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ANATHEMA

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PENGUIN BOOKS

CONTENT NOTES

Dear Reader,

If you're new to my writing, I want to thank you for taking a chance on my first foray into gothic fantasy. My goal is to create an enjoyable reading experience for you, so before diving in I want to clarify what you can expect in this story.

My plots tend to be intricate and layered, and while romance is one of the many elements I weave into the story, it is not the sole focus in this case. If you're anxious for the spice, it'll come eventually, but know that this is a slow burn. You will be tormented with pages of unbearable tension before we arrive at the climax, so to speak. Please take this into consideration as you venture into this world.

A word of caution...

This book contains a number of potentially triggering situations. You can find the full list of trigger warnings—with spoilers—on my website: kerilake.com/anathema-full-trigger-list.

PROLOGUE

Two hundred eleven years ago...

Lady Rydainn held her infant son close as she approached the glowing vein that, only days ago, had been a snarling fissure of black fire that cleaved the ground. With the two moons nearly as one, the chasm of violet lava had hardened to stone, leaving only the flickering remnants of that sinister flame. It was almost time to harvest the igneous rock, but they weren't there for the bounty it held.

They were there for the fire itself.

The men who typically guarded the vein from thieves lay in diminishing piles of ash, their bodies and armor charred to useless lumps of soot that scattered in the wind. Burned alive by a flame so hot that she could feel its radiance a half-furlong away. Sablefyre. An ancient element of the gods, forged eons ago in Aethyria's fiery heart. A single touch turned a body to ash and blood to stone.

And she had arrived to offer up Zevander, her second-born son, to it.

Not by choice, of course. Lady Rydainn would've sacrificed herself right then and there, if it would spare Zevander from such a horrific fate. Unfortunately, the mage who'd demanded the exchange wasn't interested in her pittance of an offer. He wanted her youngest son and nothing less.

She forced herself to set her eyes upon the dark and corrupt soul,

where he stood alongside her eldest son and husband at the edge of the vein, watching her every step. The most dangerous mage in all of Aethyria, he was one of a few who'd mastered the ability to control the otherwise chaotic sablefyre and discovered a means to harness its deadly and divine power. He'd once been the king's highest Magelord, a member of the exalted Magestrol, disgracefully dismissed on accusations of demutomancy, a dark form of magic decreed illegal by the king.

Cadavros. The mere thought of his name cast a shiver down her spine.

Yet, she and her husband had been forced to make a Faustian bargain with him in exchange for protection against the Solassions who hunted their family. Ruthless warriors known for their brutality and violence who'd have made sport of their execution.

In their moment of desperation, the reclusive mage had approached the Rydainns with an offer they couldn't refuse. A powerful protection spell against those who sought their heads, in exchange for their first-born's blood magic—a sampling *Cadavros* had claimed would be used in his studies.

If only Lady Rydainn possessed the power to reverse time. She would've chided her stupidity, warned herself not to trust his lies. For what he'd taken from her eldest boy was far more than a sampling of his magic.

Black, beady eyes, those deep soulless sockets, stared back at her, as if daring her to run from his ghastly form. There was a time he was said to have been handsome, but the dark and forbidden magic had taken a toll on him and twisted him into a wicked beast. From the top of his head breached long branching antlers with horns that curled back. Deep grooves etched into his hardened skin reminded Lady Rydainn of tree bark, the black pulsing veins beneath said to house small serpents trapped inside his flesh.

Evil begging to be unleashed.

Cadavros's appearance was the result of having performed the *Emberforge* ritual on himself, the same ritual he intended for Zevander. A rite that only young children were believed to tolerate without any

permanent disfigurement, seeing as they hadn't yet gone through their Ascendency.

Beside the mage stood her husband and their eldest son Branimir, whose similarly protruding black veins and coarse skin marked the horrific deformities of her first sacrifice only weeks before. A sacrifice that'd proven insufficient for the greedy mage, as Branimir had suffered the same grotesque mutations as Cadavros. Though far from puberty and his Ascendency into blood magic, Branimir had already begun the physical transitions before the flame had corrupted the seed of magic that'd taken root inside of him. And while his resulting deformities weren't as pronounced as those of Cadavros, Branimir would never know his true power—because once the black flame entered the body, it destroyed all natural blood magic.

Run, her head urged. Save them.

It was too late for Branimir, though. His darkened eyes had grown even more vacant in the fortnight since the ritual, and the sickly pallor of his skin spoke of the hours he'd been locked away in the cells beneath the castle as his father attempted to hide him from the world. *An abomination*, villagers would have called him and understandably so. What thrived inside him wasn't a power of the gods but a deep-rooted malice that'd grown stronger in the weeks since the ritual.

