

War Song 1391

Chapter 1391

The citywide search tightened, and it actually forced Oliver to come out of hiding. But he wasn't searching for Viola-he was searching for Zoey.

She had gone to Hell Monarch Estate to deliver a set of clothing for Courtney today. While she was out, she decided to pick up a few things for the ladies of Skye Embroidery. Afterward, she was making her way back to the workshop through the west alley when Oliver appeared.

Her first instinct was surprise.

Hadn't he told Viola not to tell Zoey about his presence? Why would he risk coming here personally to see her?

"My dear, it is I," came a voice from beneath a wide-brimmed hat.

His face was obscured, but the voice-there was no mistaking it.

For a moment, Zoey was too stunned to speak, but then a surge of fury gripped her. She clenched her teeth, trying to swallow the anger that threatened to consume her. With a swift glance, she confirmed that the alley was deserted.

Her heart sank as she regretted her earlier complacency. She had assumed that since Oliver had gone to Viola, he wouldn't come looking for her. The fewer who knew of his return, the safer he would be. However, it seemed that the citywide search had driven him to desperation.

"What did you say?" Zoey asked. She bit down on her teeth, her voice trembling despite herself. But to Oliver, it sounded more like excitement.

The hat was lifted slightly, revealing a face that had become gaunt and darkened over time. His once- proud brows were now shaved off, making him appear comical.

"Zoey, it is me," he said, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. He glanced around cautiously, only relaxing once he was sure no one was nearby. "I've returned to the capital for you. Now that I know you are safe, I can rest easy."

Zoey stiffened as she watched him. His feigned concern was revolting.

"The whole city is looking for you. How dare you return?"

"I just needed to make sure all of you were safe. I'll leave soon," Oliver said, stepping closer and lowering his voice. "From now on, I'll probably be on the run, hiding wherever I can. Zoey, I know I've wronged you in the past, but I've realized my mistakes now. After all these years as husband and wife, I know you won't abandon me.

Zoey's eyes reddened, a mixture of frustration, bitterness, and anger swirling within her. Yet, through Oliver's eyes, she appeared moved, as though overwhelmed with emotion.

He took a step closer, urgency in his voice as he spoke, "You need to quickly gather 3,000 silver coins for me. I must leave the capital at once. Once I am settled, I will come back to take all of you with me."

He reached for her hand, but Zoey instinctively stepped back. His grasp fell short, and for a moment, a flicker of panic flashed across his face.

He quickly said, "My dear, I know I was wrong. Truly, I know. Please forgive me just this once."

Zoey met his gaze, her tears barely contained. "Do you truly understand the depths of your wrongs?"

"I swear, I will be devoted to only you from now on. I will never take another concubine, and I will never again hurt your heart," Oliver declared, raising his hand as though to swear an oath.

"I will trust you one more time," Zoey replied, her voice soft yet firm. "But if you disappoint me, I will never help you again."

Oliver's face lit up with relief. "My dear, I promise. Once I am safe, I will return for you and the children."

Zoey wiped away the moisture from the corner of her eyes. "I don't have 3,000 silver coins on hand. Give me time to borrow it. Where are you staying? How can I send the money to you once I have it?"

He hesitated, his eyes darting away.

"I am staying at..." he faltered.

He didn't want to reveal his

whereabouts, but the urgency of his situation left him no choice. Unlike when he had sought Viola's help, he couldn't afford to wait this time-he had to leave the capital as soon as possible.

Zoey's expression hardened. "You won't tell me? Fine then, Oliver. Are you still living with that little vixen? You're planning to take the money and run off with her, aren't you? Well, that's your business, not mine. Do what you will."

With that, she turned on her heel, ready to walk away.

In a panic, Oliver grabbed her arm. He no longer cared about anything else and said, "I'm staying at Glowmere Sanctuary for now. When you've gathered the money, go there and ask for a priest named Reuben."

As he spoke, he removed his hat. The top of his head was shaved, leaving only a crown of hair, as priests often did.

Zoey's eyes widened in shock. He had been posing as a priest!

No wonder he had been able to hide in the capital for so long. The Capital Guard rarely interfered with places of worship.

She had never considered the

possibility that Oliver would take the drastic step of shaving his head to disguise himself as a priest. If he had the audacity and wit to pull off such a ruse, then why hadn't he

used that same resolve and

intelligence on the Southern Frontier battlefield?

Chapter 1392

Zoey composed herself, her features hardening into a mask of calm.

"You should leave quickly. Once I've gathered the money, I will come find you. Until then, don't wander around and avoid being seen by the Capital Guard.

Sensing the concern in her voice, Oliver was relieved. Women, no matter how sharp they might be with others, always seemed to lack a certain sense when it came to their husbands.

After all, which woman didn't long for her husband's love?

"You must hurry," he urged, "three days, at most."

Zoey feigned hesitation, as though the request weighed heavily on her. "Given our current circumstances, as you well know, how could I possibly gather 3,000 silver coins in just three days?"

Oliver's eyes gleamed with resolve. "Isn't Courtney a part of the Hell Monarch's household now? I know you have your ways. I'll wait for your word. But remember-three days! And don't tell anyone about it, not even Mom or Viola."

With that, he pulled his hat low over his face and turned to leave in a hurry.

As Zoey watched him go, her face turned icy. She immediately followed him, but when she saw that there were no Capital Guard patrols outside, she held back from calling out, fearing it would alert him. She was also worried he might take civilians hostage and escape, putting innocent lives at risk. If he managed to escape, it would be much harder to track him down later.

