

# Tragic Fools



Kim Cormack

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## Acknowledgments

*To my wonderful parents, I wish we didn't have to rain check the big 50<sup>th</sup>-anniversary party you deserve. The 2020 pandemic is going on, and we're responsible humans. It will make future generations proud. Your love is truly inspiring. Thank you for always loving us unconditionally.*

*To my awesome offspring, I love you more than words can express. I love you always and forever, Jace and Cam. Our family has evolved in many ways. Jace, you are my baby bird. Cam, you are my sweet prince. Our unconventional family, full of love and laughter, will always be my greatest accomplishment.*

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The dragon eye pendant on the cover photo can be purchased <http://www.etsy.com/shop/BlueRoseCreationsBRC> Tentacles and chess pieces were deviations from deviant art.

## To Everyone in Essential Services

*This has been a challenging year. We've been forced to see past ourselves to save our elderly and immune-compromised. Thank you for your strength. Thank you for bearing a load too heavy to carry. Thank you for every time you went to work afraid. Thank you for the heartbreak and trauma you've endured. You are the true heroes.*

## Warning

The information contained within this website is not intended for mere mortals. Reading this may inadvertently trigger a Correction. If you survive or have shown great bravery during your demise, you may be given a second chance at life by the Guardians of the in-between. For your soul's protection, you must join one of three Clans of immortals living on Earth. Clan Ankh, Trinity or Triad will train your partially mortal brain to reboot without a shock response and attach you to your Testing Group, then you will be taken to another world and dropped into Immortal Testing to prove that even after dying thousands of times, you comprehend greater good and would never leave your fallen behind.

You will be returned to Earth to serve an eternity with Tri-Clan, training new Correction survivors, maintaining order and protecting the mortal population from themselves. You are still reading this, aren't you? Welcome to your afterlife.

## Chapter 1

### Psychic Ex Issues

The bliss of sun-kissed skin awakened her. Twitching fingers in velvety sand as a heavenly breeze tickled her spine, Kayn peered up, grinning. *Somebody gave her an immortal time out.* Even with unlimited free passes to the in-between, a surprise trip was jarring until she recalled why she died. *Who killed her this time?* Cross-legged in pristine desert with silky granules trickling through fingers, her memory kicked in, clarifying why she was deceased. *Lexy knocked on her door and took her out of the equation. Their Oracle must have caught Kevin telepathically asking her to warn him before Ankh stole the girl he had a thing for. Her attachment to him was always getting her in trouble. She shouldn't be having conversations with an ex-boyfriend while in bed with her new one. Frost's patience had to be wearing thin. They'd just been separated as punishment for killing Kevin at a banquet. She tossed her ex off a balcony for giving her a clover. It was still funny.* Sensing a presence, Kayn got up, squinting in luminescence.

Ankh's Guardian Azariah sighed, "I'm beginning to think you enjoy being punished."

*She didn't know what to say, she kind of did.*

"Being part Guardian doesn't mean you can bend rules to your will," the angelic entity reprimanded.

Brushing the sand off her short ivory in-between attire, Kayn responded, "I wasn't going to say anything."

With divine angelic light attaching Clan Ankh's Guardian to the sky, Azariah wandered off, explaining, "That's just it,

if he can tap into your mind, you have no say over what he knows.”

Keeping pace, strolling the clean slate desert with warm silken sand underfoot, beneath an azure sky, Kayn thought of a monarch butterfly. An orange and black distraction flitted by as proof she wasn't focusing on what the Guardian was saying.

The angelic entity trailing radiant light, scolded, “I'm not talking to hear myself speak, child.”

*She wasn't a child.* Now, a variety of vibrant butterflies were fluttering around. *She couldn't shut her feral imagination down.* Wincing, Kayn apologised, “I'm listening, I swear.”

With a clap of her hands, distractions vanished. Smiling, Azariah carried on, “Here is the issue, Ankh needs a Venom before Immortal Testing. As you know, the Third -Tier sped up the timeline in response to the glitch your group used to get out. Currently, Triad is the only Clan with one. Your ex's crush means nothing. Residual mortal sentiment is clouding your judgement.”

*It was, she couldn't deny it.*



Back in the land of the living, Ankh's Oracle voluntarily stayed with Zach to make sure Kayn remained deceased until their compromised job was finished. Relaxing on the queen-sized bed by Kayn's corpse, Jenna mindlessly flicked channels.

With Kayn's head on his lap, Zach gently stroked her hair, asking, “Do we have to keep killing her? Can't we lock her in a tomb?”

“The bracelet to block Kevin's connection isn't working. I need to tweak it. He's psychic, they're linked. Taking her out when we're dealing with Triad may be our only option.”

“We all have ties to other Clans, I used to be Triad,” Zach implored, meeting Jenna’s eyes.

“Aren’t you glad we stole you?” Jenna baited as Kayn’s chest rose and fell. “Heads up, Handler. She’s back.”

“Can’t we just keep her occupied? She doesn’t know where they went,” Zach bartered.

“Azariah needs time with her, a Guardian’s word is law, take her out,” Jenna instructed.

