

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

A/N:

-x-X-x-

In the awkward silence that follows, Zatanna realizes a few things in quick succession. First and foremost, the purified nature of this extremely small studio apartment remains in place despite the presence of a demon within its walls. Unlike the demonic fat tub of lard that had thrown Constantine out a window and then been subsequently banished, there doesn't seem to be anything keeping this female demon out.

Which in turn leads her to her next realization... she'd detected the demonic taint on the woman who had helped the Lord of Order she was trying to track down back where they'd fought Chemo together. And if that bound demon and this one were the same person... well, that explained a lot, didn't it? Maybe she really had stuck her foot in things. Maybe she'd jumped the gun a little bit.

However, there's one final realization that leaves Zatanna still a bit... on edge. What she's sensing from the female demon now feels a bit too familiar to what she sensed from the massacre at the laundromat and also the fat demon who was trying to get into Cole's apartment. Put simply, they were all related in some way.

And yet... all of this was to say, she needed to be very careful if she didn't want to mess this up. She could still salvage this first impression... hopefully.

Plastering a smile on her face and straightening up, Zatanna looks to Cole and nods.

"Cole. Apologies for the... overreaction. It's a pleasure to finally meet you, I've been looking for you for a few days now."

Cole glances back to the demon, the one he'd called 'Raven', and then back to her. He seems wary as he stands there between the two of them, still blocking them from one another with his body.

"... Am I in trouble? Why exactly would a member of the Justice League be looking for me? Surely you have better things to do with your time..."

For a moment Zatanna considers mentioning the Chemo Fight... but obviously this young man in front of her was not responsible for the sheer power she'd felt back on that street. While Raven might have been there, she was probably sent on by her true master to watch over Cole right afterwards.

However, Zatanna is confident that Cole's magic was involved at the laundromat, because it has the same feel as the bodega down the block and his apartment as well. With that said, she decides to focus on that.

"Do you recall a laundromat you might have stopped by in the past week? A place where you... used your abilities a few times?"

Cole immediately stiffens up at that, looking rather alarmed... and also frustrated.

"Whatever that asshole said about me, it's not true. He hired me to clean the place for him and I *did*. Then, he refused to pay me the agreed upon amount. But I didn't push my luck... I left it at that."

Cole's defensiveness has raised the hackles of his demonic protector, Zatanna absently notices. Or perhaps... Zatanna meets the eyes of the female demon, looking at her past Cole's head. While she believed Cole was telling the truth... nothing stopped his companion for going back after the fact and killing the man to 'help' him.

She doesn't get any semblance of recognition from Raven's eyes though. But then, demons tend to be consummate liars.

"The man in question is dead, Cole. He was murdered... violently."

Would a Lord of Order send their demonic familiar after a mortal man for such a petty reason as stifling their protégé though? Zatanna certainly hoped not, but she had to admit that not every magical practitioner on that sort of power level was... entirely reasonable. Even on the Order side of things.

Still, the mess that had been left behind didn't feel particularly ordered or clean, so maybe...

Cole's eyes widen in shock at least. And Raven looks slightly surprised as well.

"Dead? He didn't... I didn't kill him. I promise I didn't!"

Zatanna is quick to shake her head at that.

"I know you didn't, Cole. You're not a killer... and your magic isn't suited for that sort of thing anyways."

She moves her eyes to Raven, missing the way Cole winces as she focuses her full attention on the demon he's currently shielding.

"... Can you say the same for your companion though? With absolute certainty, I hope?"

Blinking, Cole looks to Raven and then back to Zatanna with a scowl.

"Yes! Yes, I can. Raven wouldn't... she couldn't have, literally. She hasn't left my side since we met."

Hm. Well, at least he sounds sure of that. Raven, meanwhile, just juts her chin out at Zatanna, staring at her with a dark expression on her face. It's clear the demon doesn't trust her one bit... but that's just fine because Zatanna doesn't trust Raven either.

Still, if she is the Lord of Order's pet, there's no helping things. Zatanna will just have to deal with it for now.

“Then you’re being hunted, Cole. First by whichever demon attacked the laundromat and then by another demon who was caught outside of your apartment just yesterday. You’ve attracted infernal attention.”

She’s expecting Cole to blanch at that. She’s expecting him to panic a little bit at least. After all, it’s not every day that one is told they’re being hunted by demons. Zatanna is fully ready to need to comfort the young man and assure him he’ll be alright.

Instead, Cole just straightens up and shares a meaningful look with Raven. If anything, the demon looks more stricken then he does at Zatanna’s words, her eyes wide and a grimace on her face. But Cole... Cole just slowly nods as he turns back to Zatanna.

“Understood. Thanks for the warning Mrs. Zatara.”

Zatanna blinks and then winces.

“Ah... just call me Zatanna. I’m not even married...”

She wasn’t that old either, she doesn’t say. Was she? She was only in her mid-twenties! Sure, that was a few years older than Cole seemed to be, but... maybe it was the costume making her older?

Cole just shrugs in the end and nods.

“Ms. Zatanna then. Thanks for the heads up, but... I think we’ll be okay. We’ve uh... got a new place we’re moving into. It has better security.”

