

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

A/N: Cole tells the truth!

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There was simply no chance he was going to get away with lying to a member of the Justice League forever. That, more than anything else, was what decided things for Cole. He'd like to say it was because he had good morals or whatever, but as much as he tried to be a decent guy, if he thought he even had a shot at keeping it under wraps forever, he might have.

Why? Simple... having to explain to a member of the Justice League that they were wrong about pretty much everything they'd just said was almost as bad as trying to lie to one. Cole grimaces as he gives Mystery a small shake of his head, signaling to her that he doesn't expect her to try and deceive Zatanna.

This prompts the blonde avatar to look over at the raven-haired woman and smirk.

"I can honestly say I don't have a clue what you're talking about. I found Cole all on my own, a shining beacon in a sea of bad choices and the neglect of my previous owner."

Zatanna blinks and then furrows her brow, frowning at Mystery. Before she can call the other woman a liar, Cole clears his throat.

"Ah... Zatanna Zatara, ma'am? There's... not any mysterious Lord of Order pulling the strings here."

Turning to face him, the beautiful heroine looks incredulous.

"Excuse me?"

Wincing, Cole shrugs his shoulders.

“All of those things you just described? That was all me. Nobody ‘sent’ Raven to look after me. I found her in an alley and we decided to bond as... as master and familiar.”

Oh god. Cole could tell he was making a mistake just saying the word ‘master’. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Raven visibly perking up, her eyes alight with excitement. Even Mystery grins a little bit. But that’s the terminology! It doesn’t mean anything weird!

Zatanna seems to agree, because besides continuing to look incredulous as her eyes dart between him and Raven, she doesn’t appear disgusted or freaked out by the idea. Just... confused.

“And Chemo? I, uh... that was me too. That was my magic that... took down Chemo. Raven and I were in the park nearby. We were... celebrating a recent windfall of sorts. And then Chemo attacked and I... we moved together to stop it. Raven protected me while I used my cleaning magic to clean Chemo into oblivion. And then we left.”

Shrugging half-heartedly, Cole looks over at Mystery next.

“I can’t exactly confirm how Mystery came across us, but she basically stepped in and saved us from a mugging. So if she says she found us all on her own... I believe her.”

Mystery’s smirk drops into a softer and more genuine smile at that, looking visibly touched by Cole’s words. Meanwhile, Zatanna’s mouth is opening and closing as she looks at him in utter disbelief, her face rather... pale.

Yeah, this situation was pretty awkward, wasn’t it? Having to tell an authority figure that they were wrong had never worked out well for Cole in the past. If it were anyone more mundane, he probably would have just let them continue to labor under their misconceptions and side stepped the responsibility altogether.

But this was *the* Zatanna Zatara. Surely she had to be different, right? She hadn't blown up at him yet at least...

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Zatanna stands there with her world flipped on its head. She'd been tracking down the Lord of Order that had dealt with Chemo for days now, doing her best to find any trace of him. Obviously, at some point this had led her to Cole... but the sheer power on display back on that street had convinced her it couldn't be him.

And yet... it was. She could tell he wasn't lying to her. His delivery was awkward, stilted, and uncomfortable... but Zatanna knew the difference. She knew when that sort of thing meant someone was being deceitful... and when it meant that the person was worried about how the other person would react.

She couldn't pretend to know what Cole had been through in the past, but Zatanna had dealt with and helped both victims of abuse and their abusers in her time as a hero. She'd also dealt with her fair share of survivors, people who had bad experiences with the authorities and not always by their own fault.

Zatanna already knew Cole wasn't the kind of guy who trusted easily. He had magic that could have made him quite a lot of money... and he was using it in fucking laundromats and bodegas for pennies on the dollar. Obviously, he was afraid of being investigated by the government. It was a common concern in young people with powers, magical or otherwise.

So for him to explain her mistakes here and now clearly took a lot of courage. Though, if it came down to a fight, they'd probably just retreat to the House of Mystery and lock her out anyways, so it was also the safest time and place for him to be honest with her.

... Not that Zatanna was going to attack him or anything. As shocking as it was to hear that that pure magical power was Cole's, and as stupid as she felt right now for inventing a fake Lord of Order in her head, Zatanna was just going to

have to eat her slice of humble pie. Fuck, at this rate it might be the whole damn pie...

"I see. I... my apologies. It would seem I made several assumptions and now look to be quite the fool."

Cole is quick to shake his head and try to reassure her.

"No, you-!"

