

Chapter Seventy-One

The chapter opens with Cassian and Azriel confronting Koschei, a shadowy death-lord, at a lake where he holds Eris captive. Koschei taunts them, revealing his meticulous preparation for their arrival, while Cassian attempts to negotiate Eris's release, secretly hoping Koschei remains unaware of the powerful Made dagger Eris carries. Tension escalates as Azriel's shadows recoil, and Koschei's mocking laughter hints at impending danger. Azriel suddenly senses imminent peril and urges Cassian to flee, but Cassian finds himself paralyzed, unable to move as Azriel escapes with Eris and the dagger.

Briallyn, a vengeful queen, emerges from the shadows, her golden crown glowing with power as she seethes with hatred toward Cassian. Koschei, indifferent to her vendetta, casually winnows her and Cassian away, leaving Azriel powerless to intervene. The scene shifts to Nesta, who stands bloodied and exhausted after defending the mountain pass against Illyrian warriors to protect her friends, Gwyn and Emerie, as they complete the sacred climb. Nesta's resolve hardens as she faces Bellius, the last remaining warrior, who reveals the historical significance of her stand—mirroring the legendary Illyrian hero Enalius.

Bellius, unharmed and arrogant, mocks Nesta's efforts, claiming he never intended to win the climb but sought only to confront her. As dawn approaches, Gwyn and Emerie successfully touch the sacred stone, securing their victory, which enrages Bellius. Nesta's triumphant smile provokes him, and he attacks, signaling the start of their final clash. The chapter ends with the mountain rumbling, snow swirling ominously, and Bellius lunging at Nesta, leaving their fate unresolved.

The chapter masterfully intertwines two high-stakes confrontations: Cassian's capture by Briallyn and Koschei's machinations, and Nesta's desperate stand against Bellius. Both arcs emphasize themes of sacrifice, resilience, and the cost of defiance. The

tension is palpable as characters face seemingly insurmountable odds, setting the stage for dramatic developments in the story's climax. The parallel struggles of Cassian and Nesta highlight their shared determination to protect others, even at great personal risk.

