

Entry Two

The journey was a familiar one. The mud-brick estate stood on the edge of the village, far enough from the Nile that few had business in that direction, yet close enough to Jabari's estate to place little travel time between the two. My thoughts had already run too far and I needed to make haste.

I saw her before she saw me. Head bowed, ebony hair flowed over her shoulders. Though they were lowered, I knew her russet eyes. My heart pounded, loins ached, each time I saw her. She stood half hidden behind a copse of rose bushes, palm and myrrh trees, nestled within the vast gardens, just as we had arranged. I approached, letting my presence be known.

She raised her head. "Mistress. No one saw me come but I have little time this night, as my chores are vast."

I nodded. This one I had known for over a year. One of few humans remaining who, through family ties, still revered Father's people. One of few raised to recall a time when my people were seen as *Gods from the Sky*. When offering their blood to us was an honor.

Yet still I did not know her name. Usually, it mattered little. She was merely a servant, though a generous one with the sweetest scent in all of Giza, Saqqara, Alexandria, and all the Nile Delta. Even as far as Abydos. So many I had tasted none of their names known. But tonight it mattered. Tonight everything mattered. This could be my last eve here.

"I know the time has been long," said I, "but please, tell me your name. I need to know it now."

The girl raised an enigmatic brow. "Zahrah."

I smiled. "Zahrah." Though the dim light exaggerated her high cheekbones and ruby lips, her beauty was real. I pulled her toward me, one arm snaking around her slight waist. Our lips met then, and the lust of Seth came to greet me. Zahrah, her taste. Her scent. Her beauty. Everything about this human tantalized me. Almond and olive oils.

"Sweet," I whispered. "Sweetest in the Valley." With more care than usual, I pierced the thin human flesh of her lips with my teeth. No hesitation. No pain. Zahrah parted her lips against mine.

And then the smooth satin that I treasured above all others flowed over my tongue. Youthful innocence. Power. And within it I was lost. The surrounding world shrank away and all that existed was that sensuous taste. Exuberance. Tensions of the past week released. A cocoon of calm wrapped me in its warmth and I reveled in it. But it was not to last. All at once, coldness settled over me like a cruel wind. A shiver ran through me. Someone approached. In the distant fog of my mind I heard my name on the breeze.

"Kesi! What are you doing?"

A man's voice, deep, confused, angry. Zahrah was forced from my arms. Painful. The hunger had not been satiated. Frigid desert air flogged at my flesh. My eyes blinked open. At first the whole scene was as a surreal dream.

I heard my own voice. "Jabari?"

He was there. He had taken my hand, pulled me from Zahrah. Away from my meal. I was disoriented, having been interrupted, too bewildered to respond. He was speaking to me.

"What were you doing!? Wha—There is blood!"

I realised then I still tasted the bliss, licking it from my lips, feeling its trickle on my chin.

"What are you?" I had never heard him so angry.

Indeed, what am I? Tell him. You need to reveal who you are, where you may go.

"What has happened, Kesi? Answer me!" He grasped my shoulders with firm masculine hands. He shook me. A blast of wind and sand—a gritty slap in the face—helped to awaken my mind.

"Kesi!"

He took my hand, hauled me away, farther and farther from the delicious meal, the sensuous blood. I could have easily defeated him, gone back to finish my repast. But, no. I loved him. I could never harm him. My mind had begun to clear, to return from the stupor of that intoxicating meal. Those sweet lips. I glanced behind and saw Zahrah running toward Jhafi's manor, in which she served.

"What is wrong with you, Kesi?" I turned back to look into Jabari's face, the shadows of confusion cast over him. "Y-You were *kissing* her! And the blood...She is a servant...a slave!" He moved away, dragging me along. I followed in an obedient manner, too lost to resist. *You were going to inform him anyway*, I told myself. There was no getting out now.

Not like this. The time is not yet right.

No one spoke and we did not stop until we reached the portico of his home. He released my hand. The scent of human food wafted from within. The combined scents of cumin and onion assaulted me, and spices the names of which I had never learned. My stomach churned. Jabari sat on the stone bench, I paced to the rail. I squeezed trembling hands into fists at my sides.

"Kesi?"

I kept my eyes averted.

"How long have we been together? *Please!* What is your explanation for what I saw?"

Time was not right.

Hunger persisted and made me weak. I could not think. Perhaps I should fib, leave things as they were. For almost a year our life together was near perfection. Why alter it with a truth that might well push him away? Or leave him sour?

It is too late. He saw. He knows. What lie would amend what his eyes witnessed? I battled with myself.

"I have always held the knowledge that you are different, Kesi. You have never taken a meal with me. I have never seen you in daylight hours."

A sea of stars spread out beyond like a blanket in the sky. I concentrated on them. Soon I would join them. My decision had been made for me.

"I have heard rumor," continued Jabari. "That many thousands of years ago gods in human form emerged from the night desert, that they were, and gave birth to, a new race—blood drinkers. Night stalkers with superb strength and a lethal demeanor. Killers who fed on others." His voice was cold, as if he did not believe himself, his own words, or what he suspected in his heart.

I placed my hands unsteadily on the marble rail. In the distance the tip of Khufu's great pyramid was a silhouette against the night horizon and the dim light of civilisation along the Nile.

"It looked to me, Kesi, as if you were...as if you were drinking from that girl. As if...no, it is too horrible a concept to imagine that you, my future wife, could be one with the killers of rumor. Being a man of reason, I never believed these tales, and I certainly would never define you as having a lethal demeanor. But I cannot ignore what I witnessed this night." I heard the rustle of his clothing as he stood. "Will you please speak to me?"

And here it is. Time has come.

"I have meant to tell you the truth," I started. "I should have told you before now."

"Truth?" His voice quivered. "What truth?"

Still I did not turn, did not look at him. "The truth about what I am."