

Chapter Twenty-Two

Yrene grapples with the aftermath of an intense encounter with Chaol, fueled by the effects of an opiate smoke at a noble party. Overheated and frantic, she retreats to her room, struggling to regain control as the substance's influence lingers. The smoke has stripped her of inhibitions, leaving her consumed by desire and confusion. By dawn, though the physical effects fade, a lingering unease settles in her gut as she prepares to face Chaol again, burdened by the weight of her actions and the lie she fed Princess Hasar.

Arriving at Chaol's palace suite, Yrene is determined to maintain professionalism despite her inner turmoil. Her resolve shatters when she discovers Chaol in bed with Nesryn, a sight that sends her reeling. Shock and an unnameable emotion flare between them before Yrene hastily retreats to the sitting room, struggling to compose herself. The intimacy she witnesses deepens her sense of displacement, amplifying the hollowness in her stomach as she waits, knee bouncing nervously, for what comes next.

Chaol emerges, disheveled and seemingly guilty, attempting to navigate the awkwardness between them. Yrene, unable to meet his eyes, busies herself with her satchel, creating a physical barrier with the desk. Her words stumble as she offers to prepare tonics—hinting at Nesryn's potential needs—while avoiding direct acknowledgment of what she saw. The unspoken tension hangs heavily, with Yrene's professional facade barely masking her emotional vulnerability.

The chapter closes with Yrene's internal conflict laid bare. She struggles to reconcile her feelings for Chaol with the reality of his relationship with Nesryn, all while clinging to her role as a healer. The ancient texts she brought, including **The Song of Beginning**, symbolize her trust in him, yet the emotional distance between them feels insurmountable. Her offer to help, though sincere, underscores her isolation, leaving

her trapped between duty and desire in a room that suddenly feels too vast.

