



That which slumbers
should never be awakened.

ELDRITCH

KERI LAKE

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THE EATING WOODS, #2

KERI LAKE



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ELDRITCH

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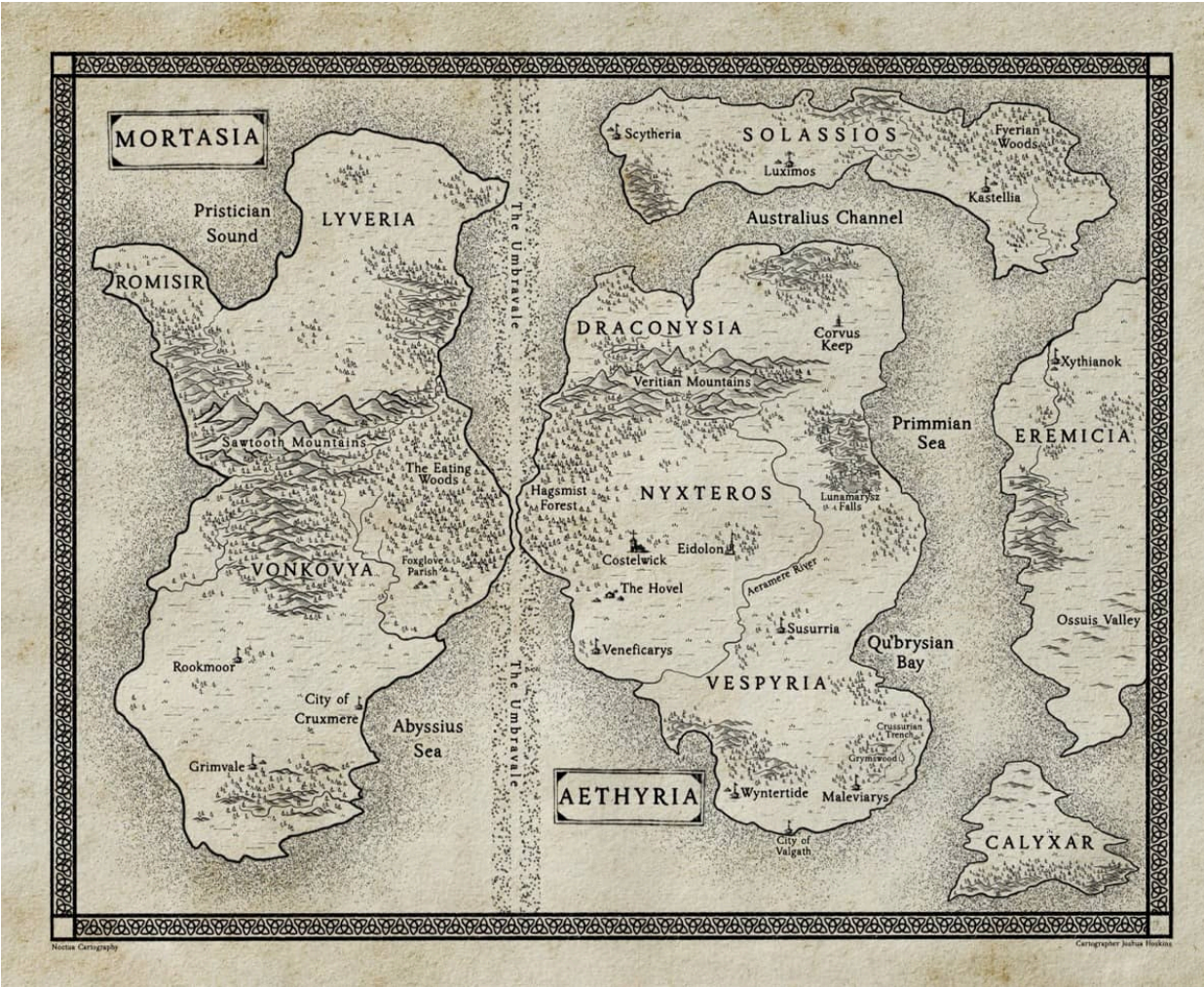
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Warning: This book contains explicit sexual content, and violent scenes that some readers may find disturbing.

So do the dark in soul expire,
Or live like scorpion girt by fire;

—Lord Byron



Dear Reader

Thank you for picking up the second installment of The Eating Woods Trilogy. When I wrote *Anathema*, I never dreamed that so many would embrace this story and these characters. This sequel exists, in large part, because of your love and encouragement and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to write in this world a bit longer.

