

JENNA ANDERSON

WINTER'S CHOICE

“ATTACK!” a voice shouted good-naturedly over the expanse of white snow, the rich baritone echoing off the rising mountains to the east.

Briella barely had time to bring one wing around her body, snapping it open as she ducked her face behind the sleek membrane, allowing a few powdery snowballs to explode brightly against the wing's darkness before she reached out and touched the air gently with her mind, her magic solidifying and forming a firm barrier against anymore attacks.

“No fair!” a chorus of voices chirped as Briella cautiously peeked her head over her wing, rich chocolate eyes searching the undisturbed snow until they rested on the young man, Vaas, standing to her right, hands on hips, a small legion of school children hastily scrambling at his feet to remake the snowballs.

Their eyes locked and she stuck her tongue out at him, eyes twinkling. At his waist, the children finished preparing their snowballs and turned on her, laughing faces red with coolness of the winter evening.

Kavlyier, one of the Shadow Realms separating the Light Realms from the Dark Realms, had just begun its Nurturing Season and was only ten years into the fifty-year winter. For the long lived races like the dark skinned and winged Aryians, the winters were a joyful time to delve inward and contemplate their own internal landscape, while rejoicing and finding peace and calm in the subtle, nurturing harmonies of Kavlyier.

The Shadow Realm sang to its people on a regular basis, the harmonies drawing each inhabitant into the rhythm and flow of the realm, in the same way the moons pulled at the tides. And with the changing of the Summer Lord's power to a new ruler not ten years before, the tides

were once again growing strong, building for the rich and vibrant growing season under the protection and guidance of the Winter Lord.

Nearly all of the races—including the few humans—residing in Kavlyier drew on some kind of power, a requirement in order to sustain and thrive in a realm that, even with a full day moon, didn't brighten past an over-cast and heavily clouded day in the light realms. It was that magic, interlaced with the subtle harmonies of Kavlyier itself, that Briella drew on to give the tree above the ringleader of her would-be attackers a good shake, sending the freshly fallen snow cascading down on top of him.

“Get him!” Briella shrieked laughingly over the high-pitched excited squeals of the children as they turned on their leader, pelting him from close range with hastily made snowballs.

There were pretended agonizing cries from Vaas as he covered his face with his hands and wings, shaking the snow from his shoulders as he bunched his muscles, leaping into the air. His wings snapped open, sending a spray of fine snow across the little ones below him as they scrambled for more snowballs.

Briella followed his movements with her dark eyes, until a glitter over his left shoulder caught her eye. She felt the magic tug at her soul a second before the sparkle expanded outward, quickly and smoothly like shattering ice. She felt the harmony complete itself, drawing her in, narrowing her vision to the fragments before her.

Warm lips, soft words, dark eyes, smooth skin and the sweet feeling of contentment and love slipped through her senses. A gentle laugh and the touch of a warm hand on her skin...

“Briella?”

She jumped, pulled from the magic so suddenly she felt it slide across her shoulders, making her shiver. Just as quickly she felt the alarm slide through his stomach, linking the magic into the crystals of snowflakes, the delicate flakes allowed her to see the future and to sing the songs of nurturing that were meant only for the strongest of Aryians. Briella's magic was strong

and delicate, but hardly that of a Winter Lady, one able to guide the harmonies and notes of Kavlyier into the song which would keep it strong and enhance the coming growing season, one of the few who worked directly with the Winter Lord to nurture Kavlyier in it's time of quiet.

Vaas' fingers wrapping around her elbow jerked her from her thoughts, and she forced a smile up at him. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Pushing the thoughts aside, she flashed another smile. "How could I be okay with such vandals about?" she responded dramatically, gesturing toward the small group waiting to see whether the snowball fight was still on.

There was a heartbeat while Vaas contemplated pushing his concern, but instead he let it slide, his gaze flying over his shoulder to his followers. "It is a risky business traveling at night, Lady," he said, casting a wink at the children watching enthusiastically, "With such riff-raff ready to turn on any particular soul caught walking through the dark streets." Not far from them the children were still watching. A few had dropped down to pat together more snowballs. "A beautiful lady such as yourself should not be unescorted, allow me to walk you home?"

