
[054] [Rapid Oxidation]

Working with maidens was quite an experience, one that had led Rick to completely reassess his estimations regarding how long it would potentially take to create and improve small-scale industrialized production of chemicals.

Did he need a glass condenser that would have taken hours of work in the real world, involving specialized tools? The local glass-blower could have done it in minutes, using the same kind of magical-like powers that allowed her to heat the glass up to then turn around and cool it off faster, without affecting the quality of the result.

Because maidens treated physics as a mere suggestion.

This approach applied to just about everything else.

Did he need a purpose-built custom metal pipe? If he had the metal available, the smith could take it and use her bare hands to heat up, bend, and hammer away. The only reason she used a hammer at all was that their hands didn't lend themselves for flat surfaces.

Did he need something assembled? The Mousegirls worked like a living-breathing assembly line. Did he need a leak found? A Doggirl's ears and nose would pinpoint it within seconds.

It was both frightening and exhilarating. The only thing slowing him down was the constant testing and tweaking of the process. Pressure could be controlled with the compressor, it was enchanted to allow maidens to pour their energy into it, effectively working as its power source in a more indirect way, but he did not know enough about that for it to be something he could utilize.

Meanwhile, his only reliable source of high-temperature was Sheel, meaning that had to be eyeballed by the maiden.

She was skilled at the task, but she was no machine, and just like any human, the maiden needed to rest and recover.

That, and she was not immune to error, a simple sneeze had caused her output to fluctuate wildly enough to ruin the batch... and a segment of the pipe.

Having maidens be little more than a convenient energy source was a design flaw he intended to fix as soon as he found a way to do so. However, removing dependency on the technical expertise of Rollo's workforce was a long-term goal, nothing that could be tackled right now.

The heat in the workshop remained sweltering more often than not, and he worked with zeal. Every time he felt himself falter or slow, he only needed to think about Monica, of Kiara, and of the monster with vines that would come back to finish the job.

Steam hissed, the chemicals churned, the compressor growled like a beast, hungry for more. Maidens came and went, only staying as long as their efforts were needed, not one of them being allowed to see or know more than absolutely necessary.

And after days of toiling, of paper filled to the brim with scribbling, revising and double-checking formulas... he had succeeded.

His first batch was ready for a demonstration.

"This... is it?" Urtha frowned as she looked at the slightly brown granules in the container. A singular wooden box large enough for a basketball to fit into it, filled half-way. "Smells like piss."

"That's the ammonia; there were a few leaks." He covered the wooden container carefully. "I figured out how to make some low-grade ANFO out of the nitrate. We might not have diesel, but vegetable oil is a usable substitute." His lips stretched into a grimace. "It's definitely not at the quality level you'd find in my world, but this is just the first batch. The process will be perfected."

Next to them were a handful of barrels containing ammonia, a few others filled with nitric acid. Rick would've preferred not to have the raw ingredients just laying around, but they only had one compressor. For now, they'd need to make things in batches, cleaning the machine before switching it from ammonia to acid to nitrate.

The process was slow and clunky, but that was to be expected when they were still polishing the ins and outs. Rick couldn't help but feel an almost vindictive satisfaction at the thought of how much further things could be pushed once he found a way to incorporate the magic of this world in a more formalized way.

"And this is dangerous?" The Orc held the container, looking completely unconvinced.

"Pound for pound, it's a bit more destructive than black powder."

Next to him, the Hobgoblin let out an appreciative whistle. "Hear that, Urtha? You might get hurt."

The Orc laughed. "Father, if your plan is to use this against maidens, you should try it out against me first."

His response was instantaneous. "No."

"There is wisdom to be had in her words, my Lord." Yasir piped up from the corner, eyeing both Urtha and the container as he stroked his ever-impressive beard.

"Hobgoblin firewood is known to be more potent than black powder by weight, especially when properly charged. I've seen the spars between Spear Urtha and Elder-to-be Sheel."

