
Before the Fall

*A Callen POV Bonus Scene
from the world of Dorchadas*

▫ *This scene contains light spoilers for A Dragon's Queen*

CALLLEN

Only the dead feel nothing. In this court, I was a dread prince walking. Black lightning rumbled in my chest. To be awake here was to know the truth of the dirge they wished to hide.

Leaning against the cold, rough wall in the dimly lit corridor, I tugged at my collar. My attention drifted to the ceiling, taking in the muted colors of the painting—a memento of the fabled Vanished King. Though it had severely faded over the years, I still recalled the mosaic: the dragon hunted and slaughtered. A kingdom saved. A kingdom cursed. My father had painted over it once, but it always bled through, faintly, like the truth always did.

With a rustle of black feathers, Eira landed on my shoulder, her tiny claws finding purchase. She stretched her neck, fluffed her feathers, and meticulously preened the gray down on her back, breast, and belly. We must have made quite a sight—those nearby turned and bowed. The dark prince and his hooded crow. What a match we made.

Once she settled, I reached up and gently petted her head. She peered at me for a moment before her eyelids drifted shut. The trust in that. She was my family as I was hers—my sentinel, always on alert, always at the ready.

The only hope battle had ever provided.

Her eyes flickered open, and she squawked her warning.

The Keepers moved in—the tainted holiness temple's guardians. I sensed the shift before I saw them: the way the once lively corridor stilled, how conversation thinned into something brittle and watchful. Incense followed, sharp and green, clinging to the air like a warning dressed as ritual.

Sage. Or something meant to pass as it.

I didn't bow. Didn't move. I merely observed. Their swaying robes. Hands aligned in prayer as they moved through the crowd.

Royal guards lined the corridor in perfect formation, their black and silver catching what little light the torches gave. Too many of them. Too deliberate.

The Court's invisible strings were tightening again, knotting around something unseen. Or someone.

I set my jaw, watching the shadows flicker on the walls.

Not here. Not now.

The Keepers were supposed to be a memory, but the kingdom's lies had legs. And the royal family, cursed as it was, needed the appearance of sanctimonious regard for the people's mythos. The truth was always messier than the conspiracy theories. All that mattered was the bloodline—and wielding the power of the throne. Still, the nagging thought of a life beyond these walls clawed at me. I forced it away.

I moved toward the edge of the hallway, where two children crouched over a circle of bone shards and rune-marked marbles. Their laughter was quiet, cautious—as if they had learned early that joy had no place here.

A lesson that had taken me years to understand. There was no warmth in the shadows. Only arctic cold.

I crouched anyway.

"Careful," I murmured. "You rush the throw, you lose the circle."

The boy grinned. The girl leaned closer, eyes wide as she studied his hand.

Eira shifted on my arm, feathers brushing my sleeve as if she studied the children with equal scrutiny.

"Friend?" she clicked softly.

"For now," I murmured.

From my pocket, I pulled the folded napkin I'd tucked in there earlier. Gold caught the torchlight. A mistake—I recognized it the second the foil glinted. These weren't meant for this. Not meant for them. Not for anyone but me. And yet—I placed the sweets into their waiting hands.

The girl gasped. The boy looked as though he'd been handed gold from the King's treasury.

I stood quickly before either of them could thank me. Better they hadn't. Gratitude had a way of lingering—and I found myself unable to want something I was never meant to keep.

No one would believe them if they told their story. They, like their parents, would remain part of the castle's staff until their dying day, their burden inherited by their children and so on, for generations. Some might rise in title, but their duty would always be to serve the crown. And its shadows.

The procession passed. The air changed. Motes drifted where the incense had clung. I waited. This moment should have ended.

It didn't.

Before I even found her in the crowd, I knew she'd be there. The weight of her gaze pulled at me. Subtle. Wrong. And yet inevitable.

Inclining my head just enough, I saw her—half-hidden in the thinning crowd, watching me. Not like the others did, not with fear or calculation, but with something dangerously close to curiosity.

Our gazes met, and I held it a half-heartbeat longer than I should have. Why couldn't I look away? I had faced monsters without flinching—yet this felt far more dangerous.

What was this rattling in my chest? The shadows on the wall leaned forward as if listening.

Did she not understand that in this place, she would never be queen? Only prey.

I looked away first, back to the wall where the shadows practically strained toward us.

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"Hi," Jaz said, soft enough to be swallowed by the corridor. But the slow smile was not hidden.

I didn't answer. Instead, I held out my remaining treasure—my bonbon. Her lips curved at the offering. It was true: dragons liked shiny things.

A test. Or a weakness. I wasn't sure which.

"Walk with me?" I said. "If you're to live here, you should know the place."

I didn't look at her when she took the candy. Didn't trust myself to. Not when something as simple as her fingers brushing mine felt like a line I should not cross—and wanted to anyway.

"Don't mind my sweet girl," I added, nodding toward Eira. "She's good at keeping secrets."

Too good.

I began walking before Jaz had the chance to refuse. If she followed, that was on her.

