

WHAT HE GETS AWAY WITH IS CRIMINAL



THE
SPIRIT
THIEF

RACHEL AARON



"A DELIGHTFULLY GIDDY ROMP OF A NOVEL." —KAREN MILLER

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boldly. “You may speak it to me.”**

“My orders are to speak only to the king himself,” Miranda said. “It is a matter of some delicacy.”

“I am Oban, Master of Security. You’ll speak it to me, or not at all,” he huffed.

Miranda looked at Gin, who flicked his ear in the ghosthound equivalent of a shrug. “I suppose we have wasted enough time,” she said. “I am here on behalf of the Spirit Court by order of the Rector Spiritualis, Etmon Banage. Yesterday morning we received a tip that the known fugitive wizard and wanted criminal Eli Monpress has been sighted within your kingdom. It is our belief that he is after an old wizard artifact held in your treasury. I am here to offer my assistance to keep him from stealing it.”

There was a long pause, and Miranda got the horrible, sinking feeling that she had missed something important.

“Lady,” the Master of Security said, shaking his head, “if you’re here to warn the king about Eli, then you’re a little late.”

Miranda scowled. “You mean he’s already stolen the artifact?”

“No.” The Master of Security sighed. “He’s stolen the king.”

By Rachel Aaron

The Legend of Eli Monpress

The Spirit Thief

The Spirit Rebellion

The Spirit Eater


 THE
SPIRIT
THIEF

The Legend of Eli Monpress Book 1

RACHEL AARON



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For Travis. All the really good ideas are his.


 THE
SPIRIT
THIEF

CHAPTER 1

In the prison under the castle Allaze, in the dark, moldy cells where the greatest criminals in Mellinor spent the remainder of their lives counting rocks to stave off madness, Eli Monpress was trying to wake up a door.

It was a heavy oak door with an iron frame, created centuries ago by an overzealous carpenter to have, perhaps, more corners than it should. The edges were carefully fitted to lie flush against the stained, stone walls, and the heavy boards were nailed together so tightly that not even the flickering torch light could wedge between them. In all, the effect was so overdone, the construction so inhumanly strong, that the whole black affair had transcended simple confinement and become a monument to the absolute hopelessness of the prisoner's situation. Eli decided to focus on the wood; the iron would have taken forever.

He ran his hands over it, long fingers gently tapping in a way living trees find desperately annoying, but dead

wood finds soothing, like a scratch behind the ears. At last, the boards gave a little shudder and said, in a dusty, splintery voice, “What do you want?”

“My dear friend,” Eli said, never letting up on his tapping, “the real question here is, what do *you* want?”

“Pardon?” the door rattled, thoroughly confused. It wasn’t used to having questions asked of it.

“Well, doesn’t it strike you as unfair?” Eli said. “From your grain, anyone can see you were once a great tree. Yet, here you are, locked up through no fault of your own, shut off from the sun by cruel stones with no concern at all for your comfort or continued health.”

The door rattled again, knocking the dust from its hinges. Something about the man’s voice was off. It was too clear for a normal human’s, and the certainty in his words stirred up strange memories that made the door decidedly uncomfortable.

“Wait,” it grumbled suspiciously. “You’re not a wizard, are you?”

“Me?” Eli clutched his chest. “I, one of those confidence tricksters, manipulators of spirits? Why, the very thought offends me! I am but a wanderer, moving from place to place, listening to the spirits’ sorrows and doing what little I can to make them more comfortable.” He resumed the pleasant tapping, and the door relaxed against his fingers.

“Well”—it leaned forward a fraction, lowering its creak conspiratorially—“if that’s the case, then I don’t mind telling you the nails do poke a bit.” It rattled, and the nails stood out for a second before returning to their position flush against the wood. The door sighed. “I don’t mind the dark so much, or the damp. It’s just that people

are always slamming me, and that just drives the sharp ends deeper. It hurts something awful, but no one seems to care.”