Looping an arm around her neck, he released his grasp as she went limp, muttering, “You’re doing it next time.”

“Suck it up Zach, you’re immortal.” Jenna teased with a smile.



Everything was uncomfortably white as Kayn opened her eyes with a brief flash of waking up in the hospital after her Sweet Sleep. *This time, it wasn't Kevin by her side as she clued into where she was. She remembered this place. She'd been here before.*

Radiance encompassed Ankh’s Guardian Azariah as she helped Kayn up, praising, “Impressive regeneration time.”

“I’ve been healing faster,” Kayn admitted, grimacing as she took in where she was. *A blank white cell. The word nothing described this destination. She had concentration issues. Funny, well played Azariah, bravo. It felt like their Guardian was working up to an epic punishment reveal.*

Grinning, Azariah explained, “Time runs faster in a blank cell. Your soul can’t escape or think up distractions. We’ll stay here, so your Handler doesn’t have to keep killing you each time you rise.”

*An immortal penalty box, so she couldn't think up butterflies or heal herself to escape the boredom, clever.* Kayn had to ask. “Am I going to be punished?”

“Do you need to be punished?” Azariah probed with a knowing twinkle in her eye.

*Damn it, she did.* There was a lingering silence as it sunk in. *It felt like she could stop Kevin from having access to her mind if she wanted him gone. There it was...her truth. She wanted a way to keep their friendship alive, even if they were supposed to be enemies. Even if they always would be. He was her last attachment to a mortal simplicity that was no longer. She was going to lose the trust of her Clan. It felt like she was in the Testing again, being forced to see past mortal bonds engrained in her being.*

“Calm down, we don’t want to sever the connection. The Clans join forces on occasion. We need to control the flow of information. Having two Guardian offspring in the same Clan, Ankh may require assistance as you did when Abaddon tried to force you to send a group through the Hall of Souls. My brother jumped the gun when he took the cap off your abilities. You are a spiritual anomaly, a Conduit who is part Guardian. The Third-Tier will be looking for a way to take you out of the equation to hold off the Daughters of Seth Prophecy.”

*It would be helpful if someone explained what the Daughters of Seth Prophecy was.*

Grinning, Ankh’s Guardian, replied, “Prophecies have a loose narrative. New moves come into play. It couldn’t be worse timing to train a new group for Testing, with survivors in the middle of the evolution process. Believing they’ve set us up for failure by giving us an unbeatable scenario, reveals the Third-Tier’s weakness. They underestimate us. We thrive in impossible situations. Knowing a Venom can put trapped souls into hibernation in a sleep chamber to await freedom with the next continent in gives us a way. When all is lost, all one needs is a faint glimmer of hope and courage to fight. If we find a Venom for the next Testing group, we have an insurance clause. It’s that simple.”



*Sure, they'll just find a rare immortal being in a North American population of 346.3 million.* “Do Guardian magic and point one out, I’m on it,” Kayn saucily replied.

“Being confined to this spiritual plain has limitations. If you’ll allow me, I’d like to have another look at the basis of your connection to the Triad,” Azariah asked in shimmering light with open arms.

As Kayn stepped into the Guardian’s divine embrace, the predatory Conduit was subdued by tranquillity in the root of her being. Beautiful memories floated through her stream of consciousness with easy smiles and magical healing kisses on wounded knees. She drifted off to sleep each night snuggling stuffed animals, feeling safe. She recalled easy laughter in carefree moments, racing siblings in the upstairs hallway to see who’d be first to slide on their tummy down carpeted stairs. Family days on the beach building sandcastles by the sea, turning over rocks to capture fleeing crabs. Salty ocean air through an open car window on the drive home and grape soda stains on her sleeping brother’s face. Childhood sleepovers using hairbrushes as microphones, jumping on beds. Snuggling under blankets watching movies devouring bowls of pink elephant popcorn on the couch. Climbing to the highest branch of the apple tree where they’d perch to eat while viewing their entire world. In every scenario, Kevin was present or referenced to tug her heart back.

Maturing in visions, she reached the age of Correction. Blissfully unaware of her demise, she sprinted across a finish line as a track champion with Kevin overzealously cheering. Each moment, every action, forging an unbreakable bond, maturing into love, solidifying a link created by thousands of unforgettable moments.

Caressing her hair, Azariah summoned her out of the visions, whispering, “We can leave the connection open. I’m secure, he won’t violate your trust.”

*Part of her wanted to remain in the beautiful lucid dream with only light in her soul, void of the darkness she often found herself lost in.* “I wish I could go back,” Kayn confessed, in her arms, pining for the simple bliss of childhood.

Knowing she wasn’t ready to let go, Azariah assured, “Those memories will always be wherever you are.”

“I’m not good at being immortal,” Kayn mumbled.

“Who is?” Azariah taunted, stepping away to meet her eyes, lovingly tucking curls behind her ear.

“You kept Jenna for decades,” Kayn sparred, smiling.

Intrigued by her choice, the Guardian disclosed, “Jenna sacrificed herself for someone else’s misdeeds.”

