

ANGEL: IMPRESSIONS  
Chapter One  
by Doranna Durgin

In one reality...

A young Tuingas demon moved respectfully through the special pocket universe it was his honor to maintain. He was slightly small for his clan, but endowed with the usual assortment of limbs and quite a masculine long-nose that he liked to drape back over his shoulder in an affected habit. He said it kept his long-nose out of the dust he often raised while tending the less frequently visited family shrines, but in what served as his heart even he knew that he merely liked tossing the long-nose around.

The demon moved from one family shrine to another within the pocket dimension created and sustained by his people. At this one he checked his protective amulet, buffing it slightly against his leathery skin. Only family members and highly trained priests could withstand the presence of the deathstones without protection, and this particular deathstone was newly arrived, potent not only in its freshness, but because of the demon from which it had come. One of their warriors, and a great hero. His deathstone was a handsome one, a solid oblong with unusually consistent color and texture. A stone the outside world could never fully appreciate...or even survive.

Reassured by the amulet's icy response to his touch, the demon entered the marble-walled shrine, pulling a little red wagon liberated from the human world. As fresh as it was, this shrine would need little in the way of maintenance; he rummaged through the contents of the wagon and withdrew a bright yellow feather duster. Humming a nasal tune through both face-nose and long-nose at once, he applied the duster with enthusiasm, sweeping clean the now-empty stone nooks and crannies that would hold future deathstones for this now-exalted family, and working in toward the single occupied central pedestal. With the wagon trailing behind him, he bent over to

pluck a gum wrapper from the plush shag rug, not the least bit annoyed when his long-nose fell forward. After all, it merely offered him another chance to toss it back over his shoulder.

But he neglected to put aside the feather duster when he reached for his long-nose. In fact, he all but jammed the feather duster up his long-nose in a painful collision that at first seemed to have no particular consequence. He stood mildly stunned, long-nose smarting, his dull black little eyes watering, when he felt the first tingling warning way at the back of both noses. Frantically, he patted down his broad waist belt in search of tissues, horrified at the thought of a sneeze--a doublesneeze--in this quiet, sacred space.

The doublesneeze rose in an inevitable wave of nose-spasm, violent enough to bend him in half. He lost his balance, staggered backwards, and--oh horror--found himself caught in a second spasm, a double doublesneeze right here in the hero's shrine. He fell, kicking the wagon in one direction while his arms windmilled in the other and his head fetched up against something hard.

He lay stunned.

After a moment he whimpered, opened his gummy little eyes, and pulled himself upright. His wagon and his supplies had tipped over, but to his great relief the red paint had not marred any of the marble walls. He heaved a great thankful sigh and crawled over to it, set it upright, and reached for the spilled supplies.

Only then did he realize that the lump on the back of his head had been raised by the warrior's deathstone pedestal.

Only then did he realize the deathstone was gone. Gone from its pedestal, from this shrine, from this pocket dimension. Gone to the outside world Angeles where it would wreak destruction.

Gone to Los Angeles.

#

In another, more familiar reality...

A small rat-like demon clung to the edge of the roof, leaning out over the five-story drop to peer down at the rattling fire escape. "Here!" it squeaked, accidentally spitting in its fear--although its extreme overbite made a certain amount of spitting inevitable in any case. "Take the purse, take it!" It flung a floppy crocheted purse down at its pursuer on the fire escape. "You don't have enough problems in this city, you gotta pick on a little guy like me?" And with an agitated twitch, it scampered off across the flat roof.

The man on the fire escape caught the purse neatly in one hand, never hesitating in his pursuit. Dressed in black topped by a sweeping leather duster, moving with purpose and not satisfied with the simple recovery of the stolen purse, he jogged up the noisy metal stairs and leapt up to the roof, landing in a graceful crouch and hesitating only long enough to spot the fleeing thief. Crunching steps on tarry roof gravel traced his pursuit, the duster flapping out behind him as he gained on the creature. Dark hair, pale skin, the hint of a fang...

