

CUT from *Fragile Eternity*

NOTES: I cut this because it slowed the pacing. This is a “it did happen but it’s not in your book” excerpt.

Donia was out walking when Seth found her.

"I wouldn't pursue this path. I gave my mortality for him . . ." She let her words drift away, but the meaning was still there as if she'd pronounced it.

"She needs me."

"It's a mistake."

Seth paused, weighing his words, hoping he wasn't telling Donia anything she didn't already know. He toyed with the ring in his lower lip as he tried to formulate the right words. "They grow closer every day. He has some sort of pull over her . . ."

"That is to be expected," she murmured, gently.

"I don't want to lose her."

"Sometimes *what* we are determines *who* we can love . . ." Her voice didn't reveal any change in emotion, but a shard of ice glinted in her eye, a frozen tear unshed.

"If I were faery--"

"I won't help you make this mistake, Seth."

"Even if it helped you keep her from him?" Seth watched Donia as she weighed her words. She was every bit as terrifying as Niall could be, but the Winter Queen was calculating in a way that Niall seemed to lack . . . in a way that reminded him of the last Winter Queen. He shivered at the memory of icicles driving into his skin.

It was as if Beira's visage lay atop Donia's face when she asked, "Would you throw yourself on my mercy for her?"

"You know that answer."

Donia sighed. "I do. It's the same answer Keenan would give, Seth."

NOTES: This next section was cut because it was off topic. It's from when Seth & Niall are at the Crow's Nest. I had referenced the fact that Niall had called Leslie, but it was off topic so it had to go. Again, this is a "it did happen but it's not in your book" excerpt.

. . . except now he was able to enjoy affection without killing his partners. In theory, Niall should be happier.

Except for being in love with two people he can't be with.

Niall's melancholia was unsurprising and very effective in luring partners; he exuded ennui with a healthy dose of trouble. For a guilty moment, Seth was grateful that his friend hadn't set his sights on Donia. If the Winter Queen found the resolve to spurn Keenan, he'd be far more of a threat to Seth and Aislinn's relationship.

Which is stupid. If Ash wants him Donia's presence or absence won't change anything. He tried not to think about it, but there were times when he knew that Keenan was trying boundaries. *She doesn't love him.* She was tempted though. Seth knew that; he wasn't stupid. *But she hasn't done anything about it.* He forced those thoughts away and caught Niall's gaze. "Are you going to tell me what happened with . . . the stranger? Or Devlin?"

"No." Niall frowned. He lit another cigarette before resuming the discussion he wanted to have. "I thought we could be friends. Leslie and me. I'm not suggesting we . . . date."

"Bullshit." Seth shook his head. "You don't want to be her friend. Try to tell me you just want to be a friend. Go ahead. Say it."

"I don't think that--"

“It would be a lie, wouldn't it? Telling me you want to be just her friend would be a lie. You can't say it.”

NOTES: This whole history between Dark & High Courts has been a fact in *my* mind since I wrote *Ink Exchange*. Creatures who live for centuries have interactions that cross and re-cross lines. The problem with this chapter was that it didn't move the plot forward. It was mostly backstory, worldbuilding stuff that doesn't advance the story. This section was originally set after the killings in the Hall. In my mental version of the world of these characters, the events in this chapter DO happen. They just aren't in your copies of the books.

It had been hours that Sorcha sat unmoving as Devlin brought forth the business that required her attention. One of the mortals that lived among them was mourning. It was a messy business.

"Should I send him back to their world or end his breathing?" Devlin asked.

"He was a good mortal, so he should be allowed to live a while longer." She moved one of the figures on her game board. "Explain that if he's leaving us he can't be allowed to see us. Perhaps he can temper his emotions so as to stay here."

Devlin made a note. "He's been weeping for days, but I'll explain it."

"What else?"

"Some of the discarded paintings were left in a warehouse for the mortals to 'discover.'"

Devlin stepped closer and moved a figurine carved in a kneeling position.

She nodded.

"I've not heard any more of War's intentions." Devlin's expression didn't alter, but she saw the tension he was restraining. "The Dark Court seems unaware. The Summer Court remains clueless . . ."

"And Winter?"

"She is not receiving guests. I was refused entrance."

"So we wait." She lifted another figurine and dropped it to the marble floor where it shattered into dust and pebbles. "That play hasn't worked for centuries, brother."

Devlin lifted another piece and replaced it in the same square. "Will you take dinner or will you be in cloister?"

"I'll be cloistered."

