

BEAST CHARMING



JENNIFFER WARDELL

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BEAST CHARMING

CHAPTER 1

Of Frying Pans and Fires

Beauty held up the mangled gauntlet, ready to fight. She'd spent most of the afternoon yanking the thing out from between a dragon's teeth, and said dragon would probably approve of her using it to beat her father's head in. "Get. Out. Of. My. Way."

"Not until you've returned to your senses and come back home." Noble Tremain—whose birth certificate still identified him as Frank—folded his arms across his brocade-covered chest and tried to stare her down. Her father sincerely believed he was an important and powerful man, even though he'd spent most of Beauty's formative years being kicked out of rich people's houses. "This *ridiculous* job is an insult to the family name."

Beauty shoved her shaggy brown hair out of her eyes with her free hand, glaring at the man who was technically responsible for her existence. She'd told herself only a few months ago that she needed to move again, just in case her father finally tracked her and Grace down, but she was sick of letting the man ruin her life. Besides, she couldn't leave her sister to face this alone.

"So sedating princesses and sneaking your daughters into secret ballrooms is what, creative parenting?" She gritted her teeth to keep from shouting, furious he'd insisted on doing this where she worked. The only good thing about all this was that he'd caught her before she'd made it inside. "Or how about that time you knocked us unconscious and left us in an ogre's cave, hoping a questing hero would just *happen* to rescue us?"

Her father's brow lowered at the reminder of that last incident. "You could have *tried* to be a little more in peril with that ogre," he snapped, his round face tensing up with annoyance. Behind him, Beauty could see the front doors open a little, giving whomever was on the other side a shield to continue listening behind. "I found you the largest, most terrifying-looking creature in the region, and you and your sister come back looking like you'd been out making a social call."

"It's not our fault we're more competent than you thought."

The ogre, horrified at the sight of the two girls collapsed in what turned out to be his living room, had promptly woken them both up and given them

herbal tea and berry cookies. Both Beauty and Grace had immediately sworn never to tell their father what had actually happened, though Grace still sent the ogre a card every year on his birthday. “Now get out of my way or I’ll call security. I know the concept is foreign to you, but I actually have a job to do.”

His eyes flared with a fresh burst of offended fury. “You’re related to nobility!” His face started to turn red as his volume increased, only adding to the certainty that every *single* person in the building would know about this in the next few minutes. “How *dare* you work at a temp agency!”

Beauty pulled her arm back, already visualizing the spot on his forehead where the gauntlet would make contact. Around them, the birds chirped merrily in encouragement. “Are we really dragging Mother’s second cousin into this?” she warned him quietly. “Particularly after Mother ran off and left you for the royal tax collector?”

This time, it was her father’s turn to grit his teeth. “You are *still* related to nobility, you ungrateful brat, no matter how it happened,” he hissed. “And if you and your sister would just come home and start behaving like *reasonable* daughters, I could get you married to a desperate royal somewhere and *finally* get some use out of you.”

Beauty threw the gauntlet, pleased when it careened off his head with a definite *thunk*. While he was still reeling from that, she advanced on him. Despite her short height, she was intimidating enough that her father backed up a step. “You tried to shove us into any ridiculous fairy tale situation you could for *years*, Father, and all you have to show for it is two daughters who hate your guts. If you want your happily-ever-after so bad, *you* go put on a dress and lock yourself up in a tower. Grace and I are done.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what your sister will and won’t do!” Unfortunately, her father’s thick skull had helped him recover far too quickly. “*She* at least has the decency to speak to her father with a civil tongue!”

“That’s because she’s a kind and reasonable human being,” Beauty snapped back, fury rising. If he’d started harassing Grace again ... “I, however, seem to take after *you*.”

