
[120] [Culture (Various)]

They were inside a hole in the mountain, a bunker by every right, tucked away and hidden from the rest of the world. Their location was secret, known only to its current occupants and three others.

Mark and Barry Dodson sat opposite one another, a simple wooden table separating them. The maidens these two pureblooded humans were bonded to were currently not present, which was to say that they'd made themselves scarce to allow the two siblings a modicum of relative privacy.

Which meant they'd mostly spread to adjacent rooms to listen attentively.

The silence stretched on.

Barry wondered if this was worse than not having met his brother. A part of him had been holding out hope to meet him, but that part had died during his captivity under the Warlock. Now faced with his sibling, there was an uncomfortable truth that hung over both of them like a cinder block.

"The bitch told me you'd died." Mark leaned back against his chair, avoiding eye contact, glaring at a part of the wall. "I don't even remember her fucking name. She's dead."

"I see," he muttered.

"Brye got to her, didn't know she was human until things died down," Mark shook his head. "We need to leave when winter ends."

"Leave?" Barry lowered his gaze to his knees. "Leave where?"

"The further away, the better," Mark growled, clenching his fists. "You don't know the kind of shit that's about to go down. There's this guy, the bastard calls himself 'Boss', he's..." The elder brother sighed. "He's dangerous."

Barry bit his lip, wringing his fingers together. "If he's dangerous... wouldn't we be more exposed on our own? Rick-"

"You can't trust anyone here, Barry," he cut him off. "Everyone wants us for our blood. Rick's no different." Mark's gaze darkened, visibly shuddering. "Maybe he's worse."

It was obvious why he'd said that.

The day they'd met the Succubus had been... eventful, to say the least. The Nogitsune who'd been found in the middle of an almost successful escape attempt had been brought into the city for "interrogation."

"Our aunt's alive," Barry let out a half-mustered chuckle, shaking his head. "I met her... well, before Lady Dagmar woke up and made me her prisoner."

"Her?" Mark's voice dripped with poison. "Shit, guess it's true what they say about the devil looking out for his own."

"I told her to fuck off."

That caught his brother by surprise, letting out a laugh not unlike a bark. "Really? About time!" The sound became a burst of chuckling. "How did she take it? God, I wish I could've seen her face."

"I think it took her a full minute to realize what I'd said, but by then I was kind of already running for it," Barry's smile wavered as he nodded, sharing the details of the encounter in greater detail, sharing in his brother's amusement.

The heaviness in the air dissipated, and they began sharing their stories a bit more earnestly. Barry listened intently as Mark explained the events after Barry was separated: getting lost in the woods, stumbling onto a smuggler's den, the leader of the small gang being hit by the curse of Eve and turning into Noah, the Dark Elves trying to kidnap him, and then he began sharing less and less. The closer he got to the present, to the "Boss" and the things he did for the man, the quieter Mark became.

"You have no idea what that guy's capable of," he spoke darkly, Mark's usual bravado showing a hint of fear for the first time. "It was like he knew everything that's going on in this place. Who to threaten, who to bribe - I did things for him, and even now I'm not entirely sure on what was the reason for half of it." The elder gave Barry an apologetic look. "We need to hide."

And yet, Barry couldn't bring himself to agree.

Months trapped in a room with no recourse other than pouring the entirety of his focus into his bonds. Now he sat across from his brother, having spent the past few days with Embla, Orion, and Lala, talking about the future, about staying together, fighting together.

Embla had made it clear, with no uncertain terms, that working for the Succubus was their only clear path forward. There was no way to escape the kingdom, not

meaningfully. Their only option would be to traverse through the Empress' domain, then cross the treacherous high peaks, and then be left to the Conclave's machinations beyond the mountain range. The same Conclave that had sent a fanatic who'd eagerly sold Barry to the Dark Elves in the first place.

"I don't... I think I can't do that." Barry confessed after a moment, shaking his head emphatically. "Mark, I've had a lot of time to think about things. And... we will never find a place where we'll be truly safe. We're pureblooded humans; everyone will want a piece of us."

"Who cares about everyone? We can just-"

Barry tightened his hands into fists. "If we run away, we will always end up drawing the attention of whoever is in charge of wherever we land. We can remain hidden for only so long, and I don't know if you've noticed, but one bad day was all it took for both of us to get caught up in the schemes of other people."