He bowed and left the hall then, leaving Sorcha alone and free to meditate for the evening. She stood and stretched, and then she too left the stillness of the hall. Even the minutia of business must be handled in the same way it always had been--in austere spaces with reasonable answers.

Only the swish of her skirt disturbed the quiet as Sorcha made her way to the small room where she intended to spend the remainder of the day. It was one of the indoor spaces where she meditated. The gardens were preferable, but tonight she'd opted to forego the openness of such places in favor of the intimacy of a tiny room.

Her slippers made no sound as she entered the empty chamber, nor did she verbalize the moment of discord she felt when she found the room occupied. "I did not summon you."

Irial stretched on one of the plush chairs she'd had brought in from a local shop. "Relax, love."

"Faeries of your court aren't welcome in my presence--"

"It's not my court. Not now. I've walked away." He stood as he said it, tense as if he had to restrain himself from approaching her. "Do you ever wish you could walk away, Sorch?"

Sorcha cringed at his bastardization of her name, at the familiarity in his tone. "I am the High Court. There is no walking away."

"Nothing lasts forever. Even you can change."

"I do not change, Irial."

"I have." He was a breath away from her then, not touching, but close enough that she felt his breath on her skin. It was all she could do not to shudder. He might not be the Dark King any more, but he was still the embodiment of temptation.

And well aware of it.

He took the advantage. "Have you missed me? Do you think about the last time we--"

"No," she interrupted. "I believe I might've forgotten."

"Ah-ah-ah, fey don't lie, darling."

She backed away, out of reach. "Leave it alone. The details of the last mistake aren't even important enough to be clear any more."

"I remember. A half moon, autumn, the air was too cold to be so--" he followed, letting his gaze linger on her, as if her heavy skirts weren't in his way "--exposed, but you were. I'm surprised there wasn't oak imprinted on your skin."

"It wasn't an oak." She shoved him away. "It was a . . ."

". . .willow," he murmured at the same time. He looked satisfied, sated, as he walked away.

"What difference does it make? Even queens make mistakes sometimes." Even though he wasn't looking at her, she hid her smile at his expression. She had always enjoyed watching him draw her emotions to the surface, enough so that she'd pretended not to know that the Dark Court fed on those emotions. "None of this explains why you are here, Irial."

He lit another of his cigarettes and stood at the open window inhaling the noxious stuff. If she did that, it would pollute her body. Irial, the whole Dark Court, was different in this as well. They took in toxins to no ill effect. For a moment she was envious. He made her feel so many untoward feelings--envy, lust, rage. It was not appropriate for the queen of the Court of Reason to be filled with such things. It was why she'd forbade the Dark Court from coming into her realm. Only the Dark King had consent to approach her.

But he's not the king any more.

She felt a twinge of regret. She couldn't justify giving in to his presence now, not logically.

And logic is the only thing that should matter. Logic. Order.

Irial kept his back to her while her emotions tumbled out of control. "I want to know why Bananach comes here."

"To bring me news." Sorcha began re-asserting her self-control. *Enough indulging.*

"I don't suppose you'll tell me what news?"

"No. I won't." She took her seat again, calm and in control of her emotions.

"Did it have to do with Niall?" Irial looked at her then. This odd honesty they shared over the centuries was something she'd miss now that he was no longer the Dark King. No one save her brother and Irial saw this side of her.

"Not directly."

"He's a good king." Irial wasn't quite pleading, but he would for Niall. The devotion he had for the Gancanagh was one of his greatest weaknesses. She felt another twinge of envy that didn't show on her face, but that Irial, of course, knew all the same.

"I have no mercy for the Dark King--regardless of which of you it is. That won't change."

"I don't often ask favors of you, Sorch. . . your highness--" he bowed his head. "--but please don't support Bananach's intent. She would destroy my . . . *his* court. She--"

"Irial?"

He looked up.

"She didn't ask for that. And even if she had . . . my sister is not meant for ruling. She'd be a force of destruction that I cannot imagine. I've no quarrel with Niall--" she frowned "--aside from the usual objections to the mere existence of the Dark Court."

And Irial smiled at her, as beautiful and deadly as he'd always been. King or not, he was still a force to fear. *Like Bananach. Like the Summer Queen's mortal.* Often it was the solitary ones who were the most trouble; the tendency toward independence was not something that sat well with the High Queen. It was un-orderly.