The little demon gave a squeak of fear and redoubled its scuttling efforts, heading straight for the opposite edge of the roof. "It was only a purse!" it cried back over its shoulder. "Gimme a break here!"

But they both knew that wasn't going to happen. And they knew which of them was faster--he who closed on the demon with such intent, prepared to make sure this particular creature menaced no more of Los Angeles' unsuspecting tourists.

Except the demon reached the edge of the roof a few precious steps before its pursuer, and launched itself out into the darkness--with no strength or speed inherent in its scabbling flight, but not needing those things. It spread its arms and legs, revealing a flap of skin running from scrawny elbow to knobby knee, and sailed lightly down to the next roof barely one story below.

It wasn't such a big jump, not for a vampire running full speed and full strength. But the black-clad pursuer put on the brakes, stumbling to an abrupt halt that left him teetering at the edge. His coat billowed around him, his silhouette barely visible against the night sky.

On the roof below, the ratty demon cavorted, dancing his victory and flinging all manner of rude gestures at the hero somehow stymied by the narrow space between the buildings and the minor drop between roofs.

The hero turned away from the display. The swirling duster revealed a lanky form not quite at home in the sleek black clothing, not quite as muscular or athletic as the image his clothing conveyed. His dark, spiky-moussed hair had no highlights, a bad dye job here in this city where the inhabitants were finely attuned to such things. And even with the glint of fang at his lip, his forehead remained perfectly human...at least, to those who would know the difference.

He resettled his glasses on his nose and went to return the purse.

## Chapter 2

Angel's bedroom lay swathed in a false twilight created by yellowing newspapers covering every inch of window glass. Angel himself lay swathed in twisted bedcovers, restless...frowning in his sleep. Marginally aware that something reached into his privacy, touching him. Whispering to him.

Nebulous dreams of uncomfortable passions. Exposed throats, warm pulses, an angry young man once named Liam now made powerful. Touched by those things familiar, Angelus stirs. Caressed by gentle waves of dark power...

Angelus stirs.

#

Pencil in hand, Cordelia Chase put aside her magazine and leaned over the lobby desk of the abandoned--mostly abandoned--Hyperion Hotel that Angel Investigations called headquarters and that Angel himself called home, greeting him as he came down the lobby stairs with his not-an-early-evening-person face on. Barely twilight and he was up already...not likely to be cheery.

Just the time for some distinctly cheery news. "A woman came by. She wanted to thank you again for getting her purse back from some rat-thing."

He lifted a hand in acknowledgment and shuffled past to the fridge behind the front counter, evidently ready for a second serving of breakfast blood. Definitely not all there, with the cuffs of his black jeans dragging below his loafer heels and his grey sweater rumped. Cordelia was willing to bet he hadn't even fastened the snap to his jeans, and she was never wrong about Things Clothes.

Men. They were all alike, even the vampire versions.

After a gulp, he said, "Didn't see any rat-things last night."

"She sure seemed to be full of appreciation." Cordelia retrieved her magazine and filled in one of the five-letter words of the painfully simple crossword puzzle. "Considering that her appreciation came with a check attached and all. I don't understand why she kept muttering

about not being able to find the main office, though."

He merely grunted, and she gave him a sharp look. "You're not having trouble sleeping again, are you?"

Except she didn't mean trouble sleeping, she meant trouble with dreams, like when Darla had invaded his nights, luring him back toward the Angelus side of his nature and driving a rift between Angel and the gang at Angel Investigations. And maybe he hadn't let Angelus out, not really...but Cordelia could still feel the hurt of his inexplicable rejection, and that was bad enough. So no, I don't really mean trouble sleeping.

Angel flinched ever so slightly. He, too, remembered. He lowered his cheap plastic tumbler and gave her a look with more thought behind it. Thought, and perhaps a little bit of guilt.

"Not a great expression," she told him bluntly.

He hesitated, then said, "It's just a mood. Isn't a guy entitled to a mood now and then?"

