

Chapter Twenty-One

The chapter opens with Princess Hasar deliberately separating Nesryn and Chaol during a formal meal, creating an atmosphere of tension and discomfort. Hasar's calculated actions force Nesryn to sit beside Prince Sartaq, while Yrene is placed next to Chaol, drawing scrutiny from the other guests. The seating rearrangement highlights Hasar's manipulative nature, as she orchestrates the situation to unsettle both couples. Chaol and Yrene exchange wary glances, aware they are being watched, and Nesryn silently warns Chaol to be cautious of the princess's schemes.

Chaol and Yrene engage in stilted conversation, their words carefully measured under the watchful eyes of the court. They discuss Yrene's recent achievements as a healer and her upcoming unofficial test, which she reveals is more about her own growth than his condition. Despite the formal setting, their interactions hint at a deeper connection, though the presence of others forces them to maintain a guarded demeanor. Meanwhile, Kashin observes them intently, adding another layer of tension to the already charged atmosphere.

The meal transitions into an entertainment segment, where Arghun introduces a troupe of gold-painted dancers whose provocative performance captivates the court. The dancers' sensual movements and near-nudity surprise Chaol, who humorously remarks that his friend Dorian would have enjoyed the spectacle. Yrene shares a rare moment of amusement with him, lightening the mood momentarily. The scene underscores the court's opulence and the stark contrast between its decadence and the underlying political machinations.

As the evening progresses, servants bring in smoking bowls of mild opiates, further emphasizing the court's indulgent lifestyle. Yrene warns Chaol to avoid the fumes, showcasing her practical nature amidst the extravagance. The chapter closes with the lingering sense that Hasar's manipulations are far from over, and Chaol and Yrene

remain pawns in a larger game. The tension between personal connections and political intrigue leaves readers anticipating the next move in this high-stakes environment.

