

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

**VOLUME 3:
TRUST No. # 1**

BY JUDE MCLAUGHLIN

EPISODE #75

THINK OF ALL THE THINGS WE LEARNED

Copyright Notice

Copyright ©2012, 2013, 2014. Jude McLaughlin. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from Jude McLaughlin.

THINK OF ALL THE THINGS WE LEARNED

"He's in here, shouting at the TV," Andrea said, walking into the living room with Madame Destiny.

Ira had, in fact, just been shouting at the TV. He was used to remembering things differently from other people, but this slapped-together retrospective on Jane Liberty's life was officially Too Much for his usual high tolerance level. (Also, he had to admit to himself, he'd been on a shorter fuse with everything lately. Andrea told him it was usual with anesthesia and having your insides muddled with, but it didn't make him like himself very much.) Jane had NEVER been romantically linked to anyone but the Flag for any real length of time. The idea that she and the Damned Yankee had had a secret thing going was *ludicrous*.

"Madame!" he said cheerfully, glad of the distraction, and starting to get up.

"Oh, Ira, stay in your chair," Madame said, coming over to take his hand. "You've had a big few weeks." She was wearing one of her astonishing outfits, of course, this one involving a gold silk dress with a floral pattern in it and a confection of emeralds at her throat and holding her matching gold silk turban together.

"I really *ought* to get up more often," he said guiltily. "My cardiac rehab trainer will kick my ass if I don't." He shot a smile at Andrea, and she snorted.

"Have a seat, Madame," Andrea said. "I'll just go get us something from the kitchen."

Madame opened her mouth, probably, Ira thought, to protest that she'd come to help, but then shut it again and sat down in the chair across from Ira. Andrea had a fantastically repressive look sometimes.

"So why are you shouting at the television?" Madame inquired.

"No good reason," he said, sheepish. "Tell us about what's *actually* going on out there." He waved a hand generally toward the front of the house. "As opposed to the driblets and drabs on the news."

"Well, all the humans from the ship and everyone who could be found that was part of the Men In Black have been jailed and charged with conspiracy to world domination," Madame said, sitting back and clattering her many gold bracelets together. "There's a call for the US citizens to be prosecuted only in US courts, but the World Court and all other signatories to the World Domination Prosecution Accord are prevailing."

"I saw that West fella is pulling the Flag defense on his wife," Ira said, grimacing. "Can't imagine how Lady J feels about that."

"Angry," Madame said simply. "I hear that the Ultimate is working on that, though I'm not sure what she can actually *do*. In any case, the enhanced paras who were all involved in dominating particular geographic regions are all locked up in New Alcatraz—except Renata, of course. The one that was mind-controlling all of England is, I guess, not in very good shape. It looks like he may end up in care rather than in prison."

Ira grimaced again. "What a mess, what a mess," he mumbled.

"There are also a few countries that are starting para registration," Madame sighed. "And doing it badly, of course. They *all* do it badly."

"How many dead so far?" Ira sighed too. It was hell getting old and seeing this over and over.

"No Amnesty reports yet," Madame said, shrugging. "The governments are saying, 'Only a few,' and the activists are saying, 'Hundreds or thousands.' Of course, the activists are going to probably have more correct numbers."

Ira rubbed his face. "Well, how's X doing?"

Andrea swept back in with a tray holding plates of sandwiches and cookies, and three cold Arnold Palmers as Madame said with a shrug, "Sie is getting used to the... unpleasant little interruptions in life that the Oracle brings. Inheriting during a very complicated time makes for more interruptions. I keep assuring zir that it will settle down as the world settles down. I'm not sure sie believes me."

Ira raised his glass as high as he could (which wasn't as high as he'd like—having one's chest muscles cut by the Vorpall Sword does that, despite some regeneration from Madeline) and said, "Well, here's to the world and the Oracle settling down."

They all drank to that. Then Andrea said, "You're looking like the cat that ate the canary, Madame."

Was she? Ira peered at her face more closely—he'd gotten used to not watching people's faces when he was losing his sight, and he really had to get back into the habit. Madame was, in fact, looking well-rested and fairly youthful for a lady of a certain age. She also smiled and *blushed* at Andrea's comment.

"Well, as a matter of fact," Madame said, examining her dark red manicure, "I'm dating someone, and it's really quite lovely." She dimpled at them. "I thought the two of *you* would be the most understanding of my friends."

Andrea beamed and Ira was fairly certain that *he* blushed. Damn Madame and her perceptiveness! She must've been sitting on that for *weeks*.

"Can I ask who the lucky sod is?" Andrea said. "Do we know him?"

"Well, as to *that*," Madame said, covering her mouth with her fingers, "perhaps you remember Juniper Wolf?"

Ira's jaw dropped, and he was having trouble following the next couple of moments of conversation. He didn't know *why* he was so shocked that Madame had gotten together with the woman who'd been Women's Libra back in the 70s. He'd just been suspecting that they'd trained in martial arts together a few weeks ago. But Madame was just... she was always so... he'd heard of her dating... but... but... but...

The part of his brain that had so readily accepted Simon kept swatting down the "buts".

When he tuned back into the conversation and levered his jaw shut, Andrea was saying, "All right, I'm going to be crass: I never thought you were gay."

"Not gay," Madame said primly. "Bisexual. And really, after fifty-odd years of having a cosmic being tucked into your head, the body and all the cultural beliefs hardly matter any more."

"You always dated fellas, though, didn't you?" Andrea said, sipping her drink.

"I didn't date very much at all," Madame said mournfully. "Having the Oracle suddenly manifest in one's bed is quite a turnoff, I've found."

"I bet," Ira said, trying to imagine it. He'd thought Madame was quite a looker back in the day, and he'd always thought she was just swimming in men, but now he tried, he couldn't remember a single name or time when he saw her out with someone. She'd even come stag to the Christmas parties. Flirted with everyone, of course, but never *left* with anyone.

"I've tried talking to X about it, as a matter of fact," Madame said, frowning with concern, "but sie only ever says that sie doesn't think it will ever be an issue."

"Huh," Andrea said.

"So you're dating Juniper," Ira said with a disbelieving grin. "What's she been up to all these years?"

"Oh, this and that," Madame said, with a clattery dismissive gesture. "She's a massage therapist now."

"Nice hands, then," Andrea said approvingly.

The two women cackled conspiratorily, and Ira suspected that he blushed again.

"*Anyway*," Madame said, finishing her drink. "I should be getting along. I'm meeting with Zoltan and Washington to discuss the request for an 'official' Mystikai response to the World Court."

"Washington's reaction is going to be her middle finger," Ira said with a wry twist to his mouth.

"You're probably right," Madame said. She got up and so did Andrea and, after a moment's work, Ira. "But Zoltan's family will probably want something more serious. They're not so used to being asked for input."

They all hugged. "You'll be getting an invitation to a party," Madame said. "I'm inviting all the Forgottens over, just for one last meeting, you know?"

"Yeah, I was starting to miss those," Ira said. "But why make it one last meeting? Why shouldn't we all just keep on meeting? At least us old folks."

Andrea said, "Let's have the one after that here." She glanced over at Ira. "That okay with you?"

Ira felt a warm rush of something threaten to make his legs turn to jelly and also to make him cry. It was *her* house but... "That's just fine with me," he said, grinning, possibly stupidly.

"You two are just *adorable*," Madame said as she sailed out the door.