



First Look Access

(Episode 8: Amber Duell)

Chapter One

Theo

The musky hint of smoke follows me through the ruined Kisken city, over twisted metal and jutting pipes. The once-bustling tourist destination is hard to navigate without moonlight, but there isn't time to be careful. Not tonight. The handle of the sledgehammer digs into my shoulder as I find the edge of town and follow a line of olive trees toward the cracked highway.

With a deep breath, cold ocean air fills my lungs. War is a captivating, magnetic disorder. And it's mine. Only the God of War can decide when and how it ends, and right now I'm perfectly happy to let it rage on despite what my brother wants. He may be older, and the King of the Gods, but this is my decision.

"Theodric?"

My muscles tighten at the sound of my sister's voice—especially *this* sister—but I don't break my stride. "What are you doing here, Astra?"

She catches up to me in steel gray fatigues, her honey hair braided and tucked under a black beret. A round, blue pin with a red triangle at its center is stuck through the stiff wool. "Working," she replies.

“Right.” I raise an eyebrow and scan the uniform. It suits her, despite her small frame, but it’s nothing the Goddess of Love would ever think of wearing normally. Not with pride, anyway. “When did you enlist in the Asgyan army?”

She tugs at the wide, buttoned cuffs and crinkles her nose. “Most of the men and women deployed on this forsaken island have families waiting at home. If I have to wear this thing to bring a few of them peace of mind, I will.”

Of course she will. She loves mortals as much as they love her, even if no one believes we exist anymore. Love is the one true universal obsession. It’s said to overcome even death. Something to be longed for and placed on a pedestal. Something to live and breathe, fight and die for. But I prefer the cold, hard revenge that encompasses my heart. It’s made of stronger stuff. It’s reliable.

We walk in silence past barren fruit trees and thorny brush until we reach a rusted guardrail. I step over it while Astra scrambles to keep up with my long stride. Raw sewage assaults my nostrils. An icy breeze nips at the back of my neck and sends debris skating over the parched ground. The overpass isn’t much farther; the pillars black shadows in the distance.

“Where are you going?” Astra asks.

I shift the hammer to my other shoulder. “Don’t worry about it.”

She folds her arms across her chest. “It doesn’t mean you’re weak if you listen to Ebris, you know. This island has been a battleground for over a year now, and we’re all tired. The troops on both sides are at the end of their rope, and

Kiskens are on the verge of extinction.” She motions toward the flattened city behind us. “I know you don’t like being told what to do, but he’s right. This war is too much. It needs to stop.”

“Ebris might like to think he owns me, but he doesn’t,” I snap. “He doesn’t own *this*.”

“That’s not—”

“If he wants to stop the war, he should talk to Drea. She created the famine that turned Asgya into a wasteland. If she had offered them any hope, they wouldn’t have turned to Volkana for help.” I focus on my destination to avoid my sister’s stare. It’s common knowledge the Volks take any opportunity to infiltrate another country, but no one expected the Asgyans to drag the Kiskens into it. Not even me. “I’m only playing the hand I was dealt.”

“Don’t be a child,” Astra says with an edge.

“A child? You’re nineteen. Don’t act like you know better than I do when you only have two years on me.”

“Two *mortal* years.”

A breath heaves from my lungs. Two years is still two years, even if time moves differently in our realm. “I don’t interfere with Ebris’ business or yours. I don’t deserve this,” I say.

Astra scoffs. “Ebris respects you; we all do. You’re our brother and we love you but—”

I grind my feet into the pavement. None of my siblings respect me. They think I'm too young, too angry, too reckless to understand the consequences of war, but they're wrong. Understanding and caring are two different things. Lesser evils are still evil and hard choices are still hard, but someone has to make them. I turn to face her.

"Astra, go back."

"If you would only be open minded," she says in a rush. "I know you remember the Ostran War."

I stand rigid. Heat coils through my body, a spring ready to snap. I remember *everything* about that war. Including what it cost me. "That was a long time ago," I say through my teeth.

"It was a *mistake*," she says. "Look what you're reduced to. Before Ebris stripped your power, you could've fixed this with a flick of your hand."

The hammer drops to the ground with a low thud. My chest pitches under the pressure to control my breathing, to control myself. "It only became a mistake when everyone else tried to control the situation. I knew what I was doing then and I know what I'm doing now. Don't turn this into another disaster." I take a deep breath through my nose. It's no use. They have less faith in me than modern mortals. I can prove myself again and again, battle after battle, but they'll never trust me.