If she’d tried, she couldn’t have come up with a better insult. The red surged back all at once, making him look like an evil sorceress had turned him into a beet, and sheer rage made him seem to grow just a little as he gathered his breath for a rant that would undoubtedly be heard all the way back into town. “You miserable, ungrateful—”

Fortunately, whatever else he'd been about to say abruptly choked to a halt when he was dragged several feet into the air. Beauty forced herself to take a deep breath, giving the red in her own vision a chance to clear as she looked up at the extremely tall man who currently had Noble by the collar. "Hi, Steve," she said after a moment, trying to sound as if having a shouting match with her father in front of her work was a normal, everyday occurrence. If you take out the part about work, it used to be absolutely true. "Did Manny send you out to help quiet things down again?"

Steve nodded, completely unconcerned about her father's increasingly frantic struggling. "He said that you need to be better about pest control, or you'll scare off customers." Steve was nine feet tall, gentle as an enormous bunny rabbit. He served as the agency's yard and outdoor maintenance man since he was too tall to comfortably fit through the doors. Rumor had it that his mother was a giantess, which had led to no end of speculation about his father. "Besides, he needs your report about the dragon job."

"Pest control?" Noble shouted, swinging an arm upward to hit at Steve. The impact had no more of an effect on Steve's placid expression than the struggling had. "How dare you say such a thing, you impudent ..."

"Don't listen to him, Steve. He's cranky." Beauty hoped her father didn't make enough of a fuss to accidentally choke himself on his own shirt or something. Not that she would have minded, personally, but she didn't want Steve to get into trouble. "Any chance you can drop him in the compost pile as soon as I go inside?"

Steve considered this, giving Noble a single experimental bounce that made him squawk like an extremely angry chicken. "I could do that," he said thoughtfully, then gave Beauty a faintly chiding look. "You know you could have asked me for help, right? You didn't have to wait for Manny to tell me."

Beauty blinked, startled, then blushed as Steve wagged a finger at her. A few feet overhead, her father was attempting to light them both on fire with the heat of his most disdainful glare. Ignoring him, Beauty smiled at Steve. The expression made her round face far prettier than it normally managed to be. "Thank you." She patted him on the hand as she went by, then grabbed the gauntlet from where it had fallen. "Feel free to bounce him a few more times if you want."

She went inside, her smile widening at the one last squawk that followed her in as the doors closed behind her. Then, deliberately ignoring the sound of

rapidly scurrying feet that signaled her audience hurrying to look busy someplace else, she exchanged nods with the woman at the front desk and headed straight back for Manny's office.

He didn't look up when she pushed open the door, smoke puffing placidly up from his nostrils as he scanned the current assignment list on his magic mirror. Mandrake Kent was a three-foot-tall dragon, complete with tiny, useless wings and a blanket refusal to talk about anything he'd done before starting the temp agency that bore his name. "Well, now I know where your temper comes from," he said blandly.

Beauty took a deep breath, grateful for the knowledge that her boss was prepared to let things go at that. "Sorry about that," she sighed, fixing the collar of her shirt and absently running a hand through her hair to straighten it. The dress code at the agency wasn't nearly as strict as it would have been at Fairy Godmothers, Inc. if she would've taken the secretarial job they'd offered her, but she didn't want Manny to think she wasn't trying. She already flouted tradition enough by being the only woman in the office to wear pants. "The last I heard, he was over in Far Away trying to convince some earl to take him on as a personal advisor."

Manny made a small dismissive gesture with his claw, finally looking up at her. "He scares off my customers, and I'll sue his velvet-covered rear end into the next kingdom." He paused briefly, raising a scaly red eyebrow at the sight of the gauntlet Beauty dropped into his trash can. "Tell me that's not from the guy I sent over to Percy before you."

Beauty gave a small smile. "No. Apparently, our client went over to his brother-in-law's house for dinner and didn't ask enough questions about the ingredients list. He knows he could have gone to a dentist to have it removed, but he likes us better."