She hurried back to Skye Embroidery and found Alana, then pulled the latter aside.

"Ms. Alana, you must go to Lady Carissa at once. Tell her that Oliver is hiding at Glowmere Sanctuary under the alias Reuben."

"Understood. I'll go immediately," Alana responded, turning to leave.

"Wait!" Zoey called, stopping Alana for a moment. "Tell Lady Carissa not to make a spectacle of it. Have her send a few people to investigate quietly. I fear Oliver might be testing me."

Although the search was intense now and Oliver had no way out, they still had to be cautious to capture him. This was Zoey's only chance. If the operation was successful, Carissa could request Salvador to reward Zoey. With that, Caspian and Cedric could return to the capital with the Hell Monarch.

"I understand. I know what to tell her," Alana said, nodding before she rushed off.

Zoey returned to her room, sinking into a chair, her mind unable to find peace. Hatred and anger churned within her, tormenting her thoughts.

How dare he come looking for her?!

He really dared to come looking for her!

He was so sure she would care about their marriage and do everything she could to protect him. All the years of maintaining appearances, of swallowing her anger, must have made him believe she loved him deeply enough for him to dare come and trample on her once more.

A knock sounded at the door, followed by Viola's voice. "Zoey!"

Zoey took a moment to steady her emotions before rising to answer the door.

Viola stood on the other side, her face flushed with frustration. "Where have you been? Why are you only just returning? Oliver found me."

Zoey's gaze sharpened. "When?"

"Just today, when I went out to fetch medicine for Mom. He stopped me and asked how things were going with the money."

"What did you tell him?"

"I couldn't say I hadn't managed it. I

told him Khad a thousand silver coins, but that I would need a few more days to gather the rest. promised I'd give him the full amount soon."

"Did he say where he's staying?"

"No. He just told me not to tell you."

Zoey's expression hardened. "He came to me too. He wants me to gather 3,000 silver coins for him." Viola paused, taken aback. "He went to you? But he told me not to tell you!"

Zoey's jaw clenched so tightly that her back teeth ground painfully. "He asked you for 3,000 silver coins, and asked me for the same amount. If we actually helped him, he'd have 6,000 Silver coins in his hands. How cruel! We've already fallen so low, and he wants us to sink even further by owing others so much money."

Clever, but not very smart. Oliver didn't realize that when people were

pushed to the edge, they would

discard their grudges with each other and stand united against a common enemy. en

Viola stamped her foot, her voice tinged with fury. "Oliver is trying to ruin us!"

"What's there to be afraid of? We weren't going to give him anything," Zoey snorted.

Viola's eyes reddened with frustration. "We're living in the capital as beggars, and Mom's sick. He must know all of this-how can he be so heartless?"

"Stop with the useless talk," Zoey said sharply. "If he had any real affection for us, he wouldn't have done any of this."

Viola slumped into the chair, melancholy clouding her face. "Even if he doesn't care for us, surely he would think of Mom and his children."

Zoey fell silent, her mind racing. She could only pray and hope that Carissa would be able to find Oliver.

Chapter 1393

Carissa and Violet set off together to investigate, disguising themselves as ordinary visitors. Upon arriving at Glowmere Sanctuary, they first offered candles and prayers before seeking an audience with the abbot. They made their identities known and inquired about a priest named Reuben.

The abbot immediately summoned the priest in charge of guests, Carson Jenkins, as it was Carson's responsibility to handle the arrangements for priests who came to stay at the temple.

Glowmere Sanctuary was one of the three largest temples in the capital, with a bustling number of visitors each year wanting to stay and listen to teachings. However, very few were actually allowed to stay. Carson recalled Reuben clearly.

Reuben's spiritual skills weren't particularly high; originally, he wasn't eligible to stay at Glowmere Sanctuary. However, a few years ago, he had spent considerable time in the Southern Frontier, helping to guide the souls of the dead. Such compassion was a rare virtue, and it was for this reason the temple made an exception to welcome him.

"He has been leaving the temple daily. There was a battle in the capital recently, and many lives were lost. He has been working tirelessly to help guide the souls of the departed. His efforts have truly been remarkable," Carson said.

His tone was filled with great admiration.

"Priests are meant to withdraw from the world. But Father Reuben, who went to the Southern Frontier, is truly an exception. Few priests would do such a thing. He embodies the compassion and devotion that should define our faith."

Carissa listened politely as Carson spoke at length. When he finished, she gave a polite nod and requested him to invite Reuben to meet her. She instructed Carson to tell the priest that a devotee,

deeply moved by Reuben's work in the Southern Frontier, wished to make a donation to build a new temple in his honor. She left it to him to choose the location, and assured Carson that a yearly contribution would be provided to support his work.

Carson didn't know Carissa and Violet's identities. Although they were dressed simply and modestly, their demeanor was extraordinary. He assumed they must be ladies or wives from noble families, here to do good deeds and earn merit.

With a respectful nod, he left to find Reuben.

Meanwhile, Oliver was on edge. He had been living in hiding for so long that the news of someone coming to find him struck fear into his heart. When he heard the offer to help build a temple and provide yearly funds, it felt like they were offering to support him.

Once the Earl of Silverstone, Oliver was well aware of the large families who regularly donated to temples in hopes to improve their fortunes. He had never heard of a temple being built specifically for one person, but the idea intrigued him. After all, it would take tens of thousands of silver coins to fund something of that scale.

