

Chapter 169: Backup Plan

Olivia was not a good person. She knew that about herself. She was vain, she was brash, she had a horrid temper, and she didn't care much for other people.

But she had grown.

Worth. That was her covenant, her creed, the thing that drove her every action. Worth. To be *worth* something. To do things that matter. To change life for someone.

Absent-mindedly, she rubbed her arm. It still ached, from time to time. The hand she'd lost on Eden having its repercussions here. It felt numb faster, especially when it got cold - though as she grew that disappeared. And with the song lacing her blood, it felt dimmer.

The song. It had changed her, too, made her more real. The connections to the world felt closer, and reality seemed less... distant. Less apart from who she was. Her choices were a little less clinical. But despite that, she still yearned to be worth something.

She'd helped, of course. Spied on Zinnic. Helped Dawn of Ambition close the gates quickly enough. She'd lent her talents, her swords to them, she'd learnt in exchange, and she'd grown. Terribly quickly, she'd grown, but it was not enough.

There was a hunger within her. A hunger to prove herself, to do something that really mattered. To change the direction of something forever. She'd found that worth in killing before. Cutting something off changed it forever, after all. It had impact.

Her hands clenched into fists as the elevator dinged and she stepped out, taking a deep breath of the smoggy air. It was better, but still stank like shit. The city was damp, dark, and cloyed with refuse.

And she worked for the shittiest place in town.

Rich, new CEO of not-Zinnic, hadn't bothered to fire her. Her cooperation with Fio was so obvious after the gate fiasco it was pathetic. He must have known, and yet, she was still working there as an enforcer. To do their bidding when needed, still fed insider information.

Sometimes, Olivia wondered why. Her intel was limited, but she was kind of the strongest person with Zinnic these days. The only remaining member at wellspring or above.

Especially with the song lacing her bones.

But she truly didn't understand why Rich didn't fire her. He even hated when she called him that. "Mr. Terril" would've been the appropriate thing to use. Olivia's lips twisted into a vicious smirk.

It would have been appropriate, but she'd never use it.

The elevator dinged one final time, and she stepped outside. She was at the very top of the building, in an office that belonged to one of the richest men on the planet. Someone who should have been powerful. Someone who sat at a desk that had his father's blood cleaned off it. Someone who should have been worth something.

"What's up, Rich?" Olivia asked, eyeing the hunched over, drained figure sitting at the chair.

"Ah, Mrs. Tyrdin," he greeted her, barely raising his head. Riach had deep bags under his eyes. He looked so tired. He slouched in his chair, and his hair was dishevelled. And yet, when he looked at her, today, she saw something different. "It's a pleasure to have you here again. Today, I have a special job for you," he said, dragging a hair through his messy, blonde hair.

He was pretty, once, but stress had worn him down. Now, he was too haggard and had lost some of that shine. Handsome features gave ways to thin, frail ones. Hopeless.

And yet, Olivia couldn't shake the thought that he looked good at that moment. She stared into his eyes. "What is it, Rich?" she asked, unceremoniously.

"Enforcer work," he said, casually waving a hand. "A typical mission. Take a hostage. Hold her in place until someone gives to demands. The *board*," he spat the word like it was an insult, "demands it."

The board. There were two meanings for that. One was the mix of old, rich bastards who wanted to get more money and used Rich as a puppet to get it. The other was... the mix of old, rich, *alien* bastards who wanted more *power* and used Rich as a literal puppet to get it.

She'd seen it, once, the strings forcing him to sign something he did not want to. But the fire in him wasn't extinguished. Looking at him, she saw it. They'd tried to break him, but he wasn't broken. In fact, he looked like he'd found himself.

And then it clicked. All at once, she understood. He knew.

Of course he knew. He knew that she was working with Fio. He knew that she wasn't some kind of subordinate to command around. He knew she was leaking things, and he'd been quietly feeding her that intel since becoming CEO. And now, he was doing it again.

The board didn't know. Somehow, they'd chalked everything up to coincidence. To them, she was inconsequential. Just another wellspring cultivator, who cared if she kept it after the incident? Maybe she was just a coward, or pathetic. But she was weak enough to go unnoticed. Uncared for.

She was discarded as *worthless*. And now, she'd make them pay. A vicious grin spread across her lips.

"Who's the target?" Olivia asked.

"A little girl," Rich said, calmly. "Aged between six and fourteen, dark hair, emerald eyes. Name is Bethany Bellum. Her location should already be marked on your comms."