"I would, too. Dragon dentists tend to use swords or claws instead of toothpicks." He blew out one more puff of smoke. "Let me see it." He held a hand out as Beauty fished the gauntlet out of the trash and handed it to him. He studied it a moment, then bared his teeth in an expression that everyone in the office had decided was probably a dragon grin. "I'll call Percy back to tell him this is from a pre-packaged destroyed armor set. He didn't blow his diet."

She folded her arms across her chest, finally relaxing for the first time in what felt like hours. "I'm sure he'll be happy to hear it." When Manny looked up again, she tilted her head in the direction of his magic mirror. "I'm not

really in the mood to go home right now. Any chance I could pick up one more assignment before I call it a day?”

He set down the gauntlet, double-checking the list. “Unless you’ve changed your mind about kissing that enchanted public relations guy, there’s nothing right now that you could finish in a couple of hours. Want an overnight job?”

Beauty hesitated, weighing the likelihood of her father deciding it would be worth his time to try to harass her at home, then sighed. “Sure.” She sat down in the chair opposite his. “What have you got?”

“Let’s see.” He tapped his claws against the desktop as he mulled over a few selections. “You don’t know Dwarvish, so that one’s out. That one I’m saving for Steve ...” Manny looked up. “The agoraphobe in the tower called again. Swears she just wants some company for a few days, and promises the person won’t have to move any furniture or hear about how lonely she’s been since the evil sorceress died.”

Beauty groaned, covering her face with her hand. “Please, Manny, no.” Pretty much everyone with the agency had taken a turn with the woman by this point, and most swore they’d have rather spent a day off cleaning up after a hydra than go back. “You really should put her on some sort of ‘will no longer sacrifice temps to this’ list.”

“Never. As long as threat of death isn’t actually involved, I’m always willing to take people’s money.” Still, she was relieved to see reluctance flash briefly across his face. “I’ll save it for the next person who pisses me off.” He scanned down through a few more assignments. “Some butler’s looking for a general assistant. The timeline’s open-ended, and though I make no promises I’m pretty sure the most complicated thing you’ll have to do is clean something.”

Beauty’s brow furrowed. “Why would a butler need an assistant? Don’t people rich enough to hire one have an entire houseful of staff ready to do all that?”

Manny shrugged. “How should I know? Maybe he wants someone to keep his shoes shined.” He held the mirror up, wiggling it a little. “You want the job or not?”

She hesitated again, less than thrilled with the idea of spending the next week helping someone tackle their monthly cleaning list. But if she saw her

father again today things would end with one of them getting arrested for assault, and she wasn't above running and hiding in order to keep that from happening. "Sure. Give me the info, and I'll stop by my place and pack a bag before heading over there."

"Think of it this way." He made a few quick taps on the mirror, then handed her the printout. "At least there's less of a chance you'll accidentally get eaten on this one."

THE HOUSE, AS it turned out, was surprisingly normal for an ancient manor in the middle of nowhere. Sure, there were spikes in various places, and some stone things leering down at her from the upper ledges, but the entire place was generally clean and well cared for.

Of course, the shattered statue in the middle of the front walkway put something of a damper on the overall look. Beauty moved closer to it, peering upward at the spot of ledge just overhead before glancing back down at the wreck of stonework sitting at her feet. The rest of it was scattered over a surprisingly wide portion of the otherwise immaculate front lawn, and all Beauty could think was how hard the statue would have had to hit the ground in order for the pieces to spread out that much ...

Her head snapped upward at the sound of the front door opening. A lean, impeccably dressed older man stood in the doorway, looking at her as if she intended to sell him something. "If you've come here to break the curse, it would be wisest of you to leave now and find something more useful to do with the rest of your evening. You are, of course, fully within your rights to persist in your initial venture, but if that's your decision I insist you remain outside while you speak to him. I grow weary of replacing the carpeting, and won't be able to hire a reliable serviceman to perform the task until Monday."