The lure of profit-powerful, overwhelming-conquered Oliver's fear. He believed no one would suspect him of pretending to be a priest, and he was certain that Zoey would never betray him.

Carissa's strategy had worked.

Oliver was desperate for money, and the promise of such a substantial sum outweighed any lingering doubts. Moreover, it was only a lady who had come to seek him out.

Still, he remained cautious. He told Carson that he needed to bathe and purify himself before meeting his visitors, and asked the devotee to wait a little while longer.

Once Carson had been sent away, Oliver quickly changed into new clothes and stepped outside, making a careful circuit around the temple. He scanned the area for any signs of guards or officials. When he saw none, he returned to his quarters. After changing into his priest's robe, he made his way to the guest hall.

Oliver had encountered Carissa before, and the memory of her left an indelible mark. He had always been

keenly aware of beautiful women, and Carissa certainly stood out.

When he first laid eyes on her in the guest hall, his heart skipped a beat. The next instant, panic set in. His first impulse was to flee.

Before he could even take a step,

Carissa was upon him. In a swift motion, she gripped his shoulder and yanked him backward, throwing him to the ground. Violet, who had been close behind, quickly placed a foot on his chest, her voice cy.

"Oliver Prince, still thinking of running away?"

Oliver's face went deathly pale.

The sudden turn of events left Carson confused. It wasn't until Violet called out Oliver's name that he remembered who Oliver was.

"What's going on?" he instinctively asked.

Carissa's answer was simple and to the point. "Ask the abbot. He'll explain everything to you."

Without wasting time, she drew a length of tough cord from her belt and bound Oliver's hands behind his back.

Since Oliver was still wearing his

priest's robe, taking him out through the temple would raise suspicions among the temple visitors. Violet

tore the robe from his shoulders

with a swift motion.

Carson, unable to do anything to stop them, hurriedly left to give orders.

"Clear the way," he called out, then turned to Carissa and Violet. "Make sure to use the back roads to

avoid drawing attention. We don't want any trouble for the temple."

Chapter 1394

Oliver was a notorious criminal, and he should have been sent directly to the Supreme Court. However, Carissa took a different route. She had him detained at the Capital Guard headquarters, where he was to be interrogated first.

Afterward, she planned to report the matter to Salvador. She would credit Zoey for her tip, and then plead for Caspian and Cedric to be allowed to return to the capital as soon as possible.

Celeste was still detained in the Capital Guard headquarters. If she and Oliver met, it might uncover more secrets-such as just how deeply the Spencer family's collateral branch was involved in this mess. The two prisoners were held in adjacent cells, separated by only a narrow iron bar. When their eyes met for the first time, both faces changed instantly.

On the way here, Oliver kept cursing Zoey for betraying him. But when he saw Celeste, he completely forgot about Zoey. He snarled, his teeth clenched.

"You wretched woman, look at you now! It's true-bad people get what they deserve. This is a great thing to see!"

Celeste's eyes narrowed for a moment before she smirked. "I'm a wretched woman? What about you? If anyone deserves their fate, it's you. Look at where you've ended up locked up just like me."

"Everything's your fault!" Oliver shouted, lunging forward, trying to reach her through the bars. "You got me into this mess!"

Celeste stepped back two paces, her expression one of cold amusement as she watched his angry attempts.

"Pathetic fool!" she spat, the words dripping with contempt.

"You dare mock me? You're the fool!" Oliver's face contorted with rage. "If it weren't for you conspiring with the rebels and tricking me into leaving Southern Frontier, I'd still be the marshal there! I wouldn't have ended up like this!"

Celeste replied coldly, "You're blaming me? Was it really my deceit, or was it your cowardice? You know the truth. You knew from the start that I was only getting close to you for a reason. You thought that if I got pregnant and had your child, I would be bound to you.

"Not every woman is like the ones in your family, who treat children as their whole world. Family ties are the most laughable thing in the world. You thought you could use that foolish idea to trap me? How ridiculous!

"Did I not make it clear enough when I left you? You're a middle-aged good-for-nothing with no skills, no talent, and mediocre martial arts. You only got the position of marshal because of your noble title. Even if I were blind, I wouldn't have fallen for you!

"You should've realized it was just a transaction from the start, but you still pretended it was something real. You can't even tell the difference between true feelings and fake ones. What use are you? You're trash. Just wait for your beheading!"

Oliver hammered against the iron bars with a fury that seemed to consume him, his voice a low growl. "You wretched woman, I'll kill you! I swear I'll kill you!"

"Do you have what it takes to do it?" Celeste replied coolly. "You wouldn't dare. You're nothing but a coward."

"You dare say that to me?" Oliver's face twisted with rage, his fists tightening around the bars. "Do you want to know how your son died? I snapped his neck—he couldn't even cry! He died, just like that!" "I don't care," Celeste said nonchalantly.

Her attitude completely broke Oliver, as he had hoped to provoke her with that. He howled like a wounded animal, his words a frantic, guttural snarl.

Outside, Carissa listened, her patience never wavering as the conversation unfolded. She turned to the scribe.

"Make a record of this. Write that Oliver planned to abandon his wife and children when he was with Celeste, and that he even wrote a divorce dismissal letter. Later, find a divorce letter and get him to put his fingerprint on it."

All of this needed to be reported to Salvador.

A divorce was not the same as being

cast out. Normally, a divorce was preferred, but this case was different. The divorce dismissal letter, which indicated that a wife was to be cast out, would highlight

Oliver's cruelty. It would also garner sympathy for Zoey in the eyes of the common people.

