

Chapter Eighteen

The chapter opens with Nesta descending an endless stone stairwell, consumed by inner turmoil and physical exhaustion. Her thoughts spiral as she seeks escape from her own mind, yearning for distraction through music or wine. The repetitive motion of descending—marked by her burning handprint and counted steps—becomes a futile attempt to outrun her pain. By the thousandth step, she collapses against the cold stone, momentarily imagining a heartbeat within it, a fleeting comfort before the harsh reality of her isolation sets in.

After reaching her limit, Nesta begins the agonizing ascent, her body strained to its breaking point. The physical exertion temporarily numbs her emotional pain, leaving her empty by the time she returns to the landing. There, Cassian waits, his presence both a confrontation and an unspoken offer of support. Their exchange is tense; Nesta deflects his concern with blunt dismissals, but Cassian persists, probing the root of her distress. His gentle yet firm questioning reveals her despair over the slow progress of her healing compared to others who have suffered similarly.

The tension escalates as Cassian shares his own traumatic past, recounting the brutal vengeance he took on those who harmed his mother. His raw honesty and unflinching admission of the decade it took him to confront his actions starkly contrast Nesta's avoidance. The revelation shocks her, cutting through her defenses. Cassian's vulnerability serves as both a mirror and a challenge, urging her to acknowledge her pain without judgment or timeline.

In the chapter's closing moments, the dynamic between Nesta and Cassian shifts. His plea for her to unleash her anger on him—to trust him with her darkest emotions—hints at a deeper connection beneath their combative exterior. Nesta's resistance wavers as she confronts the gulf between her self-perception and Cassian's unwavering belief in her strength. The chapter ends with an unresolved tension,

leaving the reader poised for the next step in their complex relationship.