She drummed the pen against the counter and considered him. Yes, a definite hint of guilt. And Angel was a take-charge, do what had to be done, whatever had to be done kind of guy. Lots of remorse over things he couldn't change, things he'd done, lots of regret...but the guilt? Guilt meant something he was afraid he might do. Time to worry. "Nope," she said decisively. "No moods. Not for you."

He looked a little hurt, but Cordelia held firm. There were some luxuries that a guy walking around with a wantonly evil vampire personality lurking beneath his soul just couldn't take. Flirting with darkness...that would be one of them.

But then he realized what she'd said a moment earlier and latched onto it with not so subtle relief. "A check? We got money?"

She retrieved it from the computer desk and waved it at him. "Money," she confirmed. "Think paycheck! And I'm going to go right over to her bank and cash it."

He drained the tumbler and left it sitting on the counter. "Cordy...the money's not ours. I was here last night. No rat things. The woman's mistaken me for someone else."

She gave him an incredulous look. "And how likely is that?"

He shrugged. "How likely is anything that happens in this city?"

She had to admit he had a point there. She looked wistfully at the check. "I suppose I could hold it for a couple of days..."

Wesley wandered out of his office--once the hotel manager's office, with a huge window

and a solemn decor of dusty green and dark wood. He was in his rare rugged look today--a day's worth of seal-brown beard, a flannel shirt with rolled sleeves...a year ago Cordelia would have bet he didn't own a flannel shirt. But the refined features of his face were as serious as ever, as were grey eyes that often seemed to turn dark with the solemn wisdom of someone who knows all the things that can go wrong with the world.

Well, most of them. There was always something new and improved going on.

Wesley jammed his spiffy new black lacquered chopsticks into the contents of a Chinese take-out carton with finality as he swallowed a last mouthful.

Angel winced at the stabbing gesture. "Kind of rude, don't you think?"

Unaffected, Wes barely glanced at the utensils. "They're hardly up to the standards set by Buffy's Mr. Pointy. I think you have nothing to fear. Now what's this about money?"

"We have some," Cordelia said, and waved the check again, giving Angel an accusing look. "He wants me to give it back, as if anyone could possibly mistake him for somebody else. Plus he's all moody, which as we know never bodes well."

Angel stood at the end of the counter and said with exasperation, "Cordelia, I'm just--"

The main lobby doors burst open--an event that should have happened with much less frequency, but as it was startled none of them. A man ran into the lobby, stumbling over the step down as he tried to take in all directions at once. He wore a rumpled old overcoat over a hounds tooth sweater-vest and polyester pants that should have been burned a decade earlier, and Cordelia immediately assigned him the clothes Fashion Police for the day. The man raked a frantic gaze across them, looking and not finding. He hesitated upon reaching Angel and almost imperceptibly shook his head in rejection. "I need to find Angel," he blurted.

#

The young Tuingas demon hadn't waited for the priests to ponder his punishment; he hadn't even waited for them to find out about the missing deathstone. The sneeze, the fall, the physical touch-chain of his amulet to the deathstone--only two degrees of separation!--he'd known what had happened. He'd known he was responsible. And he'd known what had to be done...and what would happen to Los Angeles if he didn't do it.

He took it upon himself to leave the peaceful pocket dimension where his particular branch of the Tuingas clan spent most of their time, and he entered the human world to find the deathstone.

Tracking the stone hadn't been hard at all. Their pocket dimension was anchored in Los

Angeles; anyone or thing emerging from it generally found themselves in one of the unfathomable concrete river channels veining the city. This fact combined with the seasonal floods made the Tuingas clan very much a set of look-before-you-leap demons.

Look-before-you-leap wasn't a luxury that the young Tuingas had had. So he'd leapt, and he'd landed on hard concrete, and he'd followed the stone's distinctive emanations, knowing he had very little time.

