



# GERATHON

**G**ERATHON MOVED. HER BLACK SCALES, THICK AS PLATE metal, clicked against the sandstone. Her mouth was open, tasting the air. Her tail flicked playfully behind her.

Life! She thrilled with life, with her own body sliding over earth, and the earth sliding under her. Life is a pulse, a twitch, a flutter, an inhale. Life is movement. She wagged her tongue and tasted human on the breeze. More life! She wasn't hungry at the moment. Flocks of animals skittered, lumbered, and scampered after her, trembling with fear yet unable to turn away. Anytime she wanted a snack, she simply extended her great neck and snatched up a kangaroo or wild dog. She had not known hunger since her escape. All the same, life filled her with the desire to grab pulsing things and squeeze.

She changed directions toward the lone human, her weaving body frisky. She could move nearly silently, of course, but there was no need. What creature could outrun two tons of cobra?

This creature did try—a young man, his face still full of childhood when he looked back at her with wide-eyed

fear. She hissed, a happy kind of giggle, and buzzed with the strength of her muscles and long, strong body. She spread the elegant hood of skin on her neck, coiled, and sprang.

Life! This life between her jaws thrashed, kicked, his heartbeat galloping against her tongue. He screamed heartily as her fangs pressed into his back, and her thick, black venom oozed inside him. His heart graciously pumped the venom along with his own blood throughout his body. He twitched for a time before going limp. But his heart was still beating, slow and lovely, as she swallowed him whole, her fantastic muscles pulling him foot by foot through her soft pink mouth into the final darkness of her belly.

She curled up and rested in the hot coral sands, enjoying the sensation of that second heartbeat beside her own, another life inside her, slowly dying by her own power.

She laughed now to remember how she had raged and seethed for centuries beneath her prison of rocks and dirt, the weight trying to crush life, swallow movement, end her. But new freedom made everything more delicious. Warm with sunlight and fresh food, she felt giddy and just a bit mischievous. She couldn't possibly eat another thing, yet her hunger for life was only piqued.

Her yellow eyes turned white as she reached out with her mind. Many white spots of heat vibrated behind her eyes, each one representing a person, all known to Gerathon as a shepherd knows her sheep.

Gerathon chose a sleeper. Easier to slip into the unconscious ones. This was a woman, elderly by human standards, living far away in Nilo. Gerathon's consciousness filled

the woman's mind like sand fills a jar. She made her stand, leave her little house, and look around. Night in Nilo was brown and warm, scented with jasmine. Gerathon could almost feel the crack of dry grass beneath the woman's bare feet, the soil still holding heat from that day's sun.

Through the woman's eyes, Gerathon saw a cliff ahead. She moved her toward it, faster, faster, running now.

The woman flinched then, as if trying to wake up. Gerathon hissed pleasantly. Life is movement.

She moved the woman over the edge and fell with her, abandoning the woman's consciousness a moment before she hit the canyon floor.

A waste perhaps, considering Gerathon's plans for the future. But she needed to collect all the talismans first anyway, and in the meantime, a Great Beast deserves to play.

She licked the wind. The curl of her scaly mouth was always smiling.