

Chapter Twenty-Six:

Brennan

Kasai vanished into thin air, taking the disturbing spread of new skin that had been bubbling from his pores with him, and I- I-

What could I do? His words kept ringing in my head, a tolling bell that was fading with every repeat.

"I'm sorry I couldn't find another home with you."

I'd had so many things I'd wanted to show him.

Brighde, a world that was the opposite of Hiyuki, with every surface frozen over and its shattered moon, Sleii, drooping like an apple on a weak branch.

Vathaylia, a world that was dead above the surface but so very alive in its bunkers and warrens, tunneling beneath the earth.

I'd wanted him to meet my friends.

Ellair, the brilliant inventor whose mortal enemy was anything more than the most simplistic of social interactions.

Lillibeth, who lived in both the past and the present, and her beaux, Blake, who she'd risked breaking time to save.

I'd wanted to travel through the doors I had left with him, braving the dangers of the worlds behind each of them with him, sharing their wonders with him.

And when I finally, *finally*, found my way back home to Earth, I'd wanted to introduce him to my parents. I'd wanted my dog to sniff him and decide whether he was trustworthy. I'd wanted to build a life together but he- he-

"I'll love you forever."

Who could have guessed that I'd find love? Me, the recluse with an intermittent ability to touch other people. Who watched other people kiss or otherwise display their affection with a churning stomach and prickling skin. Who'd never understand people's obsession with breasts or legs or hips.

They were parts of the body. What else was there to them?

I had fallen in love, despite the odds, and he- he-

"I'll see you where we met."

This last whisper in my head was all that kept me from dissolving into the grief-stricken heroine trope. It was a small hope that breathed calm into me every time my thoughts started gibbering, and I could indulge in it as soon as I figured out a way to break free of this branching cage Kasai had wrapped me in.

Something he'd done so that he could throw his life away without interference.

"That bastard," I hissed.

Once more, I strained to slip an arm free of my wooden restraints, but they held me firm, and my overlay had yet to pick a weakness out of the interlacing web. So, was I stuck here until the royal guard finished wailing on each other like immature brutes?

Likely. No one else would check the Gateway for us, and who knew how long those medieval idiots would be at the whole killing each other thing? If they took too long, I'd be delayed in reaching our meeting point and Kasai...

What if he'd left by the time I got there?

"Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

In all my life, I'd never squirmed so much or desperately while the growl, long rumbling under my breath, quickly became a scream.

"Stop struggling, or I might hurt you."

What? Who'd said-?

The branches holding me captive disintegrated. Dust littered the ground wherever it had failed to land on me, and stumbling, I only stayed on my feet with someone's help.

A teenager with raven hair, delicate features, and an outfit that might make her look intimidating if it weren't for her obvious distress and the red color ringing her fiery eyes. The ones I'd found disturbing scant days before. The eyes that were so like Kasai's.

Himi.

Because of her, the one I loved...

He'd stepped through the Gateway. I should hate her, but I couldn't, and that wasn't just because her normally spunky demeanor had charmed me in the time I'd known her.

For she was one of Alouin's seven, another of us added to the list. Alouin himself. Lilibeth, the anomaly from Vathaylia. Ellair, the prodigy from Brighde. Me, the word wright. And Himi, the killer from Hiyuki.

Or at least, I thought it was so.

That left only the successor from Auden and the liar from Hekili to be added, and then, we'd be complete, we seven who would save reality.

So, despite my burning need to leave this place, I paused to make sure Himi could take care of the dangers stalking her.

"Do you need anything from me, sweetie?" I asked. "If you need it, I could walk you to Zhao or someone else loyal to you."

Pulling my satchel in front of me, I stuck my hand through it and into the pocket dimension that lay at its base. My request for my power boots flickered from my overlay to the tips of my fingers before flinging itself into the void. While I waited for a response, I pretended to rummage in my satchel, as if looking for something.

"How can you ask that?" Himi said. "Kasai just-"

She glanced toward the Gateway, which was now a scattered mess on the floor, and I shoved my body's nagging demand for tears to the side.

Himi had sounded like she was in shock, which if so, was awful timing on her part. Her position in Hiyuki was far from secure.

"I'll power it up again," she said. "Go through. Drag him back."

As she started toward the Gateway, I grabbed her wrist. Much as I craved for her to do as she'd suggested, I couldn't let her. It wouldn't be safe, and her safety superseded my happiness and Kasai's... life.

"You can't," I forced myself to say. "K wanted you to become the empress of Hiyuki. If you go to the planet's core-"

I choked off.

My God, he was in the core. What would that do to him? How would he-?