He added the last with a deep bow. Laughing she acceded to his request, sliding her fingers lightly along his arm and tucking them into his elbow as he turned, giving the children an enthusiastic thumbs up, which caused them to laugh and cheer. Then he turned his attention to Briella.

"Why so late tonight, Brie?"

"I had a few extra lessons I wanted to work through with my teachers," she said, shivering slightly in the chilly evening and pulling her cloak more tightly around her.

"Tonight was not so cold you couldn't have flown," Vaas pointed out as she tucked her fingers more tightly against his side in order to warm her gloved hand. Most days were warm enough to fly, but every so often, as winter set in, the upper airs became so cold even the strongest Aryian wouldn't fly for risk of damaging a wing or getting frostbite on a limb.

She smiled at him in the gathering darkness. “True, but sometimes a walk helps to clear the mind.” And the heart, she added silently afterward.

“Something bothering you, Brie?” he pushed, catching her withdrawal.

She shook her head, unwilling to explain the vivid dream snippets she had been having lately, the ones which ended in violence, blood, and the screaming of a voice which sounded familiar. The feeling of a heavy decision weighed on her chest and she realized there may be more to her magic than just the subtle healing art she had been training in. Especially when, more than once in the past few months, she had found herself weaving the harmonies throughout Kavlyier and had resisted the urge to weave her own snowflake into each new snowfall. It could be a long winter, indeed.

“Just lessons,” she replied, somewhat truthfully.

He raised an eyebrow, but otherwise didn’t push her, a trait in Vaas which Briella was suddenly thankful for. “Where to?” he asked, changing the subject lightheartedly.

Taking a deep breath, she squeezed his arm, a silent thank you for not pushing the subject of her over-quietness, and said, “To my parents for dinner.” Her own apartment wasn’t far, but her mother had been especially excited about the idea of Briella having dinner with the family after her lessons tonight. Tired as she was and wanting nothing more than a hot bath and some time to herself, Briella knew she couldn’t disappoint her mother, and so she had pushed aside her worries to make the quick trek across town, and enjoyed her walk.

“Ah, lucky girl,” Vaas said, steering her gently down the street. “Your mother sets a wonderful table. I can only imagine the delight she’ll have for her favorite daughter after a long week of studying and hardship from school.”

If only he knew, Briella thought to herself before saying lightly, “Her only daughter you mean, Vaas, and as always, I’m sure she has plenty for an extra plate, especially for the young man who saved her child tonight from such villains as the park held this evening.”

His eyes gleamed in the semi-darkness, and Briella didn't know if it was from the idea of her mother's no-doubt delicious meal or from some other thought; either way, it brought a smile to her face.

She had known the young man at her side since they were children in school together, learning basic craft, and again as they pushed into adulthood, even though their chosen areas of experience sometimes kept them apart for long periods of time. Vaas was a metal crafter, using his magic to shape, create, and set the precious stones and metals of Kavlyier into beautiful jewelry pieces. Lately, he'd begun working with a blacksmith friend of his on ceremonial blades and gift daggers. The two had, inadvertently, started quite a business, with customers sending requests from across Kavlyier and even into the Dark Realms themselves.

As his business and reputation as a craftsman grew, and her own powers built, Briella had been surprised to suddenly find herself looking at Vaas as more than just a friend. Then winter had set in, her magic had changed, demanding her immediate attention, and her instructors used the power of Kavlyier's winter to help drive their students inward, dissolving all barriers between a student's ultimate potential and what was immediately available.

The barriers had been hard to break through, and Briella hadn't necessarily felt or seen any changes. Then suddenly the snow called to her, the world sparkled, and the future seemed to shimmer before her eyes. The fear of what it might mean kept her mouth shut, and she suppressed the urges and the abilities when her instructors tried to call them forth, wanting to see the magic. So far, no one knew of the power she suspected she had, the power of a Winter Lady, an advisor to the Winter Lord, and one who spent her time in the castle. Briella wanted to heal, or so she told herself. She couldn't do that as an advisor to the Winter Lord. Honorable or not, powerful or not, she only had to resist the magic for another forty years, a skip in time for long-lived races, and she could enjoy herself as a healer.