Beauty narrowed her eyes at him, the tone superior and dismissive enough to set her teeth instantly on edge. Then what he actually said finally filtered through her brain. "Wait." She blinked at him, the first flickers of panic flaring to life in her stomach. She could deal with dragons, ogres, witches, and the vilest of evil sorceresses without a problem, but put an enchantment or a member of the nobility anywhere near her and she turned straight back into a fumbling, mortified sixteen-year-old. "What curse?"

He studied her a moment, then his expression eased as he gave her a small nod. "Ah. Pardon my presumption. How may I help you?" His eyes flicked downward to the broken statue at her feet, and something that looked

almost like parental disapproval flashed across his face for a moment. “I must apologize for the mess. Normally such matters don’t escape my notice.” He lifted his hand a fraction, then hesitated. “If you would be so kind as to take a step back.”

Having seen enough in her life to know when to take that kind of advice, Beauty did what he asked. The man made a brief gesture with his hand, and what felt like a sudden gust of wind ruffled Beauty’s clothing as it circled the pile of stone and lifted it like a small, gentle tornado. It hung in the air for a moment, waiting, until the man swept his hand to the right. “Put it with the others, then you may return to your previous duties.” The wind sped off with the stone like a herd of obedient puppies, and the man’s attention returned to Beauty. “Now, you were saying?”

Panic now tamped down under a very firm desire to know exactly what she was getting herself into, Beauty pulled the printout Manny had given her out of her pocket. “You are Richard Waverly, right?” she asked carefully, making sure she had a route open in case she suddenly needed to retreat. “And you did hire a temp from the Mandrake Agency, despite the fact that apparently you’ve figured out how to get the wind to do your bidding?”

“I am indeed Richard Waverly, though I would prefer it if you referred to me simply as Waverly.” He studied her for a moment, expression suddenly penetrating enough that Beauty would not have been at all surprised to learn the man was capable of reading minds. “I presume you’re the woman they’ve sent over to fill the position?”

She nodded. “Beauty Tremain.” When his brow furrowed slightly, she reached into her pocket again. “Do you need to see my ID?”

“No.” Brow still furrowed, he shook his head. “It’s of no consequence. Come inside, and we can discuss the details of your employment.”

“There are a few things we need to discuss out here.” Firmly aware of the fact that nothing short of potential death would be enough of an excuse for Manny to let her out of this job, Beauty lifted her chin and pretended like she had options. “If you can get the wind to help you do all your cleaning, I need a better idea of exactly what sort of work you’re expecting out of a human assistant.”

“Wind is a close enough description of my support staff for the moment, though technically speaking, not accurate in the slightest.” He smiled slightly, which annoyed her. The annoyance was almost a relief, the emotion steadying

her in a way little else could have. This, she was used to. “As to what your other duties will be, I believe that would be best discussed after you’ve met the master of the house.”

She glanced down at the disturbed patch of grass where the broken statue had been, remembering her earlier thought about how hard it would have needed to hit. Then she looked back up at Waverly, raising an eyebrow. “You mean the same master who was apparently playing lawn darts with stone sculptures earlier today?”

The faint disapproval from earlier flickered back across his face. “Yes, unfortunately. And while I admit that the particular example you saw was no loss to the art world even before James had finished with it, the habit will need to be stopped. Hopefully that will be a side effect of your current duties.”

Beauty’s eyes narrowed. “And how exactly am I supposed to stop someone who can toss a statue around like an egg?”

This time, it was his turn to raise an eyebrow. “If I were to hazard a guess, I would say by being cleverer than he is.”

That stopped her short, particularly when she realized she had no snappy comeback. After five minutes of conversation she felt shaky, confused, annoyed, and just defiant enough to not have the sense to back down. On top of all that, she really needed the money if she wanted to keep eating on a regular basis.

She took a deep breath, hoping she wasn’t about to get herself into the kind of trouble she’d spent most her life trying to get out of. “I know what you said before, but I want to make absolutely sure you know that there will be no fairy tale endings whatsoever if I’m involved. No curse breaking, no handsome princes, nothing.”