He might not be a priest, but he was in the shrines on a daily basis. He'd learned well enough what would happen should an exposed stone not be recovered. Removed from its protective shrine and its protective pocket dimension, the stone's emissions--normally experienced only by prepared visitors under priestly supervision--would flood this city's demons with the very impression left on the deathstone. In this case, by warrior, fighting at peak emotion for a just cause. A warrior who'd left impressions of his death fury, his intent to avenge the cause...all the passions and motivations of a warrior in his last fight...moments before it became his last fight.

Oh, why this one? the young demon moaned to himself. This potent new stone, so strong it had tasteful warning signs inscribed upon its pedestal. So potent that no unprotected demon would be able to resist the wave after wave of emotion it emitted. And the deathstone itself--activated by the warrior's death, kept in the shrine for its own purity and protection--would be just as sensitive to the resulting mood of the city.

The stone would transmit its anger. The L.A. demons would receive and assimilate that anger, acting on it...and creating more emotions in return, emotions the stone would absorb and retransmit, until the feedback loop became too much for either the local demons or the stone to bear.

The young Tuingas didn't even want to think about that. He wanted to be gone from here long before the feedback became strong enough to express itself in the city. And so he'd been heartened to track the stone as easily as he had, from the one who'd found it and the next day put it in a suburban garage sale as a unique garden stone, to the one who'd bought it for a paltry sum, having no notion of the pricelessness of the deathstone but just savvy enough to think that his friend, a collector of odd artifacts, might be interested in it.

For an equally paltry sum and with a determinedly casual expression, that friend had indeed acquired the stone. With just as much determination but no opportunity, the Tuingas lurked and waited and stalked and...

Waited.

And the collector had known. The young Tuingas could see by his actions, how he carefully and quickly packed the stone up in its odd bag. But the man's admiration for the stone had nothing to do with its intangible value to the Tuingas...the lingering presence of a hero and loved one. There was no respect in his face. There was only greed. To judge by the man's other such transactions, he would keep the stone only long enough to find a wealthy buyer, either not knowing or not caring about the consequences. Or figuring, as many humans seem to, that somehow he would be the exception to the rule.

The young Tuingas grew frustrated. Limited to hiding in shadows and waiting for opportunity, he followed the man to a temporary cluster of dwellings...and there he ran into real trouble. Where the unfamiliar nature of L.A. had not deterred him, where his lack of sophistication had not discouraged him, the man's wise precautions--no doubt a newly minted amulet of his own--stopped the Tuingas short.

The young demon couldn't enter the building. Not from the roof or the windows or the so obvious door. He tried and he tried again, and found himself inexorably repelled. The man had visitors...people bearing food and messages and then another man, younger, all dressed in black and awkwardly keeping to shadows. But for the Tuingas there was no entry, so he waited. He watched. He wondered what the priests had said when they found his crudely scrawled note of intent to reclaim the deathstone, and he wondered what would happen to him when he finally returned. He'd already lost weight. His long-nose hung limp and unhappy.

But eventually the man had emerged.

The young Tuingas had followed him.

#

"I need to find Angel," the man blurted.

He's crazy, Cordelia decided at once, and applied her politely interested but really not face for him.

"I know I'm not supposed to come here, that he likes to keep his street people under cover. But he's not at the main office address he gave me and I need to see him--"

"Calm yourself," Wesley said, glancing at Angel with wry bemusement as he set aside his take-out carton. "We'll try to help you, but--"

Angel looked at the man who had so decisively and unexpectedly dismissed him and then down at himself. He straightened his sweater, surreptitiously tugging his jeans up to fasten the

snap.

I knew it. But Cordelia savored the private triumph only for an instant. She gestured at Angel. "But this is Ange--"

The man waved a hand in vehement denial. A bowling bag weighed the other hand down, a battered old thing with handles that barely seemed to be attached. "I know all about the look-alike he sends out on the street to confuse those who might be following him," he said. "Don't try that charade on me. I need the real Angel, and I need him--"

The doors crashed open. Really crashed, as in right off the hinges. Even Angel blinked at that, and at the distinctly inhuman creature that bounded through them, heading straight for the desperate man and his bowling ball.

