

Chapter Twenty-Eight:

Brennan

After all of the effort I'd put into reaching this place promptly, I'd expected *someone* to greet me. At the least, Alouin should be here since this was his pocket world, his refuge from the iterations' many troubles.

What I got was no one. No welcome party, no friendly hellos, nothing. Just me, alone, in this creepy-ass place.

"That's it, Bren. Let irritation take over," I said under my breath. "Don't examine what it's masking."

I made one more one-eighty, hoping my overlay might pick up on something I'd missed, but of course, it didn't. What else should I have expected? That it worked here at all was a miracle, considering how Ellair's other toys in my satchel were often made useless in this place.

There was a reason I didn't often visit, besides the obvious.

"Alouin? Are you here, you bastard?" I shouted. "K?"

Nothing.

I *could* sit here and wait for something to happen, but I'd never done well with the whole staying still thing. So, I might as well pick a direction and start walking.

Whatever had happened with... Kasai, Alouin would find me eventually, and if he took too long, I could always return to the antechamber.

Not that I wanted to do that. I was here for a reason. I'd stay until I'd fulfilled my purpose or my body demanded relief from privation.

As I set off, I let my thoughts wander within carefully controlled constraints. How had Himi done with taking her throne? How many people might she have had to kill?

I hope the number was low to none. I'd seen how having blood on her hands had affected that girl, but I also wasn't naïve enough to believe that Hiyuki's guilds would relinquish their recently gained power without violence.

In some ways, I pitied them, our adversaries on this adventure, but in no way, shape or form did I think they should control that iteration's government. They reminded me too much of big business

back home, especially those that had thrived during the Industrial Revolution.

But I also didn't think that a monarchy, of any type, was good for a nation's people. Call it the personal bias of someone who lived in a democratic country on Earth. I just didn't like a government where the people had little say in how things were done.

At least the Hiyukian Empire didn't follow the tradition of hereditarily passing down the crown. With the way they did things, they had a slightly higher chance of getting a ruler who gave a damn about the nation.

Overall, Hiyuki had made a nice change of pace after Vathaylia and Brighde. I'd felt like an idiot in those high-tech societies, so being on the opposite end of that dynamic had been nice.

At least, it had been nice until I'd grown close to a handful of the iteration's inhabitants.

Why did I keep doing this to myself? After I'd escaped from Brighde, I'd known that each of my stops on the worlds behind my doors would be temporary. Why did I keep making friends with people I knew I'd soon say goodbye to?

Why had I fallen in love with one of them?

With my vision blurring, I stopped to even out my jittery breathing and push down the wave of hurt that was swelling up my throat. I couldn't think about...

I couldn't. Not yet.

Since I was already taking a break from my stroll, I spun in place again, intently scanning the horizon. I'd almost made it full circle when my overlay flashed a notice into view. A little to my left, two minor bumps were rising from perfectly smooth grass.

Grass flew in clumps behind me as my pounding feet tore through it. Was it him? Please say it wasn't another of Alouin's unexpected guests. My poor heart couldn't take it, and he'd been getting so many more of those recently.

A box flickered into being in my overlay's periphery, giving me a zoomed-in image of the bumps. One of them, Alouin, I'd expected, but the other one...

The other one was a dream made real, a prayer answered for once.

My buoyed heart sped my already racing feet with the exhaustion accrued during my earlier run lost in the zeroed focus of my fixation. A few seconds into this, Alouin leaned toward me with his finger extended, and any conversation that might have been taking place between those two was discarded like a bag full of rotten fruit.

Kasai ran to meet me as eagerly as I did him.

We slowed to a stop with several meters still lying between us. I wanted to draw closer, but my feet had merged with the ground while a tether between my shoulder blades was holding me in place.

I didn't know what was keeping Kasai from coming to me, but he didn't seem to mind the distance. He drank me in like a glass of water offered after a day spent laboring under the hot sun, but I didn't sense any desire in the look. It felt more like one received from someone who'd thought they'd never see you again.

I could relate. That wavy black hair, those scarlet eyes that sometimes hurt to see, that well-defined physique? These didn't stir anything in me, never had, but looking upon him now, I felt ready to burst from... something.

Comfort? Belonging? It didn't matter. What was standing in front of me had contained the man I loved, or how I'd seen him at least, and it no longer- it-

"You waited!" I blurted.

