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Sister of Darkness

by

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1940 Hyères, France

Leora woke with a start. A heavy weight pressed against her chest, and she couldn't breathe. She tried to scream, but a hand covered her mouth. Her eyes flashed open and widened—in the pitch darkness, her sister, Leila, straddled her. Leila's eyes were ecstatic. Her mouth curled up in a feral smile. She held one hand over Leora's mouth and with the other pinched her nose.

Leora heaved her body up. She pressed with her legs and tried to roll Leila off. She twisted her head to the side, and spotted Amisi, her servant, by the door crumpled in a heap across the threshold. A cloud of darkness seemed to rise from the spot where Amisi lay. Leora snapped her head back toward Leila. Her sight of Leila was also being swallowed in darkness. Leora suddenly realized no dark cloud came from Amisi; the darkness wasn't filling her room—her

vision was fading away, slowly, so slowly. She stared imploringly at her sister. Leila laughed harshly deep in her chest.

Within the darkness of her failing mind and body, Leora grasped for her last hope, she opened her mouth as wide as she could. Leila's ruthlessly crushing fingers pressed into her mouth. With all her remaining strength, Leora bit down on Leila's fingers. She tasted blood.

Enraptured in her zeal, confident in her success, Leila didn't notice Leora's response for one long moment; then with a howl, she ripped her fingers out of Leora's mouth and leapt off the sleeping cot onto the tiled floor.

Leora took a long and strangled breath and rolled off her cot on the other side. She knelt on the cool tile and coughed and drew in deep revitalizing breaths. Leila knelt in a crouch on the other side of the cot and nursed her bloody fingers. After a moment, she moved threateningly toward Leora.

The sudden noise of running bare feet and soldier's sandals stopped her. Leila stared across the cot, down at her sister, "I will have my way with you, sister. Darkness rules the light. It always has from the beginning of the world. If you won't bow to me in the temple, you shall certainly bow to me everywhere else." She spat at Leora and ran out of the single door to Leora's small bedroom.

"Mama," Marie shook her sleeping mother's shoulder, "Mama!"

Leora Bolang groggily shook her head and rose up on her elbows. Marie, her sweet child of nine leaned impatiently over her. She stood in her nightgown and her gentle face was filled with worry. In one hand she held a threadbare rabbit, and the other held on to Leora.

Leora ran her fingers through her thick black hair, "What's wrong Marie?"

“Lumière is dreaming again. I can’t wake her up. It doesn’t sound nice at all, and she’s turning blue.”

Leora leapt out of bed and grabbed her robe. She ran to the bedroom Lumie’re and Marie shared in the small house on the beach at Hyères in France.

Lumière was hardly making a sound. Her twelve year old body thrashed around as though her upper limbs and chest were pinned. She arched her back and did not breathe.

Leora sat at Lumière’s side and grasped her shoulders, but Leora could not move her. She tried to wake her. Lumière would not wake. Her eyes were open fully and stared outward not seeing anything in the here and now. All the time Lumière did not make a sound, did not take a breath. Without warning, her mouth opened wide, and she clenched her teeth. She gasped—an enormous breath.

Leora and Marie heard a pain filled sound that did not come from Lumière. Lumie’re wrenched out of Leora’s grasp and rolled off the other side of the bed onto the floor. Her eyes were open—had been open. Leora and Marie ran around the bed to her. In her fingers, Leora gathered the feeble light of the moon and raised up her hand in a sign. It seemed like the sign of the cross mixed with a cabalistic motion. The light coalesced around her fingers and made a shape a glowing shape that did not immediately dissipate.

Lumière’s eyes closed and snapped open. She let out a low moan and cried out hoarsely, “Mama, oh Mama.” She buried her face in her mother’s arms, “I was you, and this time, Leila tried to kill me.”

Leora held her eldest child closer and with sudden insight spoke into her dark hair, “Was it the time she came in the night and held my nose and mouth?”

“Yes, just that time. She said she would make me bow to her.”

“I’m sorry Lumière. I’m so sorry she is attacking me through you. I’m not sure what I can do.”

Lumière wept against her, “Can’t you stop it. Can’t you stop her?”

Leora choked back a sob, “I couldn’t stop her then. I’m not sure I can stop her now.”

“Oh Mother. Did she do these horrible things to you?”

“Yes, the ones you experienced and many more.”

“Please, Mama stop her, stop this.”

“I don’t know if I can. I would, oh how I would if only I knew how.”

Lumière pulled her head back from her mother’s embrace, “Just, who is she? Who is your sister? Who is Leila?”

Leora placed two fingers over Lumière mouth, “Don’t even think that name and especially don’t say it. Her name has power, just as my name has power.”

Marie stepped closer, “Why does your name have power? I want to know too—who is this person in Lumière’s dreams? Is she real?”

Leora smiled slightly and looked at her two girls gazing so wondrously up at her, “I must ask your father if it is the time to tell you.”

“To tell us what?”

