

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

A/N: Back to Cole for his take on things!

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They've met? Cole blinks as he looks between Mystery and THE Zatanna Zatara. It's funny, he would have expected to be more starstruck, coming face to face with a member of the Justice League. Sure, Zatanna was no Batman or Superman, but she was still a very recognizable figure. Not to mention, she was magical.

Alas, any chance of him being struck dumb by her fame had fallen to the wayside in Cole's rush to keep her and Raven from fighting. And not just because they probably would have destroyed the apartment and he was still hoping to get his security deposit back!

Obviously, Zatanna was a total powerhouse... but frankly, Cole didn't know how powerful Raven was either. Regardless, he didn't want either of them hurting the other, so he'd done his best to quell the misunderstandings before they could spiral into chaos and bloodshed.

Now though... well, Cole can't help but be confused, even as Zatanna looks like she's seen a ghost. Her eyes slide down to the iron key still in his hand and she licks her lips carefully.

"Cole... where did you get that key?"

Huh? Before Cole can answer her, Mystery does it for him.

"I gave it to him, of course. I decided I deserved a better owner."

Zatanna's gazes moves sharply to Mystery, still standing on the other side of the open closet door.

“You can do that? Just... decide to change owners on a whim?”

Mystery scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Of course. I’m offended you thought I couldn’t.”

Wincing, Zatanna shakes her head.

“I guess I’m just surprised you stuck around as long as you did then.”

That, to Cole’s surprise, gets a laugh from Mystery.

“Ah. Fair enough.”

Meanwhile, Cole has been ping-ponging back and forth between the two women, listening as they’ve talked... and he’s started to come to a conclusion that has his heart dropping in his chest. All the clues are there. He’d had to be an idiot to miss them. The familiar way they’re talking. The things they’re saying...

“You were the previous owner, weren’t you Ms. Zatara?”

As Zatanna and Mystery both turn towards him, Cole can’t help but feel a little stricken.

“I’m sorry, I truly had no idea. If you want, I can return the key to you...”

Even as he says that, he knows it’s probably the wrong thing to say, especially in front of the personification of the Magical House that chose him. But rather than get angry... Mystery just starts to grin. And even Zatanna just blinks before letting out a little laugh.

“O-Oh. No, I’m not... I’ve never been in possession of the House of Mystery, Cole. You didn’t take it, or rather her, from me.”

“Indeed. Also, you didn’t ‘take’ me from anyone, Lord Cole. I decided to bequeath myself to you. If you continue trying to give me away, I will be quite cross with you.”

Cole blanches and gives Mystery a nod to show he understands. But then he goes right back to being confused a moment later, his eyes darting between the blonde and the ravenette on either side of him.

“Okay but... how do you two know each other then? Why are you talking like you’re already familiar.”

Smirking, Mystery’s blue eyes twinkle as she looks over at Zatanna.

“Oh... she’s just fluffed my pillows once or twice upon a time.”

Huh? Cole watches as Zatanna’s face goes bright red. Now its her turn to cross her arms over her chest as she rolls her eyes and huffs, finally, she just looks to Cole.

“I dated her previous owner and stayed over a few times. That’s it, that’s our connection. I never even met the House like we’re meeting now, to be clear... I might not have stayed over if I had known we were being voyeuristically watched the entire time.”

Mystery scoffs and then sniffs haughtily.

“As if either of you were anything worth watching.”

That draws a noise of outrage from Zatanna, which Cole thinks is very fair. While he doesn’t know anything about this ex-boyfriend who also apparently owned the House before him, he does know one thing... Zatanna Zatara is a very fine woman with very fine legs and a body that just does not quit.

“Anyways, can you really blame me for finally cutting off that toxic relationship and heading for greener pastures? You did the same long before I did.”

Zatanna winces, looking forced to concede the point as Mystery smirks once more.

“And I’ve certainly traded up in the world, haven’t I? From a deadbeat using my innards as storage, to a man who spent his first several hours inside of me cleaning every surface he could get his hands on. Mm, you tell me who the better owner is~”

Cole’s flush turns into a full-blown blush at that. He wanted to protest, to say that she didn’t have to make it sound so dirty... but given what they’d actually done together, she was honestly being pretty tame, all things considered.

Zatanna, meanwhile, stares at Mystery for a long moment before looking back to Cole.

“Cole, I think you’re being taken advantage of by the House of Mystery.”

... Is she serious? He can’t tell if she’s serious or not? At least, not until Mystery squawks in a similar manner to how Zatanna did and Cole sees the barest hint of a smile as the corner of Zatanna’s mouth quirks upwards.

Well, at least the situation had been largely defused. Maybe things were all going to work out after all.

“Hang on a second.”

Zatanna’s brow furrows and she frowns as she suddenly looks suspiciously between them again. Cole stiffens up, even as she gazes at him, then Mystery, and then even Raven in the back before finally returning her gaze to him.

“... Why is the House of Mystery calling you ‘Lord Cole’?”

Oh, he’d been getting nervous again for nothing. Resisting the urge to cover his face with his palm, Cole doesn’t bother holding back the sigh as he shakes his head.

"It's a compromise. She wanted to call me Master... I'm not comfortable with that sort of thing. So we settled on 'Lord'."