Zatanna stares for a long moment before belatedly realizing that yes, Cole was indeed moving out of his apartment *today*. And looking around the place, she can see that he’s somehow already almost done. Yesterday, when she’d unlocked the door and taken a quick look inside, the place had been spartan and absurdly clean but nevertheless furnished.

Today? It was already nearly emptied out, with pretty much nothing left. How the hell had they managed to move so many things out in less than an hour? She'd arrived on the sidewalk outside and she hadn't seen any sort of moving van or anything like that...

More importantly, if she lets Cole go now, she'll have lost him again entirely. And given there's a Lord of Order directing her to him and demons hunting him that are dangerous enough for said Lord to send his familiar to protect him...

"How secure are we talking here? Magical security?"

Cole arches a brow at the pointed question, but Zatanna just arches a brow right back as she crosses her arms over her chest.

"You said it yourself Cole, I'm a member of the Justice League. I'd be a pretty shitty hero if I didn't bother to do the bare minimum follow up. You're being hunted by demons, man... mundane security isn't going to cut it."

Not to mention she wasn't sure how he would even afford mundane security, all things considered. Not if he was living in a place like this and getting scammed by laundromat owners who were paying him under the table.

But Cole just shrugs, unimpressed by her concerns.

"Yes, it has magical security. I think we'll be fine. And if we're not... Raven and I can still take care of ourselves."

Ah shit. Zatanna recognized that stubbornness in his tone. It was the same stubbornness she herself had whenever she'd talked to her father or mentors back in the day. She really had to tread carefully here, because if her own lived experiences were any indication, pushing too hard would only drive him away and cause him to do reckless, foolish things.

Letting out a low, steady breath, Zatanna offers Cole a fresh smile.

"I don't doubt that, Cole. You've made it this far haven't you? But you shouldn't have to take care of yourselves. Not when there are people willing to help you."

Cole looks thoroughly unconvinced.

"Can't say I've met many people like that in my life."

Well, there was the Lord of Order who had sent Raven to him. But again, Zatanna doesn't mention that. Still...

"What about Rafael? He certainly seems like a good man."

That softens Cole's furrowed brow slightly. He huffs, forced to concede the point. Chuckling, Zatanna shakes her head.

"Look, if nothing else I want to help you. So please, let me help you. Even if you just give me your new address so I can stop by and check on you in a few days... I promise, I won't do anything more than that if you don't want me to."

There's another pregnant pause as Cole seems to consider her words for a long moment. Then, something in his face hardens.

"Apologize first."

Zatanna blinks, only for him to jerk his head over to Raven.

"To Raven, I mean. You nearly tried to take her head off when she hadn't done anything wrong. I get that you thought she might be a danger to me... but she isn't and you know that now. So I think you owe her an apology."

Hah, the audacity... for the briefest of moments, Zatanna wonders if Cole really is the Lord of Order just hiding or something, because he certainly has the bearing of a lord in that instant. But... no, of course not. That would be silly. Still, he's sort of right. If Raven really hasn't done anything wrong, it was wrong of Zatanna to discriminate against her. Even if she's pretty sure the only reason Raven is so chill is because she's bound by a very powerful man.

With a swallow of her pride, Zatanna gives Raven a small, stiff bow.

“I am sorry for almost attacking you.”

There’s yet another pause and for a brief moment Zatanna wonders if the demon is going to reject her apology just to create more drama and make things harder for her. But no, in the end...

“It’s fine.”

Raven’s answer is surprisingly subdued as she just shrugs. Cole stares at the female demon for a moment longer before sighing and looking back to Zatanna.

“Alright then. Thank you for doing that. There’s just one minor problem... I don’t really have an address to give you.”

Wait, what? Zatanna’s mind immediately goes to the worst case scenario.

“Are you homeless? Did you end your lease because you ran out of money? Cole, you don’t have to live on the streets, I-!”

But Cole waves his hands back and forth with a laugh, cutting her off.

“No, no. It’s not that, heh.”

Right, of course not. She was making assumptions again. Ugh, she really had to stop doing that, it was only going to get her in trouble one of these days. Obviously he couldn’t be homeless, he had literally moved most of his apartment already to some new place. Some place with magical security. Some place... without an address.

Hang on a second...

“Right, so this is going to sound really weird... or maybe it won’t to you, because you are who you are. But uh... well, have you ever heard of the House of Mystery?”

Zatanna stares blankly as Cole reaches into his pocket and pulls out a large iron key. A very familiar large iron key. In fact, Zatanna has seen it many times before... pulled out of a trenchcoat pocket by an insufferable man with blond hair.

In the face of her shocked stupor, Cole decides a demonstration is in order. He moves over to his closet and slides the key into a lock that technically shouldn’t be able to fit it, turning the key and pulling open the door.

On the other side lies the foyer of the House of Mystery... and a blonde woman that Zatanna has never met before.

“Lord Cole? Is everything alright?”

“It’s fine Mystery... this is Zatanna Zatara. Zatanna, this is Mystery. She’s, um... the house.”

‘Mystery’ looks at Zatanna knowingly and somehow Zatanna knows what the other woman is going to say before she even says it. Smiling sweetly, albeit without it reaching her eyes, Mystery nods.

“Yes. We’ve met.”

... Zatanna was suddenly really, really glad that this had all happened on such short notice she hadn’t been able to bring John. Because she just found who stole his house from him.

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!