There had already been rumors about this before, and now with Oliver captured and a proper confession,

it was as good as confirmation from the authorities.

It was truly sad for that baby who had died. How innocent had he been? He was simply born into the

wrong family with such cold, selfish, and indifferent parents.

Carissa truly felt for Zoey and her children. If Oliver could treat his son with Celeste this way, he probably hadn't cared much for Zoey's children or the ones born to his concubines.

Chapter 1395

When Carissa went to the palace to deliver her report, she also expressed her sympathy for Zoey besides presenting the confession. She didn't hide her admiration for Zoey in her words.

Despite her difficult life, Zoey still had a kind heart. She continuously gave out food and medicine. Even though her whole family now lived in Skye Embroidery, she never asked for the money she had given away to be returned.

Furthermore, Zoey had shown great courage and moral integrity. She had publicly condemned her kin for the sake of the greater good—a rare quality that many men, even among the nobility, could not aspire to. Recognizing the need for such an example to inspire his people, Salvador immediately issued an edict praising Zoey. He granted her 100 gold coins and a residence.

As for the exiled men from the Prince family, they could return to the capital after the Southern Frontier won the battle, along with the Hell Monarch.

Zoey had turned an impossible situation around. Now, who would dare to underestimate women?

As for Oliver, there was no need for an investigation. An order was given for his execution—he was to face the Torso Cleaving, a punishment in which the criminal is cleaved in two. Celeste, who had aided the rebels and caused great harm, was to face the same fate.

Salvador somewhat regretted his earlier decision to show leniency to the Kingsley family women. Had he not considered them victims, Celeste would have long been imprisoned and never allowed to cause such turmoil in the Southern Frontier. The remaining members of the family in the nunnery also remained a concern if there were still any with malicious intent hidden among them; they posed an ongoing threat. Though he did not speak directly of it, Salvador had given Galen a few brief instructions: when time permitted, Galen was to visit the nunnery and keep a watchful eye on the people there. It was a subtle order, more for monitoring than for any other purpose.

When Galen departed, Carissa understood Salvador's intent. However, he had already made a clear promise before: as long as Carmen and the others didn't do anything excessive, they wouldn't face any trouble.

Still, Carissa sent word to her associates, urging them to take care. She feared that in Celeste's final moments, the bond of sisterhood might prompt some reckless act that could bring about more trouble. Meanwhile, Evelyn had learned of Oliver's capture and his death sentence by Torso Cleaving. In her grief and fury, she railed against Viola and Zoey. She accused them of betrayal, and fell to the ground in a fit of tears. She couldn't comprehend why one would betray a brother and the other a husband.

Evelyn caused an uproar, her grief and rage twisting her features as she struck Zoey and Viola sharply across the face. She demanded that they find a way to save Oliver.

Zoey had been kneeling on the floor, pleading for Evelyn to calm down. When she saw the situation

getting worse, she got up. She went to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and threw it on the ground. Then, she dragged all the other concubine-born daughters and Luna's daughter to kneel beside her.

"If you wish to save him, then kill us

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all first," Zoey declared, her voice shaking with emotion. "If we speak even a single word on his behalf, His Majesty will hold us all equally guilty. So, let us die together, as a family."

Evelyn staggered back in horror, tears streaming down her face as she cried, "No, His Majesty could never be so cruel! It is you who are heartless and have betrayed him!"

Zoey picked up the knife and thrust it into Evelyn's trembling hands. "If we are heartless, then avenge him. We are no longer worthy of life. Let us all go together and accompany him in death."

Evelyn recoiled, her hand shaking as it touched the cold steel of the blade. A shudder ran through her, and her tears fell freely. "Is there truly no other way?"

Viola, still kneeling, sobbed

uncontrollably. There is no other way, Mom. Qiver has committed a heinous crime. If His Majesty does not execute him, the hatred in his heart will never be quenched. The fact that we haven't been

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condemned as well is a mercy. If you continue with this and His

Majesty hears of it, not a single one of us will be spared."

Evelyn wept bitterly. "But it shouldn't be you who betrayed him! How heartbroken must he be, being betrayed by his wife and sister? You are too cruel!"

"Are you saying that none of you are upset that he betrayed your family?"

Just then, Jessica arrived at Skye Embroidery. She had been watching from outside for a while and couldn't help but walk in.

"When he fled with his concubine, did he think about you?" she sneered coldly. "Had it not been for the protection of others, your bodies would lie in a mass grave by now."

Jessica stepped even closer and stood before Evelyn, her gaze hard.

"Listen here, you selfish old woman! Your daughter-in-law is still willing to show you respect and care for you. You should be thankful and quietly rejoice. Oliver has wronged her and cares nothing about your

fate.

"These countless trials you have endured-Zoey has stood by your side, suffering alongside you and your entire family. Now, you dare to blame her? Have you ever thought about how heartbroken and hurt she also feels? You're no different than your heartless son! Both of you are just bullying her."

Jessica's words hit Zoey hard, and tears streamed down her face in heavy drops. Her pain was clear for everyone to see.

Evelyn could see it too-whether she chose to care was another matter.

Evelyn slumped into the chair, staring blankly for a long moment before finally breaking down in loud, uncontrollable sobs.

Chapter 1396

After Evelyn finished crying, she didn't say much. However, she stubbornly insisted on going to deliver Oliver his final meal. Her eyes were swollen and her voice was thick with congestion, nearly a rasp.