“Let me have a look,” Eli said, his voice soft with concern. He made a great show of poring over the door and running his fingers along the joints. The door waited impatiently, creaking every time Eli’s hands brushed over a spot where the nails rubbed. Finally, when he had finished his inspection, Eli leaned back and tucked his fist under his chin, obviously deep in thought. When he didn’t say anything for a few minutes, the door began to grow impatient, which is a very uncomfortable feeling for a door.

“Well?” it croaked.

“I’ve found the answer,” Eli said, crouching down on the doorstep. “Those nails, which give you so much trouble, are there to pin you to the iron frame. However”—Eli held up one finger in a sage gesture—“they don’t stay in of their own accord. They’re not glued in; there’s no hook. In fact, they seem to be held in place only by the pressure of the wood around them. So”—he arched an eyebrow—“the reason they stay in at all, the only reason, is because you’re holding on to them.”

“Of course!” the door rumbled. “How else would I stay upright?”

“Who said you had to stay upright?” Eli said, throwing out his arms in a grand gesture. “You’re your own spirit, aren’t you? If those nails hurt you, why, there’s no law that you have to put up with it. If you stay in this situation, you’re making yourself a victim.”

“But . . .” The door shuddered uncertainly.

“The first step is admitting you have a problem.” Eli

gave the wood a reassuring pat. “And that’s enough for now. However”—his voice dropped to a whisper—“if you’re ever going to live your life, *really* live it, then you need to let go of the roles others have forced on you. You need to let go of those nails.”

“But, I don’t know...” The door shifted back and forth.

“Indecision is the bane of all hardwoods.” Eli shook his head. “Come on, it doesn’t have to be forever. Just give it a try.”

The door clanged softly against its frame, gathering its resolve as Eli made encouraging gestures. Then, with a loud bang, the nails popped like corks, and the boards clattered to the ground with a long, relieved sigh.

Eli stepped over the planks and through the now-empty iron doorframe. The narrow hall outside was dark and empty. Eli looked one way, then the other, and shook his head.

“First rule of dungeons,” he said with a wry grin, “don’t pin all your hopes on a gullible door.”

With that, he stepped over the sprawled boards, now mumbling happily in peaceful, nail-free slumber, and jogged off down the hall toward the rendezvous point.

In the sun-drenched rose garden of the castle Allaze, King Henrith of Mellinor was spending money he hadn’t received yet.

“Twenty thousand gold standards!” He shook his teacup at his Master of the Exchequer. “What does that come out to in mellinos?”

The exchequer, who had answered this question five times already, responded immediately. “Thirty-one thou-

sand five hundred at the current rate, my lord, or approximately half Mellinor's yearly tax income."

"Not bad for a windfall, eh?" The king punched him in the shoulder good-naturedly. "And the Council of Thrones is actually going to pay all that for one thief? What did the bastard do?"

The Master of the Exchequer smiled tightly and rubbed his shoulder. "Eli Monpress"—he picked up the wanted poster that was lying on the table, where the roughly sketched face of a handsome man with dark, shaggy hair grinned boyishly up at them—"bounty, paid dead or alive, twenty thousand Council Gold Standard Weights. Wanted on a hundred and fifty-seven counts of grand larceny against a noble person, three counts of fraud, one charge of counterfeiting, and treason against the Rector Spiritualis." He squinted at the small print along the bottom of the page. "There's a separate bounty of five thousand gold standards from the Spiritualists for that last count, which has to be claimed independently."

"Figures." The king slurped his tea. "The Council can't even ink a wanted poster without the wizards butting their noses in. But"—he grinned broadly—"money's money, eh? Someone get the Master Builder up here. It looks like we'll have that new arena after all."

The order, however, was never given, for at that moment, the Master Jailer came running through the garden gate, his plumed helmet gripped between his white-knuckled hands.

"Your Majesty." He bowed.

"Ah, Master Jailer." The king nodded. "How is our money bag liking his cell?"

The jailer's face, already pale from a job that required

him to spend his daylight hours deep underground, turned ghostly. “Well, you see, sir, the prisoner, that is to say” — he looked around for help, but the other officials were already backing away — “he’s not in his cell.”

“*What?*” The king leaped out of his seat, face scarlet. “If he’s not in his cell, then where is he?”