"If you do what *you* want, you'll lose this prime time to secure your power, and when you return from there, you'll find your enemies, ready and waiting to kill you," I continued in a thick voice. "Besides, who knows what will happen after Kasai frees Growth and Decay? Use the full range of your powers while you can. Be the woman, the ruler, that K saw in you."

Silicone gel and still filled my hand in the satchel, but I made sure Himi had accepted what I'd said before trying to retrieve what I was holding. Squaring her shoulders, she nodded at me, and I dropped to the floor. I pulled a beautiful pair of boots from my satchel's pocket dimension, dragging one over my foot while Himi stared.

"Do you need my help?" I asked. "I can stick around for a little while, but I need to leave soon. I don't know how long K can wait for me before..."

Flinching, Himi crouched in front of me, catching my gaze with swirling fire.

"He's dead, Brennan," she said. "You need to admit this to yourself."

Shoving the second boot on with more force than necessary, I dropped my eyes to it. I knew she was right. I knew exactly how to handle this in a healthy manner, but I couldn't bring myself to touch those two words with my thoughts or my tongue, not until after...

"Do you need anything or not?" I asked, amazing myself with how calm I'd sounded.

Shaking her head, Himi rose from her crouch before offering me a hand.

"I've got it from here," she said. "You're leaving?"

With her help, I reached my feet. I'd forgotten how unwieldy these boots could be until energy gave them life.

"I am," I said. "You probably won't see me for a while, but I'm sure we'll meet again."

Nodding, Himi rested her hands on her hips, staring at the floor. She looked so well put together with no pain or grief to bother her, and a part of me hated that she'd so quickly pushed through her shock.

I should leave, but I'd sacrificed enough for this bubbly girl. I need to know.

"You seem surprisingly... ok," I said.

Himi shot her head up.

"I'm not," she whispered. "*Gidae's* gone, dead by my hand, and now, Kasai? I feel like I'll burst from the pressure building in me, but I have something to distract me, alleviating that pressure for a time. I have a task that a man I greatly respected gave me. But I didn't know him for long, Brennan, and I certainly didn't love him in the same way you did."

For the longest moment of my life, my grief battled with my convictions about this girl, but in the end, they won out. I spread my arms—*like he had*—and Himi fell into them before I could flinch.

We held each other, two women battered and bruised by life's cruelties, while the sounds of the royal guard's clash drifted to us.

After a moment, Himi pulled away from me, wiping her eyes.

“I’d better stop those idiots before I lose my entire guard,” she said with a laugh.

It was weak, that laugh, but accompanied with it came a glimmer of the peppy, crazy girl I’d first met.

Tucking her hair behind her ears, I said, “Good luck, Himi. When I next visit, I expect to hear about the empress who changed Hiyuki.”

“I’ll make it happen,” Himi said. “Good luck to you as well. And I’m sorry.”

Before I could protest her apology, she sprinted out of the tree, and her departure let my clamoring need to leave have control of my body once more. With difficulty, I kicked my boots’ activation switch, and a blue glow washed over the wood around me. I didn’t give the change much thought, racing away from the fight.

With my boots’ help, my stride covered about three of my normal steps, and wind tugged at my pulled-back hair. My overlay warned me about dangerous obstacles in my path, but twigs and leaves still occasionally smacked me in the face. To distract myself from that annoyance, I opened a link with Ailig.

“Hey, buddy,” I said. “You there?”

Text started scrolling into view at the left corner of my sight, but I delayed in reading it, focusing instead on transferring the momentum of my run into a push off of the dirt. As I flew through the air, my overlay politely informed me that I’d misjudged my jump, and with a curse, I authorized its temporary override.

Of their own volition, my boots dumped the waste of a vaporized plasma burst, and the energy of it kicked me higher. It was a good thing too because the palace’s roof was swiftly approaching. Without the boots’ added energy, it might once have bisected me. With the adjustment, however, I landed with nary a stumble, pulling Ailig’s response to center view right as the world exploded.

The earthquakes from before? They were nothing compared to this.

It picked me up and tossed me over the roof, and only a quick grab at a steam vent kept me from rolling further. Instead, I got the distinct pleasure of lying on shuddering metal while I watched Mt. Teisu erupt.

Now, this wasn’t a typical volcanic eruption. For reasons I had yet to determine, Mt. Teisu cradled lava in what should have been an empty earth caldera. So, rather than the usual spew of dense ash kilometers into the air, I was greeted by a spreading spray of red and orange with the excess of it leaking over the edge.

It jetted a handful of times with each of these rising closer to the sky, and I was momentarily afraid that its droplets would fly as far as the palace before landing. Not the same as an eruption on Earth but no less heart-stopping for me.

It appeared, however, as if it would prove less deadly than what happened back home. As lava oozed down the mountainside, turning black as it crawled, it fed itself into pre-dug funnels, ones that manipulated and directed the deadly flow into Takanai's many emergency channels at Mt. Teisu's base.