"I know the court allows family to see their loved ones before execution," she said, her tone strained. "I don't want anything else just this one thing. I need to see him and make sure he's fed. I don't want him to die hungry and become a vengeful spirit."

Tears began to fall once more as she cast a tearful glance at Zoey. "You have children, too. You should understand what it means to be a mother. To the world, he may be seen as the greatest of villains. But to me, he will always be that helpless child that hasn't changed."

Zoey remained silent for a long moment, then finally said, "Mother, do you know how the final meeting is arranged? It is at the execution ground. Are you sure you want to see him getting decapitated?"

Evelyn trembled, her body shaking with emotion. "You must beg Lady Carissa. I will go to the prison to see him."

Jessica let out a sharp laugh. "Is it really so simple? Just ask Carissa, and she'll grant your request?" Zoey's face was grim as she responded, "I can't ask her. It doesn't matter what Lady Carissa says. His Majesty has already ordered Oliver's execution. The one overseeing the beheading won't be her." Through gritted teeth, Evelyn spat, "The execution ground... I will go. I cannot allow him to die with an empty stomach."

"Mom, he won't be hungry. The prison will prepare a lavish meal for him before the execution. They'll even give him wine," Viola said.

"It is not the same," Evelyn insisted stubbornly.

Zoey fell silent.

Camila grabbed Jessica's arm, gently pulling her toward the door. "Let them figure it out on their own. It's fine as long as it doesn't escalate any further."

On the day of the execution, the sky was clear and bright, the air crisp and fresh. The heat of summer had passed, and the winds carried with them the unmistakable chill of autumn.

Since Augustus' reign, there had been no executions by Torso Cleaving. So, when the two prisoners were sentenced to such a fate, the entire city flocked to witness the event. Many didn't understand the difference between Torso Cleaving and beheading, but there were always those willing to explain.

The criminal would be severed at the waist, and they wouldn't die immediately. Their eyes would still see and their mind would remain aware-enough to witness the horror of their body split

in two. They would also feel every agonizing second of it. The pain and fear the criminal would experience in those final moments was unimaginable—a torment beyond words.

Zoey and Viola supported Evelyn as they blended in among the crowd, where the air was thick with gossip and speculation. Some spoke with excitement, their words laced with an unsettling thrill.

Embezzling military funds and deserting his post in battle—not only had Oliver betrayed his kingdom, but his actions also almost ruined the land the soldiers had fought so hard to reclaim.

His crime was seen as the most heinous in the kingdom.

Carissa was present with the Capital

Guard to maintain order today.

Meanwhile, Matthew was overseeing the execution. The

criminal hadn't been brought up yet, but ropes had already been set up around the execution platform to prevent the crowd from getting too close.

Once everything was arranged, Carissa caught sight of Evelyn and Zoey in the crowd.

Zoey stepped forward and addressed her, "Commander Sinclair, my mother-in-law wishes to send food to the criminal before the execution. May she do so?"

Carissa glanced at the frail old woman who could barely stand on her own, and replied, "It is allowed, but can she bear it?"

Evelyn took a deep breath and suddenly knelt before Carissa, sobbing. "Your Grace, he knows he was wrong! Please, I beg of you—help him! Please, Your Grace!"

Carissa frowned, then turned and walked away without a word.

In front of so many outraged citizens, begging for mercy on Oliver's behalf and kneeling for it-how could Evelyn not attract attention? Why must she go out of her way to invite disdain?

Seeing Carissa leave without responding, Evelyn was so devastated that she could no longer shed tears. Supported by Zoey and Viola, she wobbled to her feet, barely able to catch her breath.

Just then, a stir swept through the crowd.

Zoey looked up, watching as the Supreme Court officers brought Oliver and Celeste's prison carts into view.

The sight of Oliver, shackled and haggard, struck Evelyn with the force of a dagger to the heart. She faltered, her strength gone. All she could do was mutter, "Oh, my son..."

They squeezed their way to the front, where Carissa exchanged a few words with Matthew. Matthew glanced at the crowd and gave a small nod in response.

Carissa sent Michael to pass a message to Zoey-once the criminals were led to the platform, they would be allowed to approach for the final farewell and to feed the criminals. However, Zoey and Viola were to accompany Evelyn to the platform to ensure nothing inappropriate was said.

Salvador had granted Zoey a residence. Though they could have eventually afforded one themselves, the king's gift carried a weight that others would respect. In the future, Cedric and Courtney would not suffer from contempt, nor would they be looked down upon.

When Oliver was dragged up to the execution platform, he was so terrified he nearly passed out. He trembled and soiled himself, his body a mess.

Celeste fared no better. After everything that had happened in prison, she had convinced herself that she wasn't afraid of death. She had accepted the consequences of her choices.

However, no amount of mental preparation could quell the terror that gripped her as she saw the executioner's gleaming blade resting ominously on his shoulder.

Chapter 1397

The capital guards escorted Evelyn, Zoey, and Viola up to the execution platform. Evelyn's legs trembled, and she couldn't muster any strength. Her tears flowed uncontrollably, blurring her vision to the point that she could no longer see clearly.

"You foolish boy!" Evelyn let out a mournful cry, raising her hand and slapping Oliver's face. "You've disgraced your grandfather and your father! How can you face them in the afterlife?"

Her slap lacked force; even as she exerted every ounce of her strength, Oliver barely felt the sting. Caught in a whirlwind of panic, Oliver's mind raced. Seeing his mom before him, he seemed to have found a lifeline in a stormy sea. He cried desperately, "Mom, save me! Please save me!"