“We’re working on that right now, Majesty!” the jailer said in a rush. “I have the whole guard out looking for him. He won’t get out of the palace!”

“See that he doesn’t,” the king growled. “Because if he’s not back in his cell within the hour . . .”

He didn’t need to finish the threat. The jailer saluted and ran out of the garden as fast as his boots would carry him. The officials stayed frozen where they were, each waiting for the others to move first as the king began to stalk around the garden, sipping his tea with murderous intent.

“Your Majesty,” squeaked a minor official, who was safely hidden behind the crowd. “This Eli seems a dangerous character. Shouldn’t you move to safer quarters?”

“Yes!” The Master of Security grabbed the idea and ran with it. “If that thief could get out of his cell, he can certainly get into the castle!” He seized the king’s arm. “We must get you to a safer location, Your Majesty!”

This was followed by a chorus of cries from the other officials.

“Of course!”

“His majesty’s safety is of utmost importance!”

“We must preserve the monarchy at all costs!”

Any objections the king may have had were overrid-

den as a surge of officials swept down and half carried, half dragged him into the castle.

“Put me down, you idiots!” the king bellowed, but the officials were good and scared now. Each saw only the precipitous fall that awaited him personally if there were a regime change, and fear gave them courage as they pushed their protesting monarch into the castle, down the arching hallways, and into the throne room.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty,” the Master of Security said, organizing two teams to shut the great, golden doors. “That thief won’t get in.”

The king, who had given up fighting somewhere during the last hundred feet, just harrumphed and stomped up the dais stairs to his throne to wait it out. Meanwhile, the officials dashed back and forth across the marble—locking the parlor doors, overturning the elegant end tables, peeking behind the busts of former kings—checking for every possible, or impossible, security vulnerability. Henrith did his best to ignore the nonsense. Being royalty meant enduring people’s endless fussing over your safety, but when the councilors started talking about boarding over the stained-glass windows, the king decided that enough was enough. He stood from his throne and took a breath in preparation for a good bellow when a tug on his robes stopped him short. The king looked down incredulously to see who would dare, and found two royal guards in full armor standing at attention beside the royal dais.

“Sir!” The shorter guard saluted. “The Master of Security has assigned us to move you to a safer location.”

“I thought this *was* a safer location.” The king sighed.

“Sir!” The soldier saluted again. “With all due respect,

the throne room is the first place the enemy would look, and with this ruckus, he could easily get through.”

“You’re right about that,” the king said, glowering at the seething mass of panicked officials. “Let’s get out of here.”

He stomped down the steps from the high marble dais and let the guards lead him to the back wall of the throne room. The shorter soldier went straight to an older tapestry hanging forgotten in one corner and pushed it aside, revealing, much to the king’s amazement, a small door set flush with the stonework.

“I never knew this was here,” the king said, genuinely astonished.

“Doors like these are standard in most castles this age,” the guard said, running his gloved hand over the stones to the right of the door. “You just have to know where to look.” His fingers closed in the crack between two stones. Something clicked deep in the wall, and the door swung open with a soft scrape.

“This way, sir,” the soldier said, ducking through.

The secret passage was only a few feet long. This was good, because it was only a few inches wide, and the king was getting very claustrophobic sliding along sideways between the dusty stone walls, especially when the second soldier closed the door behind them, plunging the passage into darkness. A few steps later, they emerged into the back of another large tapestry. The soldier pushed the heavy cloth aside, and the king was amazed to find himself in his own drawing room.

“Why did no one tell me about this?” he said, exasperated, watching as the second soldier draped the tapestry

back into place. "It will be fantastically useful the next time I want to get out of an audience."

"Over here, sir," the shorter guard said, waving toward the wide balcony that overlooked the castle garden. The king didn't see how a balcony was much safer than a throne room, but the guard seemed to know what he was doing, so the king followed quietly. Perhaps there was another secret passage. The king frowned, regretting all those times he'd chosen to go hunting rather than let the Master Builder take him on that tour of the castle the man was always so keen on. Well, the king thought, if the Master Builder had put more emphasis on secret passages rather than appreciation of the flying buttresses, perhaps he would have been more inclined to come along.