He rattled off the information all business-like, but Olivia was smarter than that. She saw how he ground his teeth. This was a man who'd committed atrocities. Who'd been a replacement for the world's most cruel tyrant, and found himself forced to fill those shoes. A man who wasn't good, in fact, he was kind of an asshole. Just like her.

But he wasn't a killer. And despite being broken, he rebelled. She respected that.

Olivia smiled politely and nodded. "It will be done," she said, then swiftly spun around on her heel, and headed to the elevator.

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Beth looked at the sky with wide eyes, pointing up. "Miss Olivia!" she said excitedly. "There's a second sun!"

Very gently, the ex-mercenary covered the kid's eyes. "Don't look directly at that," she chided gently. "You'll hurt your eyes." Only when the brat turned away did she take her hand off the kid's face, letting Beth resume her hungry war against a cone of ice-cream.

With a faint smile playing on her lips, Olivia brought the communicator to her lips. "Target secured," she spoke into the watch, grinning at the fact. Then, she brought Beth to the cafe, sitting down across from Agatha, who gave Beth a stern look for a moment, opened her mouth to chide her for eating un-ladylike, then sighed and let it go, simply drinking her coffee.

Olivia felt good, for once. It was a small part she played, but an integral part nonetheless. In a way, today, she'd proven her worth. She'd done her part in what it took to save a world. And sometimes, that meant buying ice cream for kids, apparently.

She found it a nice thought

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Ivan sat on a hospital bed next to his father, Lars Desum. The two were similar, though Ivan was of smaller frame. Fio had picked up all the muscle in the family, and Ivan had been more of a bookish person, taking after their mom.

He felt a little twitchy, itching for a smoke, but held back, opting to take deep breaths instead. He was trying to quit, to be a good example for their dad. The Mana circling his heart helped with the symptoms - two circles now. Nowhere near the five Ann had, or the four that surrounded Marie's heart, but enough for small spells and alchemy. He was proud of his growth.

"I'm sorry to make you wait it out like this," Rae said.

Fio's brother gave the older man a long look. He had a kindly face, but those smile-lines were new additions. For years, decades, Rae must have been someone who frowned much. And right now, he frowned a little as he spoke.

"It's quite alright," Ivan said with a smile. "You're the one doing us a favour."

The old man scoffed at that. "No. I'm being *done* a favour. They're keeping me from fighting on purpose. My dear disciple cares for me, after all." At Fio's mention, the lines in his face softened, faintly.

Lars stirred. He was still hurt, but recovering well. The fire burned brightly in his chest. Not as brightly as the song thrummed in Ivan, but brightly nonetheless. Perhaps, if he was worthy of getting called a father again, Fio might add him to the network. Perhaps she wouldn't.

"You know my daughter," the bear of a man said, his voice hoarse and thin.

Rae looked at him for a long moment, with a mix of disappointment and respect. Ivan simply observed. "I do," the older man said, crossing his arms, spear held in the crook of his armpit. "What about her?"

"You probably know her better than me," Lars said quietly. Ivan sighed softly. Today was a wallowing day, then. "Tell me about her," the new cultivator requested.

That surprised Ivan. His eyes widened faintly, and it brought a small smile to his dad's face. Perhaps it wasn't a wallowing day, after all.

The old spearmaster gave the wreck of a man a long look, then sighed. "Your daughter is strong," he said. "That's the first thing to say about her. She's strong. Tough as nails. But also kind and caring. Sometimes too hard on herself. Sometimes too hasty, or even almost naive. But she sees the good in people," he said. "The good in people who don't deserve second chances."

Those last words were spoken quietly, but they resonated with Lars. Ivan saw in how the older man stirred, nodding quietly. His eyes closed, Lars spoke from the hospital bed.

"She's... the best thing to ever happen to me, isn't she?"

"She is," Rae nodded. "You are becoming a better person for her. That you can be proud of."

"Proud?" Lars scoffed. "I don't think-"

There was a whip-crack noise as Rae punched someone else. He opened the door, knocked someone out cold, then closed it again in the blink of an eye. Then he leaned against it casually, another Zinnic agent unconscious outside. He fixed Lars in his gaze, cold, uncaring, and wise.

He nodded. "Yeah, you don't deserve to be proud. We all know. And yet, you must be. You have sinned, Lars Desum. You have hurt someone you should never have hurt." The hospital patient flinched at the harsh accusation, but it was true, so he did not refuse it. "But you must look forward. I am here to keep you safe, because despite everything, Fio cares. So, take pride in your worth. Take pride in your growth. Accept your flaws, and grow past them. No excuses, no wallowing, no... self-pitying apologies," he said the last part with a smile.