Evelyn, near exhaustion from her sorrow, could barely speak. "You've committed an unforgivable crime! How can I save you now? His Majesty once showed favor to you-how could you betray such grace?" "Mom, I know I was wrong! I know it now!" Oliver cried, tears streaming down his face. "Please, I beg you, save me!"

Standing nearby, Zoey heard Evelyn's words and felt a heavy weight lift from her chest.

Throughout their journey, they had discussed this moment. Each word spoken by Evelyn would reach Salvador's ears. If it pleased him, then Caspian and Cedric, who were exiled to the Southern Frontier, might return soon. But if Salvador found it displeasing or upsetting, the two might never return to the capital.

While Evelyn was heartbroken, she knew how to weigh her words carefully.

Zoey methodically unpacked the food from the box, setting out the meal and a flask of wine. Turning to Oliver, she said somberly, "Though our bond as husband and wife has ended, I will see to your mother and children. You may go in peace."

Oliver lifted his head, his gaze filled with resentment. "You still dare to come? You're a disgrace—a woman who sold herself for fame! You don't deserve to be called my wife!"

Zoey looked back at him, her eyes calm and unwavering. "Yes, we are no longer married. From this day forward, you will walk your path in the shadows, and I shall walk mine in the light."

"You wretched woman!" Oliver shouted, his fear now transforming into rage.

His outburst was loud enough for the crowd to hear. The people, already stirred by the spectacle, began

to murmur in judgment. They cursed Oliver for his betrayal and sympathized with Zoey. She had borne his children, managed his household, and served his family-only to be left with such a fate.

Zoey stepped aside, silent, not a word more to say.

Gathering what little strength remained, Evelyn turned her fury onto Oliver. She scolded him for betraying Salvador's favor and for his cruelty toward his wife and children. The more bitterly she reproached him, the more fiercely her tears fell.

Celeste, standing off to the side, didn't look at them. Her eyes began scanning the crowd, searching for a familiar face.

Was there no one to see her off as she approached the end of her life?

As she scanned one stranger's face after another, the disappointment in her eyes deepened. Was it truly the case that no one had come for her?

Tears welled up suddenly,

you

uncontrollably. What if, all those years ago, she hadn't killed her mom? What if she hadn't left the capital and had instead joined the other women at the nunnery? What would her life have been like then?

Back when choices had seemed impossible, Celeste believed that once she gained control over her fate, she would live better than anyone else.

But now that she could make her own choices, why did things turn out so miserably?

The time for the execution was set for three in the afternoon.

As the hour struck, another prisoner's cart arrived. Randall, the warden of the Supreme Court, led

Nicholas, Yuvan, Harvey, Clifford, Wayne, and others to the execution grounds.

Salvador had not yet dealt with them, as there were many local officials involved in their crimes, and he intended to eliminate them all at once.

Nicholas was still trying to shift the

blame onto Hayden. He refused to admit his guilt, even after multiple interrogations. Despite Clifford and Wayne testifying against him, he wouldn't budge. Even when tortured, he remained stubborn. He insisted that he would bear the blame for his dad's actions, speaking endlessly of his supposed devotion.

Salvador had ordered them brought here today, not only to witness the execution but to tear the mask of hypocrisy from Nicholas' face.

After Nicholas saw Clifford captured, he knew there was no chance for him to turn things around. Only death awaited him.

Death didn't frighten him anymore-what he feared was the dishonor of being labeled a traitor.

But now, as he was brought to the execution ground, his legs went weak and his heart raced at the sight

of the executioner's large blade resting on the man's shoulder. The fear crept over him like a tide, drowning him in terror.

He suddenly realized that death was not just a word, nor merely an end. Death had a process, and it was that process that made it truly horrifying.

At three in the afternoon, the platform was cleared. Evelyn, overcome with grief, fainted. Viola had to carry her away.

Zoey held the food containers and

positioned herself near the front of the crowd. Her gaze fixed on Oliver and a complex sorrow filled her heart not for Oliver, but for the fact that he had been her husband and the father of her children.

Chapter 1398

At precisely three in the afternoon, the long execution block was brought forward.

The block was forged from ironwood, solid and unyielding. It was the only one of its kind in Starhaven, used solely for execution by Torso Cleaving.

The block had been kept in storage for years.

Augustus had once deemed the act of Torso Cleaving too brutal. Even those who committed the most grievous offenses were spared this form of execution. Yet, the punishment had not been abolished. It remained a tool to strike fear into the hearts of would-be traitors.

The cruelty of Torso Cleaving lay in the fact that after a person was cleaved in two, the upper body could still crawl, struggle, and leave behind a bloody trail.

Normally, Torso Cleaving wasn't meant to be witnessed by the public. But treason, betraying the kingdom, and plotting to overthrow the throne were considered unforgivable crimes.

Salvador didn't know how many people had dealings with the traitors, and some conspirators were too deeply hidden to uncover. So, he decided that such a gruesome spectacle would serve as a warning for any who had ever harbored treasonous thoughts.

Oliver's clothes were stripped away, and two guards held him down on the execution block. They pinned his shoulders firmly in place to prevent any movement.

In terror, Oliver's eyes rolled back, and he fainted.

At the moment the executioner raised his great sword, many in the crowd averted their gaze.

Only Nicholas, Yuvan, and the others in the prison cart were forced to keep their eyes forward. Their necks were locked in place, and they were unable to turn away.

They could only shut their eyes, trembling with fear.

