

The Necromancer's Human

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Eperson awoke in a sunbeam.

An Abyssinian shorthair cat, Eperson rolled onto its back and stretched wide, its back arching backwards as it spread its claws. A textured pink tongue unfurled from behind tiny sharp teeth. The cat finished its stretch, rose onto its flank, and looked sleepily around at the stone room. The subterranean chamber was encased in total darkness except for the single window that let in the sun, and only on the carpeted rug.

Eperson trotted from the warm sunbeam and hopped up onto the master bed. He stepped between the folds of the blanket and approached the sleeping Lord Raithborne. The master of the dark realms beneath the forest, the man of nefarity and power, had an arm thrown over his head and was snoring. His chinstrap beard was growing a bit long and wild, and his long hair was tangled all over the pillow. Eperson approached his human and butted the Lord's head.

Raithborne twitched in his sleep, smacking his lips dryly. He rolled away from Eperson but absently tossed back his hand a few times until it landed on the cat. Eperson ducked under his human's hand and let it clap him on the back. Once flesh and fur met, Raithborne instinctively began to stroke the cat, paying extra attention to the space just between the shoulder blades. Eperson shimmied under the affection and flopped onto his back, letting Raithborne scratch his pink belly.

A loud bang startled them both. Raithborne sat up with a delirious start, looking around frantically. "Wha..." he stammered as he tried to wake up. Eperson faced the door from Raithborne's room, his sphinxlike eyes huge. "Stay here," Raithborne told his cat. Beyond the door, they could hear footsteps. More clanging. Battle.

Raithborne took up his staff, the jewel at its crest beginning to glow a sickly green. In bed robes and in slippers, Raithborne commanded the door to open with a wave of his hand. From the bed, Eperson could see three figures in the main chamber of the underground fortress. "We've come for you, lord of thieves!" yelled a woman in chainmesh armor that was more for fashion than function. Her giant sword, on the other hand, was stained with blood. With her were two jerkin-clad men, one with a bow, the other with a staff not dissimilar to Lord Raithborne's staff.

Raithborne sneered at them, unimpressed by the trio. He glanced back at the door into his bedroom and it slammed shut by magic. Eperson stared at the door and rose onto his haunches. He heard combat, the brutal physical attacks and the swirling chaos of magic. He flinched at a loud scream from a familiar voice and ducked back to the head of the bed. Eperson dove under the pillows, hiding beneath them and comforting himself

with the scent of Raithborne. He remained hidden as more chaos and shouts followed.

Then came silence.

Long moments of fear and uncertainty followed.

The cat's curiosity caused it to peak out from beneath the pillow. Giant eyes searched the darkness of the room and saw nothing, hearing even less. Eperson jumped down onto the stone floor and very carefully approached the door. Still sealed shut, Eperson neared it and meowed. A quiet whimper of a noise, the cat stared up at the door, waiting.

Only silence.

Eperson cried again, rose and circled the floor, and mewed a third time. His call was unanswered.

Worry filled the animal's mind and it flopped down onto its belly. Peeking out through the tiny crack between door and floor, Eperson peered cautiously into the main chamber. He saw the three adventurers who had invaded his home. It was their backs he saw, carrying with them objects he recognized from Raithborne's possessions. Before them, however, he saw Raithborne's hand lying still on the floor.

Eperson reached under the door, barely fitting his paw through the gap. He spread his claws wide, anything to narrow the distance between him and his human. He mewled at his human, calling to him.

Only silence.

Eperson drew back his paw and scratched on the door. Leaving deep, thick marks that his human hated, he clawed irritatingly. He meowed loudly, doing exactly what he knew his human detested.

Only silence.

Eperson howled loudly now.

Only silence.

The cat came to the door and sat before it, waiting obediently for the door to be opened for him. For long moments, he was still, certain the door would be opened. Certain his human would return.

Only silence.

Eperson peered again through the gap beneath the door. Seeing the hand of Raithborne, still and right where it had been, Eperson mewled. He looked at the door and leapt at the handle. The heavy cast iron ring didn't budge under his weight as he clawed at it in mid-leap.

Abandoning that effort, the cat raced across the room and leapt at the window. He caught the ledge but slid off, crashing onto his human's desk. He turned, instinctively knowing his human would come in and chastise him with a harsh voice and loving pets.

Only silence.

Eperson mewed again, then leapt again for the window. His claws pierced the wooden edge and Eperson managed to pull himself up. The window was an angled tunnel of stone, which the cat struggled to navigate at the smooth, steep angle. He pushed through to the small chimney that exited into the woods, hidden behind two trees that had grown practically together.