I was only a little surprised by that fact, considering that Alouin had been with him. How often had that asshole offered to usher Kasai on before I'd arrived? He probably hadn't wanted to watch this reunion, the selfish fucking...

Couldn't focus on that yet. I had to save it for... later.

"Of course I did," Kasai said. "That's what I promised, isn't it?"

A broken giggle burst from me as the waterworks began to flow.

Running my fingers under my eyes, I said, "Not in so many words. Still. I was worried that I'd get here and..."

"I'd be gone," Kasai gently finished. "I'm not, Bren. I'm here, and if you like, we can- I can-"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he looked away, and I bit my lip. He was so different from the stiff man I'd met, and yet, still so careful, even as an... essence.

My feet popped out of their meld with the grass while the tether on my back snapped, and I raced across the distance between us. When I buried my face in his chest, I rocked him in place, wrapping my arms around his waist, and it took a second, but soon, he hugged me back.

Safe in the warmth enfolding me, I lost time in that refuge, carved from the space between realities. It was a familiar warmth, the warmth of serenity and love and- and home. I didn't want it to end or to retreat from something so glorious, but life is a cold, cruel bitch.

Kasai's hold on me loosened, and almost, I squeezed him tight, refusing to let go, but these were his moments. We'd spend them however he wanted, save for one exception.

When he pulled away from me, Kasai looked like he wanted to speak, but I lifted a finger in front of his face.

“Allow me one thing, K,” I said, “and then, you can tell me everything you need to say.”

He looked confused as he nodded, but when I folded to the ground, Kasai joined me. I clasped my hands in my lap, idly playing with the cuff of my pant’s leg, while I set my overlay to actively record.

“I’m a writer,” I said. “I don’t know if I ever told you that.”

I bit back hysterical laughter, and while I worked to calm it down, Kasai silently watched.

When I could, I continued, “I’ve been recording our journey together, writing each days’ adventures down before bed. To my mind, this story is... entrancing, better than the others I’ve taken part in, but it’s lacking something: an ending.”

I held my breath while he processed my confession and unspoken request. Would he hate me for doing this to him after... now? Would he view my rambling thoughts on his life as an invasion of his privacy?

If so, I hoped he knew that I’d hated it too, most of the time at least, but I could do no less. I was Alouin’s word wright. He and I weren’t sure about everything the title entailed, but it at least indicated that I was to serve as the record keeper, sharing the tales of us seven on the off-chance that something survived the disaster stalking us. I had to write these stories and hope to everything holy that I’d done their players justice.

Of course, I also had selfish reasons for requesting the end of this tale but... details.

“You want to know what happened after I stepped through the Gateway,” he said in a hollow voice.

Scooting forward, I gently cupped his face.

“Only if you’re willing to tell me,” I said. “I’d like the details that I need to make your story as beautiful as it deserves to be.”

Kasai pulled my hands off of him, but he didn’t release them, hardening his grip around them instead.

Taking a shuddering breath, he said, “Ok.”

And like I’d asked, he told me. And I wished I’d never made the request.

“I- I’m sorry,” I breathed.

Shrugging, Kasai said, “It’s over. You have no reason to be sorry.”

“Still. I- How-?”

“Bren, stop,” Kasai said. “Please?”

I was making him relive it. Again.

The falsest smile I’d ever donned cracked my features.

“Ok. So, now that my pesky thing is done, what did you want to say?” I chirped.

Still gripping my hands, Kasai snorted a laugh, lifting his captives to brush his lips along my knuckles.

“You’re terrible at concealing your feelings, love,” he said. “Please, don’t hide with me.”

Cold air rushed into my lungs, pinching my tongue and biting my throat, and the swell of hurt in me, fighting for its freedom, gained more ground. Tears puddled in my eyes, but before they could escape from their confines, I turned aside. I didn’t want Kasai to see how broken I’d be... later, but laying a hand on my cheek, he turned me toward him, brushing tears away as they ran over my face.

“Still needs work but better,” he said. “I wish I could take this pain from you. I wish my... absence wouldn’t cause you more. I wish I could- we could-”

The anguish on his face hit me like a horse stomping on my chest. In a couple of weeks, he’d gone from near expressionless to this.

I should never have gotten involved in his life. I should have saved him from his execution and left Hiyuki. Who knew what might have gone differently if I had, following my damn instincts for once?