The notion of watching her jubilant baby—an echo of the sweet, loving boy Branimir had been—suffer the same fate was an agony she couldn't bear.

Her demands to break the devil's bargain with Cadavros had proven futile, and he'd vowed to slaughter both boys should she fail to comply. Not an idle threat, given the many inquisitions she'd witnessed where he'd exerted his power with merciless cruelty.

Tears blurred her vision, her steps faltering as she drew closer to the vein. Her younger son lay sleeping in her arms, completely unaware of the night to come. A night that would forever change the innocent baby boy she so dearly loved.

For hours, she'd prayed to the old gods in the hopes that his fate might be changed, that he might somehow be spared. Alas, the gods

had never answered, and darkness closed in on her as the moons slipped into the shadows.

She'd have sooner taken young Zevander and fled to Mortasia, beyond the Umbravale that separated the mortal lands from Aethyria. A place believed to be nothing but a barren wasteland brimming with famine and death.

The remorse in her husband's eyes failed to move her, anger slinking its way through her blood with renewed fervor. After all, it'd been *his* nefarious dealings on Solassion land that had sealed their family's fate. She bit back the proud Lunasier magic pulsing in her veins that would've surely struck down her husband. How easily he'd been convinced to offer their only sons.

Lady Rydainn's power trembled like a plucked thread, as rays of moonlight hit the sigil on the nape of her neck, penetrating the thick fabric of her cloak and eliciting a charge that hummed in her veins, rousing a cold rush to her fingertips, where it begged to be turned loose. The moon affected all Lunasier that way, and Zevander shifted in her arms, as if sensing the vibration beneath his mother's skin.

It would've been years before his power came to fruition, and she'd longed for those heartwarming moments of discovery that would soon be tainted by the poison of the flame.

Cadavros approached her and reached out a bony finger that appeared more like a branch than a digit. She curled her fingers into Zevander as Cadavros stroked her baby's soft, cherub cheek. A trail of blood followed, and Zevander stirred, letting out a quiet mewl that heightened as the small cut on his face deepened to a dark gash. One so frighteningly malicious-looking, she wondered if the tip of Cadavros's finger was tainted with death poison. The mage reached again, and on instinct, she jerked the baby away, shielding him with her hands. Her kettled magic surged, winding around her bones and beating against her skin, demanding to punish the mage. Her baby screamed in her arms, his face red, limbs shaking. He hardly made a sound most nights, a contented baby from the day he'd been brought into the world, and it tore at her heart to hear his distressed cry.

Fighting Cadavros was futile, though. With the power of sablefyre at his command, she'd be reduced to ash like the guards who'd tried to fight him off when they'd first arrived at the vein.

A tear streaked down her cheek. "*Pilazyo. Orosj tye clemuhd,*" she whispered. *Please. I'm begging your mercy.*

Cadavros wordlessly slipped his fingers beneath the baby, and her tears turned hysterical when he gave a tug.

She yanked her child back to her, jerking the young boy to her chest. "*Nith! Nith hazjo'li! Je fili meuz!*" *No! I will not do this! He is my son!*

Zevander's outcry as Cadavros pried the boy from his mother's arms stirred her instincts. On a whim of madness, Lady Rydainn lurched for the beastly man who carried her son toward the smoldering vein, but a force struck her throat, knocking the breath out of her. Black smoke crawled from her mouth, choking out the words she'd longed to say. *Stop! I surrender myself!*

Cadavros didn't even spare her a glance, his invisible grip unyielding.

Lord Rydainn strode toward his suffering wife, but as he neared, his leg snapped beneath him with the gut-twisting sound of splintering bone. His cry echoed through the surrounding forest, and he fell to the ground, the limb bent wrong at the knee.

Branimir didn't move, his murky eyes vacant and lost.

In spite of the pressure at her throat and the lack of breath in her lungs, Lady Rydainn called out for her son, reached for him, to no avail. Needles of terror prickled her spine as Cadavros held the baby in the crook of one arm while stretching a roughly tessellated hand into the black flame that rose up from the glowing vein. The black ember he captured flickered in his palm, and Zevander's cries quieted, the child seemingly mesmerized by the sight.

Lady Rydainn whimpered and quailed, her knees weak with defeat. Before she could shutter her eyes from the horror, Cadavros shoved his palm against her baby's mouth, smothering him with the black flame.

Zevander kicked and writhed, his tiny feet dangling helplessly from his captor's grasp. Rage and anguish shook her body, the endless stream of tears creating an irritating blur in her eyes.