“To tell you about what you asked and about our family. For now, don’t be fearful. I know Lumière what you have dreamed is terrible and frightful, but do not be afraid. My sister did not overcome me. She did not win this time against you either. Face her and you will be able to overcome her.”

As Leora stood, Lumière grasped her arm, “Don’t leave yet. Stay a while, please Mama.”

Leora helped Lumière back into bed and stroked her hair. Marie came around the other side and slipped under the covers, “Sometimes I wish I had a normal sister who would just wet the bed at night.”

“Hush, Marie. You are lucky you haven’t had these dreams yourself. You and Lumière are different pieces cut from the same cloth,” Leora lay down beside Lumière.

Marie tucked in her rabbit, “If I had a dream like that, I’d get her first—I would.”

Lumière smiled in the darkness at Marie, “I bit her.”

“You did?”

“I bit her fingers so hard; she won’t be able to use the Osiris Offering Formula for a long time.”

Marie put her fingers under the covers, “Just don’t mistake me for her.”

Under her breath, Leora wondered, where did she learn about the offering formula—what does my child know of such things?

On Saturday, Paul Bolang came home. The children heard the moment his cab turned off the road from Hyères. It pulled noisily through the gate above the beach, and the four children came running. With anticipation they watched as the cab tracked down the thin cliff side road and came to a halt in the sandy yard of their small house. Paul threw out his small bag and leapt out of the automobile. The cabby, already paid, turned the car around and roared back toward the road. Paul stood for only a moment before his children overwhelmed him. Marie, nine, insufferably cute with a perpetual pout and dangerously precocious reached him first. She launched herself into his arms and almost knocked Paul over. Robert, eleven, strong limbed and tall with an amused smirk on his face as though he alone ensured Marie reached Paul first,

stepped into the fray and grabbed Paul's right arm. Jacques, ten, loudly protested Robert's tactics that let Marie arrive before him. Almost as tall as Robert, his shoulders were wider, and his look more playful. He took a firm hold of Paul's left arm. Paul shifted Marie's weight to one side and sat her in the crook of his arm. Lumière, all of twelve and completely refined, stepped with stately grace in front of her father and curtsied, "Welcome home, Papa."

Paul kissed her cheek. Kissed Marie's cheek. Kissed Robert and Jacques cheeks. "I bless you for your courteous greeting." The children stared up at him, adoration plain on their youthful faces. Paul's features were angular and handsome. They were refined; they combined both gentleness with a hardness that was rooted in his past and his profession. His skin was uniformly tanned by exposure to life outdoors in the mountains that formed the border of France and Italy. His blue uniform announced him as a Colonel of the French Cavalry. The bright cord around his right arm said he acted as a consultant and liaison for the French Alpine forces that guarded the border between France and Italy. Around his eyes and mouth were fine wrinkles caused by the sun and wind as well as the lines from his bright smile. His children loved those small wrinkles that always heralded his smile. He was of average build and height, but that masked a strength trained by harsh conditions and constant warfare.

"Come on," Paul pulled Robert and Jacques in his wake, "Let's find your mother."

Marie grasped the sides of Paul's face and kissed his lips, "I love you, Papa." She put her head against his.

"I love you too. How is your mathematics coming along?"

She whispered, "Robert and Jacques are helping me. Mother says she knows nothing about it. Did you know it is impossible to do multiplication in Greek?"

Paul's lips tipped into a wide smile. He whispered back, "That's no reason to not learn how to do it."

"But mother can't."

"That is why you must."

"Robert told me you would say that."

When they reached the door, Paul let Marie down and called, "Leora, I'm home."

She stepped out of the coolness of the small house. Her children expanded their orbit from papa to include mama also. They turned their gaze from their father to mother. Leora was radiant. The sunlight literally seemed to gather in her creamy coffee au latte skin and long black tresses. She appeared as though she was not quite thirty, but appearances can be deceiving. Her eyes were almond colored and slightly almond shaped, thin lidded like an Egyptian tomb painting without makeup. Her beauty always took Paul's breath away. Her smile for him was large and inviting. Paul folded her in his arms and kissed her.

"Eww," Jacques curled his lip.

Leora kissed him again. Then, she turned her head, "Marie, Jacques, go set the table. Robert, pour the drinks. Lumière check the bread and set out the oil."

"*Oui*, Mama," they made no move to go.

"Scoot, go, I want to speak to your father," she turned a gentle scowl at them.

The four children ran off to the kitchen, and Leora threaded her arm through Paul's, "Come, my love, let's walk down the beach a little ways."

The sound of the soft Mediterranean surf filled the late winter shore. The water was cool, but the air charged with a touch of the coming spring. Leora leaned on Paul's arm and let her whole body rest against him, "I missed you very much this week."

“You will have to miss me even more—for a while.”

She sighed, “I know. I saw it. Since the fall of Poland your particular skills are greatly needed.”