That said, before you dive in, I want to point out a few important elements.

For the second book, I decided to explore Zevander's backstory, to show how integral it is to his character and the events in *Anathema*. Keep an eye out for links back to book one--some that might be subtle. I'm also very intentional with the past and early chapters. What might seem irrelevant has meaning, so please be patient, as it will eventually come together.

If you're looking for spice after having read *Anathema*, know that I took great care to handle Zevander's past and trauma delicately. The scenes in this book are open door and explicit but were approached with consideration and acknowledgment of the abuse he suffered. Please be patient regarding the romance, as both characters have a lot to work through.

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:

[FULL TRIGGER LIST](#)

Glossary

A printable glossary is available on my website

[CLICK HERE](#)

PROLOGUE



Nineteen years ago...

Screams echoed down the abyssal passageway. The damp and frigid air of the stony undercroft nearly stole the young acolyte's breath on her hurried flight toward the guttural cries. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

"Slow your pace, infernal child," Sacton Crain grumbled from behind, as he hobbled to keep up with her.

Each cell she passed housed no less than a half-dozen women and children—most of them Lyverians seized by the Red Men. While the putrid odor of death, defecation, and decay surely must have nauseated Sacton Crain, the girl had grown used to it, having spent most of her days in the temple's rotting bowels.

The cries led her to a cell in which a Lyverian woman, not much older than herself, lay writhing, kicking and screaming on the gritty floor. Her limbs and forehead bore the carvings of the cross, cut by a crude knife, all of them trickling fresh blood. Arms pinned at either side of her body by three other Red Veils, she lay drowning beneath a cluster of red robes.

"Give her to me!" Her Lyverian accent clung heavily to her hoarse words, as fresh blood leaked from her nose where she must've been struck. "Give me

my child!”

Sacton Crain slipped past the acolyte into the room. “What was so pressing that you dragged me out of bed as if the dead were afoot?”

“A birth, Your Grace.” Mother Vona, the only Red Veil who’d been permitted to keep her tongue, loomed over the fussing woman, her stern eyes dulled with apathy. “See for yourself.”

Beside Mother Vona stood another prisoner—a Vonkovyan, given the filthy golden tone of her hair—in threadbare clothes that barely clung to her body. She held a small bundle in her trembling arms.

Sacton Crain hobbled over to her, and the moment he peered down at the child, his brows lowered. “Was it you who assisted?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the Vonkovyan prisoner answered. “I heard her whisper to someone in tongues.” She glanced at the woman on the floor, betrayal twisting the Vonkovyan’s expression. “There were nothing but shadows there.”

“Lies!” the woman screamed, wriggling against the willful hands pinning her wrists to the ground. “I prayed to the gods. *My* gods!”

Mother Vona swung her gaze toward the Lyverian mother. “Silver eyes are an abomination. You’ve birthed a demon. Your gods have forsaken you. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

The restrained woman screamed, fighting against the Red Veils as they scrambled to hold her down. “Give me my child! Give her to me now!”

Sacton Crain knelt beside the woman and stroked his hand across her cheek. “There, there. Evil brought into the world must be extinguished, for we are merciless shepherds of the sacred tenet.”

The older Red Veil set her eyes upon the acolyte and nodded toward the prisoner holding the baby. “Take her to The Eating Woods. Offer her as a sacrifice, so that we may be blessed with a mild winter.”

A cruel and brutal fate for a child no more than a couple of days old. If whatever lived in those woods didn’t strip the flesh from her small body, the animals that lurked for scraps of food in the night surely would. Without

question, the acolyte gave a curt nod and stalked toward the woman, who held the baby outstretched.

No sooner had she accepted the child than the acolyte watched in horror as Sacton Crain sliced a blade across the Lyverian mother's neck.

A stuttering breath caught in the woman's throat, and she choked, gurgling and gasping, while the blood poured out of her onto the gritty floor. Managing to free one of her hands, she seized Sacton Crain's, her blood dripping from the blade still caught in his grasp.

Raspy words, spoken in her native tongue, were interrupted by errant spurts of blood from her mouth, and Sacton Crain's eyes widened, his body still, seemingly paralyzed by her touch. His gaze remained rooted on the woman, mouth open as if he might scream, but his voice seemed strangled by something unseen.

"An ancient power...loosed...from thrall. Two worlds smothered...by a pestilent...pall." The Lyverian mother's words were broken by her dying breaths. "From the tree of rot...the insects...crawl. Decay and blight...unslain by steel...will bring...the strongest men...to kneel."

