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Sister of Light

by
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1 Corinthians 8:4-6

4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one.

5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords,

6 yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we {exist} for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we {exist} through Him.

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1926 Paris, France

Leora Bolang sat at a small table outside the cafe and sipped delicately at a cup of coffee au latte. She wrinkled her nose with each sip. She was still not used to its bitterness, but the hot liquid helped reduce her nervousness. Paul was late. He should have been back from his interview almost three quarters of an hour ago.

He had been all smiles when he left her nearly three hours before. He had handed her a few francs and settled her at this table.

“Wait for me, my love,” he kissed her then turned to leave. “I’ll only be a couple of hours.” He looked jaunty in his crisply pressed uniform. Leora kissed him deeply and reluctantly let him go when he turned from her. He crossed the street and entered the Headquarters of the Army of Paris to receive his new orders. The building was old but not ancient. It was a long brownstone with a colonnaded façade. Paul had been gone so long, if she didn’t possess his heart, Leora would have feared he had left her for good.

Leora calmed herself with another sip of coffee. If Paul didn’t come soon she would go look for him. Indeed she half stood a couple of times as if she would go. Each time, she lost her nerve and sat back down again. The uncovered stares of those who passed by deterred her as much as her own uncertainty.

Leora smoothed her dress and crossed her legs as if to force herself to stay put. The white linen fabric was so pleasant, much smoother and softer than anything she was used to. She combed her long black hair with her fingers and laughed as it caught in the thin gold of her beautiful new wedding band.

Leora looked as if she were not quite twenty. She didn’t know how old she was, but she knew she was much older than that. Her skin was a dark cream as smooth as the coffee au latte in her cup, a stark contrast to Paul’s paler European appearance. Her eyes were almond colored and slightly almond shaped, thin lidded like an Egyptian tomb painting but without makeup. The only makeup she wore was lipstick. Her appearance and skin color drew the stares of those around her, but she held her head high. She forced herself to think of something other than

Paul's delay, and almost unbidden, her thoughts wandered into the past. She had nothing else to occupy her time...

I am Leora. I have been the Goddess of Light since my first remembrances. I was born in Egypt more than three thousand years ago. My sister, Leila is my twin. She is the Goddess of Darkness. We were worshipped until the Aton God led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. When Pharaoh's army failed to stop them, and all the gods of Egypt could not stand against the Aton God, my sister and I were able to escape from the two lands with only our lives. We fled in darkness, and my sister who had power in and over darkness ensured that I departed without my followers and without any protection. She took over and ruled me like a master rules a slave, and in the darkness, I was powerless to stop her. We fled to the sparkling blue lakes, one salt and one fresh, in the land now called Tunisia. In that place, my sister built a temple to darkness and ruled over the lands and people we found there.

Leila was not content with her power and ever sought to expand it, but the number of her followers was not unlimited, and their power, like hers was bound by the light of Ra. She knew I foiled her when I could, for that is the nature of the Goddess of Light. But darkness and dark deeds are her nature.

When all seemed lost and she was about to taste defeat at the hands of the people she had attempted to conquer, Leila put into place a diabolical plan. She prepared a tomb below her temple, a tomb to encompass the living and to bring the apparent dead back to life. She wove a fantastic magic into the fabric of the tomb—a magic that required blood to awaken it and blood to loose the inhabitants of the tomb. I was one of those buried alive yet not alive within the confines of that horrible place. In spite of her power, she could not work her spells without me. In that she was limited and that is the only reason she let me live.

The tomb was a trap to lead the unwary to their own sacrifice. But my sister misjudged the rage and fear of the people she fought. They defaced the tomb, and when they learned from captives of her forces the purpose of the tomb, they destroyed all evidence of the temple and the markers my sister hoped to use to draw her sacrifices to the place. She thought to lie in death for a hundred years and return then to greater power. Instead, we were entombed for over three thousand years.