I couldn’t indulge in self-flagellation yet, though, not when he- when he-

“Do you want to make it hurt less?” I asked.

“More than anything,” Kasai said.

“Ok, then.”

Rising to my knees, I shuffled to him, slowly straddling his lap. I took hold of his shoulders and gradually, gently lowered him to his back, everything done in increments and while maintaining eye contact.

I couldn’t cross a line here. I had enough of those to understand how important they were.

After letting my hair loose, I leaned my elbows beside his head before lowering mine until a black-dyed curtain was shielding us from the world. With a measure of privacy gained, my goal had been achieved.

“Tell me you love me,” I said.

Every other time he'd done it, he'd caught me by surprise. I'd never gotten a recording of it, but until I told my overlay to do otherwise, it would keep capturing every moment for me now.

Lifting his hands, Kasai rested them on my head, twinning his fingers between the strands of my hair.

“Of course I do, Bren,” he said.

My chuckle allowed fingers of light to break through the sway of our concealing curtain.

“No, K,” I murmured. “Say it. All of it. Please.”

With a slight frown, Kasai said, “Brennan Adams, you are the bedrock of earth that has stabilized me for these last few days. You are the fire inside my heart, warming me and giving me the motivation I've sorely needed. You have shaped me into someone who knows he's both strong and weak but also that those traits don't define him.

“You've opened my world, Bren. For this and more, I will always love you, no matter where I am.”

I heard those words and...

I'd shoot into the sky and soar among the clouds. I'd shatter into so many pieces that no one could put me back together.

I was glowing like the sun. I was wilting beneath an ever-present shadow.

Delighted laughter mixed with soul-wrenching sobs, and Kasai's frown deepened as he tried to push himself off the ground. I held him down, kissing him like he had with me yesterday.

Tears slid between our lips so that a slight taste of salt tinged my tongue, and I couldn't breathe, not with my nose blocked from my crying, but I didn't dare more, couldn't move.

Because when I did, it would be one more thing that would never happen again.

When Kasai tapped my head, I reluctantly pulled away, retreating until space lay between us, and as I folded my legs together, I switched my overlay into a passively recording mode. Unlike when it wasn't recording at all, these memories would still be captured, but they weren't placed in a specialized folder, like actively captured recordings were. Instead, they'd go into my overlay's general file, which I'd need to review soon.

Not now, though.

“Thank you,” I said.

"It was my pleasure," Kasai said. "Any other serious topics coming from out of the blue? I don't know if I can take another discussion where you turn weepy."

My God. Was he teasing me?

"I don't know," I said with a smile. "Are there?"

"Not that I can think of," Kasai said, "but since Alouin's not here yet, I wondered if you might tell me about those worlds you meant for us to visit. You're a writer, yes? Tell me their stories."

What was he doing? Was this how he wanted to spend his-

Or was this meant to make things easier for me?

As if reading my mind, Kasai said, "I'd like to pretend, if only for a moment, that I haven't died. For once, I'd like to *completely relax* and indulge in what might seem like a meaningless conversation with you. Is that ok?"

"More than ok. It sounds fabulous!" I said. "And I have the perfect visual aid for your requested tale."

As I reached into my satchel, I scrubbed my face free of tears. They hadn't ceased their reign of me, but for now, I'd earned a reprieve.

After a moment, I pulled free perhaps the only toy of Ellair's that might work here. My friend liked to complicate things, adding more features to his inventions than they required, and advanced tech like that struggled against the restriction against 'threats' that Alouin had placed on his safe space. This, however, was simplicity itself.

Placing a metal button between us, I left a finger on it as I spoke.

"Brighde."

An image of that ice-infested world fanned from the button like light would from a projector, but the created picture hovered in the air with no backdrop needed to clarify it.

"Vathaylia."

A snow-covered landscape was replaced with sterile halls and severe-looking men.

"Earth."

With cars speeding down it, a wobbly image of a road beside an apartment building sprang into view.

"I know this one doesn't look as nice," I said. "I programmed and designed it myself, but I'm not great with Brighde's tech. Earth is home, though. I had to add it to my growing repertoire."

Although he'd looked a little uneasy at first, Kasai now leaned toward this floating image with his eyes gleaming.

"This is your home?" he asked.

"Yep. In all its filthy glory."

"I think it's wonderful," Kasai said with a grin. "Tell me about it."