Waverly smiled again. “Then you should fit in wonderfully.” He took a small step to the side, holding the door open wide enough that she could get through it as well. “Now will you come inside so we may discuss the details, or should I have dinner brought out to you on the lawn?”

With a sigh, Beauty went inside.

CHAPTER 2

Pest Control

Something stirred in the decorative hedge.

James Charlton Hightower, who had been known as “the Beast” long before he’d ended up furry, froze at the small sound it made. The noise was too loud to be from either a bird or small animal, both of which usually knew better than to take shelter in the extremely thorny witches’ nails bushes. Clearly, it was time for a little more pest control.

He waited, claws flexing, for a second sound to help him pin down the exact spot where his prey was hiding. Then he pounced, grabbing the girl’s foot and dragging her out from the hedge without any concern over the cuts and scrapes he was adding to her already impressive collection.

When she shrieked, he yanked her up so she was hanging in the air by her ankle. “Maybe I should eat one of you,” he growled, letting his voice climb slowly into a full roar. When she looked up, eyes wide, he peeled his lips back enough to give her the full effect of his long, sharp canines. “Indigestion would be worth finally managing to pound the message into your tiny little minds that *I’m not interested in having the curse broken!*”

“I just ... I ...” He’d barely done anything to her, and the girl was already trembling so hard she could barely speak. “I was ... my family is in the area, and I know the guidebook had a warning about you but I thought maybe they just didn’t understand ...”

“Stop. I don’t care.” His eyes narrowed as she went silent, wishing for a moment that he really did eat people. It was about the only vengeance suitable for the company behind the enchanted nobility guidebook that had included his name in last year’s edition as part of a misguided attempt at expansion. He’d had Waverly threaten them with a lawsuit, using a legal team rather than claws to emphasize that he wasn’t even titled, but that still left an entire year’s worth of guidebooks the company hadn’t been able to recall. “Burn the book this second and I’ll decide whether or not I let you live.”

The girl made a whimpering sound, nodding frantically. “I didn’t really think I was your true love or could break the curse or anything, but I’ve had the guidebook for months now and I haven’t even used it *once*.” She was

crying now, tears streaming down her forehead, though he couldn't tell whether it was due to terror or to the blood dripping pretty steadily from the cut on her shoulder. "I ... I was just going to wait in the bushes and see if you were really as scary as everyone said ..."

Hating the guilt he could feel threatening to overtake him, he dropped the girl and watched while she scrambled into a sitting position. "Did you get the answer you were looking— Not that way, you idiot ..." James cut off the rest of the threat to reach forward and grab the girl again, stopping her panicked retreat straight back into the middle of the thorny bush he'd yanked her out of. He picked her back up, and looked for a place he could put her back down without having to rescue her again. When she started sobbing, he shook her a little. "Stop it. I'm trying to help you run away without your collapsing in the woods and dying of blood loss." He pointed toward the front of the house, hoping Waverly wasn't anywhere near a window at the moment. "Do you think you're capable of escaping that way without doing any more injury to yourself?"

She bolted the second he let her go. Once she'd disappeared from sight, James sighed and ran a hand through his hair. The encounter had been both frustrating and deeply unsatisfying, leaving him even more restless than when he'd come out hunting for home invaders. He could head upstairs and smash more statues, but he doubted it would do much to relieve the pressure building inside him. The last one certainly hadn't ...

"That was stunningly compassionate." James flinched a little at the dry voice behind him, hesitating a moment before turning to see Waverly standing on the walkway. When their eyes met, the older man raised an eyebrow. "Should I be concerned?"

James narrowed his eyes, pointing a claw at the man who had been his only family since he'd turned fourteen. "That wasn't compassion," he insisted, knowing that protest was futile but unable to stop himself. "It's just useless to torment them when they can't even see me through their flood of tears. And how long have you been standing there, anyway?"