"You've seen me lose an arm and grow it back." Urtha glanced at him, patting her left shoulder. "Do you not trust me?"

Rick clenched his teeth. He'd seen Urtha's spars too, and he'd seen more than one maiden trying to stab her or wreath her in fire, to little actual effect. He wasn't too sure whether having knife-proof skin meant it could translate into explosion-proof too.

"Half." He relented, snatching the container from her grip. "And you get something to protect the rest of you."

The Orc rolled her eyes. "Men."

While he went back into the warehouse to carefully split the container's payload into two separate containers, Urtha got herself one of the Orc-wood reinforced shields she'd made for the laboratory. The shield boasted an intricate design featuring Orc symbols of protection.

"I'm betting she'll have to grow back a finger," Sheel whispered as Urtha walked down the pier, the sound of waves gently crashing.

Yasir nodded slightly, mischief in his eyes. "Two."

"I can hear you!" The Orc declared. "I'm betting no fingers!"

"No reinforcing," Sheel called back. "I'll know if you do!"

Rick just stood there, tapping his foot, arms crossed, glaring, chewing the inside of his cheek, and trying to mentally remind himself that there wasn't such a thing as an Orc being crippled by an injury.

They either survived and would get back up within a few days or weeks... or die.

Not exactly reassuring.

She hefted the shield between herself and the explosive, reaching around while holding a small wooden disk of firewood. Sheel had made a few of those to work as detonator caps when snapped.

And it was when he saw Urtha inserting her hand into the box that Rick remembered one crucial fact.

In his world, black powder had historically been filled with impurities and poor understanding of the ideal ratios, leaving its effective explosive rate nearly half that of the chemically pure variant.

BOOM

In a ball of fire and smoke, Urtha was shoved back, falling into the water.

The force of the shockwave rattled his bones, the area where the explosive had been placed now entirely gone, leaving behind only splintered wood and a gaping hole a meter across. As if some creature had taken a bite out of the thing.

Rick rushed ahead, feeling an inkling of pain through the bond, and saw the splashing, the Orc grasping the pier with one hand to pull herself up.

Alive, good.

Urtha glanced down at her other arm, grimaced, and kept the limb submerged. "See? I'm fine," she spoke up at him, water dripping from her hair like a cascade making its way down a mountain. "Though it had more of a kick than I expected."

"Show it."

He crossed his arms tighter.

"In a minute."

His brows lowered, gaze turning into a line.

"Now."

With a petulant nod, the maiden lifted her right arm. Where the hand should have been, there was now a mangled mess of burnt flesh and bones. A mess that was cracking and popping as it was already underway to fix itself back up, not even bleeding anymore.

"You're an idiot," Rick proclaimed magnanimously.

"And a lesson was learned," Sheel gave a good look at the wound, then at the damaged pier. "Father, your tricks are getting quite dangerous."

He let out a huff. "Do you think you could do something similar?"

"It's not worth the effort," she replied. "I could make a large block of firewood, fill it up with my fire, and if I spent a few hours, it would certainly do worse than this. But at that concentration... it would lose half its potency within the day. If I wanted to make something like this, I would do it without firewood."

"There are ways to slow down that loss, enchantments carved into the wood, for example," Yasir stroked his beard, looking intently at the destroyed pier. "The pirates of the Sapphire Sea have one such arrangement. They use cannons with firewood for the first wave of attacks, that way their fighters are fresh and unspent for the ensuing battle."

"And there's the risk that putting too much firewood in one place could cause it to go off on its own," Sheel added.

"ANFO has a few advantages in that regard." Rick nodded. "I won't go bad so long as it remains dry, and you can put a mountain of the stuff in one place and it won't go off unless you throw fire or shock at it," he shrugged, glancing at Urtha as she pulled herself out of the water with just one hand and then proceeded to dry up. But it was Yasir's expression that caught his attention. "You seem troubled."

"The issue is of distribution, you see," he stroked his beard. "How complicated would it be to create another such workshop in a new city?"

