

PRISONER'S KEY

A Charmed Fanfiction by AmandaK

*"Like a prisoner who has his own key,
I can't escape until you love me"*
[Wham! - Freedom, written by George Michael, 1984]

Chapter 1

Pale, thick mist drifted through the halls and chambers of the Elders' headquarters. It muffled sounds and painted everything with a white, surreal light. Except where Elder Rhiannon marched through the fog with large paces. There, it swirled angrily as if reluctant to part before her. Thin, white tendrils quickly reached out and met again as soon as she passed by, like young lovers' hands desiring each other's touch. Most celestial beings who lived here walked slowly, carefully, as if they were unwilling to move and preferred to spend their time deep in thought. Rhiannon didn't have time for such fancy. She had promised to give a lecture to a group of newly arrived whitelighters-to-be and she was running late.

Ania, Rhiannon's aide and a young female whitelighter-in-training who would graduate in a couple of weeks, scurried on the Elder's heels. She was forced to skip a step every three paces to keep up with the taller woman's long strides.

All of a sudden, the mist whirled crazily around them. The air grew heavy and viscous. Ania let out a grunt of surprise. Rhiannon discovered that her feet suddenly moved faster than her upper body and she stumbled, barely keeping upright.

The sensation was gone as abruptly as it had come. The swirls of fog settled more slowly until the tendrils floated through the air again in silent contentment.

"What--what was that?" Ania sounded troubled.

"A spike," Rhiannon answered absently. In her head she was already listing the possible causes. "A sudden burst of magical energy. Something big must have happened." Really big, if they could sense it up here.

She made up her mind and turned to the young woman. "Ania, please extend my apologies to the class. I cannot give my lecture at this moment. It's too important I find out what caused that surge."

"But--"

Rhiannon didn't hear the young whitelighter's protest. She was already marching across the grounds toward her private chambers, once more upsetting the tranquil fog. The burst of magical energy had been incredibly strong; she was convinced it had something to do with those most powerful witches, the Charmed Ones. And that meant it had to do with Cole Turner. These days, it always did.

oOo

"But Phoebe, I thought you *wanted* to vanquish Cole?" Leo was exasperated. Sometimes he just didn't understand these women. His wife remained a mystery to him, and her sisters were even worse.

"I do!" Phoebe plopped down on the couch in front of him. Leo was glad; her pacing back and forth while she ranted had been giving him a headache.

"Then what was the problem? Why didn't you throw the vial?"

"I want him dead on *my* terms, not *his*!" Her eyes flashed. "Leo, he attacked you and Paige so we would do exactly what we did: cook up a potion and try to vanquish him. Who knows what he's up to next?"

"What makes you think he's up to something?"

Phoebe snorted. "Because I know Cole, Leo. He's always up to something. He is *evil*. He has evil plans. We will vanquish him, but not the way he wants us to, or when he wants us to."

"I don't know," Leo said. "That elaborate scheme to get you to vanquish him seems more like the act of a desperate man to me."

He didn't pay attention to Phoebe's vehement denial. Someone was calling him. He cocked his head as if that would help him hear the metaphysical summons better. He frowned. An Elder named Rhiannon wanted to see him right away, in her private quarters? Leo racked his brain. Elder Rhiannon, wasn't she the red-headed, fierce Elder? Always the voice of dissent within the Council? What she could want with him? He really didn't need any more trouble on his plate right now.

"Sorry, Phoebe," he said with a shrug and a dip of his head. He got to his feet. "I have to

go. They want me."

"Now?" Phoebe asked, incredulous. "We are in the middle of a conversation here!"

One-sided tirade would be a more accurate description, Leo thought but he didn't say it out loud. Phoebe was agitated enough without him adding fuel to the flames. "We'll continue this when I get back," he promised. "Tell Piper I had to go see the Elders?"

oOo

"Whitelighter Wyatt. Glad you could heed my call so quickly." Rhiannon sat in a straight-backed chair behind a wooden desk when Leo entered her quarters. Her hood was down and her fiery red hair framed a pale, freckled face. She was a handsome woman, he couldn't help notice. And she had presence. She was definitely someone to be reckoned with. Again, he wondered what this meeting could be about.

"Of course, Elder Rhiannon." He glanced around curiously. He had never visited an Elder's private rooms before and was startled to find the furnishings not much different from any upscale office on Earth. On the right was the desk that Rhiannon sat behind; neat stacks of papers lay in tidy rows upon it. It even featured a laptop computer. To the left was a small sitting area, with two easy chairs and a low coffee table. Rhiannon gestured for him to take a seat in one of the chairs before she walked around the desk and joined him.

