
[126] [Reunions (various)]

Barry Dodson had gone through many life-defining experiences since reaching this world. First crash-landing into a feral-infested forest, then following his brother and a few others in an attempt to find any semblance of civilization. A crazy girl leaving him for dead (she died instead, though. Barry still wasn't sure how to feel about that). Then getting enslaved and verbally abused by two wandering maidens from a place called "Coven" who'd come to meet the Dark Elves. Following this, he'd been taken in by the Dark Elves, and there he met Embla (the Malumari), tamed Orion (the Hound), and became very close friends with Lala (the Tenebrilin). He'd even begun opening up, meeting and bonding other maidens, slowly helping them phase out the need for human prisoners/slaves.

There'd been a fair share of drama and things he hadn't enjoyed, while also meeting again with his aunt and telling her to go to hell. But really, everything started going downhill when he helped cure Embla's mother.

Once she'd regained consciousness, Barry had been locked into a room, barely allowed to see sunlight, let alone other people. Embla's attitude had shifted drastically, the sway her mother held over her so intense she'd felt like an entirely different person. The sensations coming from the bond had just been overwhelming; fear, duty, fear, duty...

Rick had saved them.

As Barry sat, staring out the window into the sludge-filled streets of Sinco, he found it hard to believe he'd gone through so much. A part of him wished he could go back and tell himself things would be alright, that they would pull through.

"I was trying to avoid talking to you and your brother until you were ready." Rick's voice drifted through the common room as he put down two cups of tea on the table. "It seems like you still have much on your mind."

"It'd be an understatement." The young man spoke softly, holding the cup gingerly, staring at the guy who'd once been his professor.

If the events of the past few months felt like years away, life before coming into this world felt like a lifetime. He could barely believe the man opposite him had once been "normal."

Rick might have tried to hide it under a humble house and scuffed clothes, but Barry had spotted all the signs. How the people bowed and spoke tersely and courteously. How every room he entered he silenced with but a gaze. How every word he spoke carried a weight to it. How he moved among maidens as if certain they could not even touch a hair on his head.

The Lord of Sinco appeared to be a very long way from the strict if unenthusiastic chemistry teacher.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.” Barry commented idly. “This city feels... peaceful.”

“I sure hope so.” Rick waved it off with a dismissive chuckle. “Been busting my back trying to keep things from blowing up.”

Though he’d not meant it deprecatively, Barry still felt a sting. He remembered his own attempts at trying to unify a tiny group of rebels had failed spectacularly. In the end, he’d just been unable to find any meaningful middle ground with anyone, not even Embla.

“I’d ask what’s gnawing at you, but I suspect it’s not the reason why you came.” He took a sip of his tea.

“And what would you guess is the reason I’m here?”

Rick gave him a long look, letting out a sigh as he closed his eyes and took another sip. “If I were taking a guess, then I’d say you came here to ask how you can help.” He leveled his gaze with the young man. “And if that’s the case, then I’d ask you what sort of help are you looking to provide.”

This time he flinched visibly. “I’m not sure. I guess the most I could do is that I can bond-”

“No.” Rick’s answer was firm and immediate, his brows furrowed. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Your genetics aren’t the only thing that gives you worth.”

Barry shrunk. “Doesn’t it? All that mattered was that I was a pureblooded human. Over and over. Maidens fought over me because I was pureblooded, people...” He turned away, feeling his shoulders draw together. “People died over it.”

“Sure, and?”

“Wha-what?” Barry did a double-take. “What do you mean ‘*and*’?”

“What about other people dying over this? It’s their choice to be idiots, their damn fault they end up dead.” Rick gave him a flat look. “You can’t seriously argue you are responsible just for being a human being.”

“I mean, no, but-” The young man stopped himself, shoulders slumping. “They’re slaves, Rick, always were. And when what they said wasn’t what the kingdom wanted to hear, the humans took everything from them.”

“The son is not responsible for the father’s sins... though in this case you’re not even the son of anyone responsible for what’s happened here.” The teacher replied. “You have no culpability in what was done to them. The most you can argue is the responsibility of lending a hand.”

Glancing at the teacher, he frowned. “You don’t seem convinced.”

“I’ve got my own problems, Barry. I want to do what’s right like everyone else, but I’m not going to let morality put the people I care about at risk.”

The young man didn’t argue that point, he’d heard the stories. And Embla hadn’t exactly been flattering about him.

“Let’s keep things simple.” Rick made a short wave, interrupting Barry’s thoughts. “Right now the city doesn’t have any need for someone to just up and start bonding maidens by the dozens. What we do need is perspective.”

“Per-perspective?” He perked up.

“There’s a maiden under my employ called Raphaella, she’s a Metalmouse. Poor thing’s working herself to the bone with a big project.” He commented idly. “Her team might be able to gain much from having an outside perspective on their work. Think of it as giving input in whatever you might feel is relevant.” Reaching out a hand, he smiled slightly. “And if you don’t like it, then we can think up somewhere else where you might be able to help.”