"Long enough." Waverly smiled slightly. "If you're rethinking your choice of the witches' nails, I would be happy to have them removed and replaced with somewhat less predatory bushes."

James glared at him. "The bushes are *fine*. After this, I'll start chasing the girls into them on purpose." He stopped, catching something in the other

man's expression. "Were you looking for me? I thought you'd decided to spend the afternoon working on the financial reports while the elementals swept the walkways." They were lesser air elementals—Waverly had always been infuriatingly vague about the details, but apparently he'd won them off a djinn in a poker game and they needed constant supervision on any task in which there was a chance of breaking things.

For a second, Waverly's normally serene expression looked almost solemn. "I would be more than happy to turn the reports back over to you the moment you say the word," he said quietly.

They'd had this discussion several times already since he'd been cursed, half in the form of fights and half in tense, heavy silences. This time, James felt the quiet weigh down on him as he slowly shook his head. "No." His voice was flat, making it clear he didn't want to discuss the matter. "I know you think it would work, but for once in your life you're wrong about something."

Waverly narrowed his eyes. "Name me one thing you have ever truly wanted to have happen that you didn't achieve through sheer bullheadedness."

"Juliana." He felt the growl rise up at the memory of the delicate blond he'd proposed to. They'd never been able to prove the curse was her fault, but if she wasn't the cause, the coincidences were a little too ludicrously convenient. "I wouldn't call that an achievement, would you?"

"I said *truly* want," Waverly shot back, "and you and I both know this has nothing to do with whether or not you would be accepted by the people you used to do business with. What you are truly doing by hiding out here and refusing to see anyone is making some sort of ridiculous point to the universe, without giving even a *moment* of thought as to whether or not you will survive the experience!"

The silence that fell was heavy enough to make it difficult to breathe. Waverly never shouted, and seeing him upset enough to break that rule shook Beast in a way the words themselves couldn't have. He wanted to apologize, even though he didn't think he was wrong, but that would start a conversation about feelings that he sincerely doubted either of them wanted to have. They were far more comfortable caring about each other without actually having to discuss it.

"So," James asked finally, the gruff edge in his voice the only visible

sign of the argument they'd just had, "Did you need something, or did you just come out here to torment me?"

The other man, his own expression once again restored to its usual implacable serenity, inclined his head back toward the house. "We have a visitor. She'll be staying here for the foreseeable future, and as such I insist you introduce yourself without the shadows or skulking you've become so fond of."

James just stared at him, stunned. No matter what else they fought about, Waverly had always chased the curse-breaking hopefuls away just as quickly and thoroughly as James had. Even the possibility that he might be trying to spring one on him felt like a betrayal. "Unless you have some sort of female relative you've never told me about, this had better be a joke."

Waverly's expression didn't even flicker. "I assure you, it's no joke. She's a temporary employee, and will serve as my personal assistant while I feel such a thing is necessary."

That was marginally better, though James had no doubt there was far more going on than the other man had just told him. Still, he needed to get as much information as possible before whatever plan Waverly was cooking up went into effect. "Fine," he snapped, stalking toward the house. When he got to the stairs, he turned back and pointed another claw at Waverly. "But this is the only time I ever have to see her. If she even *thinks* about trying to save me from myself, I promise you I'll eat her without compunction."

Waverly's expression didn't change. "Do let me know when that happens. I won't bother making dinner that night."

Growling at the sarcasm, James shoved his way inside and went to find this woman of Waverly's. If he was lucky, he could eat her before the older man caught up.

SHE WAS WAITING in the library, perusing the books he hadn't touched in almost a year with a wide-eyed interest that made him envious and annoyed all at the same moment. He watched her from a shadowed corner of the upper walkway, studying her entirely unremarkable face for any sign of what Waverly might be up to. She looked vaguely familiar, as if he'd met her once several years ago, but if so, she clearly hadn't made enough of an impression to help with whatever scheme Waverly was cooking up. The fact that she was wearing pants was somewhat unusual, but he had to give her credit for dressing more sensibly than most of her gender.