"I'm going to block the highway," I deadpan.

She tilts her head, her eyes narrow, and I know she's not going anywhere.

“Why?”

“Why?” My laugh is bitter. As much as I want to brush my brother off completely, it would be foolish. It has to at least look like I'm trying. “Ebris wants Kisk to have a fighting chance, doesn't he?”

I skirt around a boulder, dragging the metal tool behind me, and arrive at the overpass. Abandoned vehicles line the desolate road, pushed aside by enemy tanks to clear a path. Pieces of concrete dot the ground from the half-fallen street above while wires and strips of guardrail hang precariously over our heads. Cracks run up the wide cement post holding the pavement in place, one section crumbling from impact. It won't take much to finish knocking it down. Not much, but all that I have.

“How will more destruction help?” Astra asks.

“Because.” I heft the hammer. “Once the highway is blocked, the convoy heading this way will be forced onto the coastal route.”

She blinks.

“Do you know who camps there?” I ask.

“Should I?” she asks flatly.

No. And that's exactly why she has no business sticking her nose in this.

“Kisken militia.” I swing. The impact of metal on concrete rocks my body.

“I sent word to them earlier.” I swing again, and bits of debris fly back into my

face. “If they’re resourceful enough, their sad little band of fighters will have real weapons instead of knives and shovels by morning.”

Astra shakes her head. “That’s—”

“Whatever *you* do in a war zone, it doesn’t involve strategizing. Go home,” I shout over my shoulder.

“I’ll wait.” She backs away, her black military boots crunching against bits of rubble on the pavement. “We can go back together.”

I hold my breath, fighting to ignore my sister’s gaze on my back. The odds that she’s here at the same time I am are small. Kisk is one tiny part of an entire world, and she doesn’t like to witness the atrocities of war unless she has to. No, Astra didn’t come here for work. She came to pressure me to stop the war like Ebris did earlier today. Like I’m sure my other three siblings will in the near future.

They don’t understand. Of course they don’t; I’m nothing like them. I can’t grow crops or help two people find each other. The sea is predictable in its unpredictable nature. And even death is accepted as part of life. But every fiber of my being is woven from the rage of mortals. Threads of petty jealousy, intense greed, and misplaced righteousness knotted together, snarling in a violent ball that is warfare. I need war the same way my siblings need air, and they’re trying to suffocate me.

Anger boils under my skin, and I hit the post a third time. Then a fourth and a fifth. Each impact shudders through my tense muscles. I swing until my arms

ache, until I'm panting from exhaustion. Until steel support rods groan under the weight of the overpass. I drop the sledgehammer and bolt before it buries me. Today has been hard enough without having to climb my way out from beneath two tons of cement.

It happens slowly at first. The weakened part of the pillar bends. Then larger pieces of pavement slam down with a deafening boom. The ground vibrates beneath my feet as a dust cloud swallows everything in its path. When it settles, the same gray-white powder that coats the cars covers me as well, but the job is done. No one will get around the jumbled mess.

"Do you feel better now?" Astra calls from the tree line.

I push the sleeves of my sweater to my elbows and silently retrace my steps through the city. Astra walks beside me like a ghost.

* * *

Flames lick at the starless sky, the pops and crackles of a bonfire lost in a soft chorus of voices. From a distance, the two groups standing around the blaze are nothing but dark silhouettes. I throw up my mental shields, diverting their eyes. Astra does the same. If they look in our direction, their gaze will subconsciously skip over us as if we aren't there at all. There's no reason to create panic by letting them see an enemy soldier strut through camp with an outsider. Especially if they heard the road collapse.

And there's no way they didn't hear it. Didn't feel it. That part of the highway is only a ten-minute walk, but no one runs. No one screams. They stand, somber, around their fire like it's just another evening. One more noise going bump in the night.

Waves crash against the rocky cliff below as Astra and I round the bottom of the hill. My temple looms above, black stone cutting into the darkness. In a few dozen steps, I'll be inside those walls, flashing back to my own realm.

I follow Astra up the first few stones set into the grassy incline before a silvery voice from below makes me falter. I shouldn't turn, shouldn't waste precious time on curiosity, but I do.