Out of the corner of my eye, the shadows morphed into one enormous mass before scattering.

It was no surprise to hear her footsteps behind me.

Of course she followed.

I slowed just enough for her to fall in beside me. Close enough to hear her breathing. Close enough to sense the warmth of her—wrong, in a place that had taught me to live without it. She was a magnet, and even the air vibrated softly around her. Magic, maybe, or something older. Something that didn't belong in this court.

Something that shouldn't have drawn me. And yet I was perceiving too much. Noticing—obsessively—was the first step toward losing control.

"You can't just eat it," I whispered, bringing my focus back to the gold-foil wrapped bonbon. "You have to enjoy it."

Why did I say that? Why did it matter?

Almost sacrilegious, really—if she knew what I'd offered her. Serelith's chocolates were created only for the royal children, the last gift and memory from a dead queen and mother. Even so, I'd shared it. Perhaps it helped me remember that sweetness wrapped in grief still tasted bitter. Love had always cost more than it gave.

I didn't wait for an answer. We walked on, and I led her to the only place where I knew we'd have privacy.

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The rooftop was colder than the corridor. Eira flew from my shoulder and soared to the crenellated wall.

Wind tore across the stone, pulling at my hair, my cloak, my ironclad control.

Good. I needed the cold.

From up here, the Keepers' ritual carried on the wind as it did every evening—their chanting, the drums, steady and ancient, filling the night like something trying to wake.

I stepped toward the edge and sat as I always did—as though falling wouldn't matter. As though nothing did.

Jaz joined me.

Too close. Closer than she should have. Closer than I should have allowed.

"Look up," I said, clearing my throat.

I shouldn't have brought her here. Shouldn't have shown her this.

No good would come from getting close to her. From wanting to know more—needing to understand more. Why were our fates braided together? Fear registered as bile on my tongue, acrid and foreign.

"That one," I added, nodding toward the star I'd been taught to study since childhood. The one they said held fate, destiny—the lies they fed princes to keep them obedient.

For a moment, my mother's voice turned in my memory. She had always believed in the silver lining of the shadows. "It is the goodness of Nótt that allows us to walk in the shadows, dearest. For it is through the shadows that the stars shine even brighter. Without night, there can be no day."

I moved behind Jaz. Close enough that her warmth bled through the layers between us, grounding me even as it undid me. My body recognized it before my mind could stop the wanting.

Control. Always control.

"That one," I repeated, quieter now. "The star on which my people say our destinies are written."

Silence stretched between us.

Her breath caught. So did mine.

Might she be my light and I her darkness? The thought arrived unbidden, dangerous. It was a reckless thing, to tempt a man with something he'd never allowed himself to want.

"What do you wish for, Starshine?"

Starshine.

The word slipped free—too easy, too familiar, as if it had always belonged to her.

I stilled. She didn't notice. Or pretended not to. I couldn't decide which was worse. I stepped away before I forgot myself entirely.

The wind rushed in to fill the space between us, sharp and necessary.

"These candies," I said, forcing my voice back to something neutral, something safe, "are gifted to me once a year. A memento from my mother."

Why was I telling her this? Why her?

"Tonight, eat one. And perhaps the star—and Nótt—will grant you something."

I didn't believe that. Not anymore.

And yet I watched. The way her eyes softened slightly as she tasted it. The smile that followed—unprompted, unguarded.

Dangerous. That softness. That hope.

"So, Dragon Queen," I said, sliding my mask back into place. "Why are you really here?"

I studied her answer. Every word. Every pause. Every deflection.

She joked. Of course she did.

I almost smiled.

Almost.

"The rope they've given you is one to hang you," I said.

Not a warning. A truth. One she didn't understand yet—but the Court would teach her.

With serene obliviousness, Jaz licked the sugar from her fingers.

I shouldn't have noticed. No matter how many times I told myself that, I couldn't change course. The motion was disarming—not for anything provocative about it, but for the joy of it. The same uncomplicated joy the children in the corridor had worn. The same I had once known.

It would have been better not to see that.

But I did. Heat moved through me despite every mask I wore. I turned away before it became something more.

Hope was addictive, and hope was dangerous—liable to corrupt any grand ideal, to replace the Court as it was with something it would never be.

Before it became something beyond my control.

I never lost control. Before—

Enough.

This had gone too far already.

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The wind swallowed her footsteps first. Coldness replaced her warmth. Then her presence. And just like that—the rooftop was empty again.

I didn't move. Didn't breathe.

I held on to it for a moment, eyes shut—the echo of her warmth, the softness that didn't belong here, the quiet that had followed her like a ghost I'd never outrun.

Starshine. I exhaled—long and slow, like steam escaping a valve sealed too tight.

Gods. Hope wasn't always a good thing.

Hopelessness made this fate easier. Knowing what I was destined for. Reared for. Chosen for.

I dragged a hand down my face, jaw tightening.

I should have left her in the corridor. Should have kept my distance.

Eira shifted on my shoulder, claws tightening ever so slightly. I'd been so lost in Jaz that even Eira's presence had faded.