He frowned in return. "I don't seek to sell this. Even if I did, I'd just distribute the nitrate rather than set up another facility."

Yasir's dark skin creased, the man closing his eyes for a moment. "I suppose it would make sense, that a world without ferals would see the transportation of goods to be a rather safe endeavor." There was an undertone of jealousy in his voice. "Unfortunately, without heavy protection, moving between villages or cities is a great risk. Not just any product would be worth the trip." He raised a finger. "It is for this very reason that black powder is not commonly used outside of cities that have the materials readily accessible."

That was something he hadn't considered. Sure, he was aware of ferals and the risks of traveling, but for it to be something that straight up made it a better alternative to just make a new factory at the destination?

He could see more than a few issues with it.

"Guess it's good that this process mostly only needs air and water." There was also the platinum catalyst, which would be a pain to get if he needed more. "I think that the ideal

configuration would use three compressors. If everything's smoothed out, then the output should be roughly six or so bombs like that one every hour they're operating?"

The bearded man sputtered, eyes bulging as he focused on Rick. "My Lord, I... forgive me, but I find such a thing hard to imagine."

Urtha, nursing her hurt hand, frowned. "That's... six... every hour." Her brow furrowed.

"Imagine if every feral in that Mousegirl feral horde had two of those," Sheel stated with a cold look, glancing at Rick.

The Orc looked at her hand, then at the damaged part of the pier that was missing. "That would've been a pain... hm... doable, but a pain."

In Rick's mind, the math checked out in a different way. If one explosive nearly blew up the hand of someone like Urtha, then a full day of production would output enough explosive material to guarantee someone as tough as an Orc would become mist.

The maiden remained deep in thought, scratching her chin with her good hand while watching the mangled one readjusting itself into something that resembled a hand missing all its fingers.

"Oh, before I forget, Yasir."

The man put his contemplative expression away, replacing it with a placid smile. "Yes, my Lord?"

"Some of the chemicals I'm making could be used in dyeing processes. Since your wife works with silk, I thought it might be interesting to look into that."

The man's face lit up with a smile. "Certainly! I will make sure to share the news with my dear Ahina, she'll be ecstatic. Would you happen to have details on what kind of colors would be possible?"

"Unfortunately, no details that I can think of right now. Just something to look forward to."

"Then may the Goddess Fortune smile upon our endeavors all the more." With a slight bow, the man turned to leave.

"That's my signal." Sheel gave him a bow as well. "Tomorrow at the same time, then."

With brief goodbyes, the only one to stay behind was Urtha, the Orc looking a bit too preoccupied with imagining a potential battle involving bomb-armed Mousegirls.

Which was just fine for him, he made a pass-over of the warehouse, inspected the inventory, and proceeded to remove the catalyst from the reaction chamber before locking up.

He had his own considerations, mainly on how the explosives might be most effectively used with and against maidens. Copying from examples of how they used Hobgoblin firewood would be a good starting point, but where the firewood could be adjusted to have a slower or faster burn, adjusting the reaction for nitrate would be complicated.

One particular idea that might be worth investigating is shaped charges, and perhaps mines as well.

His thoughts stirred as he sensed a mild form of urgency. At first he thought it was Dia or Eva, but as he focused on the vague sensation, it became clear it was coming from one of the other weaker bonds.

Rick spotted the one responsible in the sky north of the city, flying in their direction, flapping her wings desperately against the wind.

Urtha noticed half a second later, snapping out of her own musings and stepping up. "She's one of ours," Rick commented with a reassuring wave of his hand, watching and waiting as the maiden practically dove at them.

"My Lord!" She shouted as she landed in front of Urtha, bowing her head. "I am Cliba, from long sentry duty sector three."

"Speak."

"I spotted ferals acting oddly, moving together, Doggirls mostly. As per your command, I came back right away," She shook her head, her voice tense.

Rick wanted to swear but held back, turning to the maiden who had the most experience in matters of warfare. "Urtha?"