A girl in an oversized khaki jacket is sitting at the edge of the firelight's glow. Shadows flicker over her tan skin, dancing in time to the flames. She can't be more than sixteen. "Last roll," she says.

"Theodric?" Astra whispers. "What's wrong?"

I hold my hand up to silence her. There's no answer to give. I don't understand why this girl's voice caught my attention nor why it's holding it. The war shows on the girl's dirt-smeared clothes and the snarled mass of black hair knotted at the back of her head. I can't look away. There's something about the careful way her chestnut eyes dart across the city center, like she knows something she shouldn't.

"What is it?" Astra asks.

A gaunt man sitting across from the girl nods once. They both raise their hands and a pair of iron dice fall, clinking against a sheet of rippled aluminum. A few bounces later, the dice come to rest between them. There's a moment of stillness before the girl grabs the loaf of bread and faded blue and yellow windbreaker from the edge of their makeshift table.

“Wait,” the man croaks. His hand covers hers.

“It was best two out of three,” she says evenly. “A fair game.”

His knuckles protrude as he strengthens his grip. “A rematch then.”

“I'm sorry.” She pries at his fingers, but he clamps down on her with his other hand. “Let go.”

“Go ahead without me,” I say to Astra, and before I realize it, I'm standing beside the man and the girl without my shields. “She said let go.”

The man jumps and the girl uses the distraction to twist her hands free. She turns and looks at me. Whatever response I was expecting from her, it wasn't this harsh glare. I stare back until the man pushes up from the piece of fallen wall he was using as a chair.

“Wait. Take this.” She rips the bread in two and holds the smaller end out to him. He snatches it from her, barring yellow teeth, and trudges away, stumbling on the uneven ground. She tugs the collar of her jacket tight around her chest and shakes her head. Then her eyes snap back across the table to me. “I didn't need your help.”

She shoves the half-loaf into a messenger bag on her lap followed by the windbreaker. *She didn't need my help?* That man would've fought her and, frail as he looked, he would have won. He's too desperate not to. But I'm too tired from fighting about the war with my siblings all day to argue again with someone else, so I bite my tongue.

Snatching up one of the iron dice, I roll it between my fingers. *Fate Dice*. An odd choice for someone who doesn't believe in the gods. She doesn't. I don't have to ask. The believers—all fourteen of them—prowl the temple in woven black robes. This set of dice is high quality, though—heavy, with intricately carved symbols on each of the six sides, one for each god, and intertwining vines along the edges. They belonged to someone with money. Perhaps someone who died in the bombings, their things left to be plundered by a young girl in a khaki coat.

“Care for another round?” I ask.

“Not tonight.” She holds out her hand for the die. “I already got what I came for.”

“No stakes.” I take the recently vacated seat across from her, and a thrill runs up my spine. I grind my teeth against the need to talk to her. There's no time for distraction while I'm working. During times of peace, it's easy enough to waste days away with a bit of mortal fun but not now. Never now. I have to remain neutral. “For fun.”

“No.”

A laugh flies from my mouth. At least one of us has some sense. “Please?” I tilt my head.

She fidgets uncomfortably, eying my hand. “They don’t like strangers here. You should leave.”

I glance at the two groups around the fire: One of bedraggled Kisken survivors, perhaps twenty total, with filthy, threadbare clothes. The other, four men from the temple. Each stays as close to the fire and as far from each other as possible.

“And you?” I ask. “How do you feel about strangers?”

Her stare cuts through me like a hot knife. “You’re not Kisken.”

It’s an accusation, not a question. My skin is almost as bronze as hers, my hair just as black, and if it weren’t for my blue eyes, I could easily pass as a fellow islander. “Not fully, no.” *I’m everything and I’m nothing—the original race that all others stem from.* “I’m not here to hurt anyone, if it makes you feel better.”

She rolls her eyes. “Forgive me if I don’t trust someone skulking around in the middle of the night after what I heard a few minutes ago.”

She’s referring to the overpass collapsing, but it isn’t fear I see in her expression. It’s unwavering certainty. Of what, I’m not sure. I toss the die up and catch it midair. “I’m not skulking. Three rolls. Each round I win, I get to ask a question.”

She inches forward on her seat and clears her throat. “And if I win?”

A grin breaks free of my control. “Win once and you can ask me something. Twice and I’ll go away.”

She glances at the fire over my shoulder before pinching her lips together. “Fine.”

