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ANGEL: FEARLESS
ISBN 0-689-86431-0

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Chapter One
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Cordelia Chase contemplated the enemy.

It stared back, unblinking, a red and white floating eyeball of a target.

Someone had drawn a smiley face on it.

Her gaze slid over to Angel; he looked oblivious.

He did it, she decided.

"It would be more impressive if it were one of those hovering target 'droids from Star Wars," she said, eyeing the hapless fishing bobber dangling from a basement ceiling pipe beside the black, worn workout bag. "You know, dodging my own personal light saber. I could do a number on demons if I had a light saber. I wonder what color blade...?" Maybe a nice peach...

"So far the target's pretty safe even without the dodging feature." He crossed his arms, looking mighty Irish this evening in a black cable-patterned sweater. Something substantial enough to fit in with warm-blooded humans, and yet not so bulky as to hamper the movement of a vampire who didn't get cold anyway.

No, not bulky at all. Just right.

If you like the centuries-old vampire-with-a soul look, Cordelia told herself.

At the moment, she didn't. She didn't like it at all--no matter how it suited the gloom of the Hyperion Hotel basement. Plastic flowers--her plastic flowers--could hardly compete with the soldierly line-up of industrial mops and buckets under the stairs, the unpainted block walls, the randomly stacked furniture rejects under yellow incandescent lighting. She gestured abruptly at the fishing bobber. "I'll never have to defend myself against something like this."

"Maybe not," he said. "Or then again...who knows. But you need the precision practice either way."

She couldn't argue that. It only made her crankier, and she didn't like the feeling. She aimed a little of it at him in a scowl and tried to decide how to distract him from this particular training exercise.

Turned out he was distracted all on his own, lingering noticeably closer to the exit of the hotel basement. Or rather, closer to the exit to the exit, leading from this initial cavern of cement block and piping and wire grates through the strange passages beneath the hotel and finally out into the sewers. He met her inquiring gaze and said, "The locals are getting restless."

"That's never good." Cordy checked the short, saucy ponytail gathered high at the back of her head and found it still secured to her precise satisfaction. "Especially when I'm pretty sure you mean local demons." She slanted a look at him.

Angel didn't answer, which bothered Cordelia not at all. Sometimes he did that. She returned her attention to the inevitable. The happy-faced bobber. No, she decided. The leering bobber.

She'd warmed up. She'd done her stretching, along with every other thing that would put off the inevitable: facing her complete lack of--

She turned, planted a foot, chambered her other leg and let fly a perfect side kick, missing the bobber completely.

--Precision. Control. Ability to hit the bad guys where she wanted to hit them.

"You're trying too hard," Angel said. He stalked around the basement, absently tapping the bobber with a quick one-two flick of a punch. He hit it, of course.

"Trying too hard at what?"

Cordy glanced up with surprise, finding the rest of the gang--Wesley Wyndam-Pryce, Charles Gunn, and Winnifred Burkle--lingering near the top of the aged wooden stairs that ran down the basement wall and waiting for the answer to Wesley's question. Well, most of the gang. Angel's infant son Conner slept under the watchful gaze of his anagogic empathy demon nanny, Lorne.

Angel glanced up with no surprise at all.

No, of course not. Not with that vampire hearing. But he could have warned her--

"Never mind 'at what,'" she said. "Let's talk about the restless locals."

"Yeah," said Gunn. "I noticed that."

"Noticed what, exactly?" Fred asked. Having come out of hiding to prove herself as one of the gang, not to mention actually painting over the hysterical scribbles that passed for a journal all over her room's walls, she still didn't venture out quite enough to be on the forefront of demony action.

Cordelia told her, "Noticed that you look like the Brady Bunch lined up on the stairs. Which is reason enough to move, if you ask me."

Gunn must have thought so too; he made a hasty descent into the basement. But he didn't waste repartee; he looked at Angel with that slight lift to his jaw that meant business and said, "Demons on the move out there...they're running from something."

"We're all running from something," Cordelia heard herself mutter, but quickly hushed as Wesley looked in her direction. It would be hard to explain her mood when she didn't entirely understand it herself.

Just...too many changes. In her life. In her.

Angel said, "I'm going hunting. Anyone with me?"

"Yo," Gunn said, straightening his shoulders a little under his orange long-sleeved tee and indigo vest. "Let's see what's got these demons full of run."

"Later, perhaps," Wes said. "If you're still out. I'm in the middle of a tricky bit of research."