"It might be the real thing. We don't know how they gathered the horde the first time, this might be the sign we were looking for," The Orc nodded. "If they're hunting for a new horde, then they're spreading themselves very thin."

"If sentries stop reporting, we raise the alarm," Rick muttered somberly. "It seems our enemies aren't going to make things easy for us."

"I'll have some of the sneaky ones try and linger near the forest edge, in case they send anything close." Urtha stated, to which he could only nod.

Monica was out, Kiara was not waking, and the production line was not fully set up.

This was bad.

[055] [Plans within plans (Eva)]

"We know their champions are, at the very least, a Warlock and the Archangel," Eva stated. "There may be powerful ferals, but we can't plan for those."

"How are you certain there's a Warlock?" Whitneye asked. "The last recorded one was nearly a century ago."

Eva straightened herself; this was familiar territory, even if her role was not one she'd held before. "The assassination attempt was carried out by Dark Elves. We detected powerful scrying magic right before the attack, and the Archangel was pulled out through a teleportation spell. A Warlock would make sense, seeing how they are one of the two ascended forms a Dark Elf can take." She pointed at the map before them. "Warlocks are powerful ritual casters; their curses, in particular, have terrifying effects. We can expect their Warlock to be the greatest threat."

"How dangerous are we talking about?" Rick glared at the map, his brows furrowing.

"It depends on what she intends to do," Eva muttered. "If she were to successfully target a handful of Orcs, she could make their skin as frail as glass, and their strength as feeble as a Mousegirl's. If she were targeting everyone within her line of sight, I'd expect she'd be able to take away their regeneration for a few minutes."

"Everything a Dark Elf can do in terms of curses and hexes, a Warlock can do better, larger, more powerful, and from further away," she continued. "They are, however, extremely frail. If anyone were to reach the Warlock, they would be an easy target."

"There's just going to be a lot of things in the way," Urtha scowled, her fists clenching. "We've lost a few of our flyers, we know their routes well enough to be sure the attack should be two or three days off."

"Our expectations are that the Dark Elves will be working as support to the ferals, hexing individual targets from safer locations."

"And the Archangel?" Whitneye inquired, her voice tense.

The Fledgling hesitated. "I don't know," she declared. "Archangels, by the book, are maidens that prefer to keep their distance and strike from afar. Anything they see, they can strike. Swarming them is the suggested approach, but..."

"But she's a tentacle monster that can slaughter anything that gets too close," Rick's face twisted into a grimace. "If she still has those ranged powers, there is no reason for her to come down." His expression darkened, his eyes narrowing. "No reason but me."

There was no uproar, no arguing, no complaints, or rebuttals. Eva glanced at Urtha, then at Dia. They shared the same look with one another, the same thoughts: No matter what he planned, no matter what he ordered, they would not let the monster get to him.

Not a second time.

Not ever again.

"Surely healing your Sabertooth..." Whitneye muttered, his voice trailing off.

"Excuse me, Sir Whitneye, but it is not that simple," Dia said, stepping towards the table. "Forcefully removing the parasite is the quickest way to threaten Monica's life. We are starving it, and to great success."

"Surely you can-"

"Sir Whitneye," Rick interrupted with a harshness to his voice. "Even if Dia were to make the attempt at forceful immediate removal, the process would take hours, and the injuries to Monica would be severe. She would not be battle-ready, and our only healer would be exhausted when we'd need her the most."

Eva knew the hours he'd spent poring over the different options. But the biggest problem was that Kiara was the one whose powers they needed the most. If they could just guarantee the parasite was drained of power, then they could strongarm it without fear of permanently harming the Sabertooth.

The Succubus was not waking, however. Neither healing nor infusing energy did anything; Eli had shown up with another from her group in an attempt to... stimulate things, to no avail.

"Back to the topic, sustaining the walls will be impossible if they have something that can just shoot at us from up above. Our own flyers cannot survive going up against that monster either," Eva said, tapping the table for emphasis. "The best approach would be to build protection."