Yuvan was the weakest of them all. He quickly squeezed his eyes shut, releasing a high-pitched scream as the sword was raised.

Among all the people, only Clifford kept his eyes open and watched. His gaze was as deep and still as the night. When the blade fell, his expression didn't change at all.

Even when the executioner moved on from Oliver to Celeste, Clifford never looked away. The screams and gasps around him seemed to fade as he focused solely on watching the two crawl on the ground. Only when they stopped moving did he reluctantly pull his gaze away.

Viola had already left with Evelyn, but Zoey remained. She stayed until the execution was finished.

In the end, she didn't watch the actual execution and kept her eyes shut the whole time. It wasn't until she heard the people around her saying that Oliver was dead and not moving anymore that she opened her eyes.

The bodies were not displayed to the public. Family members were required to retrieve them. Otherwise, they would be discarded at the mass grave.

Zoey had purchased a simple grass mat, and she asked the executioner to help roll Oliver's body up. She then hired men to bury him in the mountains, ensuring that his remains wouldn't be left to rot in the wilderness.

No monument was erected. Only a small mound of earth marked his grave.

Zoey had declared that Oliver did not deserve a tombstone. She had no particular care for what would happen to his body, but she had heard that if an ancestor's remains weren't buried, it could affect their descendants. It was for the sake of their descendants that she arranged for his burial. And, of course, she feared what Evelyn might do if Oliver's body was left unburied.

As for Celeste, Zoey had seen Carmen taking care of her remains.

That evening, Carissa sent someone to invite Zoey to Hell Monarch Estate to dine with Courtney and offer some comfort.

Courtney knew about her dad's execution by torso cleaving. She had been in a low mood ever since returning from the academy, refusing to eat or speak.

Zoey had originally planned to visit Courtney at Hell Monarch Estate. But she knew that while she had received the divorce dismissal letter, she was still seen as a member of the Prince family. With Oliver's execution just happening, she worried that Jacob might think she brought bad luck, so she hesitated to go.

When Carissa sent someone to invite her, Zoey immediately changed her clothes and went.

Courtney cried in her mom's arms. After all, Oliver was still her dad. She was filled with resentment, yet unable to be indifferent to his death.

Once her sobs had subsided, Zoey gently brushed Courtney's hair and said softly, "Before his execution, he realized his mistakes. He faced his death with calmness and offered his apologies.

"I went to see him off. He asked me to tell you all that a person must always act with integrity and never allow wicked thoughts to take root. Do not let your conscience be buried for the sake of gain. Be brave, be resolute, face hardships without flinching, and never run from your problems. Stand firm and confront them."

Courtney's eyes were red from crying. She sniffled and said, "Mom, these are your words, not his." Zoey looked at her daughter's swollen eyes in the mirror and softly said, "Yes, those are my words-keep them in your heart. Let him be a lesson to you. When faced with something, remember that avoiding it won't solve anything. Be brave, face it, solve it, and then move on."

Courtney nodded solemnly. "I understand, Mom. I won't disappoint you."

Zoey held her daughter close, tears welling up in her own eyes. "Good girl."

Chapter 1399

In her study, Carissa wrote a letter. Then, she handed it to Jacob with instructions to have it delivered to Rafael in the Southern Frontier.

She knew the situation in the Southern Frontier. Victor was amassing troops but neither attacking nor retreating, keeping things in a stalemate.

Everyone knew that Victor was just stalling. He had been given a military order to invade the Southern Frontier, but since Nicholas had failed, he could not return with any captured cities or military achievements to report.

If Victor made a hasty retreat now, he would likely lose more than just his position-his life might be

forfeited as well. He attempted to forge alliances with the nomads, hoping to find a way out-perhaps a way to secure his future or an escape from certain doom.

The nomads, tired of conflict, had no interest in picking sides. Caught in the middle, they were doing everything they could to remain neutral, refusing to aid either side.

If they really had to choose, they would choose Starhaven. But naturally, it was better to avoid choosing sides altogether.

Victor's position was weak. According to reports from Rafael, he intended to continue pursuing Victor relentlessly until the latter had no choice but to retreat. If they weren't beaten hard enough, they would never give up on their ambitions.

Carissa sat in her study for a moment, recalling a line she had written in a letter to him earlier-a simple line that she missed him. Her cheeks flushed at the thought.

"Cari!" Violet knocked at the door.

"Come in," Carissa said, hastily rubbing her face with both hands. She quickly straightened up as the door opened.

Violet entered, with Zoey following behind.

"Ms. Stark said she wanted to come and thank you," Violet explained, calling Zoey by her maiden name

now.

Zoey stepped forward and curtsied, her eyes still slightly red. "Your Grace, I truly don't know how to thank you enough for your kindness during these days..."

Carissa smiled, cutting Zoey off before the moment could grow too heavy. "If you're offering yourself, that's more than enough. I'm not one for anything too grand."

Zoey paused, caught off guard by Carissa's teasing remark. But then, seeing the playful glint in her eyes, Zoey couldn't help but smile in return.

Violet didn't join them at the table.

She mentioned that she had to go to Glimmering Tower. The members of the Pathfinders Guild and the Spencer family were still there, and she had been going over to the Glimmering Tower every night.

Carissa inquired about Evelyn's condition, at which Zoey's gaze darkened.

"Since we returned from the execution grounds, she's been crying nonstop. No one can console her," she said.

"And you?" Carissa asked gently. "Do you feel sorrow, or is it anger you feel toward him?"