*She hadn’t heard this story.*

Her luminescent relation explained, “We accepted an ill-advised deal believing Haley’s Testing group was destined to survive. Alas, Oracle’s predictions rarely come with a time stamp. Haley did survive twenty years later when intuition led her to you. Fortunately, Jenna was powerful enough to maintain duties through psychic connections.”

*Their Clan was soap opera.* Curious, Kayn enquired, “Whose punishment did Jenna take?”

Azariah teased, “You’ll figure it out.”

*Why aren’t we using Haley?*

“She’s a talented intuitionist but decades lost in a Venom-induced dream state stunted Haley’s Enlightening process. She isn’t a viable Oracle yet,” the angelic being responded to her thought.

*Psychics advertise, they can’t be that difficult to find.* Fascinated, Kayn suggested, “Can’t we just make an appointment with a psychic and snag one?”

“There are varying degrees of Clairvoyant. Only top tier has a shot at surviving Testing. The new girl Emma is top tier, but if her group can’t connect, it won’t matter,” Azariah clarified with a genuine smile.

Standing in a blank slate room having a casual chat, Kayn forgot she was speaking to a heavenly being. *Her Aunt. That was still weird. If they stole the girl, Kevin would think she didn't care. She wasn't supposed to. She needed to get back to Frost so she could explain.* Feeling a tickle, Kayn looked at her hand as it began disintegrating into sand. *Well, this isn't supposed to happen.*

Unamused by her niece's ability to override commands, Azariah loudly clapped her hands, scowling. Kayn solidified, the miffed majestic being, reprimanded, "I haven't granted you permission to leave."

"I can't control this shit," Kayn lipped like an insolent teen.

"Are you insane? Have you forgotten who you're with?" Azariah fired back.

*What was wrong with her?* Kayn said, "I'm not doing it on purpose."

Furious, Azariah paced back and forth, towing a beam of sparkling light in the room of nothing, muttering, "Seth, you ignorant ass. Idiot."

*Oh, shit. She broke a Guardian.* Kayn nervously, apologised, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that."

"I guess there's no point in staying here. We might as well enjoy the scenery," the luminescent being, sighed, half-assed waving her hand.

In a flash of blinding light, the pair was in a meadow of flowers, ankle-deep in lush, fragrant grass under a splotchy blue sky. *It always looked like someone tossed buckets of paint up there.* They wandered in silence. With each step into the bliss-inducing experience, fragrant flowers, gentle humming of bees and whispering butterfly's wings, reminded her of how blessed she was to be granted access to this magical world.

Out of nowhere, Azariah coyly asked, "What powers do you have?"

*Her horrible excuse for a parental figure cautioned her about disclosing certain things.*

Stopping, Azariah laughed, "You know I can hear your thoughts, just tell me what we're up against so we can find a way to hide it." Making herself comfortable in the grass, she prompted, "Sit, confess all, I vow to find a way to help you."

*Guess there was no point in attempting to hide anything.* Kayn sat by her, disclosing, "I've created orbs of light. Blue orbs blow things up, and white ones get me in trouble, you know about that incident."

"Yes, accidentally sending forty demons through the hall of souls doesn't go unnoticed. Tri-Clan will be cleaning up that mess for years, and now, you have a target on your back. You are the magical ticket to mortality for every demon out there," Azariah chuckled, picking grass and tossed it.

*Kevin always did that.* Kayn's heart clenched as her thoughts travelled back to her mortal life. Steering her mind away, she confessed, "Conduit, Siren and I may have stopped a bullet or two."

"Next time, you're here we'll talk about that. I'm sensing our time is up," Azariah answered. Plucking a pink flower, the Guardian tucked it behind Kayn's ear and whispered, "Don't worry, we'll figure this out."

White light blinded her. As the glare ceased, Kayn saw Kevin's Granny in youthful form, with freckles and flowing red hair. Winnie announced, "The job is done. Kayn is free to leave."

*A part of her always wanted to run into Kevin's grandmother's arms. She'd loved Granny Winnie and missed her but knew they weren't the same people. They weren't even people at all, only pawns in an immortal game. It was time to go back and deal with the fallout from her secret conversation with Kevin. If the situation were reversed, and Frost was chatting with an ex next to her in bed, she'd be hurt. Her Mother's words, sprang to mind, 'Omitting part of the truth*

*to protect someone's feelings never works out how you think it will.' She was right. She may never have the chance to say those words, but she could honour her memory by listening to her advice.*

Smiling at her inner dialogue, young Granny suggested, "Tell the truth, and let chips fall where they may. It's a long afterlife, you have nothing but time."

*With that telltale glint in her eyes, she'd always know it was her, no matter what age Winnie appeared.* Unable to help it, Kayn asked, "Did Ankh take the girl?" Laughing, Azariah vanished.

Used to her one-track mind, Winnie disclosed, "She was stolen by Trinity while Ankh and Triad were fighting. Kevin knows it was Trinity," Winnie replied as the scenery flashed and they were strolling through the warm, inviting desert.

