

ENERGUMEN

by

A.R.R. Ash

I stared at the body at my feet. The body that had once been my friend. The blood had already stopped pooling and had saturated the leaf-strewn earth. *A plop, plop* sounded as drops fell from the dagger in my hand into the crimson puddle. The metallic scent of iron overpowered the freshness of the wood and verdure.

I should have listened to Mother and destroyed that book.

The voice, calm with a note of triumph, in my head answered, *Yes, you should have, but you could not resist the power it offered. Now, you are my slave.*

This creature—the tome had called it an esprit—was the nearest I’d ever known to true malevolence. It reveled in causing pain and anguish for its own sake. Rage and hatred for the living consumed it and filled it with a malice that would not be satiated by an ocean of blood.

I will break from your control one day, I promised.

I’d been a fool. My father, Lord Azos—killed in defense by my own mother on the day of my birth—had been a Nigromancer of some power, and he’d left a library of books on the practice of what is called *the Black*. Through his power, my father had safeguarded his demesne,

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but, since his death, it stood undefended. Sightings of elves had been recently reported, and I had wanted only to harness that power, that I might stand in its defense in his stead. However, when my mother found me studying those tomes, she set them upon a pyre. Yet I succeeded in secreting away one volume, which described the process to raise various creatures, including the esprit. Unfortunately, the raising of the creature did not guarantee my control of it. To do that required an exertion of will. However, in my youth and arrogance, I sorely underestimated its formidable will and drastically overestimated my own.

Shall we visit your mother, then? the mocking voice said with a tinge of hopefulness.

My resistance dissipated like smoke in the wind. No. I'd been powerless to stop myself from killing Arathes, my friend, and I dreaded what it would have me do to my mother.

Too bad. I do so look forward to breaking your mind when you drive the light from her eyes with your own hands.

My initial reaction was one of fury and defiance, my breath ragged and anger warming my neck and cheeks. But I quickly suppressed that inclination. *As long as my mother is safe, I will do whatever you want.*

I know you will. I shall save Nyrrine for last. But remember, I know what you are thinking. Do not try to deceive me. It paused. *Or do.*

I shivered at the malevolent laugh echoing in my mind.

*

A.R.R. Ash

My mother and I lived in my late father's tower, not far from the village in which she was born. Over each of the last five nights, I left to find a victim, and, with each murder, I experienced the exultation of the esprit, even as my own stomach churned.

Whom shall it be tonight? it taunted.

The esprit was an example of a type of creature known as a phantom, an insubstantial entity with the ability to possess a host. The experience of possession is difficult to imagine if one has not suffered it. I was aware of everything that happened, but my body would not respond to my intentions. Even my own body's functions, such as pain and breathing, could be suppressed by my possessor. My mind was nothing more than disembodied thoughts witnessing the actions of a stranger.

A child?

The esprit seemed to gain as much enjoyment, if not more, from my horror and impotence as it did from the murders themselves. It knew my thoughts, my memories, everything, but I could know of it only what it allowed, and it afforded me knowledge of its own delight to revel in my horrified reaction.

Let me seek out an elf, my thoughts begged the creature.

Those five deaths had already caused an uproar in the village. In my father's absence, the people blamed them on a resurgence of the elves, and, as my father's son, they looked to me to protect them. It would not be long before that expectation turned to blame.

No.

"We must do something about the murders," Mother said to me over duskfare. "The people grow afraid." With tawny skin and large, dark eyes and black hair, shocked with white, I knew many in the village accounted her handsome.

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We sat across from one another at a long, blackwood table in the circular dining chamber of the second floor of the tower. Tallow candles, smelling of animal fat, rested on the tabletop. Before us were sumptuous plates of braised pheasant and steamed vegetables in butter sauce. The savory meal warred in my stomach with the roiling dread of what I would be made to do in but a short while.

“Yes, Mother. I will put the word out for mercenaries to investigate.”

The esprit laughed in my thoughts. *I could have you take up that knife and slit her throat.*

Then I would resist you until you were forced to kill me, and you would lose all the pleasure of my torment.

For now.

“...Mneris?”

“Sorry, Mother, I was distracted thinking of those poor people. What did you say?”

“Just that you must be careful. Those murders”—I saw her shiver—“so gruesome.”

“Yes, Mother, I will.”

“You have barely touched your meal.”

“No, I’m sorry. I seem to have lost my appetite.”