

# Chapter Thirty: Alouin

For centuries, ushering essences to what lay beyond life had been my least favorite part of what I did. Listening to someone's unfulfilled hopes and dreams quickly got tiresome, and don't get me started on regrets.

As quickly as an unlocked memory of the future had allowed for it, I'd discarded the job, abandoning who knew how many essences to an endless wait in the space between realities. I should probably feel bad about that.

In comparison, once more taking up the responsibility for Kasai had been relatively painless. He'd had few regrets, the only one of significance being leaving his loved ones behind.

If he'd only known how much I'd lied to him while we'd been waiting for Brennan to find us. Ships, how many of his questions had I fielded, knowing they'd cause me inconvenience later?

He'd believed me, though. I'd taken him to the line that I would never cross, and he'd stepped across it with little persuasion on my part, a small victory to offset what was waiting for me in my realm.

When I returned, Brennan was curled on herself with vacancy inhabiting her, and I silently groaned at the task that had been laid before me. Reminding myself of why I needed this contrary woman, I crouched in front of her.

"Brennan?" I said. "Are you-? How can I help?"

Chuckling, she said, "You can start by abandoning the pretense that you care."

Would giving her honesty, showing her my true self, help her, though? If I was to achieve my goals, I needed her functional, which made me reluctant to drop the guise that most people found endearing—I'd never understand why—but at the same time, she'd seen me for what I truly was when we'd collaborated in Brighde.

Having known me without my masks, she'd probably find my attempts to pretend like I cared insulting. It was better if I discarded them.

"You're useless to me like this, lying on the ground like the slave to emotion that you are," I said. "How do I fix it so you can be useful again?"

Brennan laughed into her knees.

"Only you could think there's an easy fix for this," she said.

Which made my lips curl. What did she think I was? An idiot?

I knew someone like her would need time to heal from something like this. I didn't need her happy, just on her feet again.

I didn't tell her this, though. I waited, letting her come to her own conclusions, because after spending so much time with her, I knew that she'd reach the right ones without my help. After what seemed like forever—although it was probably more akin to a few minutes—Brennan relaxed from her clenched state, sitting up to face me.

"I have two questions before I decide if I'll ever help you again," she said.

And nothing more came from her. Why hadn't she asked these questions without waiting to see how I'd respond? After this long spent working together, she had to know what I'd say.

Then again, I usually expected more from people than they were capable of giving.

So, once more, I bowed to someone else's expectations of the course a conversation must take.

"What questions?" I asked.

Lifting her tear-streaked face, Brennan said, "Is your future intact?"

What a good question. The memory unlocked by Kasai's arrival here several days ago hadn't advanced past the moment when he decided to sacrifice himself for Hiyuki, so I couldn't know for sure how things were now, hours after that had happened. I, however, found it unlikely that something between those two moments could have rocked us off-course.

So, I said, "It's stable."

The smallest bit of Brennan's tension leaked from her, but still, my answer made her slump more than anything.

Considering how often she'd appreciated it in the past—not to mention how much humans in general liked the gesture—I crouched, taking her hands in my own.

"And the other question?" I asked.

If anything, Brennan stiffened even further at my touch, but she gave me the response I'd wanted.

"Why did you have me rescue K?" she asked. "You could have rewound his timeline further than you did, and he'd have survived without my help."

Ah. That question. Should I answer her honestly?

Judging from how much she was glaring at me, I didn't think I had a choice. She'd always had an uncanny ability to tell when I was lying to her.

“Mostly, I did it to maintain my chosen future,’ I aid, “but I also made the request because if you hadn’t rescued Kasai, we’d have had no story, and the story’s almost as important as preserving reality, Brennan.”

Because without the story, our efforts would go unrecorded. Unnoticed. Lost to the abyss of time.

“I see,” Brennan said.

Ships, I hadn’t heard her sound so dead since shortly after she’d learned about Nuadha’s death. How long would she be out of commission this time?

“I’d like to open a link with Ailig. He’s waiting outside your pocket world,” she said. “You’ve allowed it before. Will you let me have this now?”

“Only if you let me come with you,” I said. “I’m... concerned.”

“Maybe for how my actions might affect you. Never for my wellbeing,” Brennan said, “but fine. You can come.”

She wasn’t wrong...

At her acquiescence to my request, I let the buzz that had been trying to escape my safe space out, and Brennan and I found ourselves somewhere else.

The relative dimness of our surroundings caught me off guard, but once my eyes had adjusted, I slowly swiveled in place to take everything in.

Brennan and I were in a hexagonal chamber of some kind, one that had doors in each of its six sides. Composed of a dark wood, these entrances were framed by brushed metal with a square panel in the center of their heads. Each panel was engraved with a symbol that was clearly meant to designate what lay behind them, but I could make neither head nor tail of them. To me, they seemed like nonsensical squiggles.

A pedestal with a switch on top of it stood at the chamber’s midpoint, but besides this, I saw nothing but black. No visible walls surrounded us, and the source of the room’s light was like one found in an interrogation room, soaring so far above our heads that I couldn’t make it out.

This must be how Brennan crossed between iterations, the antechamber she’d mentioned at the beginning of our adventure together. I’d seen it before, in unlocked memories of the future, but I’d never been here, and as I’d thought, it was fascinating.

Something rammed into my legs, and looking down at it, I rolled my eyes.

“Hello, Ailig,” I said.

Text scrolled into my link.

*What did you do to her?*

“Nothing!” I said. “I-”

Glancing around, I found Brennan in the room and bit back a sigh. She was crouched near the pedestal, hugging her legs, with her forehead resting on her knees. Her sobs, which my fascination with something new had drowned out, assaulted my ears, and I clicked my tongue.