"Later," Cordelia said, and did not add I'm in the middle of a tricky bit of mood.

"Later," Fred said, tugging a little at one of her usual too-small tops, one with just a little lace around the capped sleeves and highly scooped neckline. The girl must do all her shopping in the junior department; Cordy thought it was about time for a woman-to-woman on that subject. But then Fred threw Cordelia a desperate kind of look and Cordy understood; she saw the fear.

Fred wasn't quite ready for the kind of hunting expedition Angel and Gunn could run.

And looking at Fred, Cordy also saw herself. Saw her very own conflicted mood and recognized it with a little shock.

Fear.

Fred trailed Wesley back into the lobby. She discovered that Cordelia trailed her, still wearing the strange expression she'd acquired as they all spoke in the basement.

Fred liked the basement. But then, she had a certain fondness for the sewers, too, leftover from the time in her cave sanctuary on Pylea. To her such places meant safety, and a place to hide. And because Fred was so familiar with hiding, she was also familiar with Cordelia's strange expression. As Wes retrieved a book from the hotel's curving green reception counter, walking absently to his office as he read, Cordelia crossed behind him to snag a coffee mug and the Mr. Coffee carafe that was snuggled in behind the counter.

Fred sat on the first tier of the split stairway that led to the second floor, hugging her knees in a gawky way. In honor of the late fall season, the courtyard doors behind her were closed, but she really needed to find a sweater to ward off the chill that had snuck in. She looked at Cordelia and said, "You're awful quiet tonight."

"I suppose that's better than just plain being awful," Cordelia said, but her heart wasn't in the comeback. She left her coffee on the counter, untouched.

"It's okay, you know," Fred said, wisely.

That got Wesley's attention; he looked up from the book. He'd only made it as far as the greyish upside-down mushroom of a seating arrangement, anyway. It was the only grey thing in a luxuriously spacious lobby of an old-brass green and dark burnt-orange color scheme broken only by actual living green plants and silver-scrolled torchiere lamps. Some of the lobby chairs, tucked away with ottomans and lamps into the oddest corners, tipped closer to red than to burnt orange, creating a combination that hurt Fred's eyes. Everyone else seemed to take them for granted. They'd come with the hotel...ergo, they belonged here.

"And what would that be? The thing that's okay?" Cordelia asked, her lips thinning as it apparently occurred to her that Fred might actually answer, and might actually have it right.

Fred knew she did. "Being afraid," she said. "Some of the things that go on with us, you'd have to be crazy not to be afraid." She rubbed her knee and added thoughtfully, "I've been both, of course. Often at the same time. But here, not so much. Anymore."

Cordelia admitted to nothing. "But are you?" she said, making it a challenge with that one arching eyebrow.

Fred gave a little laugh, genuinely amused, and fiddled with one of the long, wavy

ponytails fastened behind each ear. "Sure," she said. "You'd think not, what with being rescued from Pylea and facing my folks and you know, just in general actually admitting to myself that everything that happened, happened--so's I can put it behind me. And what with not being a cow here in this dimension, and not being chased for being an escaped cow at that. But you and me and Wesley and Charles and Angel...we know more than most folks ever dream of when it comes to what's out there in this world. We know exactly what there is to fear. And we face it every day." Then she thought of how she'd declined to join the night's prowl and looked down at her hands and added, "Well, some more than others. With the facing part of it, I mean."

"What makes you think I'm afraid?" Cordelia said, and now both eyebrows were raised as she finally took a sip of coffee.

Fred was not to be deterred, not in this thing about which she knew so much. "'Cause you're pretending you're not."

"Come now, Cordelia," Wesley said, breaking into the conversation, although of course he automatically put a finger in the book to save his place. "We're all afraid of something. And things around here have been especially hairy of late. It hasn't been so long since we almost lost you."

Cordelia shrugged, and the loose, cropped T-shirt she wore slipped over one shoulder. "But you didn't, did you?" she said. "As it happens, I am just fine. Finer, even, because you know there's a big pre-holiday blow-out at the market, right? It starts tomorrow, and boy am I ready. Everything I own seems to have gore stains on it." She put her coffee mug down. "Now where's Lorne got Conner? I think it's time I had some baby moments."

She said it as if the conversation were over, and Fred pointed mutely up the stairs, meaning Angel's rooms--as if Cordelia hadn't known that in the first place. But Fred knew the conversation wasn't over, that being afraid was never over. And that you couldn't run from it, that the closest you could get to stopping it was to turn around and run right at it.

Screaming.

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