

Damin's Escape

His room was dark as he entered, but Damin saw the black swan feather lying on his pillow easily enough. He froze for a long moment, then slowly crossed the room to pick it up.

"A gift for you," Raspin whispered from the shadows.

Damin turned around, keeping his breathing even and his movements slow.

"So I see," he answered carefully.

Raspin stood up and stretched languidly. His sword was already drawn and his eyes glinted as they stared at Damin. There was a cold, calculated look in his foster brother's gaze.

Damin forced his muscles to relax as he assessed his situation.

"I suppose I'm not the first one who received such a gift? You've been busy."

There had been a rash of unsolved murders over the past few months with the only commonality being that a black swan feather was lying next to the victim's body. As Damin spoke, he heard a distant shout shortly followed by another. Then the screaming started. He reacted instinctively, moving towards the door when Raspin stepped to block him. Damin's sword lay uselessly out of reach behind Raspin.

Damin clenched his fists.

"Raspin, *what* is happening out there?"

"I do the work of the Gods. Right now, they require blood."

Damin inhaled sharply. "And who are you killing?"

"Any who stand in my way."

"Your way of what?"

"Becoming king."

Damin froze, his heart pounding.

“Raspin, you’re not even of royal bloodline. You can’t be king—”

“Unless everyone else is dead.”

As the mayhem in the castle grew, so did the intensity of the screaming. The screams suddenly took on new meaning for Damin. Damin’s family, his friends, they were being *massacred*. And here he was, dancing with the devil himself as he stood by helplessly and listened to their suffering.

“Not Elise! Surely not our sister, Elise? Raspin, she has only ever shown you kindness.”

Raspin sneered. “Pity is not kindness.”

“Raspin, *please*. You can stop this. They’re our friends – our *family*.”

Raspin smiled and shook his head. “I have no family but the Gods. And there’s no stopping the prophecies.”

“Brother, *what* are you talking about?”

“*Foster* brother,” he corrected Damin, emphasizing the first word with a sharpness that betrayed his jealousy – Raspin had never liked his adopted place in the Gleniferite court, and he had liked Damin even less. Although close in age, Damin had always been better than Raspin at everything.

“Haven’t you figured it out by now?” Raspin continued. “I’m Elyan, returned to you now at the end of the world.”

Damin hissed, recoiling a step. “You’re not Elyan. You should be burned for such lies.”

Raspin raised his hands, and although he held a sword in one and a dagger in the other, Damin was more distracted by the surge of magic that suddenly flared between them than the weapons. Raspin had never possessed even a spark of magic in his life, and Damin didn’t know how his foster brother wielded so much of it now.

“You would burn your king?” Raspin demanded, gathering the magic between his hands as his eyes darkened.

“You’ll *never* be my king.”

Raspin threw the dagger in his hand, quickly followed by a bolt of magic. Damin ducked the dagger, but he wasn’t quite fast

enough to dodge the bolt of magic. It struck his right arm which immediately went numb. Raspin was expecting Damin to go for his sword and out the door – Damin could see it in his brother's posture. He leapt for the window instead.

Raspin wouldn't have expected this, as the drop from the window was long enough it could easily kill a man. What Raspin didn't know was that years ago Damin had figured out a way to safely scramble down to the ground from his room. It had all started out with a dare from Elise, who had told him it was an impossible feat, at which point Damin had – of course – set about to prove her wrong.

Instead of dropping straight down, Damin jumped to the left, and caught the window ledge a few feet below him. It was hard, with his arm still numb, but he managed. Without losing time, he swung once more to the left and caught the next window down. It was still a long drop to the ground which could have broken his leg, but a few years ago after he had done just that, Damin had rearranged the courtyard below his room to ensure that there was always a wagon with a pile of straw below the last window sill. Call him paranoid, but he was grateful for his caution now when he landed roughly in the straw. He glanced up and saw Raspin's head sticking out the window. Raspin conjured another bolt of magic and hurled it at Damin as he ran, but Damin sensed the magic strike that Raspin had aimed at him and rolled out of the way. As he ran his way through the courtyard, he sensed again two more magic strikes and managed to avoid them as well. As he got farther away from Raspin, the spell on his arm started to wear off, and Damin slowly started to regain feeling.

Damin ducked behind a few water barrels and paused to catch his breath and think. What could he do? There weren't a lot of options. How many allies did Raspin have? Who could he trust? Damin could still hear screams in the castle – but there were far fewer than before.

The sound of metal crashing on metal startled him. He peeked out from behind the water barrel to see what the commotion was.

Damin saw Sir Tim – one of his father's most faithful and skilled knights – in battle against three guards Damin didn't recognize. He paused as he sensed magic on them, and when he focused he could see the three guards cloaked in an aurora of Raspin's magic. It made them utterly silent in their attack, as Damin could only hear Tim, who was breathing heavily as he fought them off. The guards also didn't appear to be tiring, though whether that was from the magic or because it was three against one, Damin didn't wait to puzzle out. He found a sizeable rock and hurled it at one of the guards when the man drew close enough. It caught the man in the back of the head and he fell with a grunt.

Damin leapt from behind the barrels, grabbing the sword of the man he'd knocked down. He ducked under a swinging sword from another of Raspin's guards, running the man through before he had time to block Damin's lethal strike. Tim had managed to dispatch his own guard with equal ease. Apparently, the guards weren't great fighters on their own.

