

# The Promise Keeper by L. Marie Wood

## Excerpt

Zaji. The name given to her at birth by her mother. The name whose meaning she would never be able to realize. Womanhood in the truest sense—physical and mental maturity combined—she would never see in her mortal life. She chuckled at the sentiment as she rose from the bed, preparing for the work ahead. That she had died a child seemed like a cruel joke to a body that felt aged and worn.

Zaji. The name echoed in her head; spoken by a voice she couldn't place. She hadn't used that name since she took the great sleep in her homeland. The night she died, she returned to her grave after a visit to a place she would never again call home. She made herself lay inert for decades, trying to still her heart and stop her breathing. But still she rose, weak and weary from lack of sustenance after years of hiding, years of denying her nature, such as it had become.

But not dead, no.

On the contrary, she was very much alive. Her senses were heightened; even the minutest of sounds rang in her ears. The cool air that met her when she arose from her grave felt harsh against her skin, like needles penetrating flesh that had been rubbed raw. The air she inhaled burned her nostrils' delicate lining. Her discomfort was insufferable, yet she had never felt so full of life. She had never felt so alert, so vibrant, so consumed with hunger. It was then, when her hunger could no longer be contained, she took her first prey: A pretty girl whose beautiful upturned eyes and trusting smile would never escape Zaji's memory. She knew, as she drank

ravenously the blood of an innocent, its metallic tang like sweet nectar caressing her tongue and throat, she was no longer Zaji, the oldest daughter of Hiji and Mariama of Dahomey.

Nothing about her present state resembled the person she had been in the past.

Before.

She was forever changed. Tainted. Holding on to that girl, the sweet Zaji who thrived on life and the quest for knowledge, would be impious. Zaji was dead. So, she let her go and became someone else. She became Angelique.