“Three Alpine battalions are being assigned to Norway to aid the British. Hitler’s attack in Norway has been as successful as that against Poland. We are shipping out next week.”

“To a cold place.”

“Yes a very cold place.”

“When will you be back?”

“You know that better than I do.”

“Hah! Just because I can see doesn’t mean I can see everything. And there is a darkness.”

“A darkness?”

“Where once the future was bright and easy to see, it has turned dark. I cannot see ahead as far as I could, and every time I try, this darkness confronts me.”

“Could it be your sister?”

“It smells of her manipulation, but she is not that powerful. I think something horrible awaits us all. Something dark and malevolent that will try us more than anything we have faced before,” Leora shuddered.

“I am afraid to leave you when you predict such danger.”

Leora’s face brightened, “You have your duty, and I have mine. I warn you, but nothing you can do will stop this. You must act as your commander dictates. It is the will of the Aton God after all.”

“Is it His will?”

Leora turned to face Paul, "It is the Aton God's will. You must heed it." She pulled him along the beach, "There is something else that concerns me as much as your assignment."

"Yes?"

"Lumière has been dreaming of my sister."

"Dreaming of her?"

"Not just dreaming. She is living out many incidents from my early life in the temple."

Leora glanced up at him, "My sister made my life unbearable until I learned how to thwart her. It seems as if she is putting Lumière through the same tortures."

"How is Lumière...?"

"She is fine. Frightened but undaunted."

"How could your sister get to our child? How is she aware that Lumière exists?"

"I don't know, my love. My sister is attuned to me. She may know much through my mind especially since I revealed myself to her when I was searching for you. I need to ask you again...I think now is the time to tell the children about our past."

"Do you believe that is safe?"

"No, it has never been safe, but this attack on Lumière and everything else that has happened needs some explanation. They are young, but I feel they should understand. We have known for a long time Lumière can successfully call in the light."

"Will Lumière become the next Goddess of Light?"

"Ah, I don't know. This has never happened in the history of the Egyptian temples of light and darkness. The Goddess's of Light and Darkness were always tied together in life and death. The death of one meant the death of the other."

Paul turned and grasped Leora by the arms, “You never told me this before. When we confronted your sister before, you expected to die?”

“I thought I would die. I was absolutely astounded afterward to find I was not dead, that I was still alive and still me.”

Paul held her tightly to him, and she put her lips on his, a long and lingering kiss. After a while, Leora tilted back her head, “Hold me, Paul. Hold me, I am so glad the Aton God let me live to be here with you.”

“You would give up your life to protect us from your sister?”

“I made that choice a long time ago.”

Paul pulled her up close to his side, “Could Lumière become the Goddess of Darkness?”

“Never! I would not permit it.”

Paul heard the dangerous resolution in Leora’s voice and didn’t pursue the thought.

“Other than this intrusion in our family, the children are progressing well?”

Leora snuggled closer to Paul, “Very well. That is, I am sure they are doing well in everything but mathematics.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t understand this mathematics thing at all.”

“Their marks are good?”

“I believe they are accomplishing their assignments correctly. Robert is my key in mathematics. He tells me they are all doing well. Marie has improved since you gave her your ultimatum.”

Paul smiled, “They must all understand mathematics, even if their mother doesn’t.”

“If I must learn, I will. Now, let’s head back to the house. Our dinner is hot, and the children are wondering what we are cooking up out here.”

“Surely, they understand.”

“They may be French, but I don’t want them to gain too much understanding too soon.”

“I think that must be the same answer to your question. I don’t think they are ready to know about their mother or their father—yet.”

Leora nodded unhappily, but she didn’t say anything more.

Paul and Leora turned back toward their small house on the beach. Paul bought it a few years ago from Monsieur Roux, his father’s friend. The house was almost the same as when Leora first saw it, but not quite. They had added on another bedroom so the boys could share one and the girls the other. They had replaced the furniture and fixed all the broken walls the mysterious Monsieur Nefis and his henchmen left during their last clandestine visit. Other than that, they lived in simplicity, without servants on the sunny beach just a mile outside of Hyères.

The children attended school with all the other Catholic children in Hyères. Except for their mathematics skills, they were many, many levels ahead of their classmates, a situation, the children, Paul and Leora, and their teachers attempted to hide from everyone else. They were of course completely unsuccessful at keeping it secret. Children, especially, discern these things. Once you catch your best friend conversing in perfect classical Greek with his younger sister, a language you have with limited success attempted to understand for at least a couple of years, you realize your friend is unusually gifted. Paul and Leora’s children were so artful and well liked that no one paid attention to their inexplicable skills and instead capitalized on them. For another student and even for a priest and school teacher, there is a distinct benefit to having a natural linguist for a student. Good examples are always hard to find, as are teachers who make

a language seem effortless. The Bolang children achieved this purpose for their small school and their friends.

Paul and his command shipped out the following week. There was nothing else to be said and much to be done. The world was running toward war, and nothing seemed ready to thwart that singular desire.