"--right now!" cried the man, his voice raising an octave. Maybe two.

"I'll fake it," Angel muttered, and put himself between man and demon as the man dove for one of the lobby columns, clinging to it from behind. The creature hesitated, long enough to offer a brief impression of alligator skin, a flexible fifth appendage swung neatly over its shoulder, and beady black eyes focused entirely on his prey.

"Hey," Angel said, annoyed. "I'm right here in front of you. And I gotta tell you, it bothers me when demons forget to knock."

It saw him then. It reached for him with every apparent intent of tossing him aside and Angel responded with every apparent intent of holding ground. The demon used its weight to shove Angel back and back again, up against the column behind which the man quivered--and not so incidentally beside which Cordelia had been standing. It pushed Angel right off his feet--and up--to dangle against the column.

Cordelia's anger flared. Was that any way to behave in someone else's hotel? She hauled back and kicked the demon. She kicked it in the shin--or what she thought was a shin--she kicked it in the thigh--ditto--and she kicked it in the groin--definitely not sure about that one. It didn't appear to notice, and, panting, she staggered back to reconsider.

At the far lobby wall, Wesley flung open the glass-front door to the weapons cabinet and grabbed something sharp at random; he tossed it to Cordelia. She made no attempt to catch it--not until it clattered to the floor and she could identify the not-sharp parts of the short curving sword. Then she scooped it up and slapped it into Angel's open hand. Just like a scrub nurse, she thought. Perfect for a guest role on E.R. That is, if they could lure George Clooney back.

In one smooth motion, Angel swept the blade deeply across the demon's mid-section.

The demon instantly dropped him, and before Angel could get back to his feet or Cordelia could catch her breath or Wesley could arrive with his own weapon of choice, the thing let out a garbled wail of agonized defeat and collapsed in upon itself.

And continued to collapse in on itself, so by the time they gathered to stand circled around it, there was little left but a mound of faintly hissing goo. As they watched, it bubbled slightly and settled even further.

"May I just say," Cordelia began, waving her hand under her nose in a futile attempt to dispel the smell of the thing, "Ew."

"Ew," Angel agreed, and looked at Wesley, who gave the slightest of shrugs.

"Ew," he said, but of course he had to add, "Indeed," just so he could sound like his usual scholarly, stiff-upper-lipped self.

Gunn entered through the broken lobby door wearing his nothing surprises me anymore expression, which totally went with the shaved head and the blocky, oversized shirt that hid too much of what Cordelia had always considered very nice shoulders, not to mention jeans that could have been tighter for her tastes. He'd given up on the skullcap bandana lately...probably couldn't keep it from turning his underwear pink in the laundry. He walked in backwards to assess the damage from the inside, brow raised. He turned around as he reached their little circle, his feet just out of the danger zone. "Whoa," he said, wrinkling his nose in offense. "Not your mother's perfume."

"No," Cordelia said grimly. Typical day so far--moody Angel, inexplicable identity crisis, and dissolving demons. "Not your mother's pile of goo, either. I mean, how rude. It's not going to be easy to identify that."

"Best make a sketch while it's still fresh in your mind," Wesley suggested.

"Also not an image I want to contemplate," Cordelia told him, but went to grab the notebook they kept for such things--mostly so she could sketch things from her visions. Goo Demon apparently wasn't vision-worthy.

Angel turned to the man with the bowling ball, who looked as if he hoped they'd forgotten about him. "We need to talk."

As Cordelia slapped her notebook on the counter and started to sketch, thinking wistfully of all those high school art classes she'd skipped, the man eased around the edge of the room. And as Cordelia decided there probably hadn't been anything in those classes that would apply to drawing demons anyway, the man edged toward the broken door and escape.

"Talking." Angel's gaze followed the man's retreat. "As in answering questions. We have plenty of questions to choose from."