After everything that had happened, Carissa knew many emotions were building up inside Zoey, and she needed a way to release them.

At the question, Zoey straightened instinctively, as if bracing herself. She put on a mask of indifference, her face betraying no emotion.

But after a brief pause, she recalled the words she had just spoken to Courtney. Deciding to face her emotions head-on, she spoke firmly, her voice steady but resolute.

"I feel nothing but hatred for him!"

The bitterness surged within her, and the hatred flickered in her eyes.

"They say that when a person dies, all past grudges should fade away. But I can still hear the sounds of my children's frantic cries when we were thrown into Astral Prison. that moment, our family was as good as dead. Our lives hung by a thread, dictated by the whim of the king. And it was all because of him."

She paused, then continued, "Though we survived Astral Prison, it wasn't because of him. If he had returned to the capital to turn himself in as soon as he learned we were imprisoned, I wouldn't hate him this much.

"I doubt you could understand what

it was like to be in Astral Prison, where death could come at any time. You couldn't know the pain of watching your children dragged off to exile, it was unbearable... And yet, even in his final moments, he blamed me. I'm relieved that he never understood his wrongs. If he had, my hatred for him might have lessened, but I refuse to feel that way."

As Zoey spoke, the tears fell freely, each drop an echo of the pain she had carried for so long. She was finally allowing herself to grieve.

Carissa stood up and handed her a handkerchief, saying softly, "It's all behind you now. Things will get better from here on out."

Zoey took the handkerchief, pressing it to her face as she allowed herself to cry freely.

Chapter 1400

As Carissa returned to the Capital Guard Headquarters the next morning, Heather intercepted her at the door.

It had been a long while since Carissa had last seen Heather. In fact, it seemed Heather had kept herself mostly secluded lately.

Since Harvey had been brought back to the capital, his son Lennon Sanford had not been captured, but Chester's forces continued their search. It was almost certain that the boy would be caught soon

enough. Heather, anxious that Lennon might be implicated and face the same brutal punishment of beheading, rushed Carissa for help.

Carissa knew Heather had already tried appealing to Leona when Harvey was first brought back. She had asked Leona to talk to Carissa on her behalf. Yet Leona had refused, and she never mentioned the matter to Carissa. Carissa only learned of this from Alana.

"Carissa!" Heather hurried toward her, her face frantic with worry. "I need to speak with you. Could we find a quiet place to talk?"

"I have matters to attend to. I don't have time," Carissa answered curtly,

Heather was desperate and quickly stepped into her path, her hands raised in a pleading gesture. "Just a few words, please! Save your cousin he's innocent. He knew nothing of it. It's all his dad's doing. You have to help him."

Carissa regarded Heather's red-rimmed eyes, her thoughts drifting back to the time when Dominic had been detained in the capital. Heather hadn't once gone to visit him, too scared to make any move that might bring trouble upon herself.

She couldn't tell if her reluctance stemmed from a cold nature or from cowardice. Whatever the reason, Carissa had no intention of indulging Heather now.

Without a word, Carissa stepped around Heather and walked into the building, giving orders to the Capital Guard to clear the area.

Behind her, Heather's sobs broke through. "Carissa, are you really so heartless? Don't you remember how good I was to you when you were little?"

Carissa didn't turn around, but Heather's voice grew louder.

"Carissa, my sister loved me the most! If you stand by and do nothing, she'll blame you for this."

Carissa paused, then slowly turned around, her gaze cold and piercing. "So you still remember how kind my mother was to you, do you? But do you remember how Grandpa spoiled you too?"

Heather was immediately at a loss for words. "I..."

Carissa turned and walked inside, not paying any more attention to her.

Heather came for two more days, but stopped after that. In the capital, she hadn't built any solid connections. Even if she had, with Harvey now labeled a traitor, who would dare associate with her? Moreover, with Harvey's title as prince likely to be stripped away soon, her status as princess consort hung by a thread, ready to fall at any moment.

She could have sought help from her natal family. While Harvey was beyond saving, the Sullivan family still controlled Victory Pass. They could have approached Salvador on behalf of Lennon, seeking clemency for him. That much could have been arranged.

However, Heather suddenly realized the importance of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame. She

had been ungrateful to her dad in the past, so she didn't dare write a letter to seek his help.

And so, she gave up.

She began selling off the assets in her estate and gathering whatever money she could, preparing to leave the capital when the opportunity arose.

The court had sent people to monitor Hartstone Estate, so Heather couldn't sell any of the property. However, she was free to take her silver and gold, assuming she could leave the capital.

Before she could even plan how to leave the capital, the Supreme Court had sent people to arrest her. Salvador's edict followed shortly after Harvey's title was revoked, his name removed from the records, and his assets confiscated.

Leona, who had long since been ousted from her family, was unaffected by these events. She

knew that appealing to Salvador et

now would be useless, not to

mention dangerous for herself. It would also bring trouble to Carissa, so she chose to stay silent.

That evening, after Heather's arrest, Gerald slipped into the Supreme Court under the cover of night. He requested to meet with Clifford alone.

Matthew didn't dare make decisions on his own. The Quinton family was Salvador's in-laws, and Malcolm had been impeached before. Salvador was clearly displeased with them and wary of their influence. Seeing Matthew in a difficult position, Gerald suggested, "Why not ask Lady Carissa to accompany me? That way, it wouldn't be a private meeting."

Matthew sent someone to notify Carissa.

Carissa had known this day would come. Without bothering to change out of her official attire, she mounted her horse and headed straight for the Supreme Court.