

WAIT STATE

A Charmed Fanfiction by AmandaK

After Leo clamped his fingers around Cole's wrist and orbbed them out of the manor, they reassembled in the alley behind P3. It was the first secure place Leo could think of where he was willing to orb Cole. Nobody would be here this early in the morning. It was still dark and a row of looming metal dumpsters shielded them from the eyes of anyone driving past on the main road. They were safe for the moment.

The demon-turned-human-again stumbled when Leo let go of his arm and grabbed the nearest dumpster to regain his balance. He rubbed his face with his other hand.

"You all right?" Leo asked. He'd been surprised when his former brother-in-law hadn't put up more of an argument as the sisters told him he should leave.

"Fine," Cole said tersely. He glanced sideways and his eyes met Leo's briefly. The Whitelighter caught a glimpse of the pain hidden in them. In his mind Leo replayed the conversation at the manor. Suddenly it made more sense. Cole's human heart was broken and he simply didn't have the energy to argue anymore.

Cole straightened and looked around. "Why are we here?"

Leo shrugged. "I had to make a quick decision. I didn't think your apartment would be a good choice."

Cole barked a humorless laugh. "Good thinking. Barbas has taken over my house along with my powers. We can't stay here, though." He thought for a moment. "We could go to my office. It'll be safe there, and at least it will be warm."

Leo considered it. They could be in for a long wait, depending upon how quickly the sisters could lure Barbas to the manor and into their trap. Being warm and comfortable was definitely preferable over huddling in a damp alley.

"Let's go."

Cole eyed the offered hand with a distasteful grimace before he accepted.

Within moments they reappeared inside Cole's office. Leo glanced around. It looked like any attorney's office. Spacious and comfortable, with papers piled up on the desk and bookcases lining the walls. A file cabinet stood in the corner. Pink morning light began

to sneak in through the large window, adding luster to the dark wood beams that supported the ceiling.

"Have a seat." Cole waved at one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Coffee?"

Leo shook his head. "No, thanks. Caffeine makes me jittery. And the girls might need me later."

Cole shrugged and sat down in the leather chair behind the desk. "I doubt I have a secretary left to bring us coffee anyway. Must've frightened the poor girl out of her wits."

Leo lifted an eyebrow and Cole told him what happened.

"When I saw it was Lauren, I realized I needed help," he finished. "Of course, coming to you only made things worse. I let Barbas steal my powers and got Paige in trouble with her sisters. Leo," Cole leaned forward, "that was not my intention. This isn't a trick to get Phoebe back."

"I know," Leo assured the other man. "Paige went by her instincts, like her sisters did. It's not a matter of right or wrong. Her instincts simply told her a different thing."

Cole planted his elbows among the files on the desk and rested his chin on the palm of his left hand. "I'm not so sure instinct had a part in this. Barbas somehow recognized my deepest fears and played on them. If he managed to get to me, he might have gotten to the girls too."

"They can handle it," Leo said. "They beat him before. They will do it again." He paused and studied Cole for a long moment. "Why did you agree to drink the power stripping potion?"

Cole shrugged and got to his feet. He rounded the desk and started pacing between the door and the window, forcing Leo to turn around in his seat. "I was afraid." His voice was low. "I feared I might do something to prove Phoebe right and hurt someone. That I would hurt her." He spun on his heels to face Leo, eyes flashing. "I am not evil! I don't want to be. All I want is for things to be the way they were before."

Leo chewed his lower lip. Cole was telling the truth. Anguish came off of him in such thick waves that it hurt his Whitelighter senses. "I believe you," he said.

"But?" Cole prompted.

"But it's not possible. You can never go back. You can only move on."

"And that's what Phoebe's doing, isn't it?" Cole sounded bitter. He quoted in a high voice: "You pulled me away from my third date with Miles'."

He turned his back to the room and gazed out of the window. Leo waited. When Cole spoke again, it was in such a low whisper that the Whitelighter could barely recognize the words. "Sometimes, I wish I was still evil. At least I would know how to take care of the guy."