He was watching her, tasting the edges of her emotions and believing she was unaware of what he was doing. So she gave him the emotion he craved most from her, need. She couldn't say it, couldn't make the first move. She counted on him to do that. It absolved her of responsibility for the mistake she so wanted to make.

If he were to realize that she knew the Dark Court's secret, their ability to feed on emotions, she'd lose these rare moments of not being reasonable. That was the prize she purchased with her silence. She kept her faeries out of the Dark Court's reach, hid them away in seclusion--all for this.

He reached out and undid the cord that bound her hair. "You need to say something or give me some clear answer. You know that." His breath tickled her face, her throat. "You can still call it a horrible mistake later."

"Or now?"

"Or now," he agreed. He didn't mock her weakness. He never did.

"Yes." The word was barely from her lips before she wrapped her arms around him and gave up on reason for a few hours.

Afterwards, she sat up and re-plaited her hair with him stretched out on the floor next to her. He never provoked her or pointed out the truth of their relationship during these quiet moments. He didn't even smoke his cigarettes so close to her. For all his shadows, he had a number of qualities that made her nights too often lonely over the years. No one but the Dark King had ever touched her heart so easily.

He was different this time though. She didn't particularly like it either. He wasn't really hers, but he was the closest to hers that she'd ever had. "Is it Niall? Are you back in his good graces?"

"No. I consider myself fortunate that he even speaks to me these days." He looked so wounded that she reached out and caressed his arm briefly.

"You do fall in love with the least acceptable people," she said.

"And you don't?"

"I don't think I've ever fallen in love with anyone, even you. I enjoy how you make me feel. There's a big difference." The admission made her sad, but falling in love was so very un-orderly. It wouldn't do for the High Queen to get caught up in the melodrama of falling in love.

"You wound me," he said.

"Not likely." She gave him a genuine smile before picking up her garments from the floor. She held the pale cloth to her chest and turned her back to him. He moved her braid over her shoulder and fastened her stays.

"I am worried about them both. I am worried about your sister's machinations . . ." He watched her slip on her skirt while he spoke.

"She always presses for war . . . but things feel different this time," she admitted. Part of politics for them had always been admissions that weren't public knowledge. During Beira's reign, Irial had come to her for solace; when he lost Niall, he had come to her for comfort; and when Beira murdered Miach, Irial had come to her--with all his unsettling presence--and together they had mourned the last Summer King.

"Niall holds her reins better than I did of late, but . . ." Irial scowled. "She's growing stronger."

"And Gabriel?" She waited, hopeful that the Hounds' allegiance to the Dark Court was intact.

"He supports Niall."

"With the trouble between Summer and Winter and between Dark and Summer . . ." She let the words fade away, not wanting to speak them into being.

"Niall strengthens the Dark Court. Had I stayed king . . . Keenan would've attacked in time. He's not going to forgive my binding him. Nine centuries is a long time for rage to fester." Irial's regret was obvious even if he didn't mention it.

They, and few others, knew the reluctance of his bargain with Beira. Binding Miach's son wasn't something the Dark King had wanted to do, but like any good ruler, he made hard choices. That choice had given his court strength. Sorcha, at the time, was grateful that Beira hadn't set her sights on Fairie. In time, she would've, but then . . . then, it was Summer's fall, Dark's entrapment, and her staying silent.

"So we wait." Sorcha reclaimed the calm reserve that was her daily mien. She gestured toward the door. "You need to go."

"If I learn anything . . ."

She nodded.

"I do enjoy seeing you, Sorch--" his arrogance came back, covering the worry "--as much as we both know you enjoy seeing me."

Then he unlocked the door and left.

Inside, she was filled with amusement and satisfaction . . . and a good dose of worry, but her face showed none of that as she strode out of the room.

She beckoned the nearest guard and said, "Escort him to the door so I know he's gone from my home."

NOTE: Cut for pacing reasons. This happens before the sequence when Seth & Keenan are alone at the table threatening each other.

Aislinn blushed. "He's just not used to--"

"You can defend him to me or to Glenn." Seth glanced over at the bar where Keenan waited--not in his club, but in Seth's preferred club, surrounded by mortals who looked at him like an enemy. "I'd suggest going for Glenn. I'm not going to provoke him from over here. Glenn will. . . plus, I'm not interested in your trying to find a way around the lying bit so you can say Keenan's not irritated with me. We both know that's not true."

He loosened his hold on her. "Go save him."

"Right." Aislinn walked toward the bar. Seth was right: Keenan would be less than pleased by Niall's violence. *And Seth's role in it.* She knew that, but she didn't want to admit it.