Waverly was nowhere in sight, despite having had plenty of time to catch up. It was a clear sign that this was a test, and he was waiting to see how he and the girl would handle each other without the aid of a referee.

James smiled grimly, wondering what she sounded like when she shrieked.

He watched her carefully slide a book back into place on the shelf, and he tensed as he waited for the right moment to pounce. She turned around, her dark brown eyes scanning the room as if she were looking for something. Then they shifted upward to peer into the shadows of the upper walkway. Startled, James withdrew a little, eyes narrowed with sudden wariness as he followed her visual search. When she found nothing, she folded her arms across her chest. "I know you're up there, so you might as well come down and interrogate me or whatever else you were planning on doing. Waverly said he was going to look for you, which means he clearly considers this part of the hiring process."

James was pretty sure she was bluffing, but the fact that anything he did would prove her right limited his options considerably. He briefly considered staying silent until she let her guard down again, but he was far too stubborn himself not to recognize the same trait in the set of her shoulders. He had no doubt she would play the waiting game as long as she needed to, and there was a pretty good chance he'd lose.

He growled, letting the sound reverberate low in his throat, and he had the satisfaction of watching her freeze for a second. "Who said I wanted to ask you questions? I might just be figuring out what part of you I'm going to eat first."

She turned in the direction his voice had come from with an "Are you kidding me?" expression. "I've known Waverly less than five minutes, and I already know there's no way he'd let you get blood on these carpets."

The corner of his mouth twitched upward without any conscious decision on his part, which only made him more annoyed. Clearly, he was going to have to reclaim the upper hand in this situation.

With a full-throated roar, he aimed his leap to land almost on top of the girl's head. She stumbled backward, just like he'd expected, and it gave him the few seconds he'd needed to straighten up to his full seven feet in height. He lifted his claws, curving them inward slightly so they glinted in the lamplight, and gave her a smile that was all teeth and no humor. "I think what

you know has very little bearing on the situation,” he said, voice a dangerous purr.

Her eyes slowly lifted to meet his, going wider by the second as she took a step back. He was certain she was about to shriek, or at least start shaking, but all she did was let the air out of her lungs in a rush. Then she squeezed her eyes shut, muttering something low enough under her breath that he couldn't catch much more than the word “stupid.” It was a confusing enough reaction that he didn't press his advantage, and by the time she opened her eyes again her expression had cleared completely. “Hi,” she said calmly, holding out a hand. He had nearly two feet on her, but the size difference didn't seem to make her at all nervous. “I'm Beauty Tremain from the Mandrake Agency—yes, I know I have a ridiculous name—and I'm pretty sure I'm going to be Waverly's new assistant for the foreseeable future. I presume you are the master of the house? James, is it?”

He ignored the hand and allowed himself a moment to just glare at her, seriously considering risking Waverly's wrath for getting blood on the carpet. The other man would deserve it, and it seemed like the only way to get the reaction he expected out of *someone* before the day was over. “Don't get comfortable,” he snarled. “You won't be here long.”

“Okay, then,” she said after a moment, dropping her hand. “I'd expected something more imaginative out of you, but I guess we all have our off-days.”

“It's not my imagination you need to be worried about.” James took a step closer so he could loom more effectively. “You're the one who apparently volunteered to be part of Waverly's latest master plan. Did he give you even a hint of what was going on, or did he dupe you into it?”

Beauty winced at that, continuing the annoying habit she was developing of surprising him. “I *knew* it was a bad idea to get anywhere near an enchantment again,” she muttered, rubbing a hand across her eyes like she could feel a headache coming on. When she lifted her head again, her expression was apologetic. “Look. Whatever you think is going through Waverly's mind right now, I promise you I want absolutely nothing to do with any kind of scheme or master plan. When my office got the work assignment, all it said was a butler needed an assistant.”