“I have a delivery to Friath in two days,” Vaas said, his second hand sliding over Briella’s fingers when he stopped.

Looking up, Briella was surprised to see they’d traversed the streets quickly and were standing outside the warmly lit front entryway of her parents’ home. She frowned, processing his words before shaking her dark hair from her face, disturbing the few snowflakes which had settled there.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but I had hoped we could spend sometime together before I left,” he took a deep breath, his eyes sliding to the front door as the latch clicked. “I have something I’d like to speak to you about.”

Confused, though her heart pounded in her chest, Briella nibbled on her lower lip, before answering, “Okay, Vaas, I’d enjoy that.” She felt the coolness of magic...a premonition perhaps...slide across her skin and she shivered, never taking her eyes from Vaas’.

He seemed to relax, straightening with a quick nod. “I’m glad.” He flashed her a quick smile, then turned to wave when Briella’s mother hailed them from the house.

“You’re nearly late,” her mother fussed as Briella stepped into the house, brushing the snow from her skirts and giving her wings a quick twitch to dislodge any snow which had settled on the membranes arching gracefully above her head. “Vaas, my dear, how are you? We haven’t seen you in nearly a fortnight. Business has been picking up, yes? Briella, please don’t keep your father and his guests waiting. Hustle upstairs and make yourself presentable, please. Hurry, we only have a few minutes.”

Briella opened her mouth to protest when her mother whisked the heavy winter cloak from her daughter’s back, turning her quickly and giving her a gentle shove down the hall toward her old bedroom. Briella barely had a chance to catch Vaas sympathetic look before her mother’s disapproving frown filled her gaze and she was shooed from the hallway.

Pushing the bathroom door open, she heard her mother extend the invitation of dinner to Vaas, and she felt a protest rise in her throat when he graciously declined, but at her insistence, agreed to take a place with her. She managed to catch a glimpse of his streamlined form as he followed the housekeeper into the kitchen, his conspiratorial smile easing some of the disappointment she felt at his departure. Shaking herself from her fanciful thoughts, Briella pushed open the bathroom door and did her best to straighten her appearance before dinner.



“Of course we’ll accept,” Briella heard her father say as she sat across the table, a glass of well-water wine held tightly in her hand to prevent it from spilling all over as she shook.

Across from her sat one of the two Winter Lord’s advisors, a beautiful silver haired woman indicating her heritage from another long-lived race known as the Kemleavers, a bronze skinned, silver-haired race residing mostly in the Shadow Realms, though a few preferred the darker, heavier magicks of the Dark Realms. The second advisor was the Winter Lord’s younger brother, Devlan, a few years younger than Briella. He had a charming smile and a delightful ability to put those around him at ease. His desire for play and life experience kept him constantly involved in some activity or another. At the moment, he was busy trying to sneak a second helping of her mother’s Snow Delight cake.

“Excellent,” Devlan declared, straightening from his attempted thievery to flash a smile at her father and then at Briella, who forced one past the lump of panic in her throat. “A gala at the Winter Lord’s Palace will be just the thing to keep the spirits and the harmonies of Kavlyier flowing throughout the season. Landrayle—” Devlan deftly ignored the irritated look from the second advisor at the Winter Lord’s name, “will be extremely pleased to have so many of his friends and family come to celebrate the passing of the first ten years of his rule.”

“We’re honored that he would think to include Briella and our family in his celebration,” Briella’s father responded, even as Devlan turned his attention back to the piece of cake.

Exasperated, and feeling slightly sick to her stomach, Briella picked up her own plate of untouched cake and slid it across the space between them to settle on top of his plate. Devlan graced her with a smile and dug in.

She forced a second smile back and set her wine down, pressing one hand to her stomach as she heard her father discussing details of her healer lessons, his own trading company, and realm's business in general with the Kemleaver's advisor.