"How's your wife, Piper?" she asked. "I hear you and she are expecting?"

Leo blinked. "Uh, yes, we are. Piper's fine. A little nervous about giving birth, but fine."

"Good." Rhiannon nodded pensively.

Leo wondered where she was going with this conversation. The Elder didn't summon him to make small talk about his family, did she?

"I'm glad things worked out so well," she continued. "You know that the Council had its doubts about this... liaison."

"I do." Leo struggled to keep his face neutral. Describing the Council's resistance to his relationship with Piper as 'having doubts' was like saying Mount Rushmore resembled a sand sculpture. They had had to fight for their love like no other lovers in history ever had. He had even given up his wings for her. At times Leo had despaired that he and

Piper would ever be able to be together but in the end the Council caved and gave them permission to get married. He knew they had set a precedent; a witch marrying her whitelighter had been unthinkable until he took Piper for his wife.

"Sometimes," Rhiannon said, looking off in the distance, "the Council can be so stuck on ancient rules and traditions that we fail to see how the world evolves. How old laws become obsolete, and new arrangements need to be made."

Leo was beginning to get an inkling of the hidden message in Rhiannon's seemingly purposeless small talk. It wasn't hard to decipher it. He knew the female Elder by reputation. She must have been one of those who were responsible for the Council's change of heart regarding him and Piper. And she wanted him to realize it. What he couldn't yet figure out was why.

He didn't have long to wait.

"What do you think of Cole Turner?"

The sudden shift in subject took Leo off guard. "Um... Phoebe thinks he's evil."

Rhiannon gestured impatiently with her right hand. "I know what Phoebe Halliwell thinks about her husband. I've read the reports. I'm asking for *your* opinion, Whitelighter Wyatt. Is Cole Turner irredeemably evil?"

"He did attack Paige. And me..." Leo answered cautiously.

"But?" Rhiannon asked. "I hear a 'but' in there somewhere."

"But I don't believe he really meant to kill us," Leo finished with a sigh. "He provoked the Charmed Ones so they would vanquish him. They tried, but it didn't work."

Rhiannon nodded. "We sensed the power spike all the way up here. It scared Elder Janus immensely." She chuckled at a private memory. Leo could only fathom what it was, but he did have some idea. Janus was a stickler for the rules and quite the opposite in character from Rhiannon. She would have butted heads with the other Elder on more than one occasion. It was very un-Elderish of Rhiannon to find amusement in Janus's fright, and Leo was shocked to discover he found her a refreshing change from the other, more sedate Elders he had dealt with.

"So, Cole effectively tried to commit suicide?"

"Um, yes, I guess you could put it like that." Leo hadn't quite thought of it that way yet,

but things had been pretty hectic. There had been no time for reflection, for trying to figure out what it all meant. If Cole tried to get himself killed on purpose, he had to be pretty desperate. Desperate people could be dangerous. But didn't it also mean that Phoebe was wrong, that Cole wasn't as evil as she made him out to be?

"Would an evil demon willingly seek to be vanquished?" Rhiannon asked. She sounded rhetorical, but Leo answered anyway.

"I suppose not," he said slowly. "I think I can see where you are going with this, Elder Rhiannon." All of a sudden he looked up, remembering something. "He gave up his powers the other week, out of fear he would hurt Phoebe! No, if you ask me do I think Cole is evil, I would have to say no."

Rhiannon gave another nod, deep in thought. Leo waited for her to continue, still not sure what the Elder was up to. The room fell silent.

"I need you to get me in touch with him. I want to make him a proposition," she said at last. "Although the Council doesn't agree with me, I feel that Cole Turner has tried hard enough to redeem himself to deserve a little of our help. Plus, he's a very powerful man. We can use someone like him on our side."

"You want to go against the Council?" Leo gasped. The implications were enormous. An Elder acting against the wishes of her peers was as unthinkable as... as was him marrying Piper!

"I'd rather call it, going *around* the Council. Do you have a problem with that, Whitelighter Wyatt?" Rhiannon raised an amused eyebrow.

Leo swallowed. "I guess not. Um... Can I ask why?" If he were to help out Elder Rhiannon with her rebellious scheme, he would at least like to know the reason. It was his wings on the line, after all.

Apparently, Rhiannon thought so too. She studied him for several long moments, then leaned forward and explained in a low voice: "I wouldn't ask this from you, Leo, if it weren't important. Times are changing. It is no coincidence that the Charmed Ones, prophesized for so long, live in this day and age. Our power to keep the balance is diminishing; the art of witchcraft is vanishing. Less and less witches are being born, and many of those refuse to acknowledge what they are. The ones that do embrace their heritage do not have the strength or skill of their ancestors. As powerful as Cole Turner is, and with the extensive knowledge of the demon world he has? He would be a major asset for us. The truth is, Leo, we need him. And I think he needs us."