The balcony jutted out from the drawing room in a large semicircle of pale golden marble. His mother had had it built so she could watch the birds up close, and the handrails brushed right up against the leafy branches of the linden trees. The king was about to comment on how peaceful it was compared to the nonsense in the throne room, but the shorter of the two soldiers spoke first.

"I'm really sorry about this."

The king looked at him quizzically. "Sorry about wha—" His question was answered by a blinding pain at the back of his head. The trees and the balcony swirled together, and then he was on the ground with no notion of how he'd gotten there.

"Did you have to hit him that hard?" The soldier's voice floated above him.

"Yes," answered a voice he hadn't heard before, which his poor, aching brain assigned to the tall soldier

who hadn't spoken while they were escorting him. "That is, if you want him to stay quiet."

The shorter soldier took off his helmet, revealing a young man with a head of dark, shaggy hair. "If you say so," he said, tucking the helmet under his arm.

The shorter soldier trotted to the edge of the balcony, where the trees were thickest. Spots danced across the king's vision, but he was sure he saw what happened next. One of the trees moved to meet the soldier. The king blinked, but the tree was still moving. It leaned over as far as it could, stretching out a thick branch to make a nice little step up off the railing. So great was his astonishment, the king barely felt the bigger soldier heft him over his shoulder like an oat sack. Then they were up on the tree branch, and the tree was bending over to set them gently on the ground.

"Thank you," said the shorter soldier as they stepped onto the grass.

And the king, though his ears were ringing horribly, could have sworn he heard the leaves whisper, "Anytime, Eli."

That thought was too much for him, and he dove into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 2

The ghosthound appeared at the gates of the royal city of Allaze without warning. One moment, the guards were standing beside the gatehouse playing divel shanks and speculating on what all the noise in the palace was about, the next they were on their backs, staring up at an animal that only lived in stories. From the way it was showing its teeth, the guards would rather it had stayed there. Twice the size of a horse and built like a racing dog, it had to swivel its head down to look them over. The great orange eyes, each the size of a dinner plate, twinkled with amusement, or perhaps hunger. But most horrifying of all was the way the white patterns on the animal's silver fur moved like night clouds in a high wind, forming terrifying, shifting shapes above its dagger-sharp teeth.

"Excuse me," said a voice, "but I need you to open the gates. I have an urgent message for King Henrith."

The guards cowered on the sandy ground. "Great powers," the left one muttered. "I never knew they could talk."

There was a long sigh, and the beast lay down in a fluid motion, bringing the woman on its back into view. She was very well dressed in a handsome green riding suit with a crisp white shirt and tall boots. Red hair hung in a cascade of curls around her pretty, girlish face. Overall, she had a very striking look that was entirely out of place for a woman who rode a monster.

When she was sure she had their attention, the woman said, very slowly and with a charming smile, "My name is Miranda Lyonette, and I am here on behalf of the Spirit Court with a warning for your king. Now, I'm on a very tight deadline, so I would appreciate it very much if you would open the gate and let me on my way."

It was the older guard who gathered his wits first. "Um, lady," he said, picking himself up off the ground, "we'd like to help, but we can't open the gate without the Master Gatekeeper, and he's been called off to the castle."

"Well," she said, "then you'd better run and get him."

The men looked at each other, then back at the woman. She made a little shooing motion, and the guards ran off, falling over each other as they rushed the tiny gatehouse door.

When they were gone, Miranda slid down the hound's back and began to stretch the last few days out of her joints.

"I could have just jumped it," the hound growled. It eyed the two-story wall and snorted dismissively. "Saved us some time. I *thought* you said we were in a hurry."

"We *are* in a hurry," Miranda said, shaking the road dust out of her hair as best she could. "But we're also trying to make a good impression, Gin. Mellinor has a reputation for not liking wizards."

“Good impressions are wasted on this lot.” Gin shook himself vigorously, raising a small cloud of grit from his ever-shifting coat. “We should have just jumped and saved the act for the king.”

“Next time I’ll just leave the negotiating to you, then.” Miranda stepped clear of the hound’s dust cloud. “Why don’t you worry less about the schedule and more about keeping your nose sharp? He has to be skulking around here somewhere.”