"Watched," she murmured.

Eira was my sentinel, always guarding, even when she wasn't perched beside me.

"I know," I said. The word came out sharper than intended.

She tilted her head toward the door through which Jaz had gone.

"Friend?"

Below, the Keepers' chanting rose—low and rhythmic, the drums following like a heartbeat, echoing through the stone as though something ancient were trying to wake. Or be buried.

I stood. Unable to answer.

A part of me wanted nothing more than to protect Jaz from the Court. But if I did, it would only make things worse. If I helped her in secret—

I shook my head.

The cold punched harder now. Good. It grounded me. It reminded me of where I was. Of what this place was.

Of what I was.

Not hers.

Never hers.

A flicker of movement caught at the edge of my vision—shadows gathered near the stairwell, too deliberate to be chance. I didn't turn immediately. Let them wait. Let them wonder if I'd sensed them.

Eira's head cocked sharply to the left.

"Not alone."

"Never am," I said.

I stepped away from the ledge at last, boots echoing softly against the stone as I crossed the rooftop. The shadows shifted as I approached, coiling and uncoiling like living things deciding whether to strike or kneel.

"Rose," I said without looking up.

The figure stepped forward from the dark, form solidifying into something human.

"Your Highness."

Formal. Too formal. I didn't like it.

"What is it?"

A pause. Measured. Careful.

"The court has taken notice," Rose said.

Of course they had. I should have left Jaz alone in the corridor.

"They always do."

"Not like this, Your Highness."

That got my attention. I lifted my gaze. Rose's expression was unreadable, but I'd trained her well enough to see the tension beneath.

"They're asking questions," she continued. "About her."

Her. Not the Dragon Queen. Just her. I flexed my hands.

"They were always going to."

"Yes," she said. "But now they're asking you."

Silence stretched between us.

Below, the chanting climbed higher, voices layering into something almost frantic.

"They've seen the reports," Rose added. "The trial. Her magic. That she survived at all—suspiciously so."

What Rose didn't say was the part that mattered: the way Jaz hadn't broken.

"Everything and everyone is breakable," my father had always said. "You just need to find the pressure points."

I didn't answer. Didn't need to.

"They think she's more than she appears," Rose hissed. "And if she is—"

"They'll test her." Flat. Final. Certain.

There would be a gauntlet. If the Keepers' chanting was any sign, they were already preparing.

Rose didn't argue. We both knew what that meant.

I turned away, gaze drifting back to the horizon where the stars burned cold and distant.

That star. The one I'd shown Jaz. The one I shouldn't have.

"She's not ready," Rose whispered. "If we don't act, she will die here."

No, she wasn't. But readiness had never stopped the Court before.

"What do they want from me?" I asked.

Another pause. Longer this time.

"They want you to watch her. Track her movements."

Of course they did.

"And you?" I asked. "What do you want? Why aren't you with the Keepers?"

Rose hesitated. I didn't like that either.

"Because I overheard the truth." She wrung her hands—was she nervous? "You need to watch her. And... not interfere."

The wind's furious howl threatened to rip my cloak, and with it, my resolve.

Not to interfere. Not to step in. Not to stop what was coming.

I closed my eyes for half a heartbeat. Saw Jaz again. The way she'd smiled. The way she'd savored the candy as if it mattered. As if joy still existed. As if this place hadn't already marked her for ruin.

"She doesn't understand this court," Rose continued carefully.

"What it will do to her," I confirmed.

"But if you let the dice fall, there's still a chance she escapes unharmed."

For a moment, I wished she never would—not that she would escape, but that she would never have to learn what this place truly was.

My hand curled at my side.

Control. Always control.

If I stepped in, I would draw attention. If I protected her, they would notice. If they noticed, they would escalate. Harder. Worse.

I exhaled slowly.

"She needs to survive it," I said.

Rose didn't respond. She didn't need to. We both understood.

Survive the test. Survive the court. Survive what they would do to her in the name of truth.

Even if it broke her. Even if she hated me for it.

"Understood," she said finally. "But remember, Your Highness—the cost of this is great." She turned and disappeared into the dark.

Her words settled like a blade sliding into place. Final, somehow.

Eira shifted again. "Danger," she murmured, quieter now.

"I know," I breathed.

I looked back toward the door through which Jaz had gone. For a fleeting moment, I almost moved. Almost wished to unspool that quiet rooftop hour, to call her back.

Almost.

No. That path led nowhere good. Not for her. Not for me. Our moment on the rooftop was already gone. Joy was fleeting. Better it stayed that way. Better she remembered sweetness, and not what came after—the bitterness of regret.

My gaze lifted to the unforgiving stars.

"She smiled at me like I was safe," I murmured to Eira. My voice barely carried over the wind.

Gods forgive me.

I already knew I wasn't.

I had not been safe for a very long time.

Casting one final glance at the star overhead, I turned away. Deliberately. No matter how bright it shone, blindness to its rewards was all I deserved. A dead prince wasn't allowed to feel. Once I'd embraced her fires, she'd burn me to ash.

And I'd let her.

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