Leo's mouth quirked in a sad smile. Cole's words didn't frighten him. They were a humorless joke that held only pain, no threat. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

Silence descended on the room. Leo listened to the sounds of another business day stirring awake outside the thin walls. Phones began to ring in distant offices and muted footsteps passed the door. Far away, outside, a siren howled. Inside, time seemed to stand still while they waited.

Without warning, something tore inside Leo's mind and he gasped with the sudden loss, startling Cole from his introspection.

"Uh oh."

"What? What's wrong?"

"Piper," Leo said. Fear snaked through his body. "I can't sense her anymore." He closed his eyes in concentration and stretched his mental feelers. "Neither Paige nor Phoebe. They're gone."

The blood drew from Cole's face. "What does that mean? Are they--"

"No!" Leo cut the other man off. "They're not! It can have all sorts of reasons. I've lost them before." He wanted as much to convince himself as he did Cole. "It doesn't mean anything."

But it did. Something must have gone wrong. At the very least, losing the connection with his charges meant that they were in trouble. Trouble they might need help with. Whitelighter help. He could no longer sit around here, babysitting a human Cole.

"I'm going to the manor."

"I'm coming with you." Cole stalked over to Leo's side and grabbed his arm. His fingers dug painfully into the Whitelighter's flesh. "You're not going to leave me here."

Leo surveyed Cole's features; his jaw was set in tight determination. The Whitelighter nodded. "Okay."

He orbed them straight into the sunroom.

Or at least, that's what he tried to do.

An impenetrable barrier blocked their way. Leo hit the shield, hard, and bounced back, too shocked to keep control over the orb. Cole's hand lost its grip on his arm when the Whitelighter landed in a rose bush.

"Ow," Leo grumbled, trying to extricate himself from the nasty thorns that scratched at his skin.

Someone groaned nearby.

"Cole?"

Leo stumbled out of the bush. Cole lay stretched out on the lawn beside the bush.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," Cole grunted. He sat up and rubbed the back of his head, giving Leo a wry smile. "But you might think twice before starting a magical taxi service. The insurance premiums would bankrupt you."

Leo grimaced, then turned back to study the house. Something had blocked his path.

"What the hell is that?" Cole spoke what Leo was thinking. The house was encased in stone, a wall of red bricks covering every window and every door.

"This is not good."

Cole raced forward to slam a fist against the wall where the sunroom should be. "Phoebe? Phoebe! Can you hear me?" He stepped back, lifted a hand, then blinked when nothing happened. He swore. "Dammit! Of all the times to be without my powers!"

Leo grabbed Cole's shoulder before he could throw himself at the bricks again. "Cole, stop it! That's not going to work. Let's think about this."

"What's to think about? That's Barbas work! They are in there, alone with their fears. You're their Whitelighter, do something!"

Leo opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. He had no idea what to do. "I'll go ask the Elders."

"That's your answer to everything, isn't it?" Cole said bitterly. "Run to the Elders. Do you ever have a thought of your own, Leo?"

"Hey!" Leo shouted, losing hold of his temper. "I don't need that. My wife is in there too, remember! And my unborn child."

Cole's shoulders sagged and he glanced away. "Sorry. I'm just worried about Phoebe."

Leo took a deep breath to calm himself. "I know."

He prepared to orb to the Elders when a crack appeared in the thick walls. "Look!"

While Cole followed the direction of his finger with his eyes, another crack appeared. And another.

"What's happening?"

"They are fighting their fears," Leo said. "Learning to control them. Destroying Barbas' hold over them is bringing down the barrier." He again reached for Cole's hand and tensed. "We have to be ready."

A few seconds later, the walls fell away and the familiar colorful windows sparkled in the light of the mid-morning sun. Leo swayed on his feet when the connection with his charges snapped back into place. Instantly, his wife's voice rang in his head.

"Leo!"

"Here we go," he muttered, and orbed, dragging Cole along with him.

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