

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Welcome to the replacement for Endless Legacy! Hope you enjoy this opening stinger~

Summary: A young man who has developed Cleaning Magic uses it to scrape by. Unfortunately, people just love to take advantage of him and life seems to enjoy shitting on him as well. And then there's this crying lady in an alley... he probably should have just kept walking.

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He's done everything he can. That is to say... the laundromat is pristine from top to bottom, and yet somehow it still manages to feel dingy. Even literal magic isn't enough to make it look brand new or anything... but to be fair, Cole chocks that up to the place being half a century old and calls it a day.

What's important is that he's done his job, so he heads up to the front of the business where the owner, an old geezer just as old as the laundromat itself, sits counting coins.

"I'm done old man. I need my payment."

Squinty eyes turn to regard him over the rims of half-crescent spectacles. The laundromat owner sneers at Cole, glancing back behind him suspiciously and incredulously.

"The hell do you mean 'you're done'? You were only at it for about an hour. Last week it took you two and a half!"

Cole straightens up at that, a bit of pride flaring through him and his chest puffing out just a bit.

"I'm getting better. I did the same work faster this time around."

But the old man just scoffs at him.

“Sure you did. Or you just cut corners and did a shit job this time because you figured I wouldn’t bother checking. Feh!”

With that, the owner opens the pouch strapped to his chest and fiddles around in it for a moment before dragging out a single crumpled twenty dollar bill. He holds it out to Cole contemptuously. Cole, of course, takes it immediately... but then stares expectantly even as he tucks it away in his pocket.

“We agreed on fifty dollars, old man.”

“We agreed on fifty dollars for two and a half hours of work you damn brat! If you only work an hour, you get an hour’s wage!”

Cole bristles, gritting his teeth as hot anger flushes through his body.

“That wasn’t the deal!”

But the owner just laughs at him.

“Oh yeah? You want me to go check your work, huh? Want me to find out how much shit you didn’t touch back there?”

And yet... Cole can be just as stubborn as this ancient bastard. He stands his ground, hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“Go ahead. The place is spotless you fucking geezer. Even sitting here up front on your lazy ass, you can see I did good. Go ahead and check my work... and then give me the rest of my fifty fucking dollars.”

There’s a long, pregnant pause as they both stare each other down. Cole with all of the righteous fury of a youth who knows he’s in the right... and the old man with all of the calculating vile of a penny-pinching bastard who doesn’t want to have to pay a cent more than he already has.

Alas, what they say about old age and treachery always beating youth and exuberance turns out to be true, because...

“Get the fuck out of here, brat. Or I’ll call the fucking cops on you.”

Immediately, Cole’s red hot fury is replaced with fear in the form of icy fingers skittering down his spine. He straightens up all over again, but this time... this time it’s the stiffening of prey in the face of a predator. He wishes he could say it wasn’t so, he wishes he could have controlled his reaction better... but no. The old man sees it too. His lips curl back into a yellow tooth grinned and he chuckles evilly, knowing he has Cole dead to rights.

Cole still makes an attempt at retorting, even as his protests feel weak to his own ears.

“That’s not... I haven’t done anything fucking illegal, old man. Casting spells isn’t against the law!”

The laundromat owner just laughs.

“Sure it ain’t! But I betcha more than anything there’s some spooks out there that’d love to hear about you all the same. Fuckers who’d probably love to get their hands on you and dissect you in some lab somewhere!”

... He’s hit the nail right on the head, unfortunately. There’s a reason Cole hasn’t turned his cleaning magic into some sort of high-end business catering to rich people who would pay him a lot more than fifty fucking bucks for hours of work. It’s because Cole has heard the horror stories. And he knows better than to make a nuisance of himself.

No, keeping his head down and avoiding getting the eyes of anyone truly powerful is the only thing that someone like him can do, in the end. After all, he’s not some superhero. He’s not a member of the Justice League and he’s not anyone important. The moment he catches the attention of the wrong person, he’s going to vanish from the face of the Earth and nobody is going to fucking care.

Scowling furiously, Cole wants nothing more than to wipe the smug smirk off of the ancient bastard's face, preferably with a fist. But in the end, the asshole knows he has Cole dead to rights... so all he can do is stuff his fists into his pockets as his knuckles go white and turn on his heel.

A moment later and the bell chimes as he pushes his way out of the laundromat and onto the street rather roughly. The sun is just starting to set in the distant horizon, giving the city maybe an hour more of sunlight before its dark out. Cole considers things for a moment... with the rat bastard cheating him of his fair cut, the day's haul is just under a hundred bucks. Not too bad... but also not too good either.

And yet, being out after dark is dangerous in its own right... especially for someone who can't defend himself. All Cole can do is wave his hands around and make grime magically go away. He's been able to do so since his eighteen birthday just a few months back... and frankly, it's the only thing that's kept him off of the streets.

The less said about his familial situation, the better. It had been just Cole by himself for quite a while now... but at least with his magic he'd been able to make do. Everyone wanted a cleaning wizard after all. He didn't need to spend anything on cleaning supplies either. He just... did the magic and it worked.

And the best part was, it had been getting stronger too. HE had been getting stronger. Faster casts, greater output, cleaner surfaces. He was getting better with each passing day. Like a muscle being put to use, his magic seemed to grow the more he did with it.