*This timeout was for nothing.* Feeling strange, Kayn looked at her hand as she disintegrated into a cloud of golden dust and floated away on a gentle breeze.

Opening her eyes, with her head on Zach's lap in the land of the living. *There was panic in his eyes. Here we go.*

"Trinity may already be here. Small talk later. Get your jacket, grab your bag, we need to run," her Handler urged.

"What's going on?" Kayn said, scrambling into her boots. They sprinted down the hall, took the stairs and dashed out into the frigid Alaskan air. *Oh, sweet lord, it was cold. The RV was gone. They got left behind.*

Going back inside, Zach gave her the rundown, "Trinity snuck in and stole the Venom while Ankh and Triad were fighting at the other job. Jenna had a vision and took off. Mel came in and gave me an Aries group card, saying, if the RV is gone, don't panic, join the distractions at the pub."

Walking down the hall, Kayn vowed, "I wasn't going to tell him anything."

"I know," her Handler affirmed as they entered the pub and took off their jackets. "Game face, Brighton," he teased,

as they strolled up to the counter of local riffraff. Chuckling, Zach patted down her bedhead, whispering, “You’re looking recently resurrected feral this evening.”

*She’d been hoping it was Frost and Lily with Mel as distractions. She didn’t see anyone she recognised.*

Nudging her, Zach whispered, “Ten o’clock.”

She glanced to her upper left and giggled. *Ten o’clock.* In an unexpected plot twist, their backup was Killian from the other continent with his massive muscular frame and wavy mane, sitting by a curvaceous black goddess so breathtaking, everyone was enamoured. With those two alluring unicorns, Mel seamlessly blended in with locals, downing shots like it was the end of the world.

Leaning in, Zach whispered in her ear, “She is insanely hot, I’m going in.”

*That seductive being was way out of Zach’s league. He was in the minors, destined to strike out so fast, all you’d see is a blur of her blowing him off.* Owing her Handler for blindly believing in her innocence, Kayn said, “Go Zach.” Snickering, as they picked up their drinks and strolled over.

Killian raised his glass in greeting, “Guess we’re diversion buddies, our plan to be newbie protection backup was foiled by a five-minute bathroom break. Drink up, you two. Jenna says, acting like nobody is showing up until tomorrow and looking unprepared is how we’re going to buy the others enough time to get away.”

“Emery,” the hot stranger introduced herself, extending her perfectly manicured hand to Zach.

Awestruck, Zach shook her hand, flirting, “Your British accent is amazing.”

Grinning, Amar’s continent’s vixen, cheekily reciprocated, “Your everything is amazing.”

*Wow. Zach didn’t usually have girls come on this strong.*

A tray of shots was placed on their table. Killian raised one, saluting, "Go hard or go home."

The table of immortals slammed three in a row, throwing caution to the wind. *Emery seemed familiar.* "Have we met?" Kayn enquired, shaking her hand.

"I was blitzed at our last banquet, it's possible. Either way, it's nice to meet you coherent," Emery toyed.

*The way Mel was slamming drinks back, their play was obvious. They were expecting Thorne. Mel was the bait.*

"Slow down, love. I don't want to hold your hair later while you're parking the tiger," Emery commented, coyly sipping wine, adjusting her seductively crossed legs.

*Parking the tiger?*

"Hurling, upchucking, technicolour yawn, ralph," Killian deciphered British slang.

"Praying to the porcelain god, barfing, boot and rally, blowing chunks, tossing your cookies," Zach commentated.

"Chilling my anxiety, it'll sting less when he ignores me. The girl Thorne was seeing made it out of Testing with the other continent. He may be over me," Mel disclosed, doing another shot.

"You're not that easy to get over, Mel," Zach affirmed, giving her hand a reassuring squeeze.

*Where did she know Emery from? It was driving her crazy.* All eyes darted to the door as Trinity wandered in.

Zach whispered, "Heads up."

Raking a hand through his sexy mane, Killian whispered, "Immortal lie detector in the house, get ready to pull out the big guns, Mel."

## Chapter 2

### Royal Pain in Thorne's Ass

Some bonds can't be broken by time. Mel's eyes locked with the leader of Trinity's as he came in. *Ultimately, losing him had been a choice. She'd chosen Ankh over Trinity. It was her call.* Her time with Trinity before coming to Ankh was tumultuous. She'd been a royal pain in Thorne's ass. Guilt-ridden, she spent nearly a year trying to kill herself as penance for her family's demise. For an immortal with a healing ability, it was pointless. She lured him in with ridiculous drama. His days were devoted to convincing her she was worthy of being saved, and hers were spent proving why she wasn't. With an intense connection teetering on the edge of more, everyone knew they cared for each other. On her final night with Trinity, she was about to leap to her temporary demise when their feelings came to fruition in an explosion of passion on a cliffside beneath the stars. The next day, she ended up in Ankh.