By the time I'd fought to my feet and saw this, though, another, much more otherworldly phenomenon had trumped an erupting volcano when it came to how quickly it could dry my mouth.

Takanai was writhing. From the soil that made up its flesh, vines and trees and stalks and every other plant type I could name were bursting free. They built on themselves and climbed, both in the streets and through the city's buildings, a sporadic rainforest that stretched hungry fingers for the poisonous sky. It reached and reached and reached...

Until parts of it withered and dissolved into dirt, forming a mound of dust where life had once claimed dominance. Survivors of this continued to grow, as if chased by fire, but eventually, they met the same fate. Even still, the successors had risen from the dead's ashes by the time they'd collapsed.

And so it went across Takanai: a towering, crumbling, leaping, shriveling war between Life and Death, Creation and Entropy.

Growth and Decay.

"He did it," I whispered with tears drizzling from my eyes.

I didn't know if these saline drops had come from pride or despair, though, because a tiny part of me had hoped...

I'd hoped that Kasai would understand his foolishness and return to me.

Before the horrid snarl in the pit of my gut could rise to defeat me, I focused on Ailig's response to my message.

Of course I'm here, Bren, it read. Where else would I go? I'd begun to worry if I'd see you again. You took your time with making contact.

A rebuke. Of course he'd spouted that off first.

After a bit of empty space where Ailig had waited for me to reply, the message continued.

Bren? Are you there? What's that noise-?

Why is the earth shaking again? Will this cave collapse on me?

If it's shaking so much here, though...

Bren! Are you ok? Are you ok? Are you-?

This continued for a good ten or eleven pages worth of repeats. Damn, I shouldn't have kept the link open.

"Calm down, buddy. I'm safe," I said. "I'm sorry I haven't reached out before now. I wasn't sure how long I'd be here. Didn't want to drain your power reserves with a link.

"Some pretty weird shit's been happening up here, but since when has that been unusual for us? I'm going to cut the link for a while so I can concentrate, but I'm coming to you. Confirm receipt, Ailig."

I waited for a moment until text scrolled across my overlay.

Confirmed. Please, be careful, my reckless mistress.

Chuckling, I closed the link, blinking to focus on the world beyond my overlay again. Then, I ran.

At the edge of the rooftop, I leapt for the ground, authorizing another dump before touchdown. The slope that led to the palace flashed past me in a heartbeat, and I entered Takanai with hardly a second passing.

Around me, Hiyukians were reacting to the chaos around them in several amusing ways. Some of them were huddled together with their lips moving in prayer to earth and fire, the very things that had turned against them. Most of them, however, were running around like chickens with their heads cut off.

So much for their vaunted strength.

I found the downtrodden particularly interesting. A large chunk of those I could see were taking advantage of the bedlam to loot from the wealthy, but I couldn't blame them for that.

In all of the iterations I'd visited, Hiyuki had the harshest class system, as bad as some of the ones back home could get. Of course the downtrodden would take every chance they could get to make their lives more comfortable.

Most of them, however, went out of their way to help their fellow Hiyukians. Perhaps they did so because kindness counted as a weakness here, something the downtrodden were accused of possessing in abundance. I couldn't say for sure whether that was the reason for their seeming self-sacrifice.

As I observed all of this while speeding through a foreign city, I wondered what these people would think of the man who'd instigated the terror plaguing them. They'd hate him for it now, of course, but in the future, would he be hailed as a hero or despised by the masses?

I didn't think I could stand it if circumstances turned toward the second option. I'd do everything in my power to destroy those who failed to appreciate what Kasai had done for them, no matter hypocritical that might be.

After all, even as I sped down Takanai's streets, I was also fleeing from him and everything he'd done.

My overlay flared red, giving me a warning about incoming danger, and with two more dumps from my boots as well as a roll to the side, I narrowly avoided getting carried into the sky by a thick stalk of plant life. Left on one knee from my tumble, I felt something rumbling beneath my surface, giving me just enough time to expect my sprawl across the dirt.

My body danced with hilarity while jerks and spasms became pirouettes and arabesques. When someone stopped to peer at my collapsed form, I pointed at what might have killed me.

"Jack and the Beanstalk!" I gasped. "Except I'm not Jack, and no giants are waiting in the sky."

Giving me a confused look, the stranger shook her head before hurrying away. She was right to do that, though. Why had something that wasn't at all funny laid me flat on my back? Was I that desperate for the relief that laughter brought?

How sad. I'd be a useless wreck once this was done.

Nothing else impeded my journey through Hiyuki's capital city, and once I'd reached its far side, I kept running until my boots' energy reserves ran dry. As soon as I'd removed them and placed them in my satchel, I took off again with my destination in sight.