"Identikit," Cordelia murmured, sketching away. Erasing. Erasing more. "A demon Identikit. That's what we need."

"I do have a new guide," Wesley said, with deceptive lack of reaction to the slyly outward-bound visitor. "Fairly recent, and it uses the same basic identification template as the Newcomb's Wildflower Guide. I'll see if I can dig it up."

Their escaping client was so close to the door that he probably thought he had it made. But more smoothly, more quickly than the man could possibly anticipate, Angel stepped in front of him. Inches away, as though he'd been there all along and simply appeared. "That's not talking, that's leaving."

Ordinary words, but there was something in his voice that made Cordelia look up from her work, startled. Angel loomed over the man, and she would have said he was all but fang-face.

"The fight's over, Angel," Wesley said, a note of worry in his voice that made Cordelia think he'd seen the same thing.

Or maybe the fight wasn't over. For yet another figure burst through the abused lobby doors--except this one had apparently been shopping in Angel's closet. Of the same height only gawkier, his hair darkened by a bad home dye-job, his glasses slightly askew, his face a caricature of dismay, his entire appearance a caricature of Angel. In one swift look he took in the scene before him.

There was a thick moment of silence.

Then he muttered what could only have been an extremely bad word, turned on his heel, and burst right back out the doors and into the night.

The fellow with the bowling ball cried, "No! Wait!" and dodged around Angel, breaking into a run as he called out after the most recent arrival-departure. "Angel, wait! We have to talk!"

"Yes indeed," Angel muttered to himself, his face full of grim. "That's just exactly what we're going to do." And out the door he went.

Cordelia reached for the check from the rat-thing woman and flicked it thoughtfully against her fingers. "This is starting to make a little more sense." Mistaken identity, Angel sorta-look-alike...

"Do you think so?" Wesley asked. "Because, frankly, I don't think it makes any sense at all."

"Don't look at me," Gunn said. "All I know about is this pile of stinky goo here."

"Whose day is it?" Wesley said, but there was resignation in his voice. As there well might be--even if it had been Cordelia's day to catch the lobby messes, she wasn't about to get any closer to this one. Besides, she had sketches to make.

"I know dam sure it's not the guy who didn't make the mess," Gunn said. "Besides, I've got places to be."

"Perhaps," Wesley said with exaggerated weariness, "you might be so good as to see if there's anything you can do with the door. Just to hold it for tonight. Not," he added dryly, "that it seems to have been any good at keeping people out in the first place."

"Or in," Cordelia murmured, looking at the doors as if she could see right through the remains to whatever Angel had encountered when he caught up with the man, the bowling ball bag, and the poor imitation of Angel himself. "I wonder if we'll ever know what that was all about."

Wesley headed for the cleaning supplies, grimly rolling his sleeves even higher. "I suspect it'll go down as an inexplicable moment. Those do have their charm, after all. The demon's dead, the potential client has run away...the world was never in danger."

Cordelia frowned at him. How much more could you possibly tempt the Fates than by suggesting the world was safe?

Gunn gave a wise shake of his head. "Bowling night. Worse than a full moon."

#

Angel should have been able to catch up with them. He should have been able to catch up with them, do barrel rolls around them, and cut them off short, all while wearing a smile.

If he'd been paying attention.

He eased to a halt in the middle of an alley, feeling more than a little foolish. He hadn't the foggiest idea when they'd zigged and he hadn't. By now they'd probably zagged as well and weren't anywhere to be found.

Because he hadn't been paying attention. He'd been caught up in an unexpected anger, pouring it into the speed and effort of the run until the run became the point and not the chase.

He stood in the middle of the alley and looked at his hands--they trembled--and then ran fingers over his face, confirming what he already knew. Fang-face, right out here in public. He

took a breath--or what would have been a breath, if he'd actually needed to breathe--and felt the gruesome features ease back into normal flesh. What was that about? Temper over a bad vampire wannabe? An Angel wannabe?