Gin gave her a withering look. “My nose is always sharp.” His long ears twitched, then swiveled forward. “The guards are coming back, and they brought a lot of other clanky metal types with them.” He flopped down, resting his chin on his paws. “So much for doing things the quick way.”

Miranda ignored him and put on a dazzling smile as the two guards, and a small squad of spearmen, marched through the gatehouse.

The gate guards had had no trouble finding the Master Gatekeeper. He was in the throne room, standing in a rough clump around the empty throne with every other official in Allaze.

“Sir,” the older guard said, tapping him on the shoulder. “We have a situation outside.”

“I’m a bit busy,” the Master Gatekeeper snapped.

“But, sir,” the guard said, clutching his metal cap, “it’s really something I think you should—”

“There’s a wizard at the east gate!” the younger guard burst out, and then shrank back as the older guard and the Master Gatekeeper both snapped their heads around to glare at him. “It has to be a wizard,” he said sheepishly. “Ain’t no one else can ride a monster like that.”

“Did you say wizard?” The Master of Security pushed his way over to them. “Was it a dark-haired man? Young looking?”

“No, sir.” The young guard saluted. “It was a lady wizard, sir. Redheaded. Said she had a warning for the king.”

The Master Gatekeeper and the Master of Security put their heads together and began arguing quietly. Whatever it was they argued about, the Master of Security must have won because he was the one who started barking orders. Three minutes later, the two gate guards were back at their post, only now with a squad of royal guard and the Master of Security between them and the monster, which lay with its long chin rested on its paws, watching.

The woman appeared completely unruffled by the sudden arrival of a large number of spears pointed in her direction. If there were any remaining doubts about her being a wizard, the large, ostentatiously jeweled rings covering her fingers put those to rest. She watched patiently, gently tapping her nails against the large ruby on her thumb, which was beginning to glow like an ember in the bright sun. Several of the men started to ease back toward the gatehouse, their spears wobbling, and the Master of Security decided it was time to take control of the situation.

“I hear you have a warning for the king,” he said boldly. “You may speak it to me.”

“My orders are to speak only to the king himself,” Miranda said. “It is a matter of some delicacy.”

“I am Oban, Master of Security. You’ll speak it to me, or not at all,” he huffed.

Miranda looked at Gin, who flicked his ear in the ghosthound equivalent of a shrug. “I suppose we have wasted enough time,” she said. “I am here on behalf of

the Spirit Court by order of the Rector Spiritualis, Etmon Banage. Yesterday morning we received a tip that the known fugitive wizard and wanted criminal Eli Monpress has been sighted within your kingdom. It is our belief that he is after an old wizard artifact held in your treasury. I am here to offer my assistance to keep him from stealing it.”

There was a long pause, and Miranda got the horrible, sinking feeling that she had missed something important.

“Lady,” the Master of Security said, shaking his head, “if you’re here to warn the king about Eli, then you’re a little late.”

Miranda scowled. “You mean he’s already stolen the artifact?”

“No.” The Master of Security sighed. “He’s stolen the king.”

Three hours later, Miranda was seated at the foot of a small table in a cramped office in the lower part of the castle. Oban, Master of Security, the Master of the Exchequer, and the Master of the Courts were crammed together at the other end of the table, as far from her as possible. Other than Oban, none of them had told her their names, and they all looked equally displeased at being cornered in a small room with a wizard. Still, this was a step forward. An hour ago, she’d been sitting in the throne room with all forty masters of Mellinor, whom she guessed were the local equivalent of the standard governing body of lords and appointees that most kingdoms this size seemed to favor, staring daggers at her. It was only after much official argument that these three had stepped forward to speak for the whole, but from the way they

were glaring at her, Miranda didn't think she'd gotten off any easier. In fact, she was beginning to regret telling Gin to wait at the gate. Miranda knew from experience that a large set of teeth on one's side tended to make these bureaucratic talks much easier.

