He should want to hold me close, smile, and maybe even mark me.

My stomach turned to concrete as he pulled his arms away entirely. My dagger dropped to the ground from his loose hold on it, the blade embedding itself into the moist soil.

His body heat leaving me as he stepped back felt like I had just walked outside into a blizzard as all my fears surfaced. I spun around, not wanting to let him run out of my sight this time. He had escaped from me too many times before. We needed to have this conversation, even though I was terrified of what might be said.

My smile fell when I saw the horrified look on his face. The whites of his eyes were bright in contrast to the black irises, and I hated that as he let them roam over my body, I felt inadequate. He looked bothered by what he saw as his gaze returned to my face.

I wasn't what he had expected from the Goddess... that much was clear.

"No."

That single word made me wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole. The heat behind my eyes began building rapidly, and I knew tears would come next if I didn't do something.

"No?" My echo seemed to amuse him as his lip twitched, but I didn't find this funny. "You carry half of my soul, and your response is just no?"

He tilted his head to the side, a heavy focus taking over his expression as the tears I had been fighting back filled my eyes anyway. "I don't have a mate." "You might not have known you had one before, but you do now." My voice cracked, and I couldn't even find it within myself to be embarrassed.

"Bears don't have mates." He repeated, his eyes locked on me with unashamed pity. He didn't know me, but how could he be so casual about ripping my heart out?

My chest felt heavy, and my spit thickened as I felt the dam about to burst. "Just because you don't feel the mate bond doesn't mean you don't have a mate."

I felt it. I felt it enough for both of us and if he would let me, I would love him with everything I had, even after my last breath. Was it how I looked? Was he not attracted to me? Was it because I was the Princess? Did he even know who I was?

"I'm sorry, Charlotte." It came out so formal as he stepped back, and my lungs shuddered with each pull of air.

It was almost instinct to correct him, to tell him to call me Charlie. But that was what my friends and family called me. The people and the court members all referred to me as Princess Charlotte. He may be my mate, but he was a stranger. A stranger that was holding my heart in his hands and squeezing it in his fist without a care in the world.

"So, that's it? Are you just going to reject our mate bond? Aren't you even going to give me a chance? I don't even know your name!" My hands flew to my chest before gesturing toward him in anger. Talking with my hands was a bad habit I had when I got worked up. My etiquette instructor had tried to break me of it, training me to remain calm, composed, and emotionless even when I was dying inside. They would be so disappointed in me right now. Everyone always was.

Most of the time, I succeeded in keeping my mask of indifference in place. Killian had been the only one I had ever shown my emotions around, and even then, I tried not to. He had higher standards for his heir than some emotional girl.

Killian never said it in those words exactly, but that was how he made me feel everytime he did scold me.

"I'm not... that's...." He shook his head, his mask cracking as the first tear slipped over my lid and down my cheek. He looked startled and a little scared at seeing it.

My heel snagged on a rock sticking half out of the ground, and I stumbled. He rushed forward, his hands raising toward me to steady me, but I caught myself and flinched away from him.

"Charlotte," he said but stopped when he met my stare again.

I couldn't stand to be touched by him again, not when I was about to lose him forever. The fewer physical interactions we had, the better. I couldn't have him keep touching me when he would reject me. It would make it more difficult for me than it had to be.

"Don't," I warned, my tears stopping as I glared at him. He held his hands up as I took a deep breath.

My anger allowed me to collect myself, and I schooled my emotions, just as I had been raised to do.

There was no need to embarrass myself any more than I already had.

He hadn't officially rejected me yet, and even though I had wanted to know what was going on in his head by coming here today, now I wanted nothing more than to get away from him before he could say those dreaded words and sever our bond for good.

My mate didn't say anything when I turned around and walked away. He didn't try to stop me, but I did feel him following me. Like every day before, he trailed after me, ensuring I returned to the river before he left.