He didn't think so. He recalled the dark thoughts that had haunted his sleep and then clung to him beyond waking, and he thought there was more to his reaction...even as he hoped that there wasn't. But now... he was on his guard. He wouldn't let this happen again.

Especially not where the gang could see.

He looked at his hands again--the trembling had stopped--and then jammed them in his duster pockets. He didn't feel like facing them right now, and he really didn't feel like explaining how he'd lost his quarry. On the other hand...

On the other hand, they needed him to prove he was dependable right now. That he wasn't going to--again--run off and do his own thing, shutting them off. Hurting them. The memory of Cordelia's pained expression as he helped her off the client's kitchen floor and asked if she was all right, the uncharacteristically unforgiving tone of her voice as she said, "No. You hurt me." He didn't ever want to face that again.

So he stared down the dark alley a moment longer, exchanged a long glance with a wise-looking cat, and headed back for the hotel. Being dependable. Responsible.

Faking it.

#

Angel entered through the courtyard doors, avoiding Gunn at work on the front entrance. Inside, Cordelia sat straight-backed at the computer, entering search words into their fast-growing demon database. She didn't look happy. Without looking away from the screen, she spoke to the lobby at large and said, "This is getting me nowhere. It can't find a fifth appendage unless I can give it a name, and I have no idea what that thing was. I'm not even sure I want to know. And what did it want with that man, anyway? It followed him right here, like a tracking dog or something."

Wesley's voice came from the lobby, down near the floor. Somewhere behind the round booth unit where the demon had finally gone down. "Unless Angel comes back with answers, that demon is our only lead."

"I could get a vision," Cordelia said, half with a wince and half with hope. The visions exacted an worrisome toll. A rising toll.

"The demon's our only lead," Angel said flatly, announcing himself in the process.

"Oh?" Wesley stood, surprised by Angel's presence--or perhaps just surprised that he'd had returned alone. Wesley held a black garbage bag as far away from himself as he could.

It looked full.

In his other hand--a latex-gloved hand, one of the elbow-length gloves available through large animal veterinary supply companies--he held an odd, large lump of something. An actual clue? Or just leftover demon...

"What's that?" Angel said, nodding at the lump as he moved deeper into the lobby.

Wesley glanced at it. "Part of this," he said, hefting the bag slightly. "I thought I might take a closer look." On the floor beside the roundchair was a gallon of Nature's Miracle--Stain and Odor Remover for Pet Accidents! Wesley gave it a skeptical expression. "After I break out another gallon of cleanser."

Gunn left the partially secured doors to look down into the lobby--to look at Angel, specifically. "No luck?"

Angel gave the slightest of shrugs, but knew it wouldn't be that easy.

"Hey, the way you charged out of here, I figured you'd bring 'em back with tread marks." Gunn hefted the hammer he held, obviously imagining what he might have done with it.

"I charged one way, they charged another," Angel said simply.

"Huh," Cordelia said, sounding very much like she suspected there was more to it.

There was, of course. The anger that nudged at him even now. Anger he couldn't give into...couldn't even reveal hints of. But he could give her a dark look; she was used to that.

"Don't be a poor loser," she said smartly--but as he'd hoped, he'd distracted her. Banter was safe ground, and if her eyes--luxuriously tilted dark eyes set above strong cheekbones--lingered on him as if she might see something revealing, soon enough she returned to her work. She made a face at the computer monitor and said, "This is a waste of time, guys. Wesley, where's that book you were talking about?"

"Hold on," he said, and walked off with his nastiness-in-a-bag, taking the shortest route to the alley and their garbage bin. He came back with a bowl, put the lump of something in it, and splashed the stain and odor remover over top of it. Generously.

"Nice conversation piece," Cordelia said when he put it on the lobby counter. "Ugh, not there. It stinks!"

"It should be better shortly," he said. "Just let me wash my hands."

"You were wearing gloves," she pointed out.