... It was still purely utility though. Nothing that would let him dress up in tights and run around the city trying to start crime. And thank fuck for that, Cole didn't need that kind of stress in his life. He had enough on his plate just taking care of himself without suddenly putting the onus of protecting strangers on his head.

With a sigh, deciding he's done enough for the day, Cole turns and begins the long trek home. The one silver lining was that he could cross that bastard's

business off his list going forward. He might have to let the old man cheat him once... but it would only ever *be* once.

The problem, of course, was that it wasn't the first time. That old fucker was far from the first 'proud business owner' to come up with the idea of screwing Cole over. The entire reason that Cole had to range as far as he was, over an hour away from his apartment on foot, just to find work like what he'd just got done doing, was because every goddamn small business owner in the city was secretly a penny pinching asshole who wanted to fuck with him.

He refused to put up with it, of course. He might be poor, but he still had his damn pride. So yes, Cole constantly switched 'customers', looking for new people who would pay for his services. Alas, familiar bred contempt. It was always nothing but smiles and glee at first. They would sing his praises over how good he could make their places look.

And then they'd come to expect it. Week after week, they'd get used to it... and they would no longer consider what he could do for them anything special.

Cole hoped that some of the fuckers who had tried to cheat him in the past eventually came to regret driving him away. Hopefully in a few more weeks, the laundromat owner he'd just left behind would look back on how he'd treated Cole and maybe feel some sort of regret since he highly doubted the place would look as good as it did now ever again.

But he also wasn't going to risk himself by going back to any of those places. No, once they burned him... he was done. It was, quite frankly, the only way to be safe.

He-

Cole pauses, cut off mid-thought by the sound of a woman crying. It's strange how it reaches his ears given the hustle and bustle of the busy city street around him. And yet, it's just as he's passing by the mouth of a dark, foreboding alleyway that the noise of a choked back sob hits him.

Immediately, the other people moving back and forth along the street start to pass around him, Cole becoming an unmoving island in the midst of their efforts. Most don't even bother to glance his way, though a few do shoot him dirty looks and scowls for stopping.

Cole pays them no mind though, instead turning his head in the direction of the alleyway. The sobbing... he can hear it even more clearly now. Like it's happening right in front of him.

The logical, rational part of his brain screams not to go into the alleyway. It's so obviously a trap of some sort that it's not even funny. More than that though, even if it isn't a trap... it's definitely NOT Cole's problem.

There are probably a thousand crying women in the city at any given moment. Millions all around the world. And while Cole would certainly love it if he could comfort every single one of them, he knows full well that he can't... just as he knows full well that he's not even in a position to help ONE crying woman if he's being honest.

And yet... and yet... his fingers twitch in his pockets. And before he knows what he's doing, his legs are carrying him forward into the dark alleyway all the same. The logical part of him is ultimately overruled by his empath and protective instincts, he supposes. Even his hard life hasn't managed to beat it out of him yet...

The woman in the alleyway is... deep in. At first, Cole can't even see her. It takes a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dark space after being out on the more brightly lit street. It also doesn't help that even when he finally does find her, he doesn't realize it's actually her at first.

No, at first he just sees a lump, even darker than the rest of her surroundings. Wearing a cloak of some sort, the woman is curled up in the fetal position, back against a wall, legs pulled up to her chest and arms wrapped around them. Her head is buried between said legs.

The cloak covers all of this up though, so at first Cole is just left trying to figure out what he's looking at. By the time he finally has, the crying has petered off a little bit and the cloaked lump has gone still, no doubt sensing his presence.

Swallowing thickly, a shiver down his spine telling Cole that he's in danger, he slowly raises his hands in surrender.

"H-Hey. Just... heard you crying and wanted to check on you. I... sorry, I guess there's not really anything I can do for you. I can barely even take care of myself. So coming down here... bugging you like this... it was pretty stupid of me."

Grimacing, Cole acknowledges that he's rambling. He should just... wrap this up and leave before it turns out that she's some sort of alien monster and she bites his head off or something.

"Look. Let me just... do what I can and then I'll go, alright?"

He's not about to give her any of the crumpled bills in his pocket. He sort of needs them to survive. But hey... the alleyway is kind of filthy. And Cole can at least handle a bit of filth. That's why... he reaches out with his hands, already raised up and palms open, and casts his cleaning magic on her.

Specifically, he casts it on her cloak and the wall and ground around her. Might as well let her wallow in a clean spot if nothing else, right?

As the cleaning magic washes over her, cleaning up her dirty cloak and the area surrounding her in real time, the woman goes even stiller than before. She stops moving entirely as Cole finishes up, as still as a damn statue.

"There. You, uh... you have a nice day, yeah?"

Feeling like he definitely stuck his foot in it, but also feeling a little bit good about trying to help how he could, Cole turns on his heel and prepares to leave back the way he came.

Only, somehow the moment he turns around... the cloaked woman is right in front of him, literally inches from the face.

“Holy shit!”

Big blue eyes stare at him from under the cloak’s hood, surrounded by inhuman gray skin. The gaze is a bit manic as she grabs him by the front of his shirt before he can even react.

“His voice! You... his voice is gone! What did you do?! *What did you DO?!*”

Oh god he was so fucking screwed. That’s what he gets for trying to help out a stranger...

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A/N: Here we are with our new fic! Be sure to let me know what you think. Obviously, by this point it should be obvious who Cole just tried to ‘help’, Imao.

Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!