Only this time, when I crossed the river, he stayed. He stood on the other side, showing no emotion, as I glanced over my shoulder for one last look at him. His hand flinched at his side as if resisting the urge to wave goodbye.

Because that was what this was. It was goodbye for now until I could work up the courage to confront him again and have him sever our bond.

Time apart could be a good thing. He didn't know we were soulmates before, but now he does. Perhaps giving him time to sit on that information and consider it would be beneficial.

I wasn't going to get my hopes up, but he didn't know we were mates before. He does now.

The men were loud when I returned, laughing and joking about returning earlier than usual to camp for food to refuel since I would 'need my energy,' but I couldn't focus on what they were saying, let alone respond. My eyes stayed on the ground as I felt all the emotions surfacing once more now that I was safe. Now that I was with my family.

Roman was the first to his feet, and when I looked up and met his stare, my chest caved in, and the tears fell. The men went silent, Barley standing as Roman raced around the fire pit, catching me just as a sob broke free and my knees buckled beneath me.

He held me tightly, shielding me from the world as I broke because he knew what it felt like. Roman had told me once about the pain he felt every day, the constant pull at his soul like an open wound that would never heal.

During that conversation, I had asked him, "Does it get easier with time?"

The silent shake of his head as he refused to meet my gaze told me everything I needed to know about how much he was hurting, even years after his rejection.

From that point on, I had felt protective of him. He was a man who deserved happiness. He was the kind of man who loved unconditionally and would give anything for his family. A man who wanted children and a lot of them.

If a man as good and full-hearted as Roman couldn't get his happily ever after, I didn't know why I ever thought I would. 1

\*★\*

My men stayed close to camp for the next day, sending me worried glances when I woke up late, and then stayed in camp myself. I used to hate staying still. After being trapped in the castle for so long, always being told where to go and what to do, always having guards reporting on my whereabouts, and keeping people away, I enjoyed my freedom.

When we weren't on a bounty, I would be hiking around our camp, exploring all the places the world had to offer that I had only ever read about in books. The Earth was beautiful, but for the next several days, I couldn't see past the memory of my mate standing before me, telling me, 'No.'

I knew we were about to set out to our next location soon, to the next town, in search of a new bounty or adventure.

Before we left, I would have to suck it up and return to my mate to hear him officially sever our bond. I wanted to leave here with a clean break. Once I left, I wasn't going to come back. Not ever.

I didn't want anything to be left unsaid or any doors to still be open. If I didn't get his rejection, I would always wonder, 'What if.' What if I came back to see him? Would he want me eventually? What if he mates someone else, and I have to feel his rejection through him marking them?

The worst was, would I survive it?

The chances of someone surviving their mate's death were slim to none. The likelihood of them surviving a rejection was about 50/50; of the half that didn't survive, it wasn't the rejection itself. It was them putting themselves out of the constant pain and misery years later, no longer wanting to live with the agony.

It was almost a week later that Barley growled at me as he walked by, demanding that I gather my belongings and that we had a job to do.

He must have seen the panic on my face at the idea of tearing down our current camp and leaving because he quickly explained. "You're going on the hunt today."

My hand instinctively went down to my thigh, the loss of my favorite dagger had been a hard pill to swallow, but that was nothing compared to the pain of my mate not wanting me. 'What's the job?' "Rabid Oread."

That made me want to smile, but my body wouldn't listen. That had been my first bounty all those years ago, and I had royally screwed up. If Paxton and Barley hadn't been there to bail me out, I would have been killed by the rogue woodland Nymph.

I had learned everything I could about them since and could kill one in my sleep. It would be my easiest payout ever and get my mind off the bear.

"Where?" I closed my eyes and looked away from him, staring into the flames. I was praying to the Goddess that it wouldn't be on the other side of the river. I had avoided my mate for almost a week now and wasn't ready to see him yet.

"About a mile south of the town."

So far away from the man who had broken my heart? "Then let's go hunting, men."