I ignore the expanding sensation in my chest. There’s no reason to play a game with this girl and every reason to walk away. Instead, I ask, “Ready?”

She nods and we drop our dice. Hers lands on a crown—*king*—and mine on a black dot—*death*. My win. But I pause. I had no specific question in mind when I suggested this. It was merely a way to hear her speak again. To learn something about her, maybe a clue about why she caught my attention. What she likes. What she hates. Although, I’m fairly certain the answer to the latter is *me* at the moment.

“I don’t know anything useful,” she warns.

“I’m not a spy.” I pull my winning die back before she can get any ideas of quitting early. “What’s your name?”

Her shoulders rise and fall with each slow breath. “Why?” she asks, her expression pensive.

“Why not?”

After another moment of silence, she sighs. “Cassia.”

“Cassia.” Like the flower, delicate and graceful. It almost suits her, but she seems tougher, able to weather harsher conditions. With a smile, I hold my palm

out in the Kiskeya greeting and wait for her to touch it with her fingertips. “I’m Theo.”

She scans the area again, ignoring my gesture. “I didn’t ask your name.”

“That man didn’t ask to split the bread, either.” I pull back and rub my hand on my jeans.

Cassia picks up her die and gives it a small flick with her fingers. “Love,” she says when it lands on an infinity symbol. “You lose.”

“I haven’t rolled yet.” I drop the die but I had to hope for the same or a wave—*water*—to roll again. It stops on a flower—*life*. My loss. “Your question?”

“There’s nothing I want to know.” She swipes up her die and shakes it in her fist. “Again.”

Both iron pieces drop just as an argument breaks out near the fire. A low rumble of voices, unclear but distinctly unhappy, fill the air. The flames smolder in Cassia’s eyes as her gaze darts between two points behind me. Her chin jerks toward the table, and she snatches the dice with stiff movements.

“Your win.” Her voice is light but the unevenness gives her away.

“Why do you fear them?” I ask without thought.

Her breath hitches, and I feel a small pang of regret. She doesn’t owe me her secrets. Not for winning in a game of chance. Before I can change the question, a shrill scream shatters the night. Jumping from the rubble, my hand falls to the hip

my broadsword usually hangs from. I left it home tonight, expecting nothing a sledgehammer couldn't fix.

A middle-aged survivor claws at the face of a man in black while two others pull the attacking woman away. She screeches again, lunging forward, but they keep their grip on her arms. The rest of the group closes in.

Blood runs from the man's scratches as other believers drag him, shouting a string of obscenities colorful enough to raise my eyebrows, toward the stairs where Astra still stands. We lock eyes for a brief moment, before she darts toward the temple to avoid being run over. I fight against a shiver. Tensions run high in hard times, but it feels like more than a common squabble. Heavier.

"What was that about?" I ask.

But when I turn, Cassia is gone. I squint into the darkness but it's still as death. Needles of disappointment scrape through me. I shake the sensation off. It's better not to get involved anyway.

That doesn't stop me from glancing over my shoulder again before I rush up the hill behind the zealots.

Chapter Two

Cassia

A halo of orange hugs the sun as it rises over the coastline, painting the sky pink. I watch the world usher in a new day perched on rusty monkey bars in the old park playground. It won't be much different than the last, but in the first quiet hours of morning it's easy to pretend there's no war. That my parents aren't dead and my brother, Oren, wasn't hanged for treason. For a moment, I can forget how alone I am.

I don't blame the Kiskens for refusing to let me stay with them. Their loved ones are dead and their homes reduced to dust because of Oren, but I was only fourteen at the time. Fifteen when the bombs dropped over a year ago. It isn't fair to make me shoulder his mistakes. But that's the thing, nothing's fair.

Zippering my jacket against the chill, I slip between the metal bars onto solid ground. The others will still be tucked away in the remaining wing of the mall, sleeping soundly out of the elements. I have roughly thirty minutes to drop supplies and run. They know I'm the one leaving the scavenged items—clothes, shoes, photo albums. It doesn't make them like me, but it's not like I have anything better to do with my days. And, although I shouldn't, I *do* feel a little guilty.

I grab my messenger bag from where it hangs on the handle of the slide and make my way toward the old city center. The cracked fountain at the bottom of the hill is full of black ash, wisps of smoke still rising from tiny red embers. Vendors used to set up stands for tourists here, so there wasn't much to destroy when the bombs hit. But the cobblestones are uneven now. The path to the cliff's edge where visitors went for the ocean view is gone, but it's still the closest thing we have to normal.