She walked up as Glenn sat a bottle of one on Seth's preferred beers on the bar.

"For Seth," Glenn said.

Seth might be under-age still, but in the Crow's Nest he often got a pass on that detail--unless there were people in the bar who would cause trouble. It was far from the most illegal thing that happened openly in the Crow's Nest.

"Ash's." Glenn put a bottle of water beside the beer, and then he put up a glass of water with a visible lipstick ring on it and no ice in it. He smiled nastily at Keenan. "Yours."

Aislinn put a hand on Keenan's wrist. "Hey."

Keenan's lips were pressed tightly together as if to keep words from escaping.

"Can you take Seth's over?" She handed him the bottle of water. "And yours."

"I wasn't trying to make you follow me." Keenan's entire posture was tense. "I wouldn't resort to such a base tactic for attention."

"Please? Can you just let me try to make things normal?" She felt tears of frustration prick her eyes.

"Things *aren't* normal. You can try for the illusion, but we're-- . . . I'll take these over."

Once Keenan stepped away from the bar, Aislinn called out, "You being slack tonight? You only gave us two of our drinks. Where's mine?"

Glenn's entire expression changed as he noticed her. "Hey, you. You want something other than water?"

"No, but I figured I'd say hello while Keenan carried the other two drinks over." She didn't chastise Glenn. It wouldn't help. She just wanted to set things to right, so the night could be easier, as if fixing the little errors would make the big stuff manageable.

NOTE: This section was cut because it took the story in the wrong direction at the wrong time. So, in my mental schema, this section did NOT happen.

"I could come to the school. Wear a glamour, be an altogether *different* student this time." He gave her ones of those delicious smiles, a promise of warm summer nights under cloudless skies.

"You could spurn me. You could crush me if it would make you smile more."

"You're twisted." She laughed though.

"Is that what you need?" His eyes held island waterfalls in lush jungles. "Tell me . . ."

"No." She let him hold her though, let him tangle his fingers in her hair. Her sigh caught between pleasure and remorse. "I don't know what I need, but games and hurting my friends aren't it."

He stroked her hair, letting sunlight slide down the strands until she was languid, at peace as she rarely was these days.

Cut for pacing reasons again. Obviously, Niall and Siobhan were on my mind. There is a section cut from INK with them, and then another cut from *Fragile Eternity*. Their story interests me, but my editors keep making me stay on topic when I start to go off on Siobhan tangents ;)

Aislinn asked about Niall again, "The gancanagh thing, right? That's why he responded to the mortal pursuits?"

"Mortals tempted him." Siobhan shrugged, but her expression was not disinterested. "I enjoyed his responses to the king's pursuits."

"And now?" Aislinn fingered through the dresses. There were new ones. Some were far more shocking than she'd imagine ever wearing.

"Now, my queen, I'd ask that you let me go to his court." Siobhan pulled out a turquoise dress with very low back and side cutouts. It had a few strands of satin in lieu of a back. "I'll tell you whatever you ask of me. I'll come home when you call and tell you what you wish. Time in your presence or Keenan's are required to keep me alive. I'll spy for you. If he knows of your Seth, I'll learn of it."

"To be near Niall?" Aislinn pulled out a more conservative dress. It was short, barely brushing mid-thigh, but it was neither backless nor missing its sides. She felt a pleasant camaraderie with Siobhan.

"Yes." Siobhan pulled off her blouse and slid into the dress. It fit her as well as it had fit Aislinn when she'd tried it on a few months ago. "Niall will know why I'm there, but he'll let me stay."

"I see."

"I will help you, learn what I can." Siobhan took the brush she'd used on Aislinn's hair and ran it through her own hair. "But you, my queen, need to do as we all have had to do when the one we love turns away from us--start to move on."

The Summer Girl was no longer the faux innocent she'd presented most times. Siobhan was as duplicitous as any faery. Any warm feeling for her, any tenderness over the longing Siobhan felt for Niall, it fled.

Aislinn stepped away from Siobhan. "He's not even been gone three weeks."

"And you can wait longer if you must, but your sadness plagues all of us. It weakens us. Make yourself happy. It's what a Summer Queen must do . . . be happy. It's what summer *is*. There can be moments of sadness. We have them too, but you are the essence of our court. You are weakening us. Our king's worry for you is weakening us."

Guilt replaced anger. Siobhan wasn't saying anything Aislinn didn't know--but it still wasn't a pleasant prospect. "I'm not giving up on Seth."