"And the farms?" Dia asked, concern in her eyes. "Our food supply is barely stable; another rationing..."

"They can't turn this into a siege, not if they're coming at us with some crazed feral horde," Rick replied. "We'll empty them and leave them be. If they want to destroy them, they will, if not, then better for us."

"And they know they can't just stall. Now that the rush is over, the kingdom will not stand idle."

And the kingdom would move to eradicate the Dark Elves; they would not tolerate such a force having grown right under their noses in such a way. The problem would be that the exact same fierce power could very well be pointed at Rick immediately afterward.

Placating the kingdom would be a dangerous game.

"Going back to the issue at hand," Eva tapped the table. "Our own forces constitute the tribe and the militia. Hobgoblins and Orcs make for our most consistent strength, they would make for the most effective force against the ferals themselves, with the militia serving to give them support. Meanwhile, the enchanted armor Whitneye's knights possess is our best tool against the hexes from the Dark Elves."

"Not to boast, but I would count as a champion." Urtha stated. "I can hold out on my own if necessary."

"What about Rollo?" Rick brought up.

"It is illegal to possess maidens skilled enough in combat that they'd be deemed a champion. Not without being of noble title or blood," Sir Whitneye declared. "Lord Thorley would've taken her."

"And that went very well for the man," Urtha rolled her eyes.

Rick's gaze sharpened. "The Earl of Balet didn't comment about any such law." The man spoke almost under his breath.

"Earl Vitchatt was likely seeking to groom you into a position of minor nobility," Eva replied, shaking her head. "The safest way would've been for Monica to earn her way into knighthood. Between that, his sponsorship, and your status as both an otherworlder and a pureblood, the court would have begged him to throw the title of knight-protector at you."

"That's... nevermind. Contact Rollo anyway; I don't expect him to fight, but we might need his help with the preparations." His shoulders slumped. "Though I dread the bill we'll get out of it."

"We still do not have a way to deal with either the Archangel or the Warlock," Dia pointed out.

Eva's fangs dug into her lower lip. "My powers should allow me to slip through and seek her out." Just how she'd done with the Vampire; if it was just that, then maybe...

"Denied." Rick didn't even hesitate, eyes focused on the map. "They'll be expecting something like that. If we're going to send anyone, better send the few Hounds in the city who are better prepared for battle." He frowned. "We'll see if we can put something... actually, wait." He reached out to pick up the map and turn it around. "Doesn't this seem odd?"

Urtha leaned closer to look at the drawing. "What is?"

"Let's say they win." His finger poked at the drawing of the wall. "Their horde of ferals launch an attack and overcome the walls, killing everyone that might be able to stand up to them. The city is left in their hands, defenseless. What do they do then?"

"Kill us all," Whitneye declared.

"That's what the citizens think, but the truth is that they could've done that before the tribe showed up," Rick poked at the map again. "They want this city as intact as they can get away with, they seek to rule it, not turn it to a dust-bowl." His finger tapped the paper. "So, they win... what do they do with their 'soldiers'?"

Eva blinked, leaning forward. "Oh."

The Lord of Sinco straightened up. "We're going to be on a tight schedule."

Perhaps... they weren't going to die just yet.

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With Urtha and Dia preoccupied with their respective tasks, Eva had been left to keep an eye on Rick. She was the bodyguard, but as the Rapha had pointed out, the real muscle were the Orcs that kept a tight watch over the Father of the tribe. Her real work was to keep an eye on his emotional state.

There was a simmering anger under the surface.

After the plan was put together, with each task broken down and explained to the relevant organizers, Rick would've been mostly left to wait and supervise. But the man had refused, taking to the streets.

House by house, door by door, he knocked, finding the occupants to nervously greet him, stumbling over themselves with apologies over the state of their abode.

"Sinco needs your help. May we come inside?"

Each time, it commenced the same way—those same eight words. Entry was never denied; after all, he was the Lord, accompanied by five intimidating Orcs who stood menacingly around their tribal leader.

"The ones who caused the feral rush are coming to attack the city," he would explain, and they would listen. Who could believe the Lord would visit their homes personally? "The ones who assassinated Miss Donohuei and placed a curse on my wife seek to impose their will on Sinco." His expression would contort with grief and anger, and there was truth to those feelings. "The city needs every bit of help. It doesn't matter if you cannot fight; we need hands to help prepare. You do not need to decide right now, but know that the attack will come within the next few days. Time is short."

Some would stammer through apologies, others offering insincere platitudes, a few quietly glowering, fewer still would question him, while a handful even asked him to leave then and there. Regardless of the response, Rick would answer, thank them, and move on to the next house.

In just a few hours, word had spread, and his visits would encompass entire neighborhoods that gathered in disbelief. It was an astonishing thing to consider, the Lord of a city stooping low just to converse with commoners. To ask for their aid, in fact, rather than merely take it.

To these people who'd lived under Lord Thorley's heel, the act itself was impossible.

But there he would be. House by house, hour by hour, the number of hands aiding in the preparations swelled.

"I feel slimy," Rick confided in Eva during one of their breaks. "I've turned into a politician." He bitterly sipped his water. "If I keep this up, I'll end up talking about how we need to invade some tiny country."

She wasn't sure what he meant exactly, but she could understand the sentiment. "The city is rallying to your call, my Lord."

"I'm just replicating things that were effective in my world." He shook his head, taking another gulp of water from a tin cup and getting back to his feet. "There's still much to be done; let's keep going."

The Fledgling didn't answer, returning to the comfort of his shadow. Dia's words teased her, making her keenly aware of how often her focus would return from their surroundings to the man's broad shoulders and unwavering frame.

Hours trickled by, words and more words, work and more work. Earth was dug, and stone moved. The people working to save their city grew, united by a single purpose, a single goal.

As the day came to an end, when the human reached his human limitations, his voice hoarse and his step losing its imposing edge, he returned to the simple little house he'd claimed for his own use.

It was only then, in the private solitude of the simple worn walls, in that window of time before Dia would return... only then did the man falter.

He sat on the chair, holding his face with his hands, breath trembling.

She knew the weakness would vanish the moment he remembered she was present, or when someone else showed up.

Rick's behavior might appear stable, but Eva had learned it was not the case. He would be rough and crude when near Urtha, emotional and empathetic near Dia, his temper would flare, and his mood would take lascivious tones with Kiara, and he'd become a well of infinite patience with Monica.

Only here, in solitude, did he quietly reveal his true self.

A secret only she knew.

She couldn't read his thoughts, but she had no need for it.

The man's gaze had been pulled as if by a magnet in a specific direction, and Eva knew it was where Kiara and Monica lay in deep slumber. Both of the maidens had been placed into protected isolation, for their own safety as much as everyone else's.

Rick visiting them would make their location known, and anyone with ill intent could have a clear vulnerable target. It was at this time, with the Lord of Sinco peering through stone and wood, that Eva felt it.

A wave of infernal heat rushed through her and caught in her throat, burning with a gut wrenching fury. Rick's hands clenched tightly, gaze hardening to stone, flickers of blue swirling in his black eyes.

The delicious pure scent of blood followed, trickling from his trembling fists.

But the Fledgling dared not move, frozen under the force of the wrath that washed over her like a firestorm. It tightened her throat and made her heart clench; her breathing was short, fighting against the shaking that spread through her entire body.

She whimpered, and Rick snapped towards her direction with predatory intent.

For a fleeting moment, their gazes met, emotions swirling naked in his gaze.

Within his black eyes, she glimpsed a world reduced to ash. The flicker of sapphire betrayed the influence from the Sabertooth monster that had gutted her, that had toyed with her, all because she'd hurt the one thing that mattered.

And then, it vanished.