Since becoming Ankh, whenever she found herself in the leader of Trinity's presence, either he was aggravated by the games she was playing or cautioning her to stay away during a fight so he wouldn't be forced to harm her. Tonight, Mel was plotting to use his feelings to distract him so her Clan could get away with their unsealed under eighteen Ankh. When he walked past her to the bar, she couldn't help but smile. *He wasn't stupid.*



Pulling a chair up to their table, her old friend Glory, declared, "I'll bite. Mel, Zach and Kayn, we expected. Emery and Big Sexy are a surprise. Are you here protecting Amar's kid?"

*Big Sexy, that was funny.*

"Go ahead, take a shot for having the balls to strut in here like you stand a chance," Killian provoked, sliding the tray over.

"They're in the hotel, aren't they?" Glory grilled, looking into Mel's eyes.

Smiling, Mel redirected their conversation, "It's nice to see you too." *She didn't have to turn around, she felt him there.* She did another shot before saying his name, "Thorne."

"Melody," Thorne responded, pulling up a chair. "Did we get here early?"

"I'm not saying a word," Mel laughed, downing another.

"You will," Thorne boldly decreed, holding her captive with piercing blue truth-seeking eyes.

*She wanted him. Maybe she always would. Pretending to be carefree when she was freaking out inside was proving to be difficult.*

"If you keep slamming shots, you'll tell me everything," Thorne teased, snatching a shot of whisky off their tray.

Without his fib extracting eyes leaving hers, he licked a droplet off his bottom lip, and her mind went blank. *What was she supposed to be doing? About to match his shot, Mel put it down. He was right. She needed to buy time, good thing she had a million things to confess. If it wasn't what he was here for, why not?* Shaking her head, Mel switched topics, "I'm glad the girl you were seeing made it out with the other continent."

"That was nothing," Thorne confessed, sliding his hand over hers like they were alone in the room. "I was just trying to stop myself from doing something reckless at a banquet."

"Me?" Mel baited with a charming, dimpled grin.

“You,” Thorne disclosed. “In retrospect, we should have spent the night together for closure.” Caressing her palm, he whispered, “I still miss you.” Getting back on task, Trinity’s leader compelled, “Is it just the five of you at the bar?”

Checking for witnesses, Mel said, “Yes.” Bringing up the elephant in the room, she whispered, “You’re here to steal our unsealed Ankh.”

Tucking her shoulder-length brown hair behind her ears, like she usually wore it, Thorne answered, “Obviously.”

*He thought her nervous tick was a style choice, cute.* “You won’t,” Mel confidently stated, sliding him another whisky.

“Trinity doesn’t participate in drunk fight club,” Thorne teased, downing the drink.

Grinning, Mel provoked, “What about pillow fight club? You used to love pillow fight club.”

He mic dropped reality, “There were no pillows on our cliff.”

*Our cliff.* Tears filled her eyes as the passionate encounter on a cliff beneath the stars surfaced. She whispered, “I spent a year trying to kill myself, knowing it wouldn’t work because I’m immortal. How did you have the patience to deal with me? How are you so optimistic and understanding when our afterlives are this hard?”

“Because there were people like you, along the way,” he admitted with a sheen of tears.

*She was going to have to confess everything else to stop herself from telling him what she wasn’t supposed to say.* Pulling it together, Mel said, “I tuck my hair behind my ears when I’m nervous.”

Playing with her hair, Thorne probed, “Do I still make you nervous?”

Mel nodded, lost in his steel blue lie extracting eyes. *No matter what she did, her heart wouldn’t let go of that beautiful night. They had to get over each other this wasn’t healthy.*

Tenderly kissing her hand, he admitted, “You make me nervous too. Whenever we run into each other, it aches like we lost each other yesterday. I try to stay away. I’ll be arguing with myself, then you smile with those dimples and I can’t.”

“Thorne,” she whispered as he slid a hand onto her knee.

Caressing it, he whispered, “Mel.”

*She wanted to tear his clothes off.*

Making it clear he caught her thought, Thorne leaned in and whispered, “Right here?”

“Come to my room, so we can be alone. You foiled the job and stole the girl. You know where our backup is,” Mel persuaded. *She needed to prove her heart wrong.*

Thorne suggested, “Let’s go to my room where we won’t be interrupted.”

*Worrying she was the one being played, she put it to rest knowing who he was. In this scenario, she was the bad guy.* Leaving their coats on the rack, they slipped out, speed-walked down the hall, hitting nearly a jog as they scooted into the elevator, laughing. As the elevator door slid shut, their mouths met in passionate persuasion.

Breathless as their lips parted, Thorne gazed into her eyes, confessing, “I do love you.”

“I’ve never stopped. I wish...” Her declaration of love was interrupted as the elevator door slid open, revealing a Trinity poised with bow drawn. *He’d set her up.* An arrow whooshed into her heart. Stunned, Melody dropped. Thorne cradled her in his arms as the light flickered and went out.

## Chapter 3

### Big Sexy Snacks

The rest of Ankh's distractions were three sheets to the wind dancing when Ankh symbols heated beneath their fingerless gloves, letting them know one of their own was dead. They sprinted out of the pub into the hall. The elevator opened as they approached. Mel's body was on the floor with a gaping chest wound and blood pooling behind her.