“Oh! Sure!” Barry immediately perked up, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake. “When could I start?”

Rick’s smile grew into a grin. “Right away.”

The door opened, a cold winter wind blew inside, startling Barry. He barely had the time to turn and see three blonde Mousegirls with stripped furred ears stepping into the house. The trio gave a quick bow towards Rick. “My Lord.”

“This is the one.” He declared.

Six eyes fixed on Barry. “Test subject!”

“What?”

The trio approached quickly, pulling him on to his feet.

Barry hastily turned to glance at Rick, concern etched across his face.

“Best of luck!” The ruler of Sinco declared, giving Barry a slight wave, watching as the door closed.

“You sent him to the wolves.” Dia muttered as she discreetly stepped into the room.

“I’ve been that boy’s teacher for three years.” Rick shook his head. “Everywhere he’s gone, he’s worked himself into being the voice of reason in the room.”

“You just want to have someone else handle the Horde.” The nurse poked him with an accusatory smirk.

“Nonsense.” Rick replied, barely able to hide the smile. “I just think he’s got the potential to thrive with them.”

Dia’s arms wrapped around his waist. “And why would that be?”

“Because they’re honest, almost to a fault.” He grimaced. “Though it only works out if he can earn their respect.”

Brye groaned, scratching at the metal collar around her throat. It was heavy, her ankles were chained together, and all of the metal carried a slight energy-distortion enchantment. The effects of the enchantment itself weren’t much; it couldn’t even keep her from using the full breath of her powers. But it was plenty to guarantee any attempts at teleporting would be sloppy in nature, easily detectable, and easier still to disrupt.

Not that the Succubus or Malumari needed any help in keeping the Nogitsune from being able to use any of her powers properly.

Even as suppressed as she was, she could feel the Succubus’ energy coursing through her body like a sweet poison. The mere act of noticing its presence sent tingling sparks down her spine and straight into her tail.

It was an insidious curse the Charmer had put upon Brye. It was impossible to purge the intruding energy without paying attention, and the act of paying attention filled her core with gooey bliss. It made it oh-so-easy to just lose herself, to pretend she was trying to find a way out. Yet day after day she caught herself more frequently focusing on the Charmer's presence within her merely to wash away the discomfort, to leave a smile on her lips and her tails wagging in lazy contempt.

Brye was no stranger to addiction, she'd seen it in the minds of dozens of maidens, trapped within the spiral of desperation and abusive humans. Pain was a powerful tool, but pleasure twisted the mind in ways none could truly fight against.

"Foxy, be a dear and bring our recruits some water."

The Charmer's voice caused Brye to flatten her ears against her head, shivers running down her spine. Yet another layer to the curse, it seemed almost anything and everything the Succubus did would go straight into Brye's traitorous tails.

With a growl to recompose herself, Brye wandered off to fill up the water jugs and bring them to the front of the house. Her chains rattled as she shuffled around, forced to walk in quick short steps as she exited the cottage.

Two weeks ago, her face would've been burning in shame at the bastardization of a dress that she'd been made to wear. Of how tight and demeaning it felt. It was so much worse than being naked.

Now she merely simmered with a barely restrained growl.

In front of the tiny hut were the Dark Elves, each of them seated on a rock (one they'd been made to carry from a nearby stream), and every one of them was holding on to an elemental stone the size of a grain of rice. The stones themselves were too small, borderline worthless for anything other than very weak enchantments. But the Succubus had seen some use out of the things for training. Each maiden present had to fill their stone, then empty it, all without causing it to break.

Kiara, the Succubus, was comfortably lounging on a reclining chair in front of the maidens. Her golden eyes met Brye's and the Nogitsune's knees weakened. "Well, Foxy, you know what to do."

Suppressing the wag of her tail, she obliged, taking the jug and approaching the first maiden in line. The Dark Elf glared at her, and for a moment Brye felt a twinge of satisfaction as she emptied the jug of freezing water on her head. It was the first time she'd felt good without it having been created by her captor.

This realization quickly made her scowl as she moved on to the next target down the line.

She repeated the process twice more until all the “recruits” were drenched.

They would soon start to shiver, chattering teeth and trembling limbs, their dark skin growing paler.

“I sense that your collective warming spell is starting to falter~.” She sang, gesturing at the circle of lush green around where she sat. “Don’t lose focus now, little recruits.” The Succubus’ lips curled into a cruel smirk, leaning further into her chair.

One of the Dark Elves gasped, the elemental stone in her hands exploding in a flash of light.

“Seems we’ve got our first volunteer of the day!” She pointed at the cottage, and the Dark Elf almost looked happy to run off into the warmth of the house, even if it meant becoming the Succubus’ next snack.

No, Brye corrected herself.