I slip the bag off my shoulder and kneel, pulling out yesterday's spoils. I would've left the ripped blanket and pair of socks last night after I won the bread if my opponent hadn't tried to cheat me. And if Theo hadn't delayed me.

Theo.

My head snaps to the aluminum table at the edge of the center, and I frown. Strangers don't pass through, and they certainly don't do it in the middle of the night. Not for any good reason, anyway. Not when the north, south, and east are crawling with troops that will shoot first and ask questions later. The only thing west is the ocean.

Theo couldn't be much older than me, but he was gorgeous. I don't know who he's fighting for or where he comes from, but I'll give him that much. The sharp angles of his face, the slight stubble on his cheeks, the cords of muscle running through his forearms. *That smile.* I've never seen eyes so blue before. Maybe he's one of the zealots, transferring from a foreign temple. Rumor has it

they stockpile everything during times of peace in their fortress atop the hill— food, soap, razors, shampoo— to entice people to convert during wars. Theo was well-fed and smelled sharply of steel instead of rotting onions, so it would make sense.

Except I've never seen the zealots recruiting. They hide in their temple, pretending they're untouchable while the rest of us pay for our disbelief. Last night was the first I've seen of them in months.

I set the things down beside the fountain with a sigh. The air shifts. An eerie stilling. The hair on the back of my neck rises as I stand. Before I can turn, a dark sack is thrown over my head. My heart slams against my chest and, for a moment, I forget how to move. Then my father's self-defense lessons come rushing back. I twist my head to the side, bend my knees, and haul the attacker over my body. He lands with a grunt and I run, ripping the sack off as I go. Voices rise up behind me. They're close and getting closer.

My joints ache with fear. I pump my arms, refusing to give into the urge to freeze. If I stop...I can't stop. Two men in black are almost on my heels.

Zealots.

The glance back throws me off balance, and I trip into thick debris. I grab a coiled pipe to stop from face-planting, but my hip crashes into a steel frame. Pain rolls over me like a wave. I swallow hard and shove to my feet.

A wide arm hooks my waist, lifting me off the ground. I scream until my throat burns. No one will come though, no matter how much I cry for help. I swing my legs back. My heel cracks against a shin, and my captor staggers.

“Hold her.” A man with jagged scratch marks on his face limps over to us. A silver handgun gleams in his hand, and my heart lurches. “I don’t want to use this, but I will,” he says.

I spit in his face, and his smug look disappears. “What do you want?” I growl.

“This isn’t about me, Cassia. It’s about Kisk.” He jerks the gun and a second man comes from behind to grab one of my arms. Together, the two men drag me toward the base of the hill. “Quickly. We can’t lose the dawn.”

My pulse races. There’s only one reason I can think of to take someone like me to the temple. Sacrifice is illegal, but chickens and goats still came up missing from farms across the country before the war. There’s no livestock left now, but there’s also no police or government officials to hold anyone responsible for murder.

And no one will miss me.

No. I can’t think like that.

I slam into the man holding my right arm, but, even though he staggers, his grip stays strong. We start up the grassy hill and I know it’s now or never. Kicking

out, I slam the soles of my sneakers against an uneven stone step and press back, locking my knees.

“Calm down,” the gunman says. “We’re offering you a way to earn a place among your countrymen again.”

As a dead girl.

No one holds a grudge against the deceased—not unless your last name is Stavros. Then they’ll curse you all the way to the grave and toss your family onto the street.

My sneakers slip, morning dew still coating the ground, and I scramble to regain control of my legs. If I can kick one of their knees out, he’ll have to let go to stop us all from tumbling backward.

“It’s a long way down,” the man adds as if he’s reading my mind.

He’s right. We’re too far up the hill to end the fall uninjured, but broken and bruised is better than corpse. I’m more sorry than anyone can know that my brother brought us into this war, but I won’t die for it. I twist sideways and sink my teeth into the man’s upper arm. He screams and a fist lands on my jaw. My vision blurs and a deep throbbing pain takes over.

“What are you doing? She’s not to be harmed.”

“She bit me,” the man snarls.

“Listen.” I fight to drag in a breath. “You don’t have to do this.”