Killian commented, "Taking out our only Healer, smart. Emery, there's a camera. If the footage is stored online, we'll need to call the Aries group. Zach, go with her, watch her back." They slipped out as the door closed.

"An arrow to the heart?" Killian questioned as he broke the camera and pressed garage.

Focused on willing energy into Mel, Kayn didn't reply. Mel gasped as her eyes opened.

"Impressive, you're a Healer too," Killian remarked, as he held out a hand to help her up.

Dizzy, Kayn held his gaze and said, "Trust me," as she siphoned enough energy to stay on her feet through their joined hands. Confused, the burly Adonis swayed, quickly regaining his bearings. While helping Mel up, Kayn looked at her snack and asked, "You good?"

"All good, energy thief," he chuckled, shaking his head.

*His energy made her feel like she could bench press a Buick.* Kayn directed, "Mel, take off your shirt and sop up as much blood as you can. Killian, give Mel your shirt so she isn't topless."

They dressed, and cleaned with the elevator open, thankful for the heated landing.

Reading a text, Killian announced, “They have our bags and jackets from the bar. Trinity’s coats were still in the pub. I bet they’re searching the hotel. We’ll have to run out to the truck without jackets. Let’s go!”

Darting out into frigid two am Alaskan air through icy crackling snow, they got into the truck. Emery casually drove away from the hotel with the biggest grin as they put coats on and noticed there were too many.

Killian chuckled, “Did you take everyone’s jackets?”

“I did,” Emery laughed. “Zach also may have flattened the tires of every vehicle in the parking lot.”

Everyone was celebrating their escape. Kayn dug through her bag praying her cell was in there. The light was blinking. *There was a message.* Afraid to read it, she stared at the flashing light. *Reality was a buzz kill. She’d been the cause of their separation again. He had to be getting sick and tired of her shit. Hell, she was getting tired of her shit.* Nobody uttered a syllable until they hit smooth highway. They started talking, avoiding the topic of ex-boyfriend’s arrows. Strength shifted to fatigue as Kayn’s brain recalled bringing Mel back to life. *She needed to close her eyes.*

Nudging her, Zach prompted, “Look at the message.”

“So, I can see how ticked off he is? No thanks. I’ll wait for the live show,” Kayn said, yawning.

Zach instantly yawned. Yawning loudly, Killian scolded, “Stop that crap. I don’t need to be yawning for hours.”

*He’d mentioned yawning.* They all yawned again triggering each other in a ridiculous chain, except for Emery, which struck her as peculiar.

Snatching Kayn’s phone, Mel read it, and gave it back, saying, “Yeah, he’s pissed. At least he didn’t seduce you into

an elevator, tell you he loved you and get a Trinity to shoot an arrow into your heart when the door opened.”

“Shit Mel, that’s brutal, I’m sorry, hun,” Zach consoled, caressing her shoulder.

“Why are you sorry? You didn’t shoot an arrow into my heart?” Mel sparred, lightening the tension. Meeting Kayn’s eyes, she assured, “It’s not that bad. He just says you need to talk.”

*When though? How long would she have to wait? All Dragon excuses aside, if she wanted their relationship to last longer than five minutes, she had to start thinking about how her actions affected him.* Ripping off the band-aid, Kayn texted Frost. *Full disclosure, Kevin has a thing for the Venom girl everyone wants. He must have had a vision. He asked me not to take her. You were asleep.* She gave it to Zach to read over. He looked at it and pressed send. “What in the hell, Zach? I just wanted you to read it.”

He chuckled, “You’ll thank me later. It would be silly for him to be ticked off after reading that. You didn’t really do anything wrong, Brighton. You just omitted the truth so he wouldn’t be ticked you were in bed with him, mind chatting with your ex.”

Everyone else started laughing as Killian glanced back, asking, “Is Brighton American slang?”

“That’s her mortal last name, Kayn’s Canadian,” Zach explained, grinning.

“I love that, Brighton,” Killian stated. “Were you really in bed with Frost mind chatting with an ex? I’d be choked.”

With her eyes on the snowy road ahead, as tires crunched over gravel-strewn icy highway, Emery shared, “If memory serves a night with Frost is many hours of cardio. I think it’s badass that you bedded him and chatted with an ex. He’s been a player for eight hundred years. He deserves that Karma.”

*Great, she wasn't going to be able to unhear that. Emery and Frost slept together.*

Catching her reaction, Emery backtracked, "Sorry about just blurting that out, it was a long time ago. No big deal."

If you're going to get ticked off every time you bump into someone Frost slept with, you're going to be pissed off a lot," Killian chuckled, changing the music. Emery slapped his hand. Giggling, he playfully swatted back.

Mel changed the subject, "Where are we going?"

"We're driving east through northern B.C into Alberta to meet up with Markus' crew," Killian explained. "Who can drive? We should break this up into four-hour shifts."

Zach and Melody volunteered, Kayn admitted, "I drove once in a parking lot."

"I'll teach you how to drive," Emery laughed as the tail end of the truck swerved on black ice and recovered.