“I may have sent her to Hiyuki, knowing she’d fall in love and that the man she loved would die,” I said.

Honesty usually worked best with constructs like Ailig, as they were better lie detectors than even Brennan was, but in this case, that tactic seemed to have backfired. A panel on Ailig’s sphere flipped open with a blowtorch extending from it, and igniting it, he advanced on me.

“Stop, Ailig,” Brennan said. “You know that would barely sting him.”

As the source of danger he’d presented retreated into his sphere, Ailig shot toward his mistress, nuzzling her like the dogs on her beloved Earth would. While those two commiserated, I circled Brenna’s antechamber.

No matter how many circuits I made of it, however, I couldn’t figure out how these doors let Brennan skim over the space between realities when traveling to new iterations. I’d love to learn that secret. Avoiding the Morán’s domain seemed... smart, given how antagonistic they’d become toward me in recent centuries.

Oh, well. Maybe I could figure out the antechamber’s secrets later. After all, its every detail now lay waiting in my link for review.

Eventually, Brennan climbed to her feet, and I sauntered to her. Damn, she didn’t look good, like a shell waiting to be cracked, and I couldn’t have her like this for long.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“No, you’re not,” Brennan said with even her voice empty.

Wincing, I said, “True, but you seem to like hearing me say it regardless.”

“It’ll take a hell of a lot more than an apology to return things to how they were between us,” she said.

Obviously. Unfortunately, I didn’t yet know what it would take, so I kept my mouth shut, and soon enough, Brennan crossed her arms.

“Do you want my report?” she asked.

And we’d returned to familiar waters.

“That’s not necessary this time,” I said. “I watched everything that happened in Hiyuki as it happened, which makes me think we might have reached our midpoint. This may mark the moment when our divergent timelines intersect.”

“Fascinating,” Brennan sarcastically drawled.

That had seemed a little over the top. I knew she found some of my obsessions—like why her timeline was opposite in nature to mine—more frivolous than others, which made listening to her opinions about them... annoying. As usual, I kept this irritation to myself.

“If you don’t need a report from me, I’m leaving. I’ll visit Brighe. Spend some time with Ellair while I deal with... things,” Brennan said. “Unless you have a problem with that?”

No memory of the future had unlocked to warn me against her taking this course of action, so I shrugged.

“El may be lacking in many things, but he’s a better choice to help you through this than me,” I said. “At least he can relate.”

“You’ve never lost someone? No one you loved has ever...?” Brennan said before shaking her head. “What am I thinking? You can’t love. Of course you’ve never mourned someone before.”

For reasons I couldn’t define, this sparked a fire in my heart, and I barely controlled it before speaking.

“I’ve loved and lost before, but it happened before I made myself the way I am now, so many millennia ago that I hardly remember it. I recall, conceptually, what grief feels like but I can’t translate that into something that might bring you comfort.”

Brennan stared at me like I’d morphed into a monster, and I huffed at her.

“So, Brighde?” I said. “Which door leads to that frozen world?”

Silently, Brennan walked to one with something that might have been a snowflake engraved in its panel. With Ailig rolling to a stop behind her, she laid a hand on it, but before pushing it open, she glanced at me.

“You’re sure this won’t mess with what you’ve seen?” she asked.

“Time’s strange for us, Bren,” I said. “As far as I can tell, we’re moving in opposite directions with both of us traveling into our separate pasts. I doubt that you spending a few months with El will change anything, otherwise, one of us would remember it. Do what you must to heal.”

“So that I’ll be ready when you need to use me again?” she asked, so tired.

Despite myself, I grinned at her. People so rarely surprised me, and while her calling me out was nothing new, doing it in a way that acknowledged how much of our relationship was me preying on

her was positively delightful.

“Exactly,” I said.

Sighing, Brennan rested her forehead on the door.

“Tell me one thing, Alouin,” she said. “Will you do anything else that might so thoroughly break me?”

Thinking back on the other times we’d met, I shook my head.

“This is the worst.”

“Ok,” Brennan breathed.

She opened the door, revealing a black similar to a reality rift’s ovoid behind it. Stepping into that ink, she vanished, leaving Ailig behind.

Text from him scrolled into my link.

*If I find out you’ve lied to her...*

“You’ll what? Burn me?” I said. “You forget yourself, construct. When it comes to inventions like you, your creator may be a prodigy, but I could pull you apart with a thought. After all, I wrote a sequence that let me see every possible version of the future. What are your sequences compared to that?”

As Ailig extinguished his pulsing blue lights, I chuckled. With how often I’d had to allure and appease people in recent years, I’d forgotten how much fun subduing another being could be.

The construct rolled to the door with a last message scrolling into my link before he disappeared.

*Please, don’t destroy my mistress.*

I had no intention of doing that. Over the course of my life, I’d never gone out of my way to hurt anyone. In fact, I did *not* like doing it, but sometimes, horrible things like harming another person were necessary for ensuring my chosen future, and doing that came first for me, in all things.

So. Hiyuki had been balanced, something done without my direct intervention for once, and this left a task I’d long thought impossible completed.

My killer had been identified, and wasn’t she a wonder? Of my seven, Himi was, perhaps, the one with the least emotional baggage trailing her, and her personality was simply... enchanting. I’d thoroughly enjoy working with her.

Also, the last time I’d checked, everything was still stable in my other chosen iterations. With free time suddenly mine, what should-?

An initiated sequence took over, leaving me frozen for a moment, but as soon as it had released me, I gasped, leaning on the pedestal at my side.

Vathaylia? That was my last destination? The failed iteration, one that was dead to Lumin and Calig. That couldn't be right.

But my unlocked memory insisted that was where I should be.

So, I'd visit Vathaylia. I'd find my anomaly, and then, I'd prepare.

Because after those chores were completed, the end would come.

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