As exotic as two days in Hyaith, the Winter Lord's home city, would be, and at the palace no less, Briella feared she would not be able to hide her blooming talent under the presence of one as powerful as the Winter Lord and the few Winter Ladies he had present. Currently, as far as she knew, the Winter Lord was unmarried and took his role in Kavlyier very seriously, refusing to align with another just for the power she would bring to the throne. Nurturing Kavlyier through the winter season required patience, a gentle touch, and the willingness to draw inward—for Kavlyier would reflect externally whatever was happening internally with the Winter Lord, requiring the Lord to pay attention to his own harmonies.

What would happen, though, if his advisors discovered the power she suddenly feared was flowing through her? Would they make her stay in Ayiata? Would they make her take up the mantle of Winter Lady? Would she have to give up her own dreams of becoming a healer in order to immerse herself in the harmonies of Kavlyier? They were fears she suddenly didn't know how she was going to deal with, and fears she didn't feel she could talk to her parents about, since her appointment as a Winter Lady would only improve her parents' standing in the Shadow Realms.

“Briella?”

Her head snapped up and she brushed a stray strand of hair from her face as she met her mother's questioning look.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m just tired and a bit overwhelmed,” she said honestly. “An invitation to Ayiata is exciting, and it just made me think of all the things I’ll need to get done, I’m sorry.” She offered an apologetic smile to her father’s guests, but otherwise didn’t try to hide her nervousness, letting her thoughts wander as the conversation around her picked up again with talk of the trip.



She smiled up at the familiar face shining above her. Though she couldn’t quite make out the features, she recognized the touch—both psychic and physical—against her body and mind. She felt the smooth touch of hand slide across her hip, her body responding instantly, as her magic rose to tingle across her senses. A second taste of power flowed across her nerves with another touch. Kavlyier and the harmonies of the Shadow Realm swept through her body in a rush of ecstasy which left her breathless.

A soft chuckle followed her reaction, and she felt a smile slide across her face, reaching into the darkness to wrap her hands around the man across from her, one foot sliding up to help adjust her position on the bed. Sighing, she closed her eyes as the second wave coursed through her...

...And she felt cold stonework against her back, winter’s chill coursing across her already heated skin. Her eyes snapped open to find the darkness of a side street across from her. Heart thundering in her chest, she pushed her hands against the stonework, shrinking into the shadows as she looked up and down the dimly lighted street, a feeling of urgency following the panic.

A noise from the end of the street caught her attention as a figure passed across the street opening, unconcerned with the dimness of the street lighting, wings relaxed, despite the cold, which indicated the upper winds were too chilly for flying.

It took her a moment to recognize the features momentarily caught in the flash of light, the movement, and the shape, and the lightly whistled tune. Relief came in a wave, making her

legs weak as she pushed away from the wall, opening her mouth to call a greeting a second before a pair of shadows leaped from the darkness.

Stopping her movement she pressed back into the shadows, eyes flying to the traveler, then to the would-be bandits. From the wings peaking above the shorter one's head, she recognized him as Aryian; the second one, looking like an upright shaggy dog with four arms, could only be of the demon race, Ghrysel.

Mainly hiring out as mercenaries and thugs, the Ghrysel were one of the only threats to the inhabitants of Kavlyier. They were a ruthless race preferring the deepest reaches of seclusion in the caves and cliffs of the mountains. The curved knife in one of the Ghrysel's claws only showed the creature's intentions too well.

Still hidden in the shadows she saw another shift, a third in the party waited for the ambush. The man didn't stand a chance against three, and if he took to the air the upper winds might damage his wings, his lungs, and anything unprotected.

Her throat threatening to close, she pushed herself away from the wall, bare feet scraping across the uneven surface, heart pounding so loud she couldn't hear anything else. The young man had already begun to turn, the smile leaving his face as it was briefly illuminated.

Vaas.

She opened her mouth to scream, knowing he would never hear her, the growl of the demon reverberating across the walls. She screamed anyway.