Chapter 2

It was almost a week later before Leo had a chance to carry out his clandestine order, much to Rhiannon's chagrin. The Manor was in an uproar when he returned and Leo found himself confronted with an ancient Egyptian demon in search of the perfect body for his lover; Darryl's career was on the line; and to top it all off, an insane Cole created a Catch 22 situation where Piper had to choose which of her sisters would live and which would die.

It wasn't until those issues were resolved and life had returned to a more or less peaceful state, that Leo remembered Rhiannon's instructions. He wasn't certain if Cole was rational enough again though to talk to the Elder, then decided it wasn't for him to decide. He'd let Rhiannon deal with his former brother-in-law.

He orbbed straight into Cole's living room, experiencing a moment of mild surprise that Cole never bothered to put up wards against such unexpected visits.

The room was dark, lit only by the glow of the city lights coming in through the windows. In the gloom, Leo could make out a guillotine standing in a corner. The blade gleamed dully and looked frighteningly sharp. Leo shook his head, muttering to himself where had things so gone wrong. Was there anything he could have done differently, anything that would have changed the outcome? Because no matter how vocal Phoebe announced she was "*over Cole*", the whitelighter knew she was hurting deeply. And he did feel responsible for all the Halliwell girls. They weren't just his charges; they were his family.

"What are you doing here?" Cole's toneless voice reached Leo, forcing the regrets to the back of his mind.

He peered into the darkness, in the direction of the voice. It took several seconds until his eyes adjusted and he managed to make out a human shape. Cole slumped in an easy chair, his expression hidden beneath the shadow of unshaven skin.

"Did you come to gloat? Or to kill me off?" Cole let out a humorless chortle. "That would be most welcome, you know."

"I know." Leo approached the other man. He wrinkled his nose at an unpleasant smell, which somehow reminded him of P3 on a slow night. "I can't kill you, you know that. Even if you weren't as indestructible as you are, I'm a pacifist, remember? Although, to be honest, I do think you deserve to die, for the choice you tried to force upon Piper." He

failed to keep the anger out of his voice.

"Yeah. Sorry 'bout that. Was only trying to get Phoebe back." Cole's speech was a little slurred, and Leo recognized an empty glass in Cole's hands. Ah. Hard liquor. That explained the smell.

His tone softened. "I know. Anyway, that's not why I'm here. There's someone who wants to meet you."

"Who?" Cole suddenly sounded hopeful.

"Cole. It's not Phoebe. It's an Elder, Rhiannon, with a proposition for you."

"An Elder?" The hopefulness changed to suspicion. "Why would an Elder want to meet me? Is this some plot to vanquish me?"

"Of course not," Leo said. "And even if it were, what do you have to lose?"

"Why doesn't this Elder come to see me here?" Cole sat up and placed the glass on the coffee table. He appeared interested despite himself.

"Because it's too dangerous here. For Elder Rhiannon, not for you. So, are you coming or not?"

Cole considered for a long moment. "I'll come. I'll listen to what your Elder has to say. I got nothing better to do anyway. Damn guillotine couldn't even get the job done."

oOo

Cole hated orbing; it left him feeling woozy and disconnected, as if he had been taken apart and put back together on a molecular level. Which, come to think of it, was exactly what was being done during an orb. It took Cole a second or two to get his bearings once Leo let go of his elbow. Of course, he was honest enough to admit, if only in the privacy of his own mind, the half-bottle of scotch that he had consumed before Leo's arrival didn't improve matters.

Once he felt whole again, he glanced around, curious to see where Leo had taken him.

They appeared to be on the rooftop of a high apartment building. A large city spread out before his eyes. Little lights glimmered like stars far below on the ground, moving

rapidly. Cars, Cole thought. In the distance, he could make out the illuminated Golden Gate spanning the dark void of the Bay. So, they were still in San Francisco.

A pale, tall shape floated forward from the shadows. As the figure came closer, Cole realized the Elder wasn't really floating, but wore a long cloak that hung to the ground. A deep hood covered the Elder's face.

"Elder Rhiannon, this is Cole Turner."

Leo seemed tense, Cole noted. Perhaps he feared Cole would attack his Elder.

He felt a pang of sadness. True, once upon a time he wouldn't have wasted a second thought on the matter. Killing an Elder would have given any demon instant high standing with the previous Source, and great rewards. But his evil days were over. Besides, even if he had wanted to, Cole doubted he had the energy left to take on an Elder.