The final words spoken by the young mother lingered like a heavy blanket of doom, and when she finally collapsed, releasing Sacton Crain, he scrambled backward, clearly shaken by what she'd whispered to him.

His jaw trembled when he said, "No one must know of this. No one must ever know of this!"

The Vonkovyan prisoner screamed as the three Red Veils surrounded her, the sound quickly silenced when they stabbed their small blades into her body.

Panic curled in the acolyte's belly, her breaths uneven, heart pounding as she took in the gore.

"It is fortunate that you do not have a tongue to speak a word of this, or you'd meet the same fate." Mother Vona tore her gaze from the bloody visual and turned toward her. "Dispose of the child with haste."

Lowering her head, the acolyte nodded again and slipped from the cell with the too-quiet babe in her arms. She scurried through the tunnels of the

undercroft—ones she knew well, as her mother had also been imprisoned by the Red Men. It was only by the mercy of Sacton Crain that she ascended to the position of acolyte, instead of rotting away in the same cell that had ultimately seen her mother's death.

Her mother would've hung her head in shame to see her daughter carrying a freshly born infant to her death, yet even though such a thought troubled her, the acolyte refused to falter in her duties. Doing so would mean punishment—possibly getting sent to those infernal woods herself.

En route to the heavy wooden door at the end of the corridor, she swiped one of the baskets used to gather herbs in the garden and paused to lay the child within. She lifted one of the small oil lanterns that had been left beside a wooden chair and turned up the lit flame.

Lifting the hood of her cloak to conceal her face, the acolyte pushed against the wooden door, fighting against gusts of wind, and stepped out into wintry air. Frosted vapors of breath dissipated into the moonless night, and the icy snow crunched beneath her boots. God weeping, the child needn't have feared an animal's vicious teeth, as that unforgiving bite of cold would surely be her demise before anything else.

While the lamp's flame remained housed in glass and brass, it flickered as it dangled from her outstretched arm, and with the basket clutched in the crook of her elbow, she held her cloak and took swift steps through the slumbering village, past the small shops and the stony fountain. A few burning hearths offered a small bit of light as she kept on toward the narrow footpath beyond the village, where the darkness swallowed her. Eyes scanning her surroundings, she watched for any sign of wolves that were said to attack a lone passerby on occasion. Needles of cold air sliced at her face on a strong gust, and the quiet wailing from inside the basket sent a fearful shiver down her spine.

She groaned when her hood flew back, exposing her ears to that punishing chill. *Damn the cursed child for refusing to quiet!* The louder she cried, the stronger the acolyte's urge grew to smother her, until, by some grace of God, the child finally stilled. Unsure if she preferred the sound or

silence, she scurried faster, contemplating leaving the baby along the footpath instead. Except, if Mother Vona found out she'd not offered it up to The Eating Woods? Oh, what punishment that would bring.

When she finally reached the stretch of woods, she scampered along its edge, keeping her distance from those trees that might've been inclined to reach out and snatch her up. The wind settled to an eerie stillness, the child finally calm, until only the sound of the acolyte's panicked breaths could be heard beneath the crunching of snow.

Giggling echoed through the adjacent woods, and she snapped her attention there, her eyes scanning through the dense fog and thick tree trunks that she could see by the light of the lantern.

Nothing but the stench of rot and decaying vegetation.

Even so, she slowed her steps, not daring to keep her eyes off those trees, until something struck the tip of her boot. Angling the lantern toward the ground, she frowned at a small, bloody mass lying in the snow. An animal, given its bent form and cloven feet, but the lack of skin and only stringing bits of flesh clinging to its bones made it impossible to identify.

A creeping terror crawled up her spine. Swallowing back a gulp, she stepped around the poor beast, and a glance at the child's glowing, silvery eyes reminded her that she'd soon suffer the same fate.

She looked away, shaking her head.

The will of The Red God.

Even if she thought The Red God was merciless and cruel at times, who was she to question his will?

At last, the acolyte reached the archway to the forest, where vining branches, twisted around weathered bones, served as the entryway to the forlorn-looking trees beyond. Teeth chattering, the acolyte lay the basket on the stones, not daring to share so much as a hand across the threshold.

A sharp skitter of claws against snow had her whirling around with her heart pounding in her chest. A half-dozen ravens had gathered at her back, the sight of them unnerving. Still, better the ravens than whatever lived amongst those trees.

“Eleanor.”

The acolyte gasped and jumped back from the archway.

“Mine sweet Eleanor.” The voice that reached her ears sounded too much like her mother's. “What dost thou hold there, my daughter?”