She broke from the side street a moment before the third—an Aryian—dropped from the building above and pulled his knife smoothly across Vaas' neck. The blood caught her across the face as she skidded to a stop, someone screaming so loud she couldn't think....



“Briella!”

She came awake gasping, her hands reaching wildly, eventually grasping the wrists of the person shaking her. Taking a deep breath she focused and found herself staring into her father's eyes, her mother standing behind him, hands clenched tightly in front of her, though her eyes told a different story. She knew something was wrong.

Taking another shaking breath, she turned back to her father, "I'm fine. I'm sorry. It was just a dream."

Her father sat back, silently watching her for a moment. His gaze told her he didn't quite believe her but was unwilling to push the issue...yet. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly, watching her reaction.

Briella's hand shook as she lifted it to her face to push her dark hair out of her eyes, forcing a smile. "Yes, I'm just over-tired, and with the excitement of the night..." she let the sentence trail off and shrugged.

He met her gaze for a second too long, then finally stood. "I had hoped to fly most of the trip today, but the recent storm will prevent such from happening. The coach will be ready by mid-morning," he said by way of accepting her explanation.

"I'll be ready."

He gave her a quick nod and moved from the room, pausing to touch the chin of his wife as he did. She flashed him a smile and hurried to Briella's bedside, bending to drop a quick kiss on her daughter's forehead, smoothing the hair back. "Don't worry about it, dear. My own magic studies often gave me nightmares. Get some sleep, I'll have the housekeeper gather your things."

Nodding, Briella waited until her mother had left the room before sliding out of bed and drawing a light wrap over her shoulders. Her mind still reeled with the image of Vaas' murder. Premonition, part of the power of a Winter Lady, the ability to see the future and adjust the harmonies as needed.

Trying to steady her breathing, she walked to the window, one long finger reaching up to delicately trace the frost pattern on the outside of the glass. It wouldn't take much to connect it into the five points needed for a snowflake web, a web enabling her to see more clearly. A web which might help her to save Vaas' life.

It's only a dream, she told herself as she touched the first point, letting her eyes and intuition draw her finger to the second point. *Only a dream. I can spin the magic to show me the truth of the dream.* The third point lit briefly to her magic senses. *For my peace of mind, I'm not embracing the magic*, she added, closing her eyes as she found the fourth point, her fingers tingling by the time she touched the fifth.

The magic hit her fast, the space between points splashing red with blood. Even as she bit off the scream, two figures appeared, gliding across a dance floor of pure red. A ball? A festival? A gala...at the palace in Ayiata...or a death in Friath. A dark figure crouched over another, the sounds of crying, and the feel of blood on her hands. Laughter reached her ears and a pair of dark eyes turned to look at her as the bedroom door suddenly opened.

Jumping, Briella jerked her hand across the window pane, scattering the magic. One hand to her heart, she tried to force a smile as the maid stepped into the room, a startled look on her face at finding Briella up.

"Oh," the woman said, somewhat unsure, "I was told you weren't up yet, Miss."

"I am," Briella said, trying to keep the sharpness from her voice as she shed the wrap and grabbed at the nearest clothes. "If you don't mind packing my things, I have a quick errand to run."

The maid barely had time to answer before Briella had pulled on a pair of loose fitting pants, slipped a tunic over her head, and bolted for the door, pulling her boots on without socks as she ran.

The winter morning was cold and only a partial day moon was visible through the heavy fog and falling snow. She briefly contemplated flying. It was only a few short blocks to Vaas' shop. At this early hour he would already be there, warming up furnaces and preparing to open the business for the day. The cold bite of her next inhale against her lungs warned her against it though.

Her mother spotted her as she leaped from the front steps and called out, but she only waved, shouting she'd be back quickly, while fumbling to get her coat on, her cold fingers struggling with the buttons as she ran.



She could hear Vaas muttering about impatient customers as she pounded with both fists against the door, bouncing up and down both to keep herself warm and to channel her impatience. She heard the lock click, and the heavy wood swung open, revealing the shock on his face as he met her gaze.