Suddenly, he realized where he'd seen her before. “Is your father named Noble? A short man, with slicked-back hair and a ridiculously trimmed goatee?”

She went instantly pale at the mention of the man's name. "Please don't tell me you've met him," she said quietly, the sudden pleading edge to her voice more unsettling than anything else she'd done. "And if you have, please accept my sincere and deeply felt apologies for whatever extremely embarrassing thing I'm sure he did."

James felt an entirely unexpected pang of sympathy, deciding then and there not to tell her that he'd seen the man get kicked out of a ball once. Beauty and a woman who must have been her sister had followed behind, he remembered, chins held high and making as graceful an exit as was humanly possible. "I was warned about him by some business associates, back when I ..." He stopped suddenly as he realized what he was about to say, clearing his throat as his eyes slid away from hers. "A while ago."

"Ah." She moved closer, lightly touching his arm, and when he met her eyes again there was understanding in them. "Whatever Waverly's cooking up can't be that bad, right? I mean, he clearly cares about you, and if we're both pretty sure something's coming we can probably head it off at the pass."

His brow lowered. "If we see it in time," he said darkly. "With Waverly, life's a chess game and he's always three moves ahead of you."

"Which won't help him much, if you knock the board off the table." Beauty smiled a little. "Though if you'd figure out a way to do that without eating me, I'd appreciate it."

The corners of James's own mouth twitched upward again, and this time he didn't fight it. "I think I can manage that."

At the sound of the library door opening, both of their heads snapped around like they'd been caught at something. Waverly was standing on the other side, and James had no doubt he'd been monitoring the entire conversation so that he could choose precisely the right point to make his entrance. "Excellent. I was hoping the two of you could become acquainted without screams or bloodshed of any kind."

James narrowed his eyes at the almost cheerful edge to the other man's voice. "I've always wanted to know—can the elementals tell you what people are saying, or do you just stand with your ear pressed against doors?"

Waverly just raised an eyebrow at him, clearly unwilling to dignify that with a response, then turned his attention to Beauty. "As my assistant, Miss

Tremain, your duties are simple.” He pointed at James without looking at him. “Find James a hobby, and force him to participate in it.”

Beauty’s eyes widened at the exact same moment his did. “A hobby?” she said faintly, glancing over at Beast before returning her attention back to Waverly. “Seriously?”

“He can’t be,” James snapped, glaring at the older man. “I’m not a child, Waverly. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Waverly met his glare with one just as fierce. “What you need is someone to shake you back into living, and I no longer have the energy to beat my head against your obstinacy and still keep the house and accounts in proper order.” His gaze snapped over to Beauty. “I don’t care what the hobby is. Hunting, botany, needlepoint ... as long he does *something* other than brood and destroy unattractive statuary.”

Beauty’s brow furrowed as she attempted to regroup mentally. “What standards are you using to determine a hobby? Does he have to do whatever it is for a certain amount of time, or will it be enough if he starts looking more ...” She glanced over at Beast again, a silent apology in her eyes. “... cheerful?”

“I will accept less brooding, though I draw the line at the statues.” Utterly composed again, he smoothed his hands down the front of his jacket as if straightening an imaginary wrinkle. “His family’s taste was abhorrent, but eventually we’ll run out of statuary and he’ll start moving on to the good furniture.”

“I could start in on the furniture immediately, if that would help matters,” James cut in, flexing his claws. He could have handled some kind of complicated plot in which Waverly attempted to out-strategize him for his own good, but this was just insulting.

Waverly ignored him, attention still focused on Beauty. “You will have a room, meals, and the previously agreed upon salary for as long as you need to fulfill your duties.” When she didn’t say anything, he raised an eyebrow at her. “Are we agreed, or shall I have the agency send over someone else?”

She took a deep breath, eyes fixed on James. He refused to meet her gaze, glaring at Waverly in disgusted defiance of the entire mess. Waverly looked right back at him, expression serene in the misplaced certainty that he was right.

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