"Thank you, Whitelighter Wyatt."

Cole started at the sound of her voice. For the first time he realized that the name 'Rhiannon' denoted a woman instead of a man. He'd always assumed all Elders were male. He peered into the shadows of her hood, trying to make out her features. She obliged him by pushing back the hood from her face. Cole blinked.

He had imagined every single Elder to be exactly what their title described: an elderly gentleman with a gray beard, long, white hair and a face like a crumpled newspaper. Rhiannon was nothing like Cole's mental picture. Instead of finding the imaginary gentleman, he looked into the smooth face of a handsome woman. Dark-red curls lined her features and fierce eyes sparkled from pale skin. She didn't look a day over thirty-five, he decided. Of course Cole also knew how looks could be deceiving where magical beings were concerned. She was probably older than he was.

"So," he said. "You're an Elder?"

She smiled, offering him a view of a row of even, white teeth. "Yes. And you're the man that causes such turmoil."

Cole raised an eyebrow. "Come again?"

Rhiannon laughed. "Oh, Mr. Turner, the Council is very concerned about you. You give rise to a lot of discussion and dissent." She glanced over Cole's shoulder. "Leo, if you please? I'd like to speak privately with Cole."

Cole was growing more and more sober with every new discovery. In spite of his depression, this woman's appearance and the apparent secrecy surrounding their meeting piqued his interest. He wondered what she wanted to discuss with him. He was no longer worried that it was a trap. Betrayal was the sole dominion of evil; it wasn't the side of good's way of doing battle. Besides, if it were a trap and they killed him, he would probably thank them for doing him a favor before he blew out his last breath.

"You must be curious why I asked to meet you," Rhiannon said as soon as the last blue spark of Leo's disappearance extinguished.

"As a matter of fact, yes, I am." Cole folded his arms in front of his chest and pulled himself up to his full height. Again he realized Rhiannon was tall. Her eyes were an inch or two shy of being level with his.

"Then let me get to the point right away. I have been following your... career for a while now, Mr. Turner. About since the time Phoebe Halliwell fell in love with you. You are a very intriguing specimen. A demon who falls in love with a witch and changes his life around for her. I admire you for your effort."

"Yeah, well," Cole interrupted bitterly, "if you've been keeping track of me, you will also know that things didn't turn out quite so well after all."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wish it were different, but Phoebe Halliwell has made her choice, and she will have to live with it. The question is, will you?"

"Excuse me?" Cole said, bewildered.

"Will you start making your own choices? Or continue to let others make them for you? Although the Council of Elders does not agree with me, I don't think you are evil. And I think you deserve to have a free choice what to do with those powers you acquired. I can help you use them to do what's right, give you a chance at redemption. Cole, you were a demonic soldier of fortune once but not of your own volition. I want you to work for me now, for us."

"What about Phoebe? Can you help me get Phoebe back?"

Rhiannon sighed. "No, Cole, I can't. Some things even an Elder can't change. Like I said, she has made up her mind." She paused for a moment, and when she continued, her voice had taken on a stern note. "You have two options: you can accept what is and what no longer can be. Or you can keep pining away in that prison of your own making until someone finally figures out how to vanquish you. *You* hold the key, Cole--you alone."

Cole barely listened. "If Phoebe's not part of the deal, then it's not a deal worth discussing. I'm not interested." Without waiting to hear if she had to say more, Cole blurred and returned to his apartment.

oOo

Rhiannon watched him disappear, her expression a mixture of surprise and disappointment. She'd been so certain he would be ready to take her offer for help, to snatch at the chance to give purpose to his life. He was so lost. She realized she'd underestimated the power of love -- again. She should have known better, with her penchant to interfere in star-crossed love affairs.

She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. *Well*, she thought, *pride goes before a fall*. She ought to know by now that nothing was ever certain in life.

She wandered over to the edge of the building and looked out across the city. It was quiet up here, the clamor of the city dulled by distance. The breeze was cool on her skin as it whipped her hair about her face. She shifted until she was facing the wind. Sometimes, she missed Earth. She missed the feel of the wind through her hair, or sunlight warming her face, even the splatter of rain on her skin. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine it was a cool summer's day, back home in Wales, a long, long time ago. She could believe she was riding Hwyrddydd, that most gorgeous of black stallions, with the wind in her hair and the sun on her face. Jeremy would be beside her, his eyes alight with love and pleasure and--

Her eyes snapped open and she shook her head. Such memories were useless; they only made her miserable. She had work to do. She wasn't quite ready to give up on Cole Turner yet. She knew she could out-stubborn him. After all, she was a *cymráes lân*, a true Welsh woman.

