

The Fall 616

Chapter 616: Blood for Blood

The kiss came without warning, but it didn't feel wrong. Zac's hand moved to Thea's waist, and the two pressed closer in a passionate embrace. However, the warm softness disappeared as quickly as it came when Thea took a step back, leaving behind only her scent. It left Zac standing with a blank look, the series of events playing on repeat in his head.

"Uh," Zac eventually said after much thought, eliciting a snicker from his sister.

"Just in case," Thea shrugged as she pushed back one of her blond locks behind her ear.

Zac still had some trouble comprehending how things had come to this. Had she mistaken him getting the Gemling crystal as a grand declaration of love? He looked over to Ogras who stood to the side with a wide grin plastered across his face.

"Hey, don't look at me. One is all you get," Ogras snorted.

"We'll talk later. I'll get you out of here, I promise," Zac finally said to Thea as he composed himself, and Kenzie activated the machine.

A weird egg-like bubble immediately enclosed the two before it shrunk back and dropped into a spatial tear that appeared right beneath them. Both the Atwood siblings were gone a second later, and the tear closed behind them. Left were just Ogras, Thea, and a sterile lab.

"So, where's my reward?" Ogras snickered as he turned to Thea. "I almost got my ass handed to me to get that little stone out. How about it? We will probably be stuck here for a wh--"

Ogras didn't get any further as he hurriedly escaped into a swirl of shadows to avoid a sharp blue light that shot straight for his head. He appeared on the other side of the room a moment later, and Thea only gave him a scathing glance as she sheathed her weapon.

"What a violent girl," Ogras laughed. "I think Zac's better off picking one of his off-world misses."

"What are you talking about?" Thea asked with a frown.

"Oh, now you're talking with me?" Ogras grinned as he took out the [Corporeal Serum]. "I guess I could tell you, but where would the fun be in that? More importantly, the Lucky Token and our Computer Whisperer are gone, you better ready yourself for what comes next. Things will probably only get worse before they get better from here on out."

A painful current ripped through Zac's body as it felt like he was being squeezed through a thin tube. But the pain was thankfully gone as quickly as it came and Zac realized that his surroundings had already changed. He found himself in the corner of a warehouse, and he breathed out in relief when he saw his sister standing safely right next to him. Their surroundings were not as lucky, as everything within a sphere of 5 meters around them had been completely disintegrated, though new Memorysteel was already moving to make up for the parts lost.

The scene made Zac's heart thump an additional time, but he quickly calmed down when he realized there actually wasn't any response from the automated defenses. His eyes turned toward the disk beneath their feet, his best guess was that it contained some sort of failsafe that stopped the base from acting out.

Kenzie breathed in relief when he saw that the disk was still fine, and she bent down and stashed it away. She had already taken away all the other machines from the Lab, leaving just the spatial gemstone and the protected metals behind. It wasn't that Zac didn't want to take them, but just getting out the second item had been dangerous enough, and he didn't want another incident on his hands.

"Let's go," Zac quickly said, and he grabbed Kenzie by her waist as he flashed away, hurriedly leaving the room before setting her down. The base still hadn't responded to them blasting a hole in its wall, but there was no guarantee that it wouldn't do so in a second or two.

"We're alive," Kenzie said, almost looking surprised. "I guess Ogras was right about you. You're a luck magnet. You didn't just survive, you even got the girl. I'm jealous."

"Have you had enough?" Zac asked with exasperation, though he was inwardly a bit embarrassed.

He hadn't expected Thea to make a move like that out of the blue. They had gotten along quite well during their exploratory outings in this place, but she hadn't let on any interest at all. Then again, he wasn't the sharpest when it came to those things, and the more perceptive Demon had hinted to there being a spark a few times already.

Zac would be lying if he said he wasn't interested himself. Thea was smart, driven, and she cared for the people around her. She had an aura that inspired confidence even when she didn't say anything, and they seemed to be seeing eye to eye on a lot of things. It was just that Zac hadn't really been thinking about these matters since the integration, especially after what happened with Hannah and Alea.

It almost felt like he was cursed when it came to love, perhaps to make up for his luck in other departments. But mostly it was the simple fact that it was hard to think about matters of love when you had the fate of a whole planet riding on your shoulders.

"Hey, why are you looking all scrunched-up like that? I know you're interested, it's good that you're putting yourself out there a bit after Hannah. Although, I guess it was rather that Thea finally got tired of waiting? You should have gone all out, like in that picture of the sailor going off to war," Kenzie said.

"Alright, alright," Zac sighed as he looked around. "I'll deal with this after we've prevented our people from getting slaughtered. Can you tell where we are?"

"One second," Kenzie said as she took out her tablet, but a frown slowly spread on her face. "We were teleported in the right direction, but we're a bit far-off. Look."

A series of dots appeared on the screen the next moment, almost looking like a star constellation.

"I don't have a map in this sector, but these dots are my communication modules," Kenzie said before she pointed at one solitary dot far from the others. "This is us."

"It looks like we're in the Outer Ring at least," Zac said with a frown. "But we've been sent too far. We passed our own base and have been sent in the direction of the True Sky Faction."

"Yeah, not even our scouts have made it this far. We're over ten hours away if we go by the speed of scouts," Kenzie said.

"Can you contact our people?" Zac sighed.

"No, we're too far. I need to get closer to my network," Kenzie said.

"Alright, jump onto my back," Zac said.