"Briella, what are you doing here?" It only took him another breath to notice her agitation. "Is something wrong? What's happened?" he asked, swinging open the door, catching her elbow and pulling her into the warmth of the shop.

She shivered as he ran his hands up her arms, pulling her frosty coat from her shoulders and moving her toward the fire. "I can't stay, Vaas, the coach will be ready soon and I have to be back."

He raised an eyebrow as he looked over her shoulder. "The coach?"

She nodded, teeth chattering. "My parents and I were invited to a gala at the palace."

He stiffened momentarily before pushing another log onto the fire and straightening to look at her. "In Ayiata?" She nodded. "So, Landrayle has decided to look for a wife," he said quietly.

Briella felt her stomach drop, her mind racing over the events of the night before. She had known Landrayle as a young man for a summer season, before he became the Winter Lord and spent his summers learning Kavlyier under the guidance of the Summer Lord. He had been fun and easy going, nothing much bothering him throughout the day, though when it came to his responsibilities he was focused and intent. She had expected the same from him as a Winter Lord, and was not surprised at all when Kavlyier had accepted him as Winter Lord. He had been strong in magic and spirit.

Now, suddenly, after two seasons of winter, he was hosting a Gala at the palace and she was invited. They had been friends, but not overly close, having drifted apart when he left after the summer and took over the Winter Reign the next summer. Now suddenly he wanted to see her. And with her powers becoming uncertain, she wasn't sure she wanted to be there. What if he knew? What if he had just had the powerful magic workers around the Shadow Realm invited. Her father alone carried power, and she had excelled at her studies, coming to the top of her class.

Shaking her head to stop the worried thoughts as they arose, she took a deep breath. "Well, it won't be me," she informed Vaas firmly. A smile tugged at his lips and he crossed the room to give her a hug.

"Then what is the urgency with which you have pounded on my shop this morning? A bauble to wear to the gala? I'm sure I can find a beautiful piece for you to wear," he gave her a little squeeze and stepped past her to the cases lined with jewelry, his look intent.

"Detain your trip to Friath," she blurted out, feeling the tips of her ears redden as he paused from reaching into a case.

Frown lines appeared between his brows as he pulled a necklace from the case, green stone glinting brightly. "This is a wealthy customer, Briella, and he's paid handsomely for the delivery of his piece. If he's pleased I could begin receiving orders from the larger merchants

across Kavlyier, perhaps expanding my business into a few of the other Shadow Realms. It's an opportunity I can't turn away."

"I'm not asking you to turn it away," she said, "just delay your journey. No good will come of it if you go over the next two days," she met his eyes. "Please, Vaas, trust me on this."

He turned his head slightly, contemplating her in the flickering light of the fire. "There is only one way to know what the future holds...one power which allows such a gift," he said slowly.

Briella felt her stomach roll, her heart pick up speed. "No!" she hissed, stepping quickly across the case and pointing sharply at Vaas to make sure she had his attention. "Do not say it, do not suggest it, do not even think it. I am not a Winter Lady, I am a healer."

He dropped his gaze to the necklace in his hand, voice low. "It's not a bad thing, Briella, it would be the first from here ever, an honor to our home town, to your family. You would be making a difference in Kavlyier, your touch bringing about the beauty of the winter and the growth of the summer."

"I am making a difference, as a healer," she informed him, fear making her voice sharp. If Vaas had guessed, would he tell anyone or would he allow her to maintain her secret? "I'm not a Winter Lady, Vaas, my magic has only been a little off the last few days."

He nodded, swallowing his next protest at the look of fear in her eyes. If Briella wanted to remain in the small town where she grew up, near him, who was he to complain? He stroked the gem in his hand. "I won't tell anyone, Briella, but I can't delay my trip to Friath."



"Briella?"

She jumped at the sound of her name, her hand falling away from the gem Vaas had given her as a gift before she left. The green stone, despite being warmed in her hand, felt cool against her flesh as she turned to look over her shoulder at the young man approaching.