With a soft chuckle at her own expense, Rhiannon pulled the hood back over her head and called for Leo to take her back up.

oOo

Seven more days passed before Rhiannon thought Cole might be ready for another

discussion. A week filled with more murder, mayhem and madness than she wanted to contemplate. Perhaps tonight she could talk some sense into the man.

The club was shrouded in darkness when she entered. Music pounded from bulky speakers and the air was heavy with smoke and spilled alcohol. The lights were low, except for the few spotlights trained on the platforms where the girls were performing. Well, Rhiannon mentally amended, if you were to call harpies and succubi 'girls'. She looked at them for a moment, twirling around poles or wiggling their bottoms at the customers. They were pretty enough, she supposed, if you liked that sort of thing.

She was glad she had changed into more worldly clothes before coming to this bar. The spots spread the kind of light that made everything white light up in glowing blue neon. Her pale robes would have made her stand out like a burning candle during a blackout. If anyone realized who, or rather, what she was, her life was forfeit. The Council of Elders wouldn't lift a finger to help her; not when she had disobeyed their strict orders not to interfere. But she simply couldn't let matters lie. Despite what the Council thought, it was too important.

Once her eyes were used to the murk, she peered around. She found Cole slumped in his usual spot where his frequent visits had caused a depression in the cushions. He was not moving; his eyes pointed straight ahead. Rhiannon sighed. This project of hers was going to be harder than she initially thought.

She was about to make her way through the throng to where Cole was sitting when she noticed the girl in front of him. For a second, her eyes widened. It couldn't be-- Then the girl gasped in pain and morphed back into the bottle-blond vixen she really was. As she pulled away, Rhiannon caught a glimpse of dull, red blood glistening on the knife in the Cole's hands.

"O'r annwyl," she whispered. "Lord, give me strength." Was he lost to her? He had killed a human being today. An innocent, a woman whose only crime had been to be in the wrong place at the wrong moment. And here he killed a shapeshifter demon in front of her eyes. A shapeshifter who had looked exactly like Phoebe Halliwell. Perhaps it was too late for Cole Turner after all. Perhaps she wasn't meant to save him. Maybe she would be better off letting nature take its course.

No, Rhiannon told herself, and she continued to work her way to Cole. Beneath all those demonic powers beat a human heart. He deserved every chance she could give him.

"Did that make you feel better?" She slipped into the seat beside Cole.

He glanced her way and his expression hardened. "You again," he hissed. "You got some

nerve, coming here. Do you know how easy it would be for me to kill you in this place? Nobody would blink an eye, and they'd cheer once they realized what you are." He turned his full gaze on her and Rhiannon had to suppress a shiver. His eyes were filled with an angry insanity, and they were cold and hard.

"You didn't answer my question," she said. "Did it make you feel better, plunging a knife into a Phoebe clone? Is that what you are planning to do now? To kill her?"

"Yes," Cole replied through gritted teeth. "If I can't have her, nobody can."

Rhiannon raised an eyebrow. "Really? What happened to the man who was willing to give up his powers out of fear he would hurt the woman he loved?"

Cole studied her face, his look long and hard and unwavering. At last something shifted in his eyes and instead of hatred, Rhiannon recognized the pain hidden deep within. His shoulders sagged and he sank even deeper into the soft seat.

"You're right," he whispered. "I could never hurt Phoebe. The real Phoebe."

Rhiannon inwardly let out a relieved sigh.

Cole waved away a scantily clad succubus with dark brown hair and a full bosom. He looked at the dancer on the platform in front of them, apparently admiring the way she undulated her body around the tall, metal pole. Rhiannon suspected she was a lamia, a serpent woman; no skeletal body could move in quite such a sinuous way.

"Why are you even here? You must know that I killed an innocent today."

"So I've been told. Would you do it again?"

He looked at her. He desperately wanted to say 'yes', she could see it in his face. Rhiannon thought she understood. If he couldn't be good, at least he could try to be evil.

"Maybe," Cole said at last, looking back at the girl wrapping herself around the pole. "Probably not."

Rhiannon felt the weight fall from her shoulders. She had not misjudged Cole after all. "It hurts, doesn't it? Knowing how you snubbed out a life. Knowing you took away a future, a marriage, kids."

His head whipped around so he could stare at her again. His eyes were moist. "How do you--"

She offered him a gentle smile. "You possess a human soul, Cole. It's a rare human that can kill without remorse." *Fortunately*, she added in the silence of her mind. Their work would be so much harder without the soul providing a moral compass.