"I dunno if I can do that," Lars said quietly.

"There is no belief needed for it," Rae chided gently. "You simply do it. You become better. Have some faith, and move forward."

Ivan squeezed his dad's hand when the old spearmaster was finished. Lars wanted to say something again, but his son gently shook his head. "Take it in, dad," he said quietly. "You can still do right by your family."

Lars looked at his son, and squeezed back as if his hand was a lifeline. There were tears crinkling in his eyes again. They were right, both of them. He could do this. He could move forward, and be someone worthy to spend time with again.

And the first step to that was... staying safe.

Resolving himself once more, Lars closed his eyes. The fire burned in his chest, swelling gently again as he cast more regrets into the flames. He breathed, and heard another smacking sound as one more cultivator was smacked by Rae.

He breathed in, then out. And eventually, he managed a thin smile. He didn't move, not even a little bit, because for once he understood clearly what he needed to do. And that was to let his daughter be the hero she was.

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"Bethany Bellum has been taken into custody by one Olivia Tyrdin," Requiem said with a sneer, and I burst out laughing at the same time as Ion did.

The laughter resonated in Eden as it did on Neamhan. Loud, hilarity-infused gasps for air as I couldn't stop myself. It was just too funny. "Hah! Hahaha! Can you... can you say that again?"

Requiem frowned, clearly annoyed by the outburst. "Your sister, your family, is in custody of the enforcer Olivia Tyrdin," they repeated.

Liam cracked a smile, Ann snickered and Matt cackled. Even Marie gave a chuckle, and Reya a grin. They all stared up at the sky.

"That's the biggest mistake, isn't it?" Matt asked, casually holding his sword on his shoulder, enjoying the wind on his face. "They always forget that people have choices. And that people given a choice, will usually try to pick freedom."

The frown on the usurper's face deepened. Black mist spilled forth from them, eating at the air, making the water in the atmosphere condense and freeze. It fit in just fine with the smog in the sky, really. "Why are you so relaxed? I am threatening to kill your family."

"It's simple, really," Ion said. "Beth is safe."

"Safe?" the demon sneered. "She will die if I give the command."

Ion shook her head. "No, she won't."

"Yes she will!"

"No she won't."

The ridiculous game of back and forth clearly pissed Requiem off more. It scowled hatefully, and sent a magical missive to one Richard Terril. "Have the hostage's finger cut off," they demanded.

There was a short pause, but the demon frowned more as the response didn't satisfy it. "What do you mean your enforcer refuses? She's a tool to be used and should do her job! Tell the puppeteer to- what?! They can't infest her?" With each word, the demon's face hung open further. It was somewhat amusing to see it, the way it was one half of a corporate phone call. It was also buying us time.

"No, you cannot be serious. You incompetent imbecile. I will have your head for this. You are a tool, you are meant to obey. No, no- You don't get to speak to me in that tone! Calm yourself this instant or- Impudent human! I- No! I don't even have those orifices! Don't you dare!"

And then, the line cut.

Requiem blinked, staring at Ion standing in mid air. "Sorry," she said, "but I owed him for this one. I think he might not be your puppet anymore."

"You," the usurper snarled. "I will kill you. I will rip open your throat and spill your frozen blood on this planet. I will butcher your family in front of your corpse. I will stain your graves and spread my vile symphony on this planet. I will defile your home and make it into a nest for the vilest of worms, bottom-feeding trash they are, and I will feed your bodies to them until you return to the soil so you may do something worthwhile for once in your life," it said.

"Someone's angry," Marie teased.

A vein on Requiem's forehead almost popped. It gnashed its teeth, stomping the air with powerful bursts of chilling darkness and hatred. "You wretched, pathetic humans. I will see you dead and kneeling. I am divine to you, you miserable curs. You-"

"Yeah, yeah, I used to be divine too," Ann said, interrupting the tirade. "But you know what I have that you lack?" she asked, smiling pleasantly.

"What?" the thing snarled.

"Time management skills. Don't have a phone call when fighting a mage, moron. **Legacy: Starfall.**"

Ann cast her spell, and the sky itself descended. The Nova within mine and Ion's chest flared at the same time. The usurpers had played their cards, and they'd come up empty. Now it was time to turn the tide, properly.