She knew these maidens were slowly but surely growing to love Kiara’s “punishments;” she could see it in their eyes. Originally, the Dark Elves were mostly here either due to their red-headed human or the Malumari, the rest having stayed behind in the forest. But day by day, their appreciation and attachment to the Succubus grew stronger. They all knew the Charmer was working them over, but bit by bit they were being won to her side all the same.

Just like Brye.

The Nogitsune felt a shudder as she sensed Kiara’s eyes upon her.

Not once had she been asked about the Boss or the threats he possessed. She’d refrained because it was the last piece of resistance left within Brye and was clearly waiting for when the fox willingly offered it up.

They both knew it was only a matter of time.

Bit by delicious bit, Brye found her resolve eroding away.

Soon, she might not even desire escape.

And all the while, she couldn’t help but shudder at the true mastermind behind all of this, the monster capable of gaining the loyalty of a Charmer, a maiden capable of bringing kingdoms to heel.

The man with a mask that hid a thousand screaming voices.

Noah the Tigermouse sat down next to Mark, feeling the contours of his mind through the bond and her psychic powers. The young man's focus had been wavering and distraught ever since Barry had left, leaving only the two maidens and their human.

The solitude was welcome. Brye's psychic claws had dug deep into Mark, leaving their bond stronger than anything Noah had seen. It was this very bond that now left their human groaning and frustrated at nearly all times of the day.

A frustration Noah was more than happy to satisfy, but now was not the time for that. She was busy working to very carefully poke, prod, and wear out the bond with Mark's help. It was a slow and tedious process, but hopefully one that would finally see the bond snap without unleashing some severe backlash upon their human.

There was a knock at the door.

Everyone in the room froze.

"I'll get it." Shery spoke, the gray-skinned maiden standing up and carefully approaching the bunker entrance.

"I am Dia, the healer." A voice called out from the other side. "I've come to do a check-up."

Noah recognized the voice and nodded, letting out a distressed sound right after as Mark took her off of his lap and put her on the floor. A gust of chilly wind blew into the common room as a Rapha with a light coat entered. The pink haired maiden took her hat off as the door closed behind her.

"Seems I came at a sensitive time."

"He's always like that; your Succubus' influence goes through the bond." Noah declared firmly.

"I can give some libido suppressors, if you'd prefer." The nurse smirked at the mouse as the smaller of the two blushed and quickly shook her head.

"What're you here for?" Shery pressed, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall.

“Just a check-up.” Approaching Mark, she gave him a slight bow. “Your hand, please.”

“Fine.” He grumbled, reaching out.

The whole thing lasted all ten seconds before Dia appeared satisfied with the results. “It’s a bit of a relief to have a baseline to compare things to. Physically, you’re in good health, though I’d recommend meditation and proper a sleep schedule.” She stepped back, giving the human ample space. “Any issues aside from... well, the ones brought by the bond?”

“Issues like what?” He growled in annoyance.

“Mood swings, night terrors, irritation... anything really. This isn’t exactly the best environment for a healthy mind.”

“Beats being dead.”

Dia stared at him for a very long quiet moment before speaking up again. “Would you like some books? I could have a few dozen brought over to try and make things more amenable.”

The offer made Noah blanch, sharing a look with Shery as they both hastily shut up. Books were expensive, by a very hefty margin. They weren’t exactly easy to trade for gold, but if they ever needed to make a run for it... it could very well help finance their travels.

Mark appeared entirely unaware of this, but nodded. “Fine.”

“Very well, if that’s all, then...” She began turning towards the door.

“Wait.” The young human frowned at Dia, crossing his arms and leaning back into his chair. “You made the whole trip here just for this? Don’t you have better things to do?”

“Oh, I didn’t make the trip specifically for you, mister Dodson.” Dia chuckled. “My Lord happens to be in the area, and there are thermal springs not too far from here that he wished to visit. Perhaps you’ve noticed their presence by the smell of sulfur.”

“Hard to miss.” Noah grumbled, pinching her nose.

“As I was saying, we happened to be nearby, so I merely took a small walk here to make sure everything was in order.” The healer smiled slightly. “I was also slightly curious as to who Barry’s brother happened to be, since he often talks of you fondly when he visits the medicen. But it’s clear you wish not to be disturbed, so I’ll be on my way.”

“Barry?” Mark frowned slightly. “He’s talked to Rick?”

“They’ve made a few arrangements.”

“I...” The young man hesitated.

Noah noticed the slight amusement oozing out of Dia as the healer kept her smile otherwise courteous.

“I’d like to speak to Rick.”

“I’m sure he’ll be happy to hear that.”

The Tigermouse wanted to tell Mark not to fall for the trick, but she knew the argument with his sibling had left him rather sullen. It was clear he’d lost most of the drive that’d been pushing him throughout these past few months.

Perhaps this could give him a proper resolution.

Noah could only hope.