"I could do it before. It never hurt this much. Are you saying I didn't have a soul then?" He barked an uncomfortable laugh.

"No, you've always had a soul. You have your human father to thank for it. But your demonic half, and later the Source's influence, was able to suppress it. Leo told me it wasn't even easy for you to kill your first demon, after Belthazor was gone."

He grunted in response.

"Are you ready for my offer of help now?"

Cole was silent for a long time. At last he spoke. "No. I haven't given up hope yet. There has to be a way I can win Phoebe back."

"Cole--" Rhiannon stopped herself. She had already said everything there was to be said in their previous meeting. The decision was his, and only his. All she could do was wait until he was ready, and pray that in the meantime he wouldn't do something so irreversibly evil that it would destroy his soul and his chance at redemption.

She got up. He refused to meet her eyes but kept staring at the dancer.

"You know how to reach me, if you change your mind." She waited for an indication that he had heard her, but Cole sat unblinking, motionless. A few seconds later, Rhiannon got up and made her way out of the club.

Chapter 3

Over the course of the next days, Rhiannon watched with rising horror as Cole set up his last, desperate attempt to get back in Phoebe's good graces. She had been shocked to learn that he agreed to join the cult of the avatars instead of taking her up on the offer to work for her side. His decision made more sense once she figured out what he was trying to do. He would be unsuccessful, as he had been so often. Phoebe Halliwell had made up her mind, and nothing he said or did would sway her heart.

The one thing Cole failed to acknowledge was that he wasn't the same man in the

alternate reality of his own creation. Messing with time and reality was a dangerous thing, something not undertaken lightly; demons and Elders smarter than Cole had found themselves outwitted by the twists of time and the fabric of realities. And the Phoebe that lived in this other world knew a different Cole.

Rhiannon couldn't let it happen. Not just for Cole's sake, but for everyone's. If Cole got himself killed in that other world, *this* reality would be stuck with a thoroughly evil incarnation who was also the new Source. Matters would grow so much worse. But who could help her?

The avatars.

The avatars were the only ones powerful enough. They could manipulate time and space in such a way that they could save Cole from a certain death, and the world from a fate far worse than death. She needed to meet with them. But how? Although the avatars claimed to be neither evil nor good, the prevailing opinion within the Council of Elders was that they were to be avoided as much as possible. Thus, no relations were formed nor contacts kept. She didn't know how to get in touch with the avatars, and she didn't know anyone who could.

Except for one man.

Rhiannon summoned Ania in order to have the young whitelighter take her deep into the woods of Russia, where an old shaman lived in a secluded cabin. His identity was a well-kept secret, even within the Council. Rhiannon had only met him once, long ago, and she hoped he would remember her well enough to help.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Ania asked. She eyed the dilapidated hut with distrust. The wood was cracked and splintered, and grayish-green fungi covered most of the roof and walls. If not for the small trickle of white smoke drifting out through a hole in the roof, Rhiannon would have believed the place to be deserted and the shaman gone.

"Yes, I'm sure. No harm will come to me here. It's easier to talk if we're alone. I will summon you when I'm finished."

Ania threw a last, wary glance at the shed, then orbed away.

Rhiannon took a deep breath and adjusted her hood. She strode the last few meters to the structure's door. The ground beneath her feet was rarely trodden and thick mosses muffled her footsteps. They made her bounce as if she were walking on an air cushion. It was a disconcerting feeling, which didn't do much to make her feel more convinced she

was doing the right thing.

"Greetings, dear girl." The sudden voice was cracked with age and thickly accented. "The woods whispered of your arrival."

Rhiannon squinted into the darkness of the cabin. A single beam of daylight tumbling through the smoke hole in the roof, along with the flickering of flames in the hearth, formed the only illumination. She made out the crooked form of the man she had come looking for. His hair was white and straight, and hung nearly to his waist. It appeared even longer from the way he hunched over with arthritis, making him stoop and peer up at her from about the height of her chest.

"Greetings to you as well, Master Razkhupik," Rhiannon offered a formal bow of her head. "I trust you are well?"

He cackled a laugh. "As well as to be expected. It 'as been a long time, Rhiannon. Ah yes, we remember you," he added when she blinked, startled at the mention of her name. "Tea?" He poured her a cup of black liquid before she could offer a reply. "The other guests will arrive soon"

"Other guests?" Rhiannon was surprised. Not many people knew about the existence of the ancient Russian shaman, and even fewer were welcome to visit him.

"The avatars, of course." He laughed again, a sound like brittle paper being torn. "You want to meet with them, yes?"

"Yes, that's why I--but how do you know?"