Paul Bolang, truly a god of war, found our tomb, and his expedition released me alive into the world. He was the only one who believed me when I told him where I came from. He was the only one who recognized the danger of my sister, Leila. He led the mission to destroy Leila, and because he trusted in the Aton God and in me, only he and I returned alive.

He lost everything to Leila's anger, but he gained me—heart, body, and soul. He is mine for eternity. The Aton God gave him to me, to love and to equip to fight Leila and her forces in the world. Leila is not dead. She is not alive as I am alive, but her ka exists unbound in the fabric of the world and she seeks to gain the control of evil men.

I, Leora follow and lead the god of war, Paul Bolang. He is, as I said, mine for all eternity—although I do willingly share him with the Aton God...

Leora sipped her coffee again stamping another red half moon on the cup. The day grew darker as the clouds thickened, and she hunched her shoulders against the gray sky and her darker thoughts.

Paul only expected to receive the confirmation of his assignment. He was supposed to get his 'orders'—whatever those were. They had something to do with the funny thing he called writing that was so different than the beautiful word paintings she had read all of her life. He said the

'orders' would give them the authority to go where it was much sunnier and brighter, where it was much like her native Egypt. Leora longed for that, the thought made her warm inside.

Since they had left the Tunisian desert where Paul had been a Foreign Legion Lieutenant she had barely seen the sun. Since they entered France, Paul's homeland, the bright orb had hardly shown its face. The lack of sunlight disturbed her, and although she could sense the power of father Ra behind the thick clouds, her strength was diminished. She complained bitterly to Paul about it. It was getting cold here too although the cold didn't bother her as much as the lack of sunlight.

Paul abruptly stepped around the corner. That broke both Leora's dark reverie and her anxiety. He clutched a sheaf of papers in his hand. Paul waved them toward her and took a deep breath, "We are going to America."

Leora smiled then pouted a little, "I don't know what this America is, but I have missed you. Kiss me Paul."

He tossed away his cigarette and kissed her. Then he sat down and motioned to the garcon for a cup of coffee for himself. He lit another cigarette.

Leora grasped his hand, and with a similar possessiveness, she absorbed his features with her eyes. Paul's face was angular and handsome. It was refined; he combined gentleness with a hardness she knew was rooted in his past and his profession. Years of exposure to the Saharan sun left him with a uniform tan that seemed to never fade. The harsh sun and wind there had formed fine wrinkles around his eyes and mouth that accentuated the lines of his bright smile. He was average build and height, but that masked his strength trained by harsh conditions and constant warfare.

Leora took the papers from him. She unrolled them, pressed them flat and squinted at the unfamiliar markings. Her nose wrinkled, "What do they say?"

"They say that as of today, 23 October 1926, I am a special observer and scientist representing the French military to the Army of the United States of America."

"They say much more than that surely. Look how long it is."

Paul laughed. "Do you want me to read it to you?"

She rotated the papers as though that might make the symbols take on some familiar meaning. "No, I want you to teach me how to read these silly chicken scratches."

"What here? Now?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"Mostly because tonight we must meet my parents and there is no time to begin."

"You could teach me the letter sounds."

Paul downed the last of his coffee and stubbed out his cigarette. "I will tell you the letter sounds while you hurry and dress for supper."

"Very well," she pushed away her cup. "I am finished with my coffee."

Paul paid their bill, and they walked arm in arm back to their hotel room. They didn't get to the letter sounds since Leora wanted to spend more time in Paul's embrace than in her dinner clothing.

They caught a taxi to Paul's family's home. He spotted the house long before they turned onto the quiet street where it lay. The house was tall and ancient. It was a mansion built before the revolution; the Paris house of a Count in good standing with Louis the 14th. The Count had not survived the revolution, neither had Louis the 14th, the house had.

It was a grand estate; made of stone filigreed with carved woodwork and fancy brickwork. The house raised four stories into the sky. It dwarfed the buildings and trees around it. A long porch faced the street. It was fronted with lacey woodwork and protected a façade of etched and stained Venetian glass windows.