Unaffected by the drama, Killian suggested, "Pull over, I'm switching seats with Zach. Brighton stole my energy."

They stopped, leapt out into snow much deeper than it looked and comically switched up the seating arrangement. Kayn grinned as the mountainous Viking looking guy made himself comfortable, taking up a humorous amount of the backseat.

"Wake me up when it's my turn," Killian mumbled as he conked out.

*She'd never seen anyone go to sleep like that. The musclebound Adonis had a breathy coo as a snore. It was kind of adorable. Sleep was doable.* Closing her eyes, Kayn slipped into a dream, listening to Zach and Emery chatting like long lost friends.

Waking up, stiff and sore, Kayn stretched as she sat up. They were parked at a rest stop with a convenience store. *What time is it? It smelled like greasy burgers.* There was a gross amount of garbage in the back. *How long was she asleep?* She

gathered up the trash into a bag. *They must have let her sleep. She couldn't go inside and leave the engine running.* Groggily, she searched for her cell. *There was another message from Frost.* Her growling tummy took precedence as she texted Zach. *I can't get out of the truck, please bring snacks and juice.* Her phone vibrated with Zach's response. *Already on it.* Grinning, she read Frost's message. *You can make it up to me today when you get here.* Joy flooded her senses. Forgetting her relationship paranoid boyfriend filter, she wrote, *love you.* She pressed send. *Oh, crap.* Mortified, Kayn stared at her phone. *Why did she do that?* Her cell vibrated. She read his response. *Ditto, Queen of mixed signals.* Giggling, she relaxed. *She hadn't wrecked it yet. She wasn't meaning to give him mixed signals. This wasn't how she imagined love would be. Loving him felt like she was always about to lose something. Things were much simpler when she was blissfully ignorant relationship-wise. The love she had for Kevin was pristine childlike certainty. Loving Frost felt like jumping out of a plane with a chute that may not open. What she felt for him terrified her. He must feel the same way. She'd been all over the place mentally since surviving the Testing, rarely in control of which ability surfaced. Only the Siren ability came easily.* She thought back to that night in Mexico when Frost tried explaining how hard it was going to be with the complications of their abilities. *He'd vowed to keep trying, so had she, but hadn't understood what he meant. She did now. Trying, was all they could promise each other.* Her road trip buddies were on their way back to the truck with bags of snacks, chatting. Kayn silenced her inner dialogue as Emery fumbled with the keypad.

As everyone got in, Killian commented, "Sleeping Beauty has awakened and summoned the backseat cleaning elves. I'll run this to the garbage. Sorry, I knew it was gross back here. You've been out cold for a day and a half." He hopped out and sprinted to the trash can with the bag.

*A day and a half? She wasn't a napper. That was strange.*



Killian got back in and shut the door as Mel passed her a takeout bag. *Yes. She was starving.* Kayn peeked in. “You got me a burrito, you’re amazing, thanks Mel.” As they pulled away, she quietly observed Zach, riding up front flirting with Emery. Mel was pretending she wasn’t devastated. Killian was trying to lift her spirits. *Being murdered by your ex dampens one’s mood. She’d experienced that heartbreak. She barely knew Thorne, but the guy radiated goodness, what he’d done was hard to believe. It felt like there must be way more to the story. On the bright side, maybe Mel would finally be able to move on from the fantasy of what might have been.* A flicker of memory brought her back to Kevin slitting her throat in Immortal Testing, solidifying the truth of where they stood with him in Triad and her, in Ankh. *Yes, being murdered by someone you were devoted to made the situation crystal clear. She’d gone on an unbinged murder spree in the Testing. Melody wasn’t like her though. Her friend was rational, calm, and innately good to her core. Naughty, on occasion, but those lines between right and wrong always seemed finite for her.* Unwrapping her burrito, Kayn dumped a disgusting amount of hot sauce on and devoured it.

Watching with morbid fascination, Killian commented, “You do the hot sauce thing like Lexy. Amar does that too you know. I’ve always been curious as to why?”

Shrugging, Kayn downed a jug of juice. *She was still hungry.* Ravenous, she dug through bags. *Nothing was appealing. Killian smelled good though. She’d brought Mel back from the dead, fed off his energy and he’d stayed on his feet. It was rather impressive. She didn’t know him well enough to ask him for the kind of snack she suspected, she needed. Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Kayn, and I eat supernatural energy. Yours is rather addictive, I’d like more. Her inner dialogue was getting crazy. Oh, fantastic. More immortal brain growing pains, when was this bullshit going to stop?* Her stomach went off like a whale’s mating call.

Eyes wide, Killian chuckled, “You alright, kid?”