Out in the forest, Eperson felt fresh air and saw the wind stir the fallen leaves. What would normally entrance him was a distraction he ignored. He saw the adventurers departing, heading out of the forest. He ran back along the subtle path to the obscure door. Hidden next to a small waterfall, the door into his human's lair was almost impossible to see least it be deliberately looked for. Eperson found the door ajar and ran inside with a meow. He darted through the front chambers, leaving behind the bodies of lackeys who had fallen to the violence of the adventurers.

He raced down the main hall to arrive at the central chamber. He slowed when he saw his human, Lord Raithborne, on the floor. Still. Silent. Dead.

Eperson approached his human and quietly meowed. He approached Raithborne and nudged his hand, but it didn't move. Eperson leapt onto Raithborne's stomach, as he sometimes did when he wanted food in his bowl. Raithborne usually coughed or shrieked in surprise, even yelled at Eperson. Now, he didn't move. Eperson crawled onto Raithborne's chest and nudged his chin. Still no response. In fact, there was a strange coldness to Eperson's human.

Eperson hopped off his human and went to his hand. He nudged it with his head and when it didn't move, pushed it until he could crawl underneath it. When the hand still didn't move, Eperson began to mewl, meow, howl. His calls to his human echoed on the stone walls of the fortress, but they were answered with only silence.

Eli and his daughter, Rebecca, walked through the forest. The footsteps of simple but sturdy shoes matched the pair of peasants. Eli carried a giant woodsman's axe across his broad shoulders, his daughter carrying an axe of equal purpose, though scaled to the young girl's growing frame.

"What tree are we looking for?" asked the young girl.

"We need something on the young side," said the father, surveying the trees. "The order called for such. Maybe one of the trees I planted before you were born."

"Seems a shame to cut down such a young tree," said the daughter as they slowed to consider the current batch of trees around them.

"Aye, but we've the seeds to plant replacements, so that's something," said her father. He pointed at one tree. "How about that one?" It was hardly a sapling but it hadn't yet turned into a full tree.

Rebecca considered the tree and swished her lips. "I think we can find one a bit larger. This is for the king, yes?" Her father nodded. "Then let's look for one that—"

A cat meowed.

Eli and Rebecca both turned when Eperson jumped up onto a fallen tree. The cat sat on the horizontal trunk and meowed again.

"Father..." said the little girl, her eyes wide at the animal.

"Careful, child," he urged. "It might be some enchanted—"

Eperson meowed again. He hopped off the tree trunk and walked a few steps back. He turned back around as the two humans approached him. He meowed and then dashed a few feet farther away. He checked with them again.

"I think she wants us to follow him," said Rebecca with delight.

Her father corrected her. "He, and yes, it would seem so."

"Where are we, father?" asked Rebecca as she stayed close to the big man.

"Some fortress," said Eli, hugging his daughter close. The light from the door was dwindling while all around them were the bodies of the dead. "Some great battle occurred her. And not long ago, either."

"I didn't know such a fortress was in the—"

"Raithborne!" her father started loudly.

At the mouth of the main chamber, the woodsman spotted the body of the nefarious thief. "He's dead," whispered the woodsman. He sneered and spat on the floor. "Good."

Eperson ran over to Raithborne and hopped onto his stomach. Tail swishing, he meowed at the pair.

"I think the cat belongs to Wrath-born...Wraithbo...to him," said the girl. She'd gained some courage by the cat's calm but she still stayed within arm's reach of her father.

"We'll fell the tree tomorrow," her father resolved. "I'll take Raithborne's body to town." He scowled. "They'll have a celebration to see him burned, dead or no."

"That seems cruel," his daughter said.

"No less than he deserves," said Eli as he grunted, picking up the corpse. Throwing it over his shoulder, he began to walk out. "Come along, girl." Rebecca trotted behind her father, unsettled by the body he carried. Eperson followed not far behind.

Doctor Alfonso 'Alffie' Mackleson was sewing the eyes shut on a body.

Humming slightly to himself, the young man of medicine had dark black skin which contrasted with the deathly pale of his patient. The man stepped back from his work and nodded appreciatively to himself. "Alffie, good job," he decided. "You deserve a reward." He crossed his wooden shack of a medical office and washed his hands in the basin. He then pulled out a drawer over the basin to reveal several rows of different cookies. The doctor wiggled his fingers in thought as he considered the delightful delicacies.