He was close to her age, young, fit, and radiated power and confidence like a second skin. His smile was warm and just for her when he stepped from the double doors into the crispness of the evening air, stretching his dark wings wide before re-tucking them against his back.

She smiled back, surprised by the genuine affection she felt at the presence of Landrayle, the Winter Lord. He had been nothing but a perfect gentlemen since her arrival yesterday with her parents, who had quickly set about re-acquainting themselves with friends and business contacts from the area. She had been mostly by herself until Landrayle had been informed of her presence, and he's been a gentle and enjoyable companion over the hours.

Now, as the gala was within days, and the evening banquet had begun, she found herself worrying over Vaas's trip to Friath. The winter weather had remained cold, and she knew he would be unable to fly, needing to take a coach at least half way. Because the night was warm, he might perhaps fly tonight. If he did, it would put him in Friath exactly at his arrival date, causing her to worry about the premonition she had seen.

As the worry clenched her stomach, running round and round in her mind, she had eventually slipped away from the crowd milling in the great hall, finding some silence in one of the small gardens provided for guests. Now, she sat staring at the iced-over pool of water, her fingers touching the surface lightly, knowing it would only take a moment to check her premonition on the water. But so much had changed in the last few days, she was suddenly scared, and the more so as Landrayle approached and quietly seated himself beside her.

He didn't say anything for a moment, one hand reaching out to stroke the curtain of black hair falling between her wings and over her shoulders. She shivered at his touch, the pleasure only enhancing her guilt and worry for Vaas...she cared deeply for him, didn't she?

Landrayle's eyes trailed down her arm to where her nails idly traced circles atop the smoothness of the ice, occasionally lighting up a small snowflake or two, causing little lights to

wink quickly across the surface before disappearing. Sliding his hand down her arm to grasp her hand, he gave her a gentle smile as she raised questioning eyes to him, content to remain quiet.

“It’s strongly advised against using the gifts of Winter—of premonition—for oneself.” She stiffened at his words, trying hard to hide the shock and fear from reaching her face. Did he know? How silly she had been to think she could hide it from him, the Winter Lord, the most powerful male in Kavylier. Still she said nothing, just watched as he turned her palm over and stroked it with his own rough fingers.

“And yet,” he continued, voice low and soothing, “sometimes our fates are so strongly tied to the actions of another—brother, sister, parent, or lover—we must use the gifts for ourselves in order to protect that which we hold dear.” Landrayle wrapped his warm hands around hers, holding her fingers trapped gently and safely within his. She could feel the hum of his magic as a steady vibration against her skin, the soft psychic touch with which he brushed at her in order to help soothe her, and through it all she could feel the rich vibration of Kavylier, as though the Shadow Realm was buzzing with excitement over their momentary connection.

Fighting the urge to pull her hand away, Briella took a deep breath to speak, but he shook his head, giving her a gentle smile. “And, if we’re honest, Briella, everyone within Kavylier is near and dear to those of us with Winter’s gift, because we know the bright lights of each soul and how each of those lights connect to create what is.”

“And what is, Landrayle?” she asked tentatively, unsure if she was following the conversation correctly.

He took a deep breath and gave her another smile, his dark hair falling forward over his head to give him a boyish appearance. “What is, Briella, is that you are by far one of the strongest Winter Ladies I have met.” She did stiffen then, trying to pull her hand from his, but he held on. “I’ve known it for awhile, since I took my vows and was introduced to the unique feel of a Winter Lady’s magic. You had that feel when I first met you.”

Pulling her fingers from his, she tucked them in her lap and glanced down to the iced pool. "I'm a healer," she told him firmly, though her voice sounded unconvincing even to her own ears.

"Yes," he agreed smoothly, "and from what I know of you, a magnificent one. Kavylier is blessed to have such a compassionate heart eager to heal." He reached out, hooked her chin with the tips of his fingers and turned her face toward him. "But you are also a Winter Lady, Briella, and a woman I would very much like to make my wife." He held up a restraining hand to head off her protest. "Not for your power, though I knew you had it. I had already wrestled with the decision from the first summer I met you."