So I did, and when he got tired of Earth, we moved on to the other two iterations. Once I'd finished describing them all, Kasai leaned back on his hands as if lounging. I'd never seen him so carefree before.

"I think I'd like your home best," he said. "Vathaylia seems too troubled and Brighde? Just... no."

He shuddered, which made me laugh. His reaction matched what I'd imagined it would be to a T.

"Looks like you did get to take me on a tour of other worlds, Bren," Kasai said. "It's a pity that I won't get to visit the last few with you, but that's life. Or death, in this case."

I slapped my hand to my mouth, trying to quiet my snickers. I shouldn't find that funny, but Kasai was laughing with me. That made it ok, right?

"The first joke you've made around me, and it's about that," I gasped.

"Of course. When else would I make one?" Kasai said. "On a lightly more serious note, though, I'm curious. How did my *maiylaru* take all of... this?"

As he vaguely waved, I went still. I hadn't gone with Himi to force the royal guard into line, which was where Zhao had stayed, so I hadn't seen his reaction to what had happened.

Oh, hell. That man had practically been Kasai's father. How did I tell him that I couldn't answer his question?

"Pissed but proud," a new voice said.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, spinning to face my target on my hands and knees.

My target, who was Alouin. Who was watching me with an amused smile.

Bastard.

Turning to Kasai, Alouin said, "Have I given you enough time?"

"It would never be enough," Kasai said, "but yes. I'm ready now."

I scrambled to join him as he climbed to his feet.

“What do you mean ‘you’re ready?’” I asked. “You can’t- There must be something we can do. Alouin! You could reverse his timeline again!”

“Not without dire consequences for reality,” Alouin said.

“And I wouldn’t want him to,” Kasai quietly added.

When I whirled on him with a scream on my tongue, he grimaced.

“Think about it, Bren,” he said. “If Alouin reversed my timeline to the point that I was once more alive, I’d never have freed Growth and Decay, and Hiyuki would once more hover on the brink of disaster. I’d have to save it again, and before letting me do that, you’d insist on searching for another solution to the problem. Even if we learned of a way that would let me survive what lies beyond the Gateway, I don’t know if I’d take it. I don’t-”

Kasai coughed with his wide eyes going blank for a split second.

“I don’t want to repeat what I did,” he whispered.

That was... reasonable.

“But-”

There had to be another way. How many times had I seen death beaten, times when I’d thought not even an act of God could save the person who’d been skirting the edge?

“But-”

Why did so many other people get a miracle, but when I needed one, I was spurned? This couldn’t happen. I wouldn’t *let* it happen.

Pressure on my arms drew me away from my internal screaming, and I gazed into scarlet eyes.

“Bren. I’m dead,” Kasai said. “Let me go.”

“I can’t do that, K,” I whispered.

He smiled with *such* affection.

“I know. You’re too stubborn,” he said. “Unfortunately for you, I’m more stubborn.”

Pulling away, he stood beside Alouin, and that *bastard* laid a hand on his shoulder.

“The next time you decide to make a hellish prison, try not to make its halls so damn long,” Kasai told him.

“No promises,” Alouin said with a smirk.

To me, Kasai said, “You’ve had a fantastic life to this point, Bren. Promise me you’ll continue to live as vicariously as you have until now.”

I couldn’t. I couldn’t! I-

“Promise, K,” I said, hiccupping on a retained sob.

This was happening. No matter how much I screamed my denial, Kasai was-

Facing Alouin, I hissed, “I’ll never forgive you for this.”

And meeting his empty gaze, I shivered, shifting my focus back to Kasai. Sucking up every moment with the man I loved, every glimpse, every breath taken, every-

“I know,” Alouin said.

Air replaced my beloved, and with a wheezing cry, I dropped to my knees with my head tilted to the sky and the miniature depiction of the Eternal War in it. How could anything I suffered matter in the face of that, something that was so much more vital?

No. My pain mattered to me.

Falling to my side, I pulled my legs to my chest, gasping into them. With jerking hesitancy, I touched the knowledge that I’d been fleeing from, distracting myself from, avoiding for hours.

Kasai had left me. I’d given him a piece of my heart, and he’d left with it.

I expected my weeping to begin, now that I’d accepted this, but my eyes stayed dry. I kept myself curled in a ball as shrieking grief ripped through me—heart, mind, and essence—until all that remained was... me.

Who I’d been all along.

A numb shell.

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