Branimir shifted on his feet, all too aware of how ravenously that flame consumed, judging by the way he growled and slapped at his ears as if he were feeling his younger brother's pain.

The trauma that both of her precious sons were made to suffer tore at her heart with jagged teeth. Tears spilled down her cheeks as she watched the black flames emerge through her Zevander's skin, licking the night air like the dark tongues of serpents.

Zevander's struggle ceased, his body limp. The flames died, settling across the baby's flesh in wicked black swirls.

The darkness had accepted and branded him.

An eternal curse.

Cadavros lifted the baby and drew his noseless face over her son's naked chest. His mouth opened impossibly wide, and he shoved Zevander's head inside.

A scream rattled in futile misery inside her chest, as Lady Rydainn watched in horror.

The mage let out a boisterous roar and yanked the child from his mouth. He tipped his head, inspecting the black markings on her baby's skin. A deep, guttural sound rolled in his chest, and he snarled, snapping his attention back to the flame. "*Quez sa'il?*" *What is this?*

He looked back to the boy, running his finger over one of the markings on his chest. Growling, he struck the infant's face and tossed him into the flaming fissure.

"No!" The scream that echoed through the forest could've roused the old gods from their slumber, as Lady Rydainn shook and cursed their names, demanding they set her free.

Lord Rydainn howled in agony, crawling toward the vein with his horribly mangled leg dragging behind him. "You bastard! You fucking bastard!"

Cadavros roared again, smoke curling from his skin, his body trembling. He reached back into the flame, lifting the boy, who neither screamed nor cried. He didn't move at all.

Agony clawed at her heart as she examined her baby from afar, eyes searching for a single sign of life. The blankets that'd swaddled him

had burned away, leaving him completely exposed, his head cocked to the side, eyes still closed.

Is he alive? Oh, gods, let him be alive!

Snarling again, Cadavros held the boy in front of him, looking upon him with the kind of malice that curled her stomach.

"Pilazyo." She shook with the plea. *"Jye suaparcz vitaesz."* *Spare his life.*

Lingering wisps of smoke drifted over the mage's face, and she caught the glisten of raw flesh across his bark-like skin. It was then that Lady Rydainn realized: in his attempt to harm her son, he'd somehow suffered pain himself.

The pressure at her throat subsided, and sapped of all will, she crumpled to the ground. When those cloven feet stood before her again, she lifted her gaze to see Cadavros handing back her listless child, carelessly holding him by his arm as if he were nothing but a sack of meat and bones. Feeble arms outstretched, she reached for Zevander and cradled him against her. A searing heat burned her skin, but she refused to let him go.

"Is he alive?" Lord Rydainn's voice swelled with misery as he clawed at the ground toward them. "Does he live?"

She ignored him, her anger still too razor-sharp to care about his suffering, as she lifted her son to her face, noting the warm puffs of air coming from his mouth.

Thank the gods! He still breathed. On a tearful exhale, she held him tighter and kissed the top of his head. Her sweet child had survived being cast into sablefyre, a fate which should've turned him to ash.

Yet, he had survived. By the miracle of the gods, he'd been spared.

The baby awoke, and the once innocent blue of his eyes showed a gradient of wine red with swirls of orange and gold that converged at the center in a black eclipse. The silvery wisps of hair that'd begun to grow had burned away. Gone was the soul of a harmless, loving child. In his place lay an aberration that the gods would surely forsake.

Squirming in her arms, Zevander cooed and babbled, a peculiar sight given what he'd suffered moments before. The gash on his

face had blackened into a deep groove that mirrored the vein from which he'd been pulled. At the edges of the wound, smaller black veins branched out like rivulets on a map.

She ran a trembling finger over them, and on contact, she recoiled at the scorching pain that streaked across her skin. "How could you do this?" she whispered, lifting her gaze to her husband. "*How could you do this!*"

Lord Rydainn sobbed in the distance, and her hatred for him grew with every new discovery of her son's curse.

Branimir approached, his eyes wide with wonder. Tears welled in her eyes at the memory of Zevander's birth, when Branimir had looked upon his infant brother with the same curiosity. How precious and innocent it had been then, those memories nothing but a long ago dream.

He reached for Zevander, running his finger over the marking on his chest, a curious black swirl that'd seemed to anger Cadavros. On closer examination, there were words written in ancient Primaryrian embedded in the swirl in a way that reminded Lady Rydainn of a wax seal across his heart. Branimir's lips twisted to a snarl as he whispered the words that stabbed her conscience. "*Il captris nith reviris.*"

What is taken will never return.