"I can keep up, you know," Kenzie muttered, but she still did as he asked.

"I know, but you don't have my Danger Sense," Zac said as he converted [Love's Bond] to its shield-form. "Ten hours is way too slow. I'm going to be pushing it a bit. Hang on tight and tell me where to go."

He shot down the corridor the next moment, following Kenzie's directions. She didn't have the natural understanding of Leviala or the other natives, but Jeeves was an AI with amazing machine learning capabilities. They had already mapped so many pathways and Leviala had shared some input before she decided to betray them, allowing Jeeves to make decent deductions of the surroundings.

Of course, where the barriers and spatial tears were hidden was all-too-random as far as they could tell.

Zac's mind suddenly screamed of danger just a few minutes after they set out, and he barely had time to stop before he entered a hidden mine-field, his coffin-shield receiving two scars in return for smashing the outer spatial rifts.

However, Zac had expected this to happen so he immediately set out with even greater speed. One thing they had realized over the past weeks was that these barriers at least weren't placed too closely. So if you encountered one trap, then you wouldn't see another one at least for a few minutes. Zac only slowed down to a slightly less frantic pace four minutes later until they hit their next trap.

The two kept up this system of switching between a jog and a sprint, with the coffin taking one cut after another over the following hours. The shield thankfully had amazing restorative properties and it was always restored before it received a new scar. Finally, after three hours of rushing, they came close enough for Kenzie to place a communications device, and she quickly tried to contact their forces.

"Who's this?" an indistinct voice echoed out on the other side, barely audible over the sound of explosions.

"It's MacKenzie Atwood. My brother is here as well. What's going on?" Kenzie said.

"Thank god! It's Joanna. We're under attack by natives and their machines! We got your warning thankfully, which saved a lot of lives. Those lunatics blew up the gate and hundreds of meters of the wall with some sort of spatial bomb. Our whole defensive perimeter was swallowed by the void, but none of our forces was inside," the voice said.

"What?!" Zac exclaimed with shock before he glanced at his sister. "The drill?"

"It shouldn't have that kind of power I think?" she said, though she clearly wasn't sure. "Besides, it requires a lot of spatial energy to run. If they used it now, they wouldn't be able to use it to get out unless they had some special power source."

"What happened next?" Zac asked as he started running again.

"They came out blasting before the wall had a chance to heal. We tried to fight them but they have thousands and thousands of machines. We were forced to focus on defending as we retreated toward the second line of defense. We only made it thanks to the beastmasters," Joanna narrated.

"The beastmasters?" Zac repeated with surprise bordering on disbelief.

He had fought both against and with the Tal-Eladar before, and he hadn't expected to hear that they were such a big help in this place. After all, there were almost as many Anointed in the Mystic Realm there were Tal-Eladar, and most of the beastmasters weren't anything special.

"They managed to create a beast tide somehow, summoning those Lunar Wolves. They went crazy as they attacked the natives, but they mostly ignored us thanks to some sort of smoke the beastmasters released. It allowed us to make it back to our second line of defense with far fewer casualties," Joanna said.

"What's the situation now?" Zac asked as he breathed out in relief.

It was lucky that he had started mending fences with Verana. Who knew how many lives she and her people had just saved? Losing the Lunar Wolves was a shame, but it wasn't like he had any thought-out plans for them in either case.

"I don't think they have any more of those bombs since they neither used them against the wolves or our second line of defense. They are currently resting up while their machines are trying to exhaust our shields outside the glasshouse. They have too much firepower, we have been forced to set out on raids to draw attention and let the shields restore, a lot of people have been wounded," Joanna sighed.

"We've expended thousands of talismans to minimize our casualties."

"That's what they're for," Zac said. "I'm on my way. Just try to hold out, and start backing away if you can't. No need to make a last stand."

"I understand," Joanna said.

Fury burned in Zac's chest when he heard that Clan Cartava really had gone all-out to attack his people. Any thoughts of reconciliation were thrown out of his head. He'd quash this uprising, and take the spatial drill from Leviala even if he had to pry it from her cold dead hands. But he could only keep running for now, steeped in anxiety, as there was still a long way to go.

But finally, they reached mapped-out areas of the Outer Rim, at which point Zac could go all out. He turned into a blur in the hallways as he kept using [Loamwalker] to maximize his speed. He could soon hear sounds could from ahead, running steps and subdued voices. Zac immediately took out his axe just in case, but a flurry of emotions went through his heart when he saw the source of the sounds. The corridors were filled with soldiers with various degrees of injuries.

Some were carrying their unconscious or fallen brethren, while others seemingly had given up, sitting down against the Memorysteel wall with a blank look in their eyes. Zac guessed the wounded were being sent toward the next defensive layer, the gate leading to their secluded section at the edge of the Mystic Realm.

“Lord Atwood!” A bloodied soldier said with relief when he saw Zac appear around the corner. “You’re here!”

It was like a ripple went through the stream of people, with hundreds of eyes turning his way. Zac felt a bit uncomfortable, but he knew he could just slink away. He needed to say something

“I’m here,” Zac said with a voice that echoed through the corridors, a voice full of pent-up anger. “I’m sorry I couldn’t get here sooner, but I’ll make sure these aggressors never forget the price of messing with our people.”

It was short and a bit cliché, but it contained an unbending conviction that almost turned palpable as Zac passed through the ranks. There would be blood for blood.