Still, for all their pomp, the men across from her seemed to be in no hurry to get things started. After several minutes of waiting, compounded by the hours already wasted while the Mellinor officials decided who was going to deal with her, Miranda came to the conclusion that civility could get one only so far in life, and she cut straight to the point.

"Gentlemen," she said. "This would be much easier if you just told me the whole story."

The two nameless officials sneered, but Oban, at least, had the decency to look embarrassed. "There's not much to tell," he said. "We caught Eli this morning trying to get the king's prized stallion out of the stables. The horse made a racket and the Master of the Stables caught him red-handed. The thief gave up immediately, and as soon as he told us his name was Eli Monpress . . . Well," Oban said and shrugged, "who hasn't heard of him? I was called in and we locked him up in our strongest cell. Now, of course, we're sure the horse business was only a ploy to get inside the castle proper, because no sooner had we put him in the cell than he was gone, and shortly after that, so was our king."

"If you knew he was a wizard," Miranda said slowly, "why did you leave him alone?"

"Well," Oban said, wiping his bald head with a handkerchief, "as I said, it was our strongest cell. We took everything off him that looked magical. He didn't have

any rings or gems, nothing like that.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Of course, as soon as we knew the thief was out, we tried to get the king to safety. His Majesty was with us all the way to the throne room, and then he vanished. We searched all the secret passages, all the hidden stairs. By that point, the grounds were crawling with soldiers and every exit was watched. No one saw a thing.”

“This is our only clue,” said the small man to his left, the Master of the Exchequer. He took a small white card from his pocket and slid it across the polished table. “We found it in the rose garden shortly after the king vanished.”

Miranda picked up the card, holding it delicately between her thumb and forefinger. It was cut from a heavy white stock, like a calling card, and at the center, engraved in gold ink, was an extravagant, cursive *M*. Miranda scowled and flipped the card over. On the back, someone had written *Forty thousand*.

That was it, no instructions, no threats, just the number written out in small, neat capitals across the lower left corner. Miranda scowled and slid the card back across the table. “I assume he means forty thousand in council gold standards.” She smiled. “A king’s ransom, indeed.”

“We can’t pay it,” the Master of the Exchequer groaned, clutching his bony hands together. “That’s an entire year’s revenue for a small country like ours. We don’t even have that much cash on hand in our own currency, let alone Council standards.”

“But we must have our king back, whatever the cost,” Oban said, landing his fist on the table. “King Henrith is young. He has yet to take a wife or produce an heir, and he’s the last son of House Allaze. We’ve never had any kings other than House Allaze. There’s not even a

protocol for this sort of thing. If he vanished, our country would fall into chaos, and that would cost us far more than forty thousand standards.”

Miranda tapped her finger against the polished arm of her chair. “A difficult problem,” she said, “and one that could have been easily avoided. It seems that Mellinor is paying the price for its long unfriendliness toward wizards.”

“It is the law,” said the solemn old man to Oban’s right, the Master of the Courts. “The oldest law in Mellinor, decreed by our first king, a law that we are breaking, I might add, by talking to you.”

“But your first king was a wizard, wasn’t he?” Miranda leaned forward, enjoying the pinched look on their faces. Ruffling stuffy politicians was one of the best perks of her job. “Come now, gentlemen, you can hardly expect an agent of the Spirit Court not to be up on her magical history.”

“If you know that much,” the Master of the Courts growled, “then you already know why he closed Mellinor to your kind. King Gregorn was disgusted by the misuse of power he witnessed at the hands of greedy, arrogant wizards, and he sought to create a country where people could live without fear, where no wizard would threaten us. For that purpose, he led his family and followers to the edge of what was then a great inland sea. In a tremendous act of magic, King Gregorn banished the sea and created a new land, made by magic, yet free of wizardly corruption. This act of selfless bravery took his life. That is why, for four hundred years, we have honored his sacrifice by upholding his law.” The old man closed his eyes. “For Gregorn’s direct descendant to be held for ransom by some wizard thief”—he took a shuddering breath—“it’s only slightly worse than enlisting a wizard

to rescue him.” He lifted his chin to face Miranda, glaring snowstorms at her from under his bushy eyebrows. “Rest assured, young lady, were we not in such dire straits, you would never have made it into this castle.”