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PART
ONE

CHAPTER 1

MAEVYTH

*Present day...**The Village of Foxglove Parish*

The forest hadn't eaten in a while.

I peered past the macabre archway into the depths of Witch Knell, the cursed stretch of woods where sinners went to die. It'd earned its name centuries before as a place where witches had once been sacrificed, its grim history upheld as a form of banishment for the heretics and morally corrupted. *The Eating Woods* is what the villagers called it because sometimes the carcasses of those cast off were recovered along the edge, their bodies having been stripped of skin and flesh. Some so badly ravaged that only the metal cuff of their shackles confirmed them as the Banished.

Sharp bones and knotty sticks covered in hoarfrost twisted around each other to form the ominous entrance to the woods. Flanking either side of it, the gnarled and weathered oaks smothered in icy webs of thorny briars weaved an impenetrable wall that stretched for hundreds of acres to either end. A heavy gloom of overcast offered little light to see through the maze of crooked trunks that reminded me of corpses twisted in pain and reaching for the sky. Wild and hungry, the forest awaited its next meal, which was due to arrive at precisely noon.

I stared at my weathered boots, the tips of which didn't quite meet the rime-dusted rocks directly below the archway, the boundary that,

once crossed, awakened the monster on the other side. It was the closest I'd ever stood to the nefarious threshold. Curious as I'd always been to know what existed beyond it, I didn't dare set foot inside that misty labyrinth of trees. No one did, unless by force, because the Eating Woods never returned what was given.

A wintry gust rippled the hem of my black dress, the tickle at my calves taunting my nerves. The cape around my shoulders did little to shield me from the punishing cold that gnawed at my bones. Yet it wasn't the wind or cold that left me shivering but the rumors of what lived amongst the trees.

Some villagers whispered stories of the wrathavor, a demon with a voracious appetite for human meat, a punishment from the indigent people who'd been pushed from these lands to the north. Others told stories of wickens, small woodland fairies that housed the souls of scorned witches, who lured and scavenged the lost by mimicking familiar voices. Most in Foxglove Parish, including the governor, believed the angel of judgment dwelled in the woods and punished those who'd rejected their beloved Red God.

Whatever it was, it ate indiscriminately. Not all who were banished were bad, and the forest had been known to snatch a toddler once or twice. Even a small baby.

I was no more than a few days old when I'd been abandoned in front of that cursed arch in a wicker basket, a single black rose upon my chest. No one knew who'd left me there, but every villager speculated that, whoever they were, they must have hoped the woods would eat me as well.

Fortunately, someone had found me and placed me on the doorstep of the Bronwick family. Otherwise, I'd probably have ended up like so many others who'd fallen victim to the forest's voracious appetite.

So many souls. Hundreds, maybe. The man I'd called grandfather, Godfrey Bronwick, was likely one of them. He was said to have wandered beyond the archway after too much morumberry wine and gotten swallowed up in its misty depths.

No one had braved searching for him there, not even Father.

A formal letter, held loosely in my fingertips, flailed for its freedom. Ornate calligraphy decorated the thick parchment. It'd arrived that morning, sealed in red wax with the royal stamp of the king. A fancy way of confirming that my adoptive father had been killed while serving the fanatical Sacred Men, the religious branch of the Vonkovyan armies that ruled with an iron fist over most of the continent. A small faction of defectors maintained a hold over Lyveria in the northern part of the continent, and my father had ventured there as a missionary to convert the Lyverians for the glory of our good country.

Two months had passed since he'd gone missing, which had left me and my sister Aleysia in the care of our step-grandmother, Agatha. An intolerant woman who'd probably have tossed the two of us into the woods herself if my grandfather hadn't insisted otherwise in his last will.

"What now?" I murmured as I stared through a mist of tears into the endless dark wood, trying to imagine what the future might look like.

Unwed girls without a father to protect their claim suffered one of two fates. They were either promptly forced into marriage or sent to serve the church as one of the Red Veils, clergywomen ordered to worship obediently until death. Even if I wanted to be married, and I certainly didn't, the whole parish looked upon me as a pariah, so the odds of a respectable suitor were slim.

Which left only one option, and I'd have sooner raced straight into those woods than suffer the horrors I'd heard befell the Red Veils, the least of which was having their tongues cut out for a vow of silence. Those deemed most impure were said to suffer the worst indoctrination, often beaten into submission and made to endure long bouts of isolation.

Even then, pangs of anxiety clenched my chest at the thought of being sequestered from my sister. She was the only person who'd ever shown me love unconditionally, the only person willing to see beyond the cursed baby left near the Eating Woods, in spite of what it meant