

Original Version of Epilogue

It was trimmed in the final edit because it spoils the surprise of Donia's arrival to see Keenan on Solstice:

Clutching the silk-smooth wood of the Winter Queen's staff--*my staff now*--Donia walked out of her cottage and into the shadow of the barren trees.

Outside her fey waited; Keenan's guards were gone--all but Evan who'd stayed on as the head of her new guard. There were grumblings over that one, a summer fey heading the new Winter Queen's guard, but it wasn't anyone's right to challenge her choices. *Not anymore.*

She wound her way toward the riverside, trailed by six of the guardsmen Evan had chosen from among the winter fey as the most trustworthy. They didn't speak. The Winter Fey weren't a chattering lot, not like the insipid Summer Girls.

As if she had always done so, Donia tapped the staff as she walked the earth, sending freezing fingers into the soil, the first taste of the winter that would soon follow. Beside her, Sasha loped.

Silently, Donia stepped onto the now-frozen surface of the river. Looking up at the steel bridge that crossed the river--no longer poisonous, not to the Winter Queen--she tilted her face

to the grey sky and opened her mouth. Winds shrieked from her lips; icicles gathered on the metal of the bridge.

On the bank of the river, Aislinn stood, wrapped in a long cloak. She was already changed, looking more like what she now was every time Donia saw her.

The Summer Queen lifted a hand in greeting. "Keenan would be here if he could . . . He was worried about how you were feeling about all of this." She gestured at the ice.

"I'm fine." Donia slid across the frozen water, graceful as she'd never been as the Winter Girl. "It's familiar, but not."

She didn't add that she was still lonely, but that wasn't something to share with Keenan's queen. Like the rest of her court, Donia waited in silence.

"Seth and I were researching, talked to Tavish even." She laughed, short and awkwardly. "Despite how irritating he is."

Still Donia said nothing.

"Keenan was conceived on the solstice, when the hours of the sun and moon are even." Aislinn looked towards the railroad yard, where Seth still lived, where she spent many of her nights.

"Seth and I were thinking that . . . if you wanted . . . we could, umm, leave Keenan at the house for a few days. If you

wanted to be with him, I mean . . .” She blushed again. “Since the last Winter Queen and Summer King were able to . . .”

Donia stared at her, the faery who shared the throne with Keenan. Of all the things she could imagine Aislinn saying, this was not anywhere on the list. “I don’t know if he . . .”

“Donia,” Aislinn interrupted with an edge to her voice. “He loves you. You have to know that.”

Still silent, Donia stared at her, trying to quell the confusion inside. Maybe he did, but if so, why hadn’t he answered her when she told him that she still loved him? *That* was a conversation she wasn’t ready to have with Aislinn. Instead, she asked, “Solstice?”

“Yeah. At Seth’s so you have privacy . . . the girls are bunked down in the loft all the time lately.” Aislinn grimaced. “It’s like a salon in there. I don’t know how he stands it.”

“Can he travel outside in the winter now? He’s never been able to before.” Donia had no true understanding of how much he’d changed when Aislinn freed him; most days, she didn’t want to know. She had enough trouble sorting out her own court. They may not be a loquacious group, but they still grumbled--over her former mortality, over her insistence that order be restored, over her curtailing their cavorting with the dark fey.

That's a trouble I'm not eager to face. Irial was pushing already, testing the boundaries, tempting her fey. The king of the Dark Court had been too long aligned with Beira to back away gracefully. Donia shook her head. Snow fell around her face, an almost-electric touch as the flakes landed on her skin. *Focus on the good.* She smiled at the Summer Queen. "Go on."

Aislinn folded her arms over her chest, holding her cloak shut tightly about the chill. "We can get him in a taxi; he's stronger than he was before I became the, umm, Summer Queen . . . I'll make sure he's recovered from the exposure to the cold."

Donia didn't ask how; she didn't want to know. Instead, she thought about what Aislinn was offering: being with Keenan after all these years. Donia spoke softly, "I'd like that."

They stood quietly, snowflakes hissing as they landed on Aislinn's cheeks. She pulled a fur-trimmed hood up, hiding her hair. "He's not all bad, you know?"

"I do." Donia held out her hand, catching snowflakes like a handful of white stars. "I couldn't tell you that though, could I?"

Aislinn shivered. "We're learning to work together. Most of the time. I'd like to talk to you, sometime outside the court meetings--" she rubbed her arms, finally wearing out under the cold "--but not now. Sorry. I can still go out, but I guess I can't stay too long near both you and the ice at the same time."

"Until solstice then." Donia turned back to the frozen night and skated across the river, spilling her handful of snow like glitter on the ice.