Zatanna blinks... and then her shoulders slump in relief.

"Oh, I see. That's... heh, for a second there, I had such a strange thought it's not even worth saying."

Cole wrinkles his nose, curious now. And when she sees him looking at her with a furrowed brow, Zatanna seems to consider for a moment before finally coming to a decision.

"Alright, fine. You deserve to understand a little bit of what's going on, because at this point I'm pretty sure everything that's happened to you recently has been preordained... by a Lord of Order."

Lord of Order? Cole feels a strange resonance within his chest at those words. To be fair, he's always liked things nice and tidy. Organized and ordered. Everything in its place. But why would that title of all things speak to him?

"I don't suppose you've had an encounter with any ancient and wise practitioners of late, have you Cole? Someone magical with lots of power and lots of mystery surrounding them?"

At the weird question, Cole just shakes his head.

"No, I don't think so? Not unless you count Mystery or yourself."

Both women squawk at that, followed by Mystery pouting.

"My lord, please don't call me ancient! You'll make me feel insecure!"

Ah, that was fair. Cole nods apologetically to the blonde. Meanwhile, Zatanna is muttering under her breath.

"... I'm only twenty-six you brat..."

Oops. Seems he has her feeling insecure as well. Still, THE Zatanna Zatara is only twenty-six?! Holy shit, she's truly an inspiration. Before Cole can apologize to her, however, Zatanna rallies and shakes her head, slicing a hand through the air.

"Never mind that. I figured as much anyways, if you'd had direct contact with them I think I would be able to tell. No, they've been very circumspect and careful in their interference in your life."

What was Zatanna talking about? Cole can't help feeling lost, which of course she notices, smiling sympathetically.

"It happens from time to time, Cole. And someone like you with such a powerful affinity for Order... well, I suppose it just makes sense, really. Essentially, you've caught the notice of a Lord of Order. They're extremely powerful magic users, usually centuries if not millennia old. They're opposed by the Lords of Chaos, but we don't have to get into them today... one thing at a time, I'd say."

Cole blinks. Something within him fully recoils at the mere mention of 'Lords of Chaos', but like Zatanna said... there's enough going on already. Frankly, his head is swimming from what she's said so far. And she's not done either.

"For instance, your demonic companion... the Lord of Order bound her and sent her your way as far as I can tell."

Wait, what? Caught off guard by the sudden turn, Cole shoots a glance at Raven... only to see her looking just as bewildered as him. Yeah, he didn't think so either. He could feel his connection to her even now, the way his magic suffused her being and shut out her father. He would definitely be able to feel if she was connected to someone else entirely, Cole is pretty sure.

"Before that, he and your companion were responsible for stopping an extremely dangerous villain in the middle of an attack. You may or may not have heard of it given how swiftly it was taken care of. But basically, Chemo showed up again in

all of his toxic, radioactive glory, and had just started rampaging when our mystery Lord of Order took offense and stopped him in his tracks.”

Hang on a second... she was talking about him? Why was she talking about him? Cole stares blankly as Zatanna looks thoughtful for a moment.

“Honestly, there’s some question of whether Chemo will even reconstitute this time. He’s always come back before, but that was when he was destroyed and dispersed by more conventional means. The sheer power that was used to cleanse and clean up his mess this time around... might have just dealt with Chemo permanently. Only time will tell.”

She was definitely talking about him, though Cole can’t help but flush a little at the way Zatanna is praising his work. It wasn’t that impressive, was it? It was just... a type mismatch or something like that. Like in one of those RPG games where the different elements all beat each other. Or more classically, rock paper and scissors. Chemo was paper, Cole was scissors. Snip-snip, job done.

“Regardless, when I tried to track him down on behalf of the Justice League, that’s when things got... rather silly. I found myself on your trail instead Cole, and once I realized you had demons after you, I knew I couldn’t just leave you alone. It was also obvious by that point that this Lord of Order wanted me to help you out. I suppose I took too long, so he sent you Raven to watch your back in the meantime.”

Zatanna shoots a suspicious glance at Mystery then.

“... In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if Mystery here got put on to the idea of you by this mysterious Lord of Order as well.”

She arches a brow, as though expecting Mystery to just admit to it. Meanwhile, Mystery shoots a glance at Cole, clearly unsure how to respond.

Which was... fair. Because Cole was pretty uncertain at this point as well. Zatanna’s monologuing was throwing Cole for a complete loop at this point. She was talking like everything she was spouting was complete and undeniable fact.

... But Cole knew it wasn't. There was no Lord of Order running around nudging things into place for him. It was all just him. With Raven, against Chemo, and Mystery too... he was fairly certain these things had all just happened to him.

The 'right' thing to do would be to correct Zatanna's misconceptions, probably. That's what Cole's instincts are telling him to do at least. Explain the situation, let her know what she's wrong about, and let her make proper informed decisions going forward.

... Or he could let her continue believing in this nonexistent 'Lord of Order' that she'd made up in her mind. It would provide him some camouflage if nothing else and make him seem untouchable in her and the rest of the Justice League's eyes if he was understanding the situation correctly.

He only has a few seconds to weigh his options. One way or another, he needs to make a decision quickly...

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