“Had I been in this castle,” Miranda said dryly, “you wouldn’t *be* in such dire straits.”

All three men glowered, and she gave them a scalding look. “I think you’ll find that wizards have changed in the years since your country was founded. The Spirit Court exists to maintain a balance between the power of man and spirit, and to prevent wizards from abusing their gifts. So, as you see, the Spiritualist’s purpose and your Gregorn’s dream are dissimilar in method but not in substance. We both want to keep the world safe from people like Eli.”

The overdressed men shifted uncomfortably, and Miranda saw her chance. “Here’s my offer,” she said. “I will get your king back for you, and, in exchange, you will let me work unhindered. When I return your monarch, you must promise me that he will allow envoys from the Spirit Court and consider welcoming our Spiritualists into his kingdom.”

The officials put their heads together for a moment, and then the Master of the Courts nodded. “You drive a hard bargain, Miss Lyonette, but we do not have the luxury of time. Your terms are acceptable. We must have our king.”

Miranda stood up with a triumphant smile. “In that case, gentlemen, let’s get to work.”

An hour later, when Miranda had wrung almost every provision she wanted out of the old men, they adjourned. After being shown to her room, she threw down her pack, grabbed a handful of bread off the dinner tray, and went

to find Gin. This proved an easy task, for he was lounging in the afternoon sun right where she'd left him, surrounded by a gawking circle of stable boys at the main entrance to the castle.

Miranda approached with a grin, scattering the boys like sparrows. "Time to work, mutt."

Gin sat up slowly, stretching his paws. "You're in a good mood."

"There may be hope for this country yet." She smiled.

The dog snorted. "What about that artifact thing Banage made us rush down here for? Find out anything about that?"

"The bureaucrats didn't mention it, so I felt no need to bring it up," she said. "Gregorn's Pillar is only dangerous to wizards, and the only one of those we have to worry about is off having a slumber party with the king. Besides, I don't think I could have spoken ill of their honored founder and lived to tell about it. Though, mind you, I could tell them a few things about their precious *Gregorn* that would set their hair on end."

"So why didn't you?" Gin yawned, showing all of his teeth.

"Telling people what they don't want to hear gets us nowhere," Miranda said. "My duty is to catch Eli before he can mess things up more than he already has, not force old men to change their prejudices. *That's* the unhappy job of whichever poor sap Master Banage promotes to Tower Keeper of Mellinor when we're done." She flopped down on the marble step with a sigh. "So long as Eli isn't interested in Gregorn's Pillar, I'm not either. There's no point in trying to convince a panicked kingdom to let us poke around in their treasury if we don't need to. Besides, if we play our cards right, Mellinor will

be crawling with Spiritualists by year's end. We'll have a Tower and a court envoy with plenty of time to talk the king into giving the Spirit Court all the pillars and artifacts and whatever else Gregorn left lying around. Right now, we focus on catching Monpress, and speaking of which"—she leaned forward—"what did you find?"

"His smell is everywhere." Gin's nostrils flared. "He was probably scouting the palace for days before he let himself get caught. The smells are all knotted together, though, so I can't tell where he made his final exit."

"So much for doing things the easy way," Miranda said and sighed, running her hand through her curly hair. "All right, we'll do this by the book. I'll start with the throne room and work my way down. You check the grounds and try not to scare anyone too badly."

"Shouldn't you get some rest?" Gin said, eyeing the sinking sun. "I can take two days of hard travel, but we don't want you flopping over like last time."

"That was an isolated incident." Miranda said, bristling. "No breaks. We're finally in the same country as that thief, possibly the same city. I'm not going to risk letting him slip away again, not when we're this close."

"You're the boss," Gin said, trotting across the courtyard. "Don't get carried away."

"That's my line," Miranda called after him, but the enormous hound was already slinking away behind the stables, sniffing the ground. Miranda shook her head and fanned out her fingers, nudging her rings awake.

"Time to get to work," she muttered, smiling as the stones began to glow. With a final look at the setting sun, she turned and tromped up the castle stairs. With any luck, she'd have Eli by the time it rose again.

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