The acolyte frowned at her mother's archaic tongue. Such formality of words had not been spoken since her great grandmother's youth.

A spectral shadow slipped through the trees, a flash of white reminiscent of the stark, white shift her mother had worn the night they were captured and taken to the temple's undercroft. The acolyte had been no more than a child then, terrified when both she and her mother were forced into the padded carriage that collected those accused of suffering lunacy. In the months that followed, she'd watched her mother endure cruel interrogations, poked and prodded by witch prickers, and made to undergo treatment for bad humors. In time, that stark white shift had collected dirt, grime, and blood—a motley collection of her mother's suffering.

“Come, Eleanor. Escape with me to the woods.” Another flash of white, followed by the telling red of her mother's long hair, as if she were trifling about through the trees. A distant echo of her mother's laugh, one she'd not heard in years, brought a tearful smile to her face. “Let us make merry until night giveth way to dawn!”

The ghostly figure twirled and slipped behind the trees, and the acolyte stepped closer.

“Come, Daughter. Cast off thine shackles and live as thou wilt.”

The ancient tongue still troubled her, even if her mother had slipped from time to time herself and spoke as her own grandmother had before her, but the whimsy in her mother's voice compelled Eleanor closer. Closer.

A wailing cry from the child in the basket failed to break her focus, as she watched the figure mince through the trunks of the trees, stoking the fallen brush.

Mother! She reached out her hand, her fingertips stretching just past the archway. *Wait for me, Mother!*

The child screamed in the basket, her cries so filled with terror, the acolyte broke from her trance to see those tiny glowing eyes staring up at her amid a face as red as a beet. The ravens had flocked closer, cawing as if to chastise. One flew at the young acolyte, and she threw up her hands, swatting at it. Another joined the first, their sharp claws scratching against the exposed bits of her skin.

Get away! Get away!

She swatted at them with the frantic thrashing of her hands, unknowingly inching backward to avoid their attack.

Something cold gripped her wrist, and she turned to find a tall, beastly creature with bark-like skin and antlers staring back at her.

The wrathavore.

A scream tore through her chest at the same time as a hard yank sent her flying through the archway.

Into The Eating Woods.

* * *

Shrill wails of agony rang out in the distance, and The Crone Witch straightened from where she bent over a patch of frosted moonberry. She twisted toward The Eating Woods, pausing to listen. Wasn't unusual to hear the occasional scream of some poor, unwitting soul who'd gotten a bit too close.

Fools.

She turned back to her toil, but another sound rose above the first. A long, nasally cry of a child, higher pitched and more frantic. Like that of a newborn.

Frowning, she lifted her lantern and hobbled around the corner of the cottage, toward the center of her yard, where she could see something at the foot of the distant archway surrounded by a cluster of ravens.

A small babe in a basket?

Scanning the surroundings showed no one, but those cries went on, until The Crone Witch could no longer ignore it. Keeping to the edge of the trees, she limped closer. Closer still—until she came upon the basket in which a baby lay trembling, its tiny hands having come loose from its swaddling. A raven sat beside the child, roosting close, which seemed to fascinate the babe, as it no longer screamed. Those eyes, silver eyes, remained riveted on the bird.

Eyes of silver and deathly pale skin.

The child her priestess had prophesied would arrive with a new moon.

The Crone Witch glanced up at the black sky and trailed her gaze downward, to where a flitting piece of red fabric had caught on a sharp tine of the archway's bone. She lifted it from the pointed tip, noting a wet saturation, and released it, watching it vanish into the trees. What she surmised to be blood coated her fingertips.

Perhaps the child's mother, eaten by the woods.

Masculine voices emerged from the distant tree line ahead of her and the old woman dimmed her lantern, scurrying to hide amongst a copse of shrubs. She watched as an older man approached—a hunter, judging by the bow strapped to his back, the earthy tone of his clothing, and the snares he carried at his hip. A boy, no more than twelve, walked alongside him, garbed in the same clothing. Both of them headed toward the baby, and as they seemed to catch sight of her, the older hunter frowned.

“By God, is that a baby?” The boy lowered himself alongside the basket, and the older hunter knocked him backward with a swift shove of his shoulder.

“Keep your distance.”

“But it's just a babe, Pa. So tiny, like Margaret.”

The boy's father nodded toward the child. “Look at its eyes. An aberration.” He looked around, his palm resting on the hilt of a dagger at his hip. “Ravens flock to evil. Whoever left it here, did so with intention. And we will do the same.”