“The whole city agrees it’s for the best,” the gunman says.

The whole city?

It doesn't make sense that the other Kiskens would agree to anything the zealots proposed. They may hate me but they think the believers are certifiable. Obviously, they're right. Sane people don't haul people off to slaughter. I stretch my jaw side to side and relax into them. All I need is one second with their guard down. One fleeting moment of distraction, and I'll make a break for it.

The hill flattens at the top. A round three-story stone building towers over us with two levels of roofs and five turrets evenly spaced around the perimeter. My breath catches when I notice the only windows are long narrow slits I would be lucky to fit an arm through, let alone my whole body.

A pair of massive wooden doors groan open, the only entrance I see, and the men rush forward, dropping me in a dim inner chamber. Dusty red banners hang from the ceiling, following each solid stone wall to the floor. An altar is directly across the main chamber with a matching red cloth adorned with a black shield. A polished sword lies across the surface. I stay on my knees to hide how badly my legs are shaking and scan the rest of the room for an escape route.

There's a pit in the center of the floor. A circular opening, big enough for a large man to fit in with ease, seems to lead straight to the center of the universe. Bile rises in my throat. A mythology textbook in school painted a vivid picture of what happens there.

Not to me.

“Cassia, welcome.” A round woman with gray streaked hair shuffles forward in a flowing black robe. A small silver shield is pinned to her left shoulder. “I’m glad you decided to join us today.”

A man slithers up beside her, his face deep-set with wrinkles, and takes the gun from the man with the marred face. I’ll need to get it before I escape. If I can get him alone, it shouldn’t be hard. He’s too old to put up much of a fight. Then I’ll have to find an exit without raising any alarms. I’ll only get one chance; I can’t rush it.

“*Decided* is a strong word,” I say.

The woman’s laugh bounces off the high-domed ceiling. “We won’t keep you long. This is High Priest Ciro and I’m Nessa, the Temple Mother.”

“Yeah. Great.” It doesn’t matter who they are, only that they can shoot me. “What do you want?”

“We thought you might like the chance to help Kisk.” Ciro motions a young boy with a wooden cup forward. “If you make tributes to the gods, perhaps they’ll listen.”

“Me?” I rub a hand over the ache in my chest. They nod. *Exit, exit, exit.* I don’t remember seeing another door from the outside, but I never paid attention before today. What kind of temple devoted to a war god wouldn’t have the foresight to make an emergency escape? It seems like a lesson in War 101: *In case*

of a siege, have multiple ways out. “I don’t even believe in your gods. This is the first time I’ve even been near this place. Why would they listen to anything I say?”

“You will believe. It’s impossible to give tribute and not feel their power.”

Ciro takes the cup from the boy and holds it out to me. “Drink this.”

I blink, looking between him and Nessa. They can’t be serious. Yet, deep down I know they are. This is their life, as outdated as it is. Everything they do is to keep Theodric happy, and right now their God of War is angry with the island.

Incense wafts down from a hanging metal bowl, a line of thin white smoke snaking through the temple. I struggle to inhale. “I’ll pass, thanks,” I say around a cough.

“It purifies you for the tributes,” Nessa says. “You need to drink it.”

I cross my arms. If these tributes really do end in sacrifice, I’m not going to be an accessory to my own murder. “I’m not thirsty.”

Ciro raises the gun to my chest and my mouth runs dry. “This doesn’t have to be difficult.”

My stomach lurches as the sandalwood smoke continues to saturate the cool, musty air. Saliva fills my mouth but I won’t throw up. They don’t get to see me weak. “I’m sure your War God would rather hear from one of his believers.”

With a snap of his fingers, Ciro signals the men back to my side. “Last chance.”

“I’m not drinking that.” There’s more attitude in my voice than I intend. Definitely more than is smart under the circumstances.

The men shove down on my shoulders and press against my heels with their feet until my legs begin to slide out from under me. I reach out to grab them for balance, but they brush my hands away. Finally, I slip. My head slams hard against the stone and the room spins. Stars twinkle in front of my eyes. By the time things right themselves, Nessa is straddling my chest.

Sweat rolls down my temples and tremors wrack my body. *I have to get out of here now.*

“She bites,” one of the men warns.

“Come on, dear,” Nessa says, ignoring him. I slam my lips shut and try to buck her off, but she’s too heavy. The hands holding me down are too tight. Nessa snaps her fingers. “The funnel.”