But Mystery cuts in before he can finish his sentence.

"Heh, yeah, you do look pretty dumb. Talk about egg on your face."

Cole shoots the blonde a glare that has her backing off with her hands raised in surrender but a grin still on her face. Zatanna, meanwhile, just chuckles.

"You're not wrong. Still, I'm not so above it all that I can't take my lumps. More importantly though, this doesn't change much."

Those last words get the attention of all three of them back on her. Zatanna just crosses her arms over her chest and arches a brow.

"There are still demons hunting you, Cole. First at the laundromat and now here as well."

"... That's because of me."

The demon familiar that Cole has bonded with finally speaks up, prompting a grimace from her master.

"Raven..."

But she just shakes her head.

"No... I will tell the truth as well."

Raven looks to Zatanna, pushing back her hood. Zatanna arches her brow as she takes in the demoness' features... honestly, Raven looks a lot more human than most demons. But to be fair, that could just be an illusion.

"I am Raven of Azarath, born to Arella of Azarath... and the Demon Lord Trigon."

Zatanna's eyes widen. Not because she recognizes any of the names, but rather because a Demon Lord is serious business. This Trigon fellow was probably very, very dangerous and she'd be doing some fresh research in her father's library after this conversation was over.

"Azarath and my mother are gone... and my father sought to use me to create a gateway to your world, so he could destroy Earth for his own amusement and pleasure."

That sounded about par for the course for your average Demon Lord, yeah. Not that it diminished the threat at all, but Zatanna just nods along, feeling a flare of pity for the young woman... who apparently wasn't a demoness at all, but rather a half-demon. Even more egg on Zatanna's face.

"Lord Cole found me in my moment of greatest need, as I steadily weakened in the face of my father's unrelenting onslaught. His magic... quelled my father's voice and blocked his connection to me. We quickly realized that the only way to ensure this was permanent was by having me bond myself to him as his familiar."

Smiling now, Raven juts out her chin.

"So long as Lord Cole lives, I and this entire world remain free of Trigon's wrath. And so, as long as I draw breath, I swear I will do everything in my power to cherish him, obey him, and keep him safe."

That's a lot to unpack. Like, a lot-a lot. Zatanna *almost* wishes that Constantine was here right now so she could get his opinion on all of this. *Almost*. But no, he

would just turn this dumpster fire into a full blown trainwreck, she's confident of that.

In the end, Zatanna doesn't know how to possibly respond to Raven... so she just nods at the half-demon. And then she looks to Cole, because being perfectly honest...

"That is definitely not cleaning magic."

Cole blinks and jolts, looking slightly hunted and slightly guilty. Averting his gaze, he shrugs.

"I mean... I don't know what else it would be."

He clearly had his suspicions though. Still, rather than call him out on that, Zatanna decides that she might be able to salvage something from this situation after all.

"Let me help you figure it out then."

Cole's head whips around and he stares at her.

"... What do you mean?"

Smiling crookedly, Zatanna cocks out a hip, planting a gloved hand on it.

"Look. I know I probably look like an incompetent buffoon, running in here to spout conspiracy theories about some mysterious Lord of Order pulling the strings of your life in the background. But when I'm not coming up with crackpot ideas, I really am a pretty competent magician. So... what I'm offering is an apprenticeship."

Continuing to stare, Cole slowly blinks.

"An... apprenticeship."

Zatanna shrugs as nonchalantly as she can.

“It doesn’t have to be a full blown apprenticeship, to be clear. It could just as easily be a mentorship. More than anything, I want you to let me help you out, Cole. I know you have a sexy half-demon familiar and a brand new magical house... but you also have this Demon Lord’s lackeys on your tail. And they’re not going to give up any time soon.”

A scoff comes from the open closet doorway.

“Those weaklings won’t get past my boundaries. So long as he and his familiar remain within my walls, they’ll be completely safe.”

Zatanna looks to Mystery, detecting the sheer possessiveness in the blonde’s voice. She means every word too... she’ll keep Cole safe, no matter what. But... looking back to Zatanna, she arches a brow.

“I doubt you want to spend the rest of your life confined to the House of Mystery, Cole.”

Mystery squawks, but Zatanna can see in Cole’s face that she’s hit the nail right on the head.

“You’re going to need people looking out for you whenever you’re out and about. And more than that, I’m sure you want to explore the true nature and limits of your magic. I would love to explore such things with you. I would love to help you find out exactly what you’re truly capable of.”