Scowling, Kayn nodded, knowing it was a lie. The burly immortal carried on chatting with Mel about being Orin's daughter. Broiling, she wiped the perspiration off her brow. The crackling tires were echoing. *She should ask them to pull over, something was happening to her. She'd had this sense of ability related foreboding before, it rarely went well. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Be calm.* Her peripheral vision flickered ominously. Her heart was thudding like she ran a marathon. *She'd been asleep for a day and a half. She needed to feed her ability but didn't want these new people to know she fed off immortal energy. It might make things awkward. Killian smelled amazing. He had sweet, tasty, potent pheromones. She needed to get out of here.* She wiped her brow. Her throat was so dry, she could barely swallow. *If she ate them all, they'd have a nice long nap. Usually, someone called her out on her feral inner commentary by now. Maybe they couldn't hear it? That was unfortunate, survival of the fittest wise. What was that? It felt like spiders were running around under her jacket. She didn't like it.* Imaginary arachnids scurried down her arms into her palms, making every hair stand on end. *Oh, no. There were dark veins on her hands. Something was bubbling up under her skin. If spiders exploded from the boils on her hands, she was going to lose her shit!* Struggling to remain calm, she cautioned, "Guys, I'm having an issue." Nervously, Kayn watched sparks glittering on her fingertips. *Shit. This was new.* She nervously warned, "Guys." Flames lit from the boils.

Nudging Mel, Killian declared, "Your friend is on fire."

Panicking, Mel barked, "Pull over! Quick!"

Looking back, her Handler cursed, "Shit! Calm down, Brighton. Breathe. Deep breaths."

Emery looked in the rear-view, the vehicle swerved to the side of the road. "I'm trying! Out! Get Away!" Kayn freaked, with her hands going off like sparklers on the Fourth of July. Everyone scrambled out, bailing into a snowbank as flames shot out her hands, igniting the interior. Power was coursing

through her, it felt amazing. *This is so cool.* “Holy crap, I’m fireproof!” Kayn giggled as her flesh melted, laughing.

“Get out!” Zach shouted, running at her as everyone else frantically pitched snow at the fire.

Blistered, charred, engulfed in flames, Kayn hopped out. Zach leapt on her, smothering the blaze in a snowdrift. She giggled beneath her Handler. *Her back stung. Maybe she wasn’t fireproof? That was stupid.*

Looking at her ash-covered face, Zach chuckled, “If you keep laughing like this, they’ll think you’re crazy.”

*Everyone was fighting to put out the fire. They should help.*

Zach wiped her cheek, and beneath the layer of ash, her skin was pristine. Shaking his head as he got up, he reached out a hand and urged, “Come on, Brighton.” With a peculiar grin, Zach enquired, “Feeling chilly?”

*Not really.* Kayn looked down at the dangling shards of burnt material. *Shit, her clothes were not fireproof.*

Emery shouted, “Run!”

Everyone sprang into action as fluorescent orange winter jackets and a nearly naked girl covered in ash sprinted away from the engulfed vehicle. They stopped to watch like it wasn’t a big deal as it exploded.

Covering her with his jacket as they stood, watching it burn, Zach quietly teased, “Nobody can see anything, you’re covered in ashes.”

*Her head was tingling.* Kayn winced as she touched it and felt patches of stubble. *Crap. Seriously?* She sighed, “Am I bald?”

Grinning, her Handler confessed, “You’re a little patchy. I wouldn’t worry, it’s visibly growing.”

Launching a snowball, Killian announced, “Everyone left their phones in the truck, didn’t they?”

“Mine was in my pocket,” Kayn answered casually.

“A heads up on the pyrokinesis would have been nice,” romance novel Viking looking Adonis, baited.

“Yeah, it sure would have. Am I still burned or is it the temperature on my ass?” Kayn saucily countered, winking at Killian. Almost cool for a split second, she tripped over her own feet. Zach caught her before she faceplanted.

“You’re hilarious,” Killian chuckled as they trudged away from the flame gutted truck through knee-high drifts, with nothing but snow-covered farmland for miles.

Everyone’s auras were a trippy light show. *Nobody was too concerned. If their symbols went off so did the rest of their Clan’s. They were coming.* She was toasty warm. So much heat was radiating from her, snow was conveniently melting, making her hike much easier but her head was crazy itchy. *Zach was trembling in his t-shirt.* She unzipped his jacket and suggested trading it for his shirt.

“I’m fine,” Zach replied, shivering.

Feeling guilty, Kayn pressed, “My healing ability has me toasty warm. Take the jacket. I did this, not you.”

Smiling, Zach said, “You only got to that point because I was so busy flirting, I didn’t notice you were in trouble.”

“She’s hot, it’s understandable,” Kayn sparred, as they wandered down the deserted road. She took Zach’s hand. *His fingers were so frozen.* She stopped, urging, “Trade me for the jacket, you are being ridiculous.”

“Fine,” Zach chuckled. “Now that I’ve felt how warm your hands are, I’ll take it.” The others stopped as Kayn and Zach swapped clothing.

They’d been trekking through the snow for a good hour when Kayn realised she’d drained her energy reserves. *If she fed on anyone, they’d go down.* Having faith, she could keep going until help arrived, she was a second from passing out when their ride showed up.

Markus rolled down the window and laughed as he saw Kayn staggering like she was drunk in a t-shirt with a melted trail of snow behind her. He commented, “Rough day?”

*Oh, thank god.* Kayn teetered over and was out cold before she landed in the snow.

## *The Beginning*

Coming January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021.