"What's the other option here? There's no way we could muster the power to fight anyone, much less someone like the Boss." Mark scowled. "Running is the only way."

"You're right, it's impossible to fight anyone. More so if you're alone." Barry answered calmly.

"Our only choice is to remain hidden." The older sibling hammered his fist against the table.

"It's your choice." Barry stood up. "I choose to carve out a place for myself."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I'm not going to stay here, Mark." He shook his head. "I talked it over with my partners, and we believe that helping Rick is the only way to get what we want."

Gritting his teeth, he made a wide sweeping gesture with his arm. "He took over a God-damned city, Barry. He murdered the previous guy with his bare hands. He-"

"So did you." Came the harsh retort. "You said yourself that you've killed people in cold blood."

"It's different."

"Is it?" He asked. "Look at yourself, Mark. Would you trust someone like you in charge of anything? No, you'd call them out, you'd look for excuses to get away."

"It's exactly because I know what I am that I'd never trust anyone like me," Mark replied.

“Then are you saying I shouldn’t trust you?”

The question came like a blow, one Mark responded to with anger. His brows furrowed, rising from his seat with both hands spread out on the table. There was a coldness to him now. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Barry. This is not a game.” The coldness gave Barry pause.

But the hesitation was brief. “So you know better, just like our aunt used to,” the younger sibling asked in defiance.

Mark’s gaze darkened. “Don’t compare me to her.”

“Then stop acting like her.” Came the response, standing straight. “I’m not spending my life in this hole, and neither am I going to spend every waking hour looking over my shoulder. Stay if you want. I won’t.”

He waited, waited for Mark to answer, to say anything, but the only thing he got was a silent glare.

Clearly, there was nothing left to say.

Barry marched out of the room.

“Please, Eli, sit down.”

“Yes, my Lord.” The Hound obeyed easily and quickly, keeping her ears canted downwards and her gaze lowered. Even though she was nearly a decade older, the deference came to her naturally after nearly a lifetime of service.

“How have things been going?”

Rick’s question came with that slight undertone of concern that Eli had come to learn meant he was trying to soften the blow of what was to come. Daring not to touch the bond, she instead focused on the palpable scent of stress.

“I’ve been carrying out my duties properly, my Lord,” she declared, gaze on his chest, avoiding direct eye contact. “Being in service to the Lady has been very fulfilling.”

“And your injury?”

Eli's gaze flickered down to the stump on her left arm. "No, my Lord. My injuries were healed properly, and they don't hurt."

The young Rapha had healed it properly, much to the Hound's relief. Sometimes one heard stories of vindictive healers intentionally botching their work and leaving the patient agonizing for the rest of their lives.

"Has the lack of a hand-

"It has not been a hindrance to my work, my Lord," she answered brusquely, straightening herself in her seat. "I know my Lady said that I was to take less active duty, but I can still carry out most of my tasks."

It was no lie either. Working for the Lady had mostly implied scouting duties and surveillance to some minor degree. Though in a fight, the lack of a hand would be heavily felt, in all other aspects she was in no way hindered. The cost in lost dexterity made her worse than other Hounds at the job, but none of her work had much need for dexterity anyway.

As long as she could hear and smell and take to the shadows, she would remain just as effective.

Despite this, she knew that her answer was not one the Lord appreciated. "If you want to keep working, then I won't try to push you out of it. God knows we need every pair of..." He stirred, eyes lingering on her stump before he closed his eyes and glanced away. "What I was trying to get at was that I'd want you to be at the forefront of our compensation program."

"I don't understand, my Lord."

"You lost a limb in service of... me," he spoke the word with a great deal of hesitation, as if it carried a weight he could just barely hold on to. "We're still hashing out the details. But we've already set up that payment program for families that lost a beloved during this fight. Similarly-

"I cannot agree to this, my Lord," Eli straightened, meeting his gaze. "I am not crippled."

Her Lord flashed a moment of anger, his jaw setting as his brows furrowed. She could see it in his eyes, how the easiest path forward would be to just tell her to accept it. There would be no recourse for her after that, and despite herself, Eli found a certain appeal to the idea. It would hurt her pride, certainly, but it would also be more familiar territory.