Tim reached down and helped Damin to his feet.

"Come with me, Highness. These were the guards in the stables. The horses should be unguarded for the moment but that won't last."

Damin hesitated and glanced back at the castle before following Tim to the stables, the knight muttering to Damin along the way as they crept along the shadows.

Tim hesitated briefly at the stables, before selecting two horses that were already saddled, the bodies of two stable boys at their feet. From appearances, the horses had been newly returned from a late-night ride and the stable boys hadn't gotten to unsaddling them before they had been struck down. Damin said a silent prayer as he stepped over the bodies.

"These horses may be tired, but we don't have time to saddle any of the fresh ones. We need to get out now."

Damin hesitated at Tim's words. "I can't leave, Tim. Not when my family is being attacked."

Tim turned to him. “They’re *dead*, Damin. They’re all dead. Where do you think I came from? I was lingering in the dining hall when those demon-spawn flooded into the room and started hacking people apart. I saw the king fall with my own eyes – I couldn’t reach him in time. None of us could. I thought if anyone survived they would make their way to the stables to flee. I thought I could at least give them a safe route out. But now you’re the only royal left alive and you’re here. I can’t wait for anyone else. We need to flee Damin, and you need to *live*. The throne is lost, and only death awaits you if you stay.”

“I’m not a coward,” Damin said, but he hesitated, torn between a desire to flee and a desire to face down Raspin. If it were Raspin alone he would do it, but who knew how many men Raspin had called to his cause? And what if his foster brother truly were Elyan? Damin couldn’t stand against the Gods.

“No, Highness. But you’re a prince, and the only one who can reclaim the throne. If you survive, so does hope.”

Damin reluctantly mounted one of the horses and Tim the other. Damin reached out to grasp Tim’s arm. “We will return, and we will make this right,” he vowed.

Tim gave him a sharp nod, and together they fled out of the castle.

It was a harrowing escape, and more than once Damin guided them away from an ambush. There were groups of the enemy stationed throughout the castle grounds and along the road, but now that Damin was aware of their magic he could sense them as easily as if they were waving their hands and shouting. *Magic-sensitive*. It was a gift that Damin had been born with, something so rare that he didn’t know anyone else with such a gift. It had been useless to him before this night, but now it was what saved them.

They rode their horses hard until they had left the castle and surrounding village well behind them, then allowed the exhausted horses to slow to a walk. The moon was full and bright, lighting their way along the road. After a while, Damin guided them off the road onto a narrow game trail – it was hard to spot,

but Damin knew the area well from his days exploring the forest. The bush was thick, and they had to keep their pace slow. When they came upon a small creek, they paused to allow their horses to drink.

“What do we do now?” Tim asked.

Damin hesitated, as he was about to ask Tim the same question. But while Tim was older and more experienced, Damin was in charge. *King*, he told himself. *With everyone else dead, I'm the king.* The thought brought no comfort.

“We'll head for Kilaritya and seek refuge,” Damin said. “Kilaritya is the shortest distance for us to travel. We can regroup there. King Allandrex will help us, I'm sure of it.”

Tim hesitated. “I wouldn't rely on King Allandrex's help.”

“No, he'll help us,” Damin reassured him. “I know he will.”

Tim paused, then shrugged. “Kilaritya sounds like a good place to lay low, for now. But we should stay off the main road. It won't take them long to figure out that you survived and start a search for you. Kilaritya's the most obvious place for you to flee.”

“I remember my father talked of an old crossing – north of the one on the main road. I think it's in quite a bit of disrepair, and I don't know if we'll be able to get our horses across, but it should be safer than the main road.”

Tim nodded. “Well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it,” he grinned briefly at his pun, then rubbed his chin in thought. “We'll need supplies if we're going all the way to Korign. It's at least a couple day's ride on the main road under the best of conditions. I'll make my way back to the village and see what I can find.”

Damin frowned. He didn't like the idea of stealing from the villagers – most of whom had little to begin with. But all Damin had on him were the clothes he wore and the sword he'd stolen from the fallen guard. That wasn't much to offer in exchange for any supplies they took. Tim saw Damin's look and tugged on a string under his tunic. He pulled out a small purse and shook it for Damin. Damin heard coins rattling inside.

“I won’t just steal, Highness. I’ll leave some money behind for them.”

“Tim, that’s *your* money.”

“And I can think of no better use for it, can you?”

“I should be the one to go into the village.”

Tim shook his head. “You’re too recognizable. As my old knight master, Lord Staro would say, ‘don’t waste a squirrel on a fishing expedition’.”

“Use a hook instead,” Damin finished the proverb. He nodded. “Alright then, I agree you’d be better at sneaking into the village unnoticed. I’ll wait here.”

Tim turned his horse around to head back along the path they’d come. “If I’m not back an hour past dawn, go without me. You’ll have better luck surviving a few days on the trail without supplies than you would facing that lot back there,” he jerked his thumb in the direction of the castle.

“Mother Jualis guide you, Tim,” Damin said.

“And Father Kilmar protect you,” Tim added.

After Tim left, Damin guided his horse to a tree and tied the reins around one of the branches. He made sure the reins were loose enough that the mare could graze if she chose, then sat down with his back against one of the trees and crossed his arms as he waited. He thought about his family – his mother and father, his older brother, and his sweet sister, Elise. His fists clenched and unclenched. He swore to himself that he *would* return to take his place on the throne. And when he did, he would kill his foster brother.