He twirled a finger. "The trees, sweet girl. The trees."

Right. She should have known better than to ask. She'd been too shocked, though, to keep the words in. "Of course, Master." She sipped her tea. The black liquid was hot and bitter, and strangely refreshing. "Do you think I'm doing the right thing?"

"Meeting the avatars? Or trying to save your Cole Turner?" He shrugged as he took a seat opposite Rhiannon at the low table. "That is for you to decide. We are an old man. The ways of the worlds do no longer interest us. Our days are numbered; we shall be gone soon."

He wasn't being morbid; he was just evasive. She hadn't really expected an answer anyway. Master Razkhupik was notorious for letting events play out, even if he knew what the outcome was going to be. It was something every clairvoyant learned to do

eventually, since the alternative often made things so much worse.

Without warning, the meager light in the room dimmed even further. Two black shapes appeared in front of the fireplace. Rhiannon let out a startled yelp and nearly dumped the hot tea in her lap. For a moment she feared the new arrivals were demons, then recognized their aura of immense power. The avatars had arrived.

The one to the left was elderly, with a white beard and balding pate surrounded by white stubble. The avatar on the right was looking younger, with dark brown skin and matching eyes. They were clothed in matching black robes.

"We shall leave you to yourselves." Razkhupik shuffled through the low doorway and disappeared into the forest.

Rhiannon continued to observe the two Avatars in silence, while they stared back at her with unblinking gazes. At last, she shook herself.

"Um." She cleared her throat. "Th-thank you for coming. I would like to discuss Cole Turner with you."

"What concern is he to the Elders?" It was the dark-skinned avatar who spoke first, confirming the other's seniority within the cult. "He has already joined with us."

"I know." Rhiannon took a deep breath, wondering how to go about this. Diplomacy wasn't her strong suit, exactly. Other Elders might enjoy bandying words but she was much more of a charge-ahead woman. "He has also used the power you gave him to create a rent in time and travel to a parallel universe to regain his love's heart. I don't believe that was your plan for him."

"An unexpected setback," the younger avatar acknowledged. "Once he realizes it isn't working, he'll return things to the way they were."

"What if he can't?" Rhiannon leaned back, hoping she wasn't showing her anxiety. "He's not as powerful in this parallel dimension as he thinks he is. And the Charmed Ones will reconstitute the Power of Three. When they do--" She didn't finish. They were smart enough to deduce the consequences themselves.

They didn't let her down.

"We will be left with a Turner possessed by the former Source's power, and under the spell of a Seer who no longer exists in this world. Not a pleasant prospect." The elder avatar gestured for Rhiannon to continue. "What do you propose?"

Careful now, she told herself. "You have the power to manipulate time and space. I suggest you pull him out of that universe and return everyone to where they are supposed to be."

"And what do you get out of it?"

"At the very least: a safer world. But I want more. I want him to be offered a fair choice: join your cult, or take my offer to turn his life around." If she could get him out of the avatars' grip, Cole still had a chance for redemption.

"And why should we agree to give him such a choice? He already took our oath."

Rhiannon sighed. She didn't have to offer the avatars anything in return for letting Cole go; she had no bargaining chips to put on the table. All she could do was plead for their understanding and their sense of honor -- if they had any, she amended silently.

"Ask yourselves this, though: did he truly take your oath of his own free will? Or was it the desperate act of a desperate man trying to salvage the one good thing in his life?"

"Doesn't matter!" It was the younger avatar that spoke hotly. "A choice made is--"

The senior man gestured impatiently for him to be quiet. "Quiet! I'm afraid I have to agree with Elder Rhiannon in this matter. Cole Turner didn't join us because he wanted to." He met Rhiannon's eye. "We agree. We will do as you ask and undo his actions. Then we will repeat our proposal that he be part of our cause."

o0o

"She's not gonna throw it. Are you?" Cole sounded surer than he felt. He watched several thoughts flash behind Phoebe's eyes and recalled the scene in the bedroom. "We've been through so much together... haven't we? Our love's so strong, nothing can destroy it, not even... this. We're meant to be together."

It was a lie. He had been so sure of himself, so sure that changing the past would fix everything that had gone wrong with him and Phoebe. But when you really got down to it, the results were the same here as in the world he left behind. Somewhere along the line things had gone horribly wrong; Phoebe hated him with a passion, and he was as alone as ever.

"I don't think so."