"I think..." he told himself, "a crème and chocolate sandwich." He took out a cookie and studied it with the same enthusiasm he studied the organs of the body. "Yes, I do think that will do nicely." He took a tiny nibble from the cookie and smiled with joy. He then opened his mouth and tossed the cookie in.

Just before it passed his lips, a cat meowed.

Alfonso jumped in shock and whirled around. "I wasn't eating a cookie!" he defended instantly. The cookie hit his cheek and began to fall. Alfonso shrieked and snatched the cookie before it hit the ground. He froze in his workshop and looked around for the source of the noise.

On the window into the night sat Eperson. The cat tilted its head at the young doctor and meowed again. Alfonso was taken aback. "Uh..." he thumped the cookie into his mouth and chewed slowly as he thought. "What, uh, what can I do for you?" He began to near the cat. "Are you a patient?" he asked. "Have you family that passed like this man?" He pointed at the body on his table. "And don't worry, he wasn't a patient. Small villages like this barely have use for an undertaker and a physician, much less one of each. I must do double duty." He snickered at saying 'duty'.

Eperson rose onto his haunches and meowed again. "I don't have any fish, I'm afraid." Eperson meowed again and leapt off the windowsill into the night. Alfonso again looked surprised. He turned to the body on his table. "People come and go so quickly around—"

Eperson meowed again, having returned to his place on the windowsill. Alfonso turned back to him and again, Eperson meowed and jumped down.

Into the night stole the young doctor. Following the enigmatic cat, the young man walked quickly through the narrow streets of the small village. With a lantern leading the way, he still wore his medicinal apron, the tools of his trade in the pockets, jangling with each step. "I have cookies I want to be eating, feline," he protested as he struggled to keep the darting cat within the lantern's sphere of illumination.

The two arrived at the town square to find Raithborne strung up. His arms and feet lashed to a rack, he was covered in a thin cloth. Words of hate have been scrawled across his covered body and rotten food had been thrown against his corpse. "Raithborne," whispered the doctor. Forgetting about the cat for a moment, he approached the body. "A lord of magic," he said with some awe. He laughed, intelligent eyes delighted with possibility. "Cells saturated with the dark arts."

He stepped up onto the central platform at the town's center and touched Raithborne's hand beneath the thin sheet. "Rigor hasn't dissipated yet." He approached the body and tore open the cloth that covered the man's rakish face. He opened one eye and peered into it. "Still mostly fresh." He tore open the sheet near Raithborne's chest and discovered a gaping hole just beneath his sternum. "His diaphragm was pierced." The

doctor stuck his finger into the wound. "They didn't perforate the pericardium. It'd be a simple surgery to mechanically repair..."

At Alfonso's feet, Eperson meowed up at him. Alfonso drew back, terrified to realize what he was considered. "No, Alffie," he dismissed. "You mustn't!" He turned and stormed off.

At the edge of the platform, Eperson meowed at him. The doctor stopped mid-step and froze. His shoulders shrank and he turned around to the cat. "He's dead, feline," he told Eperson. "You must accept that your master is dead."

Eperson looked up at the body that Alfonso pointed at. He meowed again, then meowed at Alfonso. "No, it's foolish!" he argued with the cat. "The methods are untried and I'm sure I don't have the components." Eperson blinked at him. "And the village! The village would have my head. The king would have me hunted down. And my license would be revoked!" He backed away from the cat. He turned again.

Eperson meowed again.

Alfonso slowed and stopped. He turned back around, thoughtfully looking again at the body of Raithborne. "However," he reasoned slowly, "were it to work, I'd have the lord of the underworld in my debt. Were it to work," he postulated as he stepped back onto the platform, "the king of thieves would owe me one." His lips slowly curled up in a smile. "Oh, he could fund studies. He could secure publishing. He could..." Alfonso's eyes went wide. "Oh, the cookies he could get!"

The young doctor looked at the body, looked at the chance to transform his world and the world at large. "Oh, but dare I?" he gasped. He looked down at Eperson and the cat stared back at him.

Reason and rational restraint struck the doctor. He looked again at the corpse secured to the rack. He scoffed at his momentary lapse into madness. "What am I saying?" he accused of himself. He looked down at the cat in fury. "No," he told Eperson. "There is no way I'm doing it and that's final."

Alfonso secured the last strap onto Raithborne's head, making sure the seated body was secured at every joint. The helmet atop the king of thieves' head had two metal rods sticking out of it, attached to a giant charger hanging from the roof. Alfonso did a mental dance as he looked over the jury-rigged arrangement in his workspace, walking himself through the process.