"Humor me," he told her, and disappeared into hotel counter staff bathroom. When he came back out he was drying his hands. "I believe I know how Lady MacBeth must have felt," he said, and tossed the towel over his shoulder to duck into his office. "Here we are," he said upon re-emerging. He held out a book and Cordelia left her desk to reach for it, casting a wary eye on the Lump of Something on her way by.

"It looks like a stone," she said. "But it's a really ugly stone."

"As stones go," Gunn said, and smirked.

Both Wesley and Angel cast him frowns, and Gunn shrugged. "I'm a guy," he said. "So sue me. Anyway, it's not like we have anything to work with here. Maybe Wes is right and it's not worth the trouble."

Wesley protested, "I don't recall saying--"

"Inexplicable moment," Gunn said, unmoved. "The world was never in any danger. In case you ever doubted my memory."

A little gathering of his brow gave away Wesley's reluctance to actually take such a thing as safety for granted. "All the same--"

Cordelia ignored them all, flipping through the demon book with dismay. "Look at this!" she said, a big frown on a mouth that was really meant for smiling. "I don't even know where to start."

"It's quite simple." Wesley flipped it open to the beginning pages. "It's just like a flower guide, or a tree guide. You started with the broadest level of characteristics--for instance, does it go on all fours or stand upright--and narrow it down. How many limbs, how many eyes...see this category, for instance. Two symmetrical limbs or three whorled limbs--"

"Four bi-symmetrical limbs and a waving thing," Cordelia said with certainty. "It's that waving thing that keeps tripping me up." She heaved a great dramatic sigh and took the book. "Okay, I'll keep trying. You know, just in case it's actually the end of the world. Again."

A troubled look crossed Wesley's face; he squinched his nose ever so slightly. "I think I'll just wash my hands once more."

And suddenly Angel couldn't deal with the whole post-attack scene, all this casual normality. Not with his anger buzzing around inside his head like a saw, echoing off itself to create a reverberation that kept building and building and--

"I'm outta here," he said.

"Oh, good," Wesley said, entirely clueless. "See if you can track those two down."

Angel didn't bother to correct him. Let them think he was out hunting their interlopers, finding the Angel impersonator--the sudden image of a Las Vegas full of Angel impersonators nearly did him in right then and there--when he was really simply not being there. At his own hotel. In the middle of his human friends, trying to hide his vampire feelings.

He went to Caritas.

#

"We were too late," the elder priest intoned in a voice of doom that vibrated audibly in his long-nose. "The young one is dead, and now we're missing two deathstones."

Six under-priests huddled around the empty pedestal, resplendent in their broad sash-belts but reserved and tense in posture. One of them said, "The young one's deathstone is entirely raw. It must be recovered at once."

"This may not be as difficult as feared," the elder said. "While the warrior's stone is in the hands of one who protects it and hopes to gain from it, I have reports that the young one's stone resides with those who lack all understanding of its true nature. It will not be as well-protected."

Another under-priest tugged nervously at his sash and said, "What of the families? Do they know anything yet?"

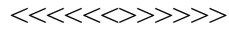
The elder priest shook his head--a broad gesture indeed on a creature with a neck so thick. "All are under the impression that we're remodeling this area in honor of the new stone. The young one is assumed to be involved. But we cannot keep up this deception for long."

"Not when you consider the consequences of the warrior's stone going unprotected in the middle of that tightly-packed city," said the first under-priest. He was a strong individual, and he stood quietly--not fiddling with his sash or tugging the tops of his stubby round ears or even cracking his toes. "I judge we have very little time. I would like to volunteer to go to the city. I have some familiarity with it. I'll bring back the young one's stone."

"That must be first priority," the elder agreed. "Both because of the stone's raw condition and the likelihood of quick success. I intend for another of you to keep track of the warrior's stone in the meantime. When you," and he nodded at the first under-priest, "have returned with the raw stone, you will go back out to work together to retrieve the warrior's stone."

The under-priests politely clicked their teeth together in acquiescence.

But none of them thought it would be quite that simple. And all of them knew the trouble was already starting.



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