Leora stepped out of the taxi and stared at the imposing structure while Paul paid their fare.

“I would not have thought it would be so large,” she exhaled, “Are you a prince and you did not tell me?”

Paul shook his head. “No, I am no prince. The Bolang family is very old. We were honored by Napoleon and always seemed to choose the winning side of every dynasty. This house has been the Bolang estate since the early 1800s.”

“Will this belong to you some day, Paul?”

“Not after tonight.” Then under his breath, “No, certainly not after tonight.”

Paul had spoken this way before. She thought she understood. In their hotel room, he had told her, “Gentlemen from Paris did not marry women who were not light skinned and definitely not those from African nations.”

“Why?” she asked, “Surely I am beautiful, and many men from Paris, gentle or not, would want to marry me.”

“You,” he stared into her eyes, “are as beautiful as the sun and as lovely as the moon. To me your brown skin is like chocolate with cream. Certainly every man in Paris would want you for your beauty, but few would marry you.”

“But, why not? Could they not love me? What would displease them?” She disentangled herself from his arms and gazed at her naked body in the room’s full length mirror.

He shook his head at her naiveté, “They believe that people who are dark skinned are not as intelligent or capable as they are.”

“I will show them the sign of Ra,” Leora drew an elaborate symbol in the air with her fingertip. The very light thickened and formed the sign she drew. It hung in the air, pulsing and spectacular until she took it in her hands and molded it. Then she let it go and the hotel room blazed with a light brighter than the sun. Paul covered his eyes, and Leora pouted, “Can they do that?”

“No one on earth but you can do that, my love. It is very difficult to explain to you this thing of prejudice in men’s minds.” He took her hands in his, “It is as I have explained to you before, my mother and father will not approve of my marriage to you, and it has nothing to do with your beauty, your intelligence, or your capabilities. It is a problem with them.”

Leora sighed, “Well then perhaps it was the same in Egypt for the Pharaoh and the Priests. They could only marry within their own families and to no one else. This is a tradition I understand. Have you broken your people’s laws?”

“No,” Paul smiled, “not at all. I have done nothing wrong. Nothing we have done is wrong.” Paul turned slowly and walked toward the closet, “We should dress.”

A thoughtful look stole across her face. She raised her right hand and smiled at the gold wedding band there. Leora asked no more questions then. She began to dress.

After Paul paid the cabby, he put his arm around Leora’s waist and led her toward the house. Before they arrived at the door, Paul thought better of his intimate embrace and placed her arm under his, “My mother especially should be eased into this revelation.”

Paul pulled the bell and within seconds a rough-featured old butler opened the door. In spite of his obvious age, he appeared well built and athletic. His hands were large and strong; the fingers gnarled and gunpowder stained. He seemed more like a military man than a butler, and indeed, he had retired as a Sergeant from the French Army.

The old man's eyes widened when he saw Paul.

"Marcel," Paul smiled and put out his hand to steady the man.

"Young Paul," Marcel's face was transfixed. "Young Paul," he froze in the doorway. Then with a furious shake, he collected himself and a large grin flooded his features. He turned with military abruptness and called into the house, "Madame, Monsieur, Paul has returned home." He raised his voice, "Paul is home." When the old butler turned back to Paul, his eyes glistened, "Come in young master, come in."

As Paul and Leora entered the house, Marcel noticed Leora, and his eyes widened again.

"Marcel," Paul nodded, "This is the Madame Paul Bolang."

"Ah, *sacre blu*. *Sacre blu*, Master Paul. She is Madame Bolang, you say." He held his hand to his mouth, "Madame Bolang." Then, he glanced up the stairs and yelled, Madame, Monsieur, come quickly. It is Paul, your son, and the Madame Paul Bolang."

"Marcel, come take our things," Paul smiled.

"Yes, young master," he received Paul's hat and Leora's wrap."

"Didn't you get my telegram?"

"Yes, it spoke of marriage but we thought..."