And what exactly he is too, though Zatanna doesn’t say that. Is he a homo magi like she is? Or is he something else entirely? Where exactly does his magic come from, and how is it capable of such high grade purification? These are burning questions now for Zatanna. Surely they have to be burning questions for Cole too, right?”

Finally, hesitantly, Cole nods.

"I... wouldn't mind some instruction, ma'am. Especially from someone as distinguished and experienced as you."

You know, he might have meant those as terms of respect, but Zatanna can't help but feel like he's calling her old. She's not that much older than him! Otherwise she'd probably push for the proper apprenticeship!

But... no. They were both adults here. She'd happily settle for just being able to help him make something of himself.

Pulling out a card, Zatanna flicks it over to Cole... only for Raven to snatch it out of the air and then hand it to him. Cole looks it over, even as Zatanna explains it to him.

"That's my 'calling card' of sorts. They're relatively common in the magical community. Run your finger over my name and focus on wanting to meet with me and I'll feel it and follow the pull. Though you'll have to step out of the House of Mystery to do so... I can't feel the pull across dimensions."

Slowly nodding, Cole looks over the card for a moment... and then tucks it away in his pocket.

"Alright then. Thank you. I look forward to learning from you."

Zatanna beams.

"And I look forward to teaching you, Cole!"

She means it too. Every word. And despite her fuck up, she feels rather accomplished even as they all say their goodbyes and Cole and Raven leave. Heh, she probably should have reminded them to go down and take care of ending the lease on this place before departing... but they could always do that later, given the House of Mystery could be any door in any building.

Honestly, as Zatanna is left standing alone in the emptied out apartment after they leave, closing the closet door behind them, she's just thankful that nobody

else was here to see her make a fool of herself. If anyone else in the Justice League knew how badly she'd fucked up, Zatanna's not sure she'd ever be able to live it-

"Well done."

Shrieking, Zatanna whips around with magic rising to her fingertips and a spell on her lips... only to freeze as her brain catches up to recognizing the familiar voice at the same time her eyes land upon a familiar cowed man.

Batman stands there like he'd always been there even if Zatanna knew he hadn't been, seemingly entirely unperturbed by the fact that she'd been about to blast him straight through a wall.

"B-Batman?! What the... fudge?!"

Great, now she's censoring herself in front of Batman. But cursing in front of him felt worse if she was being honest.

"I've been following your investigation closely since the Chemo Attack."

Since the Chemo Attack?! Oh no, that meant he knew exactly how much of a fool she'd made of herself. Oh god, had he been listening in on this entire conversation too?!

"You've done well."

What? Zatanna's mouth opens and closes a few times before she finally just... shakes her head.

"I... if you've been watching all this time, then you know I've made a complete mess of things. How can you say I've done well, Batman?"

"The only one I saw making a mess of things at any point was Constantine. You really should have had him on a leash."

Zatanna winces, reminded of the window that the fat demon destroyed... by throwing John out of it. All because he'd gotten a wild hair to go and check things out on his own...

"In the end, it's not about the mistakes we make along the way but recognizing those mistakes and learning from them. Not to mention course correcting and achieving the best possible result in the end anyways. Which you've done. That young man is extremely magically powerful, isn't he?"

Zatanna hesitates... before slowly nodding.

"Yes. He is."

She half-expects Batman to call him a threat and declare they need to use stronger measures to contain Cole or something. But that would run counter to everything he's said so far, so maybe that's a foolish expectation. Instead, Batman just nods back.

"And you've not only developed a rapport with him but also arranged to take him under your wing. As I said before, very well done, Zatanna."

... She doesn't know what to say. It feels like she's entered the fucking Twilight Zone here. In the end, Zatanna just... swallows and nods.

"Ah... thank you?"

"A young man as powerful as him... he needs guidance and structure. I hope to see you provide such things."

Straightening up and puffing out her chest, Zatanna nods a tad more confidently.

"I will. I intend to."

"He might also do well if he interacts with others in our line of work closer to his own age. Perhaps we can work together to arrange such things."

Was Batman talking about setting Cole up to meet with some of the sidekicks? Huh, that might be a good idea, yeah. Zatanna slowly nods, distracted by the thought for a moment. And then it hits her and she jolts a bit.

Hang on, she and Cole weren't that many years apart. Surely Batman wasn't also calling her old, right?!

Except, when she looks back to him to complain... he's gone. She'd only been distracted for a handful of seconds, damn it! Groaning, Zatanna just shakes her head as she leaves the apartment building behind. She has so, so much planning to do!

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