How I wished for a return to my trip on arriving here. God, I'd griped for so long about Hiyuki's wind-blown dust and how far I'd been from the closest city!

I envied that earlier version of me. She'd had no idea about what lay ahead of her.

Someone else had, though, and oo...

I didn't care how powerful he was. Alouin and I were going to have a *chat* soon.

Cracking my knuckles, I lifted a hatch, an entrance to the steamworks that lay kilometers from any homes. I had no idea why that underground system reached this far outside of the city. Maybe people had used the rift I was heading toward centuries ago, although I supposed Takanai might also have stretched this far at some point.

Once more, I made the long climb into the earth's depths, one that passed in a haze. I couldn't say what occupied my mind beyond the steady lift and drop of my hands and feet on the ladder's rungs. I only knew that eventually, I reached a solid surface, and blinking, I found myself beside an abandoned channel.

In the dark, my overlay guided me, and as I approached the rift, I again opened a link with Ailig.

“Begin the process of opening Hiyuki’s door, please,” I said. “Confirm receipt.”

Confirmed.

This was followed by another span of running before the abandoned channel I’d been following spilled into an artificial bowl. Kilometers wide, the bowl had a chamber surrounding it, and at the midpoint of this cavern hung a rift.

Even after several times of seeing one, this rift’s all-consuming, black void slowed my run to a crawl, but what else should one expect from a break in reality, a path to other worlds? If one was willing to risk gaining the attention of the entities that lived in between, one could even enter it.

I preferred my mode of travel. Sitting beside the rift, Ailig wiggled in place when he saw me. I authorized his request for a return to full power, and the strips that circled his white sphere began pulsing in a rhythm I’d learned to translate as happiness. As I drew near, however, those blue pulses slowed down, and text scrolled into my overlay.

What happened? You appear... unwell. Like you were in the days after Nuadha’s termination.

The mention of my friend, long dead, brought a twinge with it that I couldn’t handle, not on top of everything else. I didn’t like thinking about his murder and the desecration that had followed it at the best of times.

“I’m fine, Ailig. Everything’s fine,” I said. “Is the door prepared?”

Ailig wiggled in place again.

I do not believe you. I have become adept at detecting human lies, and that is what you are doing, Bren. You are not fine.

Clenching my hands into fists, I hugged myself, pulling my arms tight, and bit my tongue to keep from screaming at Ailig. He couldn’t help but pry. Keeping me safe and happy, within reason, was his primary programmed purpose.

“Ok. I’m not fine, but we can’t discuss why that is right now,” I said. “We’ll do it once I’ve finished with my next task. Acceptable?”

For now.

“Then, please open the door for me,” I said.

As you wish, Bren.

Ailig’s blue glow grew brighter, and a glittering, effervescent line stretched away from him until it touched the rift. That distortion’s interior blackness shifted, wavering until it had resolved into a picture of a doorframe with muted light on the other side.

Now came the part I hated.

Retreating a few steps, I took a running leap through the door—

Body flips from out to in

A wrench through every part

Not near as bad as the voice around

“Give the mother queen her heart”

—and landed in the antechamber.

After storing what I’d heard into its relegated overlay folder, I strode for the pedestal in the center of the room. I felt a faint smile forming when I heard Ailig roll inside behind me. While he bumped into the back of my legs, I flipped a switch, crowning a stone pillar.

The antechamber warped until its typically hexagonal shape became a heptagon. Another door, one with no symbol carved into its head, joined the familiar six around me, and I started for it.

Must you see him again? I don’t like him, and going through that door takes... a lot.

“I don’t like Alouin either, but don’t worry, Ailig. I’m not going to see him. Not specifically,” I said. “Stay here. I’ll open a link when I’m ready to return.”

Be careful, Bren. Even if he needs you, Alouin wouldn’t hesitate to do you harm.

“Oh, I know,” I said.

After this last jaunt in Hiyuki, that fact had been hammered home.

Passing through the unmarked door gave me no sense of turning inside out and no whispers of what I hoped was advice. I merely stepped onto an endless stretch of grass with an endless blue sky soaring to the horizon, and my stomach started fluttering.

I had some choice words for Kasai when I saw him, some of them biting and some not, but mostly, I wanted to hear what had happened. I wanted to know how he’d gotten here and whether it had been painful or not. I needed to hear the end of his story, if he was willing to give it.

And I needed him. Just another moment and another touch, given by the only one who could do that with me.

Please, all ye gods, never to hear my prayers, give me that. Please, universe that has never treated me with kindness, reserve your hatred for me.

For just one moment.

When I spun in place, though, desperate for any sign of activity, no one was waiting for me.

Revision #1

Created 26 December 2024 23:17:34 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:48:39 by FatalisticFable