Marcel beamed and bowed awkwardly while he still clutched Paul's hat and Leora's wrap.

Paul grinned back at him.

They were dressed in their best—Paul in his light blue cavalry lieutenant’s dress uniform. He wore a thigh length coat with a tall stiff collar. The riding pants were loose and wide at the thighs, and a wide, dark blue stripe ran down the sides. Paul’s mirror-polished boots reached almost to his knees. A broad belt was clasped at the center with two large silver rounds, and Paul’s cavalry sword hung from it on a leather strap. Paul’s many combat decorations, anchored by the coveted *Légion d’honneur* covered the left breast of his jacket. Lieutenant’s epaulets rested on the shoulders, and a silver officer’s band circled the end of the sleeves. His cap, now in Marcel’s hand, was light grey with a top red stripe and a thin polished black leather bill.

Leora provided a striking vision in pale-blue silk. She wore a dress Paul had bought for her the day before. Although the gown came from a rack on the *rue du Faubourg Saint-Honore*, it flowed over her body as though its designer had only her in mind. The modestly slit hemline floated on air; it just kissed the top of her petite, high-heeled *Arnoult* slippers. A thin silken cord encircled her neck and allowed the teasing neckline to accentuate her gentle bosom. To complete the ensemble, she grasped a small gold colored clutch with three-quarter length gloves that matched the azure of her dress.

Marcel turned to call up the stairs again, but before he could utter another word, Paul’s mother rushed down from the upper floor. Madam Bolang was a tall and stately woman. She stood almost as high as Paul’s eyes. Her hair had been a deep chestnut brown but that had surrendered to streaks of silver-gray long ago. Paul’s father trailed right behind her. Monsieur Jacques Bolang was a dark and handsome man. His posture was ramrod straight as though always in readiness to serve parliament or king. He had been a military officer, a Colonel, but retired at the end of the Great War. He was a career military attaché and never saw combat.

At the sight of Leora, Madam Bolang jolted to a halt at the bottom of the stairs and her face froze. Paul unconsciously moved a step closer to Leora. For a moment, he thought his mother would turn around and stalk back up the stairs. Instead she hurried forward almost as quickly as before and grasped her son in a tight embrace.

“Paul, Paul, Paul,” she could only repeat over and over, her voice thick with tears.

Paul’s father, with no less feeling, grasped him around the shoulders and held onto both Paul and his mother. He forgot about the straight meerschaum pipe clenched in his teeth and cried, “Lieutenant Bolang, it is so good to have you back home.” He grasped Paul’s hand and pumped it up and down. “Zut, how careless, I dropped my pipe,” he laughed while tears trickled down his cheeks.

Leora picked up the pipe and held it out to Paul’s father. He seemed to notice her for the first time. He wiped his eyes and pulled out his handkerchief.

Leora stood mute and daunting. In her dress she looked like a princess or a priestess from an ancient temple—like an ancient goddess.

Leora’s femininity and silent strength were not lost on the senior Bolang. He did not shrink from her, but he hesitated as he reached for the hand that held out his pipe. Without touching her fingers, he took the pipe from Leora’s hand and replaced it between his teeth.

Paul kissed his mother and gazed in her eyes, “Mother, you must meet my bride.”

“Your bride, Paul?” she shook her head.

Madam Bolang turned as Paul did. “Mother, Father,” Paul gestured, “This is Leora. She was born in Egypt. She is my wife, the Madame Paul Bolang.”

No one said anything for a long time. Finally with a slight twitch that turned into a smile, Monsieur Bolang reached out his open palm, “Welcome to our house.” He coughed, “You aren’t exactly what we expected.”

Leora smiled and cocked her head. In perfect French without the trace of an accent, she answered, “Madame, Monsieur Bolang, I am so pleased to meet you both.”

Both Paul’s parents’ eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes,” Leora’s smile broadened, “Of course, I speak French.”

“Come into the parlor,” Madam Bolang turned on her heel with a gesture.