"It's been two cycles, Landrayle," she pointed out softly.

"Yes," he said, "but that did not stop my feelings for you. It only helped me to solidify them. I would like to marry you, Briella, bring you into my home and heart, but I also know you have duties elsewhere. A training to finish for instance." He reached out and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, "Possibly a long engagement? Time for you to remember exactly what we had the summer we spent together."

"I've never forgotten," she said softly, "but so many years have passed."

"What are a few years to the Aryians? Nothing when our lives extend as long they do. We have time, Briella, and that's okay with me." He let his hand slide across her shoulder and away from her skin.

"I don't know what it is you seek in the ice tonight, whether a lover, a friend, or the answers to your own questions. I would merely remind you of the cautions against using Winter's gift for yourself. What we see may not always be...and sometimes our interference is what causes the harm we seek to avoid. Be careful, Briella, in whichever choice you make." Leaning over her he dropped a quick kiss on her temple and rose, tucking his wings tightly into his sides and heading back into the great hall.

Landrayle gripped the door lightly between strong fingers as he opened it, pausing before stepping in to point out, “You can’t deny the magic within you, Briella. Ask it to show you true. No matter what actions you take tonight, something must either be embraced or lost.”

He disappeared into the welcoming warmth of the great hall before the sob escaped between her lips in a soft wracking cry. One hand came to her mouth in an attempt to silence the ones following, even as she knew truth in Landrayle’s words. If she reached to the ice, asked for the truth of Vaas, of the possibilities of her life—her love—with him, of being able to save him, she would have to embrace the gift of Winter, a gift which might tear them apart.

She felt the tears shimmering behind her closed eyes. She lifted her face to the sky, whispering a prayer to the moon, Mother of Light and Darkness, and begged for an answer, even as she felt the bruises forming on her heart and Landrayle’s words in her ears. If she turned from the ice and flung herself into the air, she could reach Friath. The memories of the streets were clear in her mind. She could stop Vaas—or be the cause of his death.

A peal of laughter reached her ears from within the great hall, and Briella turned her face from the moon, breathing deeply and blinking furiously, trying to keep the tears from spilling down her face even as she felt them form on her lashes. Her eyes found the door.

She could leave it to the fates. Walk away. Trust Vaas to take care of himself, trust things would happen exactly as they were supposed too, deny her gift and return home with her parents in two days time. Return to her studies. Her home. Her family. To Vaas and the possibilities rising between them.

Or, if she did nothing, she might be leaving him to die.

Another sob escaped from her throat, and she pressed harder against her mouth with her hand, tilting her head back a second time, blinking furiously as she swallowed hard, trying to grab her bearings.

Or should she accept the offer of love and companionship from Landrayle, embracing a power allowing her to heal on spectacular levels she hadn't dreamed of. Embracing the choice of a love powerful enough to change the realm, to sing the world into a beautiful summer and nurture the shadows into the fullest possible growth.

Choose. Choose. Choose.

Look. Look. Look.

She felt the magic race through her. The promise of knowing. Though, even in her healer training, she knew some things were just not meant to be known. She could only do the best she could.

Choose. Choose. Choose.

Look. Look. Look. Look.

Taking a deep, unsteady breath, Briella glanced down, a tear sliding from her jaw to drop onto the ice, the droplet splitting, spreading, and eventually freezing, the crystals forming in perfect symmetry. She noted the shape a second before the magic flared through her with such force she jerked, hands clenching, eyes wide as the scenes unfolded quickly before her eyes, answers and questions overlapping as quickly as her heart raced. Then it was over. The magic subsiding to a quiet hum in her veins, steady hum of a Winter Lady.

Her hand fell away from her mouth and Briella shakily stood, wiping the remaining tears from her eyes while taking a deep breath. The movement of air was cool against her skin as she stood, spreading her wings once to stretch them, muscles tensing, her eyes moving toward the sky, then, slowly, she folded them tightly against her back and moved gracefully toward the double glass doors and the warmth beyond.