Phoebe readied herself to throw the potion. From the corner of his eye, Cole caught a slight movement, a shift in the shadows. He didn't turn to see what or who it was. It didn't matter. Phoebe's hand was rising, preparing for the toss, and in that final act she would end his misery once and for all. Cole straightened, waiting. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

The potion came flying at him with what the movie people called slo-mo. It was easy to follow its arch through the air, see its approach inch by agonizing inch. The glass vial sparkled in the light. Cole braced himself for the pain that would come when the bottle broke, when the potion soaked him and--

Somebody yanked him up by the collar of his jacket. A strangled sound escaped from his throat and his vision blurred, making the room spin crazily. Far off, he heard screaming, in a voice that sounded eerily like his own. There was a momentary glow of bright flames, then--

He stumbled to his knees, gasping for air. His eyesight cleared, and he recognized the carpet beneath him as his own. Slowly he raised his head, taking in the apartment around him, the French doors, their glass shattered, that led to the balcony overlooking San Francisco.

He moaned with dismay. What had gone wrong this time?

"Cole?"

He knew that voice. His head whipped around. "You!"

Rhiannon stood behind him, dressed in her white, hooded robe. Another person stood at her side. Cole blinked in surprise when he recognized him. The gray-bearded avatar, the one who had taken his oath, accompanied her.

"And you. What--"

"I pulled you out," the avatar explained before Cole could finish the question.

"We couldn't let you die in that world, Cole."

"And let the other you loose in this world."

Cole stared at them, trying to make sense of their words. The confusion must have been

clear on his face, because Rhiannon knelt beside him and explained gently.

"Paige could travel to that world, because she didn't exist there anymore. You, on the other hand, switched places with Belthazor. You saw what he did, what kind of man he was. Do you really want him to live in *this* world?"

Cole gasped when her meaning sunk in. He shook his head. "It was all wrong. He took what we had, Phoebe and me, and twisted it to serve the Source, to serve evil."

"That's what I mean." Rhiannon gave him a pleased smile that would have been condescending if it hadn't been so honest, and urged him to his feet.

Cole rubbed his face and blinked rapidly to force back the tears that threatened. He'd be damned to show them how much it hurt. "Now what?" he asked. He could stop the tears, but he couldn't keep the desolation from his voice.

"Now," Rhiannon said, "you get to make your final choice. It's up to you to decide what sort of life you want to live, what kind of man you want to be."

"Why? Without Phoebe--"

"Cole, you can't let someone else define who you are!" The Elder sounded exasperated. "You have to start taking responsibility for *your* life. The avatars and I agreed to give you this option. Our offers still stand. You can come with me, and atone for some of the horrible things you've done. You can repeat your oath to the avatars and do--" She hesitated. "Do whatever it is they do. Or you can choose neither, and learn to deal with your powers on your own."

Cole glanced at the avatar, then back at Rhiannon. "I already took their oath."

"I relieve you of your pledge to us," the avatar spoke. "You took it for the wrong reasons. You're useless to us if you don't join us out of your own free will. We need those who come to us to be one hundred percent dedicated to our cause. Now, choose."

Cole turned away and walked over to the French doors to look down at the city. He never noticed how the doors swayed gently in the soft breeze. He didn't even see the city below. Instead, his mind's eye replayed his first meeting with Phoebe, when her dazzling smile had kickstarted his human heart back to life. She would never smile at him like that again; she'd made that painfully clear on more than one occasion. He needed to give up hope. What was that line in that Janis Joplin song again? Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose.

There was nothing left to lose for him anymore. He was free.

But he didn't have to betray the love they once shared. Phoebe had given him so much. She had taught him how to fight the good fight, shown him the satisfaction there was to be found in saving an innocent.

He knew what he had to do.

At last he turned back. The two creatures, one white, one black, looked at him, waiting for his decision. Cole squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry," he said, directing his gaze at the black-clad avatar. "I choose to go with Rhiannon."

The avatar gave a single nod of acceptance and disappeared in a black smudge. Rhiannon's face lit up with a bright smile. "You made the right choice," she promised him. "I--" She broke off and cocked her head. Cole listened. The cables in the elevator started whirring.

"We've to hurry. Ania!"

A few moments later a bright-eyed, young woman orbbed into the room.

"Ania, we have to leave. Cole, if you please." Rhiannon gestured for him to take Ania's hand.

He hesitated a moment, recognizing the voices in the elevator as those of the Charmed Ones. His heart twitched at the thought that Phoebe was coming up to his apartment, that she was so close--but she'd never been further away. He grabbed the hand the young whitelighter offered, and she pulled him into a vortex of blue lights.

Just before the apartment faded from his view forever, he heard Paige's voice. "I'm telling you, he's gone for good. We don't have to look over our shoulders anymore. It's over."

Yes, Cole thought. *It's finally over.*

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