The same boy that brought the cup rushes over with a blue plastic cone. A long clear tube curls from the end. I thrash under Nessa’s weight. My body tingles with adrenaline as I push and pull against them. The sound of Ciro pulling the hammer back on his gun grates in my ears. I freeze.

“Open,” the woman says.

I shake my head and she pinches my nose. The seconds tick on until my lungs scream for oxygen. Instead of gasping for it like I want, I crack my lips while keeping my jaw tight, but it’s all the opening she needs.

The tube rams inside my mouth and slams against my molars. I fling my head sideways, but a pair of sweaty palms squeeze against my ears. A bitter liquid floods my mouth. I gag. Nessa yanks the tubing away and holds my jaw shut with the heel of her hand. I try to block the drink from slipping down my throat, but it sneaks around my tongue, pooling at the back of my mouth. Eventually, I have no choice but to swallow.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Nessa stands and the men haul me back to my feet.

“Screw you,” I breathe.

“Do the tributes and this can all end,” Ciro says.

I straighten my back. “I won’t.”

“You will.” Ciro gives me a little push toward the first of five stone arches.

I plant my feet. “Touch me again and I’ll cut your hands off.”

“With what?” he asks. “Now, go. We’re on a schedule.”

I inch forward while keeping the weapon in sight. Inside the rounded alcove, Nessa waits at a small altar with an elaborately scrolled silver box. Something warm and round is pressed into my hand from behind, but I’m only partially aware.

“This is the altar of Ebris,” she begins. “All you have to do is say the words: *Ebris, King of Gods, please accept this tribute.* Then leave the coin in the chest.”

I glare at the box as static begins to crackle and pop in my head. “That’s it?”

She nods. “Go ahead.”

I sigh, my body prickling with heat, and repeat the words. Then I set the coin on a bed of blue velvet before shutting the lid. There's no otherworldly sensation. No gusts of wind or clap of thunder. It's too easy. Years ago a man saved a little boy from drowning in the town pool. His front stoop was littered with flowers, candles, and casserole dishes for a month. These are gods they're talking about; the zealots will need more than this if they want to gain favor.

There's just as much non-reaction when I plant a peach pit in a pot of soil for Drea, Goddess of Life. When I rinse my hands in water for Brisa, Goddess of the Sea, I'm shocked to find I can't feel the water. I see it gliding over my fingers but I can't *feel* it. I tilt my head and examine the beads of water clinging to my knuckles. My pulse loses its rhythm. I want to panic, but my mind won't let me. I pinch myself until blood wells beneath my nails. *Nothing*. I try to wiggle my toes in my sneakers, hoping to feel the rough fabric of my socks, but I can't tell if I'm succeeding.

"What did you give me?" I ask.

"The robana bean is a traditional purifier for the gods." Nessa smiles, silently guiding me to the fourth alcove.

White-hot anger fizzles in my gut, but it won't help; the zombie drug will make sure of that. It's already latched onto my control. If I don't find a way out now, I never will. But I *can't* leave. Not now. Not without help. I'll never make it

down the hill alone. If I do, what then? I won't be able to move without someone telling me to once it's in full effect.

Try.

The word feels far away. My teeth click together, the only thing telling me I'm shaking, and Nessa hands me a book of matches. A fuzzy part of my brain screams, *Fire! Set the place ablaze. Escape. Run.*

Run.

"Light the candle," she says.

My fingers shake as I try to strike the match. The flimsy stick snaps, and I fumble to free another from the inside flap. Nessa finally takes pity and strikes the flint herself, setting it carefully between my fingers. I mumble the same mantra I said at the first three alters. "Astra, Goddess of Love, please accept this tribute." The words are mine. I hear my voice speaking them, but I don't feel my lips moving.

"Good." She takes the matches and ushers me back into the main chamber. Ciro waits with a wide smile, the gun still in his hand, and I blanch. "One more and then you can have a bath."

A bath will be nice.

My insides smolder. No. It won't be nice. It will be bad. Very bad. I have to run. Run...somewhere. Because...There's a reason. I'm sure of it.

Under the final archway, a tall, smooth bowl sits on the altar with a needle-like blade beside it. “Stab it,” Nessa instructs.