Paul clung to his mother’s arm while his father hesitated only a moment before he offered his arm to Leora. They escorted the ladies to the Bolang everyday parlor. Leora and Madame Bolang sat on the couches opposite each other and after the ladies were settled, Paul and Monsieur Bolang sat too—Paul beside his mother and Monsieur Bolang beside Leora.

“Paul,” began Madam Bolang, “are you coming home to stay? Do you have a command in Paris? In your telegram, you said you left the service of the *Legion Etrangere*.”

“Yes, Mother, I transferred from the Legion back to the Calvary. I do not have a command in Paris...”

“But you will be coming here to live, yes?”

“No.”

Madam Bolang’s face fell, “No? But we haven’t seen you for years. You cannot just depart from us so soon.”

“I am allowed some leave...”

Madame Bolang glanced at Leora once, but she didn’t pause, “...And of course you will stay with us. I would not have you anywhere else. Where is the Cavalry sending you?”

“I have been given a very prestigious position as a consultant with the Americans.”

“With the Americans! But Paul, that is as far away as Africa. We won’t see you for years—again.” His mother’s lips trembled, and she turned her head away.

Silence descended over them all. A silence only punctuated by Madam Bolang’s half-stifled sobs.

Leora took Madam Bolang’s hands in hers. Madam Bolang stiffened. She flinched and tried to pull her fingers out of Leora’s grasp. Reluctantly, she turned her tear-filled gaze into the young woman’s eyes. With that single glance, her shoulders slumped and she bit her lip.

Leora implored her, “Paul’s mother. Mother—if you will allow me. Do not cry. We will not be gone forever. We will come back to see you soon. I love your son, and so I love you also. There is just so much that Paul and I must do. We will not leave you forever.”

Madame Bolang collected herself as though Leora’s words alone calmed her. Without rancor she replied, “Who are you? You speak like a woman much older than you appear.”

Leora smiled and bobbed her head, “Madam, I am indeed much older than I look. Could an immature girl have captured the heart of a man like your son?”

His mother’s look declared, an immature girl might, but she almost whispered, “When I saw you at the door, I feared that very thing.” Her chin came up, “How did you meet Paul?”

Paul leaned toward his mother, “Leora is an expert in ancient forms of Egyptian writing. She worked with me on an archeological dig.” A smile tickled the corners of his lips, “She is also a goddess who completely mesmerized me with her charms. I could only do her will.”

“Paul,” warned Leora.

He flashed her a smug look.

“You studied at a university?” asked Monsieur Bolang.

“Yes,” almost an afterthought, “the university. I have also been trained in the ancient lore of the Egyptians. I am myself Egyptian.”

What she didn't say, thought Paul, was that she studied at the university at Tanis almost two thousand years before the birth of Christ.

“You speak Parisian French perfectly,” Madam Bolang sighed in resignation.

Yes, she spoke it flawlessly, thought Paul, and Leora had not heard the French tongue two months ago. If Leora could not speak French as well as she did, his mother would have another excuse to hide her from her friends and Parisian society.

“Thank you, Madam,” Leora nodded.

“Paul, when must you go?” Monsieur Bolang clamped his pipe between his teeth.

“I have two months before I must report for duty. The trip to America will take at least ten days, so we can stay for six weeks. That is, if you will have us for that long.”

“That long and longer my son,” Madam Bolang took a deep breath, “I wish I could keep you here forever. Come, let us see if the table is ready. You must eat with us tonight. Marcel will prepare your room.”

“We left our things at the hotel.”

A bell tinkled twice.

“Forget them for tonight, the house is yours. Come along, Marcel says our supper is set.”

They all retired to the family's smaller dining room off the kitchen. Their conversation through the meal was subdued. More went unsaid than was spoken, but all the while Leora shown like a brilliant star.

Paul peered over his wine glass at his mother. His parents had not accepted Leora completely, but Paul felt, if not acceptance then, at least for now, acquiescence to the inevitable.