"Okay, I think we're..." He stared at the dresser which held up an electric converter that Alfonso had made last year. It mostly worked. "We're ready to...is that good?...yes, that will...yes, we're...we're good." He turned back around to find Eperson perched on a chair in the corner, watching anxiously. "You're evil," he told the cat before he went to the drawer. Alfonso opened a tray of cookies and took out three. He shoved all of them into his mouth and chewed vigorously. He turned back around to the body of Raithborne and shouted, "Let's do this!"

"SHUT UP, DOC!" yelled somebody from a nearby house.

"Sorry! Sorry," the young doctor whimpered sheepishly. He faced Raithborne's body and repeated, "Let's do this" at a more reasonable register for the deep night. He hopped onto the chair against which he had built a set of pedals. Sitting back recumbently, Alfonso began to quickly pedal. Tiny sparks of electricity began to course from all the metal pieces in the elaborate web of improvised science. "Good, good," Alfonso said, pedaling faster.

The electricity began to course into the main charger on the roof. The metal plates began to hum, less a tolled bell and more a spinning coin. The electricity popped like a calm fire as it reached from one piece to the next, finally arriving at the cap atop Raithborne's head. Lightning arced off the helmet and began to strike back at the metal parts.

Alfonso quit pedaling and sat forward. The room grew quiet quickly, though his ears still throbbed. The office smelled of ozone and smoke. Alfonso stood from the chair and rushed to the body. He opened Raithborne's eye and peered inside it. Searching for any sign of life, he pressed his fingers to the man's throat. "No," he whispered in frantic terror. He drew back and swallowed in horror. "No," he repeated. He ripped off the helmet and Raithborne's head fell to one side. "No, no, no," he furiously removed the restraints and began to feel for a pulse, for a heartbeat, for anything.

Nothing. The body was still.

Alfonso stumbled back, his hands on his head. "Oh no," he said as he slowly realized the magnitude of his mistake. "Oh no." He breathed slowly, his eyes huge at what heinous crime he'd committed. "Oh, I'm done for." He turned and faced into his tiny ramshackle office. "Oh, they're going to be so, so mad." He left the room in a horrified daze, walking right passed Eperson. The cat watched him go, then turned back to his human. From deeper in the office, passed the work room into the living space, the cat could hear packing to the frequent chorus of "I need to go."

Eperson trotted around the elaborate and chaotic set-up of jury-rigged devices haphazardly connected and jumped up onto Raithborne's lap. The short-haired cat stood against Raithborne's chest and peered into his still face. He meowed and licked the very tip of his human's nose. There was no response. Eperson dropped down and butted Raithborne's hand with his head. Still no response. The cat turned around in his lap and meowed up at Raithborne again.

"I've got to go!" Alfonso said frantically, rushing back into the living room with two over-packed bags dangling from his shoulders and a paddleball in his hand. "I've got to go," he repeated as he opened his drawer. He pulled the entire drawer out, set aside a dozen cookies, and dumped the rest into one of his bags. Half of the cookies he'd set aside immediately went into his mouth, stuffing his face. He began to chew as he carried the others in his hand and rushed out of the office.

With the slam of the door, Eperson turned back to his human. He meowed at the corpse and butted his abdomen. There was no response. Eperson returned to Raithborne's hand and butted it to no avail. The cat wound around the lap and sat down. He crossed his paws and resolved to stay there.

Then there was movement.

Dead eyes slowly opened. It was an awkward, unnatural movement, more of a deathly twitch than a living gesture. Eperson looked over his shoulder at his human. Raithborne's hand jerked from the armrest of his chair and flopped down onto his lap next to Eperson. The cat looked at the uncoordinated hand and didn't move. The hand jerked again, this time flopping onto Eperson. The cat yelped at the impact but didn't move.

With jerky, uneven pulls, the hand rubbed down the cat's back, then flopped against its shoulders again. Each time, Eperson yelped, then hissed.

The hiss elicited a response. The hand no longer flopped down against its shoulders, but was laid with some care. Muscles regained some composure and calm as the hand of the corpse transitioned from rubbing the cat to petting it. Eperson settled into Raithborne's lap and began to purr. The corpse stared vacantly into space, unmoving save for its hand.

Eperson rolled onto his back and began to purr louder as the slowly rejuvenating human scratched the cat's stomach with familiar affection.