Drawing breath, he relaxed his shoulders. "Please, explain."

“A cripple is a person who’s been incapacitated to a point where they can no longer do their duty,” she proclaimed. “I was far weaker when I was with kit, and I was no cripple then. Having to care for three Doggirls was far more draining, and I was not crippled.” Eli sat proud, drawing breath as she squared her shoulders. “And when you rescued me, I’d spent weeks feral and starved within a box. I was as weak as a pup, and yet I was no cripple then, either.”

Rick didn’t answer right away, gaze wandering around the room. “I’m sorry if this question is too personal, but when you were married to your husband, what was your role in your family?”

“Though I call him my husband, it was Thalia who was his wife,” Eli spoke calmly. “She was the one who spent the most time with him, caring for the home, and the children. I was a Hunter, and my work was the one that helped the most to sustain the family.” She’d learned from the Lady to keep her words measured when speaking to the Lord. The truth was that she was a representative of Jacob in the Hunters; her work was his work, the payment she received was his to use as he saw fit.

“Eli, do you have money right now?”

The question caught her slightly by surprise. “I have my stipend, yes.”

“How much? No, wait, don’t answer,” Rick crossed his arms, tapping his fingers in annoyance. “Let me ask differently. If you wanted to buy a home, how long would it take you to purchase it?”

“Why would I need to save money, my Lord?” Eli asked, her tone carefully neutral but curious. “My stipend covers my basic expenses.” Though she did skim bits here and there for small pleasantries, “If I have any need for anything expensive, such as a new shirt, then I would ask the Lady, as she handles the household’s finances.”

The usual thing would be for the head of the household to make the purchase themselves. As much as Eli could haggle a price down, she’d never be able to get as much of a discount as the Lady could. After all, the Lady would be buying shirts for the entire household rather than only for one person. In this instance, the Lady also had other advantages, such as how there were none that could deny her allure. If she paid full price for something, it was entirely out of generosity.

Though now that Eli thought about it, it would be the Lord who’d be doing all of that now. As far as the city was concerned, the Lady had died during the raid. Eli and her sisters were “unassigned,” with most thinking they now worked for the Lord directly.

The “loss” of the Lady had come as a heavy blow to Sinco; it’d earned a great deal of sympathy for the Lord, whose standard absence from public appearances was seen as mourning... if only they knew how much of that time was spent sharing his bed with one or several of his closest maidens...

Eli smiled a little at the thought. Currently, their plan was for the Lady to keep her identity hidden, and eventually, she would appear again, albeit with a different form. Another “human woman” to take the spot of Lady at the Lord’s side, and thus granting a more secure air of legitimacy to his reign.

“Eli, you have oversight of the militia, correct?”

“My position is an unofficial one, my Lord. I have no proper authority over any member of the militia, but I help as a mediator and trainer.” That was the official explanation, at least.

“But you help them out, you know they receive a salary.”

“Yes, my Lord, they do.”

Unlike in other cities, there were just too many maidens bonded directly with the Lord for traditional structures to work. Typically, a human would be hired for the sake of having him “handle” bonds in the Lord’s stead, and non-official family units would naturally form around that. But this was not how things had panned out in Sinco; there were too many maidens that could feel the pull of the bond but had nowhere to build a more natural web of relationships.

It was where the Lady had stepped in and provided structure.

All maidens bonded to the Lord but not close enough to be part of his inner circle formed their own ‘family units’. Whoever happened to be chosen leader of those units would, in turn, be part of a looser group of fellow leaders in their own broader-reaching ‘family.’ The Lady had taken those most loyal to her and placed them in key positions throughout this unofficial structure that was separate yet integrated into every role key to the city.

It guaranteed Eli had a certain degree of influence over things such as guard roster and shift rotations. Through this, they could ensure that the Lady wouldn’t risk exposing her true nature to someone not in the know.

“And what do they do with it?”

“They pool it together, much as a family would, my Lord,” Eli explained simply.

It just happened to be a very VERY large family. This cohesive group effectively wielded the salary of hundreds of maidens, making them very powerful economically speaking. Kiara applied this power sparingly and subtly, negotiating better deals for anyone within the group, but never to a degree where an outsider could spot the pattern.

Just dozens of tiny advantageous deals made in service for the family. It was what allowed “seemingly random” members in the militia to own better gear than the rest.

It paid well to be in the Lady’s good graces.

“You know, this whole thing is such a large cultural loss in translation it’s not even funny,” Rick sighed, slumping onto his chair.

“How so, my Lord?”

“Where I come from, to have more money is kind of equivalent to being more free.” He made vague hand gestures. “Free to follow your passions, to get the things you want, and so on.” Then he proceeded to gesture at her. “I’d assume that the better way to show appreciation and give compensation for the sort of injury you sustained would be through money.”

“Ah,” Eli nodded in understanding. “I used to think that way as well, my Lord. My husband was an outsider to Sinco when he came, and very poor. His wives were all feralborn, myself included.” Her voice tightened, emotions welling within her as she sought to calm down the fire. Anger, sadness, and loss twisted within her, but she focused on the gratitude. If not for her Lord and Lady, then she would’ve never achieved revenge, and Thorley would still sit in that accursed fortress. “Yet despite not owning any more than I did then, I am far freer than I’ve ever been.”

“You can’t buy a shirt for yourself, hell, you can’t buy a house. Maidens are still prohibited from owning property or businesses,” he said in annoyance. “I’d know. Trying to set up something functional has been a pain. It’s like trying to pull teeth.”

“Maybe it is because you look at it from an individual’s perspective, my Lord,” Eli spoke softly. “A lone maiden is a feral maiden. We think of ourselves in groups. At its smallest, it will always be a maiden and their human, and at its largest...”

At their largest, their Lord was a part of the most powerful family in the city, a subtle and secret force that provided support from every aspect of the city’s core functions. The tribe was the large hammer, the obvious muscle and force. It was a tool to smash outside threats; to use them on the people of the city would come at a great cost. That was the true purpose of the family, a hidden cohesive web that cut through the smaller problems.

“I guess I’ll have to just brainstorm this some more. God, I miss Alice.”

“Who?”

“Psychology teacher. She had a head for this whole philosophy and culture stuff.” Lord Rick shook his head. “But I digress. Eli, let’s just get to the point: you literally gave a limb for our cause. I don’t want that to go unrewarded.”

“If I may be so bold…” Her eyes twinkled as, slowly, she bowed her head. “If my Lord would have me tonight, that would be reward enough.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am, my Lord,” she stated. “To be closer to you would be a great boon to me. My standing would be far more secure, and my peers would be more willing to seek my opinion. This is prestige and respect I cannot gain through adding an arbitrary number of gold coins to my salary. This, in my eyes, gives me freedom.” Perhaps part of this was that she was feralborn, and that she’d never seen the merit of having money. Or maybe it was that maidens could find ways to get what they wanted without needing to touch a single gold coin. It didn’t matter, in the end.

What mattered was what she wanted, and that she could not buy her way into getting it.

“This desire is not merely pragmatic either.” Eli smiled as a wolf would, flashing her fangs. The man before her didn’t blush, but she still caught the faint scent of excitement. Rick’s gaze trailed over her, and Eli liked to think he was remembering the previous two times he’d had her, both instances being while in the presence of the Lady.

“And why would that be?” he asked, daring to voice the unspoken.

“The Lady might make any nightly engagement a thrilling one to have, but I still very much prefer male attention from time to time,” Eli declared plainly, her tail wagging with naked enthusiasm.

“Fine, let’s do this.” Rick let out a low sigh, leaning his head to a side until his neck cracked. “I’ll apologize in advance. I’ve been meaning to test this out before I used for Kiara’s thing. I hope it’s not too much.”

Eli’s wagging tail froze as he met her eyes, and the flicker of gold and sapphire within. The next moment, she felt him reaching through the bond and pressing his way through her defenses as if they weren’t even there.

The Hound had never thought she’d need to build up mental protections; her affinity with shadows made her a natural predator to psychics. Now, she was faced with a torrential

downpour of lust she couldn't stop. One that made her feel just as helpless as that first time the Lady had claimed her, even if the exact flavors carried a different nuance to how they burned within her.

Eli realized she was in danger.

It would be a very long night.

One with much howling.