“Stab...” My breath rasps. I lean forward to peer in the bowl. A long brown rat sits on its haunches, staring back. I’ve never killed anything bigger than a spider. There are some big spiders in Kisk, but still. Definitely never anything cute and fuzzy. Never anything that could look as terrified as this rodent does with its beady eyes and puffed out whiskers.

Nessa takes a deep breath. “Do you think we gave her too much?” she whispers to Ciro. He whispers back, but I don’t understand. “I’ll help. Start with the words.”

“Le...Leander, God of Death.” My tongue fills my mouth and I scowl at the creature. *What am I doing?* “Please ac...accept this tribute.”

The ivory handle of the blade finds my palm. Nessa’s fingers blend perfectly around mine. I can’t tell where my hand ends and hers begins. There’s no time to think before the tiny sword plunges mercilessly down at the brown rat. A high-pitched squeal echoes through the small room and the poor thing twitches. Its sides move with rapid, worried breaths for another moment before it falls limp.

My knees buckle but Ciro is there. The gun is gone, probably tucked safely away somewhere beneath the black robes. He carries me from the final alcove and down a flight of stairs behind Theodric’s altar. I watch the doors disappear on the other side of the temple.

The doors. They were important before. I can't remember why.

Fluorescent bulbs hang bare on the ceiling of a yellow room at the bottom of the steps. An oval pool, filled to the brim with milky white liquid, is set into the ground.

Not a pool. A smile curls on my lips. *A bath.*

Ciro sets me in a wicker chair beside a rolling trolley covered in assorted bottles. "I'll wait outside."

Nessa descends upon me, pulling at my clothes and cutting the rubber band from my snarled hair. I let her even though I never would've allowed anyone to see me naked thirty minutes ago. When she eases me into the bath, it's worth it. The scent of jasmine makes my eyelids flutter shut. I giggle as a cup of water splashes over my head. Stiff fingers rub circles against my scalp before more water flows over me. She washes my hair three times before scrubbing my body with a rough sponge.

Pull her in. Hold her under.

I fight a yawn. Why shouldn't I be here? It's rather nice. There's a *bath*. And the tributes have been painless.

Not for the rat.

"Out you come," Nessa says.

She hoists me up, patting me dry much too soon, and produces a white wrap dress. The gauze-like material slips over my shoulders and cinches shut with a

wide ribbon. I glance down at the elbow length sleeves and examine the intricate white embroidery there. “Pretty,” I say.

“Hold still.” Her fingers work through my wet hair, twisting it into a low, tight bun. Bobby pins scrape the nape of my neck, but all I feel is slight pressure. “There. Done.”

She leads me from the room and Ciro nods. He helps me climb the stairs myself this time. There are a lot of them. It didn’t feel like this many on the way down. “You should put in an elevator,” I mumble.

The main room is full of men and women in black. More than I expect. A dozen, at least. I thought only a handful lived here. My head lolls to the side. “I think you made a mistake,” I whisper into Ciro’s ear. “My dress is the wrong color.”

“It’s not a mistake.” He pats my shoulder. “Thank you for your sacrifice, Cassia Stavros.”

I giggle again. *What is wrong with me? Get out! Go!*

“The next part is simple.” He walks toward the altar. “After this, it will all be over.”

“Okay.” I totter after him.

“Stand here.” Ciro lifts me by my upper arms and sets me on my feet in the pit. It’s taller than I am by at least two feet.

Pit. The pit.

My brain claws at the fog shrouding my rational thought.

“Theodric.” Ciro’s voice booms through the cavernous main room. “God of War, please accept this sacrifice for the good of Kisk. Save us from the enemies that plague us. Bring us peace.”

The sword from the altar looks heavy in his hand as he looms over the opening. *When did he pick that up?* I stretch onto my toes, trying to connect the dots, but it’s too hard to think. *Pit. Sword. Sacrifice.* I shake my head, but it only sends a wave of dizziness crashing over me.

“Wait.” My voice is a hoarse whisper.

I reach up, trying to find purchase so I can pull myself up, and Ciro snatches my wrist. His outline is blurry. I catch the flash of the blade a moment before it slices down my forearm in one swift, clean motion.

Blood pours down my elbow and splashes at my feet. *This should hurt.* But it doesn’t. I stare, transfixed, at the crimson river.

This should definitely, absolutely hurt.

Then blackness creeps into my vision, swallowing me into nothingness.

For more information on Fragile Chaos, please visit
<http://www.amberrduell.com>

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