Concern was the only thing she could see. "Sorry, you must be hungry," he spoke the words with the calmness of someone who'd just been caught mid-read in a dull story. "Come."

Evangeline didn't hesitate, emerging from the shadows, her footsteps echoing softly, struggling to calm her racing heart but finding it beating even faster the closer she came to the crimson fluid.

The voice that would've urged her to lunge for her prey was silent, quivering in a corner deep within herself, terrified of the things that would happen were it to rear its head at him. All that remained was the empty hunger, mingled with that same powerlessness from that fateful night.

"My Lord." She fell to her knees, grasping his bloodied hand, inhaling the intoxicating scent of the nectar, her body growing warmer. Carefully, she opened his palm and lapped at it.

To anyone looking, her approach would've appeared reverential.

The taste was pure, crystalline, like spring water after traversing a desert. It sent shivers through every part of her, and a soft moan escaped her lips. In the wake of the purity there was nothing but bliss, a pleasure that made Evangeline acutely aware of every part of herself.

The sound of her own heavy breaths and wet lapping noises, the slight grunts of discomfort from Rick. The way his muscles tensed whenever she'd touch the wound his nails had inflicted on his palm, the twitch and sigh that followed when she pierced his wrist with her fangs. The scent of sweat and blood and dirt, the way her clothes brushed against her skin, the pressure of the floor on her knees, the gentle strokes of his fingers running through her hair.

They locked gazes again, and there was a new emotion there, tender comfort. It was with softness that he kept her there, drowning out the world in his presence.

He pulled his hand away from her mouth, and Eva whimpered softly but dared not follow. High on sensations, she didn't think, couldn't; she stared into his eyes as his fingers caressed her chin, raising her eyes, until her focus flickered to the tiny scar on his lower lip.

The scar he could've healed but chose to keep. A reminder to torment her with the memory of that beach.

"Evangeline."

It was as much a call as it was an order, there was no need for further instruction; she rose, guided by his touch. The kiss that followed left the maiden's hands gripping her thighs, her body melting into his embrace. She did not bite him; it was the Lord who pierced his own lip against her fang, inviting her to drink.

Her hunger reared its head, and she wished for nothing more than to wrap her arms around him, but when he bit her lips she found herself frozen. Instincts warred with one another, the hesitation left nothing but thoughtless surrender.

And Evangeline was rewarded with more ambrosia.

Too soon did they break away, and her hands gingerly touched his chest, fluttering eyelashes peered up at her human, silently begging for him to come back with her ruby gaze.

He smiled. "Breathe," he commanded.

A cruel order, when her body yearned to drown in him. But she did so, filling her lungs with air for what felt like the first time in hours.

Thoughts bubbled back to the surface. Her hands pulled away as if scalded, the realization of what she'd been thinking burned its way through her mind, sobering her up in a flash.

"My Lord," she declared, stepping away with a quick bow, breaking the entrancing eye contact before it could claim her a second time. "You need to rest."

Clarity brought shame and embarrassment. She took to the shadows as the only escape before he could snare her again. But the feeling was just a little duller than at the beach. The need to put distance between them just a little less solid.

And she knew the next kiss, whenever it occurred, would be just a little weaker still.

Bit by bit, drop by delicious drop.

The Fledgling hurried out to the chill of the night, taking refuge on the rooftop of the house, trying to turn her focus anywhere but her own beating heart. She gazed at the moonlit sky, stars twinkling above.

"Just a bed-warmer," she remembered Dia's words, her face burned scarlet as she raced through the darkened streets, using the shadows to avoid the workers.

She steered clear of everyone: the people placing ropes and planks connecting the rooftops of the houses, the people digging through the very streets, the people setting up walls and dead ends.

Urtha, the massive Orc was helping carry massive pieces of stone up to the wall.

And Eva spoke the only words she could put any coherent thought into, a denial of the mocking statement the healer had spoken, the statement that now